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Role of Sound Effects and Music in Creating Mood in Radio Dramas

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Abstract

Sound effects and music are vital in radio dramas, shaping mood and atmosphere. Originally a news medium, radio evolved into entertainment, with dramas relying on narration, music, dialogue, and sound effects. These effects enhance immersion, emotion, and narrative flow. Though their use has declined in some modern settings, sound designers and Foley artists continue to craft dynamic soundscapes. This paper explores their techniques and emphasizes the importance of coherence in sound design for quality productions. Ultimately, it reaffirms the enduring value of sound effects in enriching the storytelling power of radio dramas.

Keywords: Radio Drama, Sound Effects, Mood and Atmosphere, Audio Storytelling

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background

Radio has long been a powerful medium for communication, education, and entertainment. In Malaysia, its use began in the 1920s (Ibrahim et al., 2021), with Radio Malaya launching in 1946 before evolving into Radio Malaysia in 1963 (Jamal, 2016). This shift aimed to unite the public and communicate government policies. Before television, families gathered around radios to listen to news and stories. McLeish called the radio a "blind medium," relying solely on sound to convey messages, and turned its limitation into a strength. Through narration, dialogue, music, and effects, radio drama creates immersive, sound-based storytelling (Rajpar, 2013). The absence of visuals makes listening to radio drama an imaginative act. Unlike film or TV, it requires mental scene construction, making it a personally engaging experience. Soundscapes help listeners visualize actions and characters. Globally, radio drama reached its peak between the 1920s and 1940s, and although TV reduced its dominance, it continued to evolve. In Malaysia, shows like Sandiwara Radio (1946) were well-received and used for public education (Asiah Sarji, 1995). The format remains relevant, preserving its unique role in imaginative, auditory storytelling.

1.2 Problem Statement and Research Aim

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Without visuals, radio drama relies on sound effects, dialogue, music, and atmosphere to evoke emotion and build a sense of place. The decline in the creative use of sound effects in modern broadcasts may reduce the sense of immersion. This study explores how sound enhances imagination, emotion, and understanding in radio drama. By analyzing sound design in current practices and literature, the paper aims to reaffirm the importance of audio in narrative engagement and recommend effective strategies for practitioners. McLeish's view of radio as a "blind medium" solidified after hearing *The War of the Worlds* (Crisell, 1994). This concept highlights the imaginative role of both listener and actor. Radio also utilizes voices to convey emotions, alleviate loneliness, and offer helpful information. It keeps audiences informed and bridges the gap between the government and the public (Sarji, 1995; Mustadi, 2019).

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Sound Effects in Radio Drama

Ahn (2021) explains that radio drama is a form of performance that depends entirely on sound transmitted through radio broadcasts. Following the invention of wireless communication and the development of the radio, broadcasting programs quickly evolved, giving rise to radio drama as a distinct genre. Initially, it emerged from adaptations of theatrical plays designed for auditory consumption. These early dramas were simple in form, crafted to be understood through listening. Over time, however, radio drama began to incorporate original soundscapes, dialogue, and music, developing a unique auditory experience distinct from traditional stage productions. As Crisell (2009) explains, radio drama evolved from stage-based theatrical performances into a distinct medium uniquely shaped by the limitations and creative possibilities of sound-only storytelling. The genre relies on collaboration among sound experts, such as Foley artists, musicians, and voice actors, who work together to use sound creatively instead of relying on visual cues. Their focus is to convey character movement, emotion, and plot progression entirely through auditory signals, allowing listeners to visualize the drama in their imagination. The first known radio drama was produced around 1925, marking the genre's historical beginning and laying the foundation for the immersive storytelling format it has become today.

Radio dramas are purely acoustic performances delivered through audio media without visual elements (TheatreCrafts, n.d). To compensate for the lack of visuals, they rely heavily on sound to paint mental images for the audience. As Crook (1999) observes, radio drama employs dialogue, music, and sound effects to evoke characters and narratives, achieving a psychological impact comparable to that of visual storytelling. Sound effects, in particular, serve multiple narrative functions. They establish the setting and atmosphere by providing ambient background noises that signify location and time, such as the bustling din of city streets or the chirping of crickets on a quiet night. These auditory cues effectively replace the sets, props, and visual context of stage or screen, grounding listeners in the story's environment.

Moreover, sound effects illustrate actions and events, enabling the audience to "see" through sound. For example, a door slamming or footsteps echoing can signal a character's entrance or exit, conveying scene aspects without requiring visual input. In this way, producers focus on how the play is perceived through sound, using audio cues to define characters' presence and movements. Clinking glasses might indicate a social gathering and hint at a character's demeanor, while distant thunder might foreshadow an approaching conflict. Perhaps most importantly, sound effects significantly enhance the emotional tone of scenes. They can elicit tension, fear, joy, or sadness in the listener. For instance, a sudden thunderclap or howling wind can heighten suspense and evoke fear in a tense moment, whereas gentle birdsong can create a calm, hopeful mood. Flueckiger et al. (2009) identified three primary techniques for creating sound effects: recording on set, capturing in the field, and crafting them through Foley artistry. They also emphasized that sound is inherently tied to movement, as it helps represent physical actions and spatial dynamics within a scene. Embedding sound effects in radio drama requires careful timing, layering, and balance to complement rather than overpower dialogue. This approach aligns with Ismail, Lee, and Anuar's (2021) findings on how strategically embedded sound in film enhances narrative impact and audience engagement. Indeed, sound effects add color and realism, making listeners feel present in a setting they only hear. This sense of realism and emotional resonance immerses listeners more deeply into the drama's moments.

Sound effects also stimulate the listener's imagination, which is central to the radio drama experience. Without visuals, listeners actively construct the scenes in their minds. Research suggests that engaging with rich auditory stimuli, such as radio drama, activates the brain's sensory and imaginative regions, including the default mode network responsible for mind-wandering and mental imagery (Huwiler, 2005). In effect, well-crafted soundscapes can trigger vivid internal visuals and personal interpretations of the story. Sudden or unexpected sounds can capture the listener's attention and direct it to critical plot points while subtle ambient sounds continuously maintain immersion in the story's world. Listeners may even form associative memories with certain recurring sounds, linking them to themes or characters. In summary, the literature suggests that sound effects are not mere embellishments but are essential to narrative delivery and mood creation in radio drama.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach. The researchers examined existing studies, journal articles, books, and theses on auditory perception, cognitive psychology, and sound design in radio drama. In addition to secondary data, the study incorporates a focus group with 20 students to enrich the interpretation of the literature findings. These focus groups provided practical insights into the current production workflow, challenges in sound design, and the decision-making process behind selecting sound effects and background

music. Data from the focus group were coded thematically and then integrated with the literature review. The study synthesized insights into how sound effects and music influence the listener's imagination and mood by analyzing prior research and documented practices.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Relevant sources were gathered using academic databases and libraries, focusing on publications from the mid-20th century to recent years that address radio drama, sound effects, music in media, and audio storytelling techniques. Approximately twenty key sources (including peer-reviewed journal papers and books) were reviewed in detail. The content of these sources was analyzed to identify common themes and findings regarding the use of sound in creating mood and engaging listeners. The Analysis involved comparing the authors' observations and theories and distilling the information into core concepts. These concepts were then used to formulate the structured findings of this paper. The study ensured a comprehensive understanding of the topic by reviewing literature across multiple disciplines, media studies, psychology, and sound engineering. The trustworthiness of the data was reinforced by prioritizing reputable sources and cross-referencing insights from different authors to see if they converged on similar conclusions. Next, the collected data were analyzed using the Thematic Analysis framework. This approach involved familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing the themes, defining and naming them, and producing the final report. Thematic Analysis allowed for the identification of recurring patterns and categories in participants' responses, highlighting the critical functions of sound and music in radio drama.

4.0 Findings

The literature review revealed that sound effects are crucial in helping listeners visualize scenes and emotionally engage with the story. Well-executed sound design enables audiences to vividly imagine characters, settings, and movements with surprising clarity, even without visual cues. Simple audio cues, such as the creak of a door, echoing footsteps, or the patter of rain, enable listeners to mentally construct environments and follow the action as if they were watching it unfold. This auditory visualization strengthens the immersive quality of radio drama as the mind becomes an active participant in interpreting and shaping the story's world. Equally important is the emotional influence of sound effects. Studies show that when audio cues align with narrative developments, they significantly amplify emotional responses. For example, eerie or discordant sounds can heighten tension in a suspenseful scene, while soft background noise or melodic ambiance can underscore a moment of tenderness or sorrow. The deliberate pairing of sound and emotion deepens the listener's connection to the story and its characters. In doing so, sound effects become more than technical enhancements; they become integral tools for emotional storytelling and dramatic pacing.

4.2 Contextual Clarity and Imaginative Stimulation

Another significant finding is the function of sound effects in providing context and narrative coherence. In radio drama, where visual markers are absent, sound effects guide the listener by signaling changes in time, setting, or scene. Background audio elements, such as the hum of a city, the quiet of a forest, or the transition from night sounds to birdsong, can indicate spatial or temporal transitions with clarity. These cues help maintain continuity in the storytelling and reduce potential confusion, especially during complex plot developments or rapid shifts in location. Beyond narrative clarity, soundscapes also stimulate imaginative engagement. The literature highlights how ambiguous or minimal audio elements often encourage listeners to fill in the blanks themselves, thereby becoming co-creators of the narrative. This "theatre of the mind" effect makes the experience more intimate and personally meaningful. The cognitive engagement required to interpret and visualize scenes based solely on sound can also improve memory retention and deepen emotional impact. As such, sound effects serve a dual purpose: they provide essential structure and ignite the imagination, both of which are crucial to the power and longevity of radio drama.

Table 1. Summary of Focus Group Responses

RESPONDENCE	COMMENTS
R1	<i>The sound effect makes the scene feel real to the audience, such as footsteps, doors creaking, and birds chirping. For example, the bird chirping makes the scene seem peaceful. Music, on the other hand, sets a tone for one scene. Such as fast music builds excitement</i>
R2	<i>Dialogue helps you understand the character, narration helps you understand the story, but sound effects and music make you feel you are there. It helps you picture an atmosphere or situation and oftentimes enhances the emotional weight presented. Without background music and sound effects, the immersion will feel off and end up flat like reading a book. You can understand the story, but without these sound elements, you cannot relate to it.</i>
R3	<i>Sound effects and music create mood by shaping emotion, establishing setting, defining characters, and stimulating imagination. Without music or sound effects, the radio or dramas would feel flat and unclear</i>
R4	<i>I think sound effects and music is important in radio drama's so that audience can feel the emotions the actors try to convey such as the beat from the sounds can stimulates audience heartbeat for emotions such as suspense</i>
R5	<i>My opinion music plays an important role in calming lonely emotions. Sometimes it can give us strength and change the vibe of a situation, depending on the type of music being played.</i>
R6	<i>In my opinion, sound effects and music in radio drama can bring the invisible world of the story to life. This shows how sound can make storytelling from ordinary to extraordinary.</i>
R7	<i>From my point of view, sound effects and music are important in radio drama because they help make the dramas more emotional. It can create the mood, express the situation and help listeners imagine the story and feel it deeply.</i>
R8	<i>In my opinion, sound effects and music play a crucial role in shaping the mood of a radio drama. Since the audience cannot see the actors, these audio elements help enhance and explain situations or emotions that might be difficult for the actors to convey through dialogue alone.</i>

- R9 *In my opinion, it plays an important role in creating atmosphere or bringing a scene to life in a radio drama. It makes the audience wonder and be more interested in imagining the story.*
- R10 *7. The essence of sound effects and music composition adds another layer of depth and serves as an alternative form of emotional expression that brings vibrancy to a prosaic or monotone dialogue filled with worded scripts, I'd say music never fails to strike a chord in the hearts and souls of the audience. By alluring their attention to the story with sound effects, the audience should not only be passive listeners, but it reminds them to actively feel and fully immerse themselves in the scene of the drama.*
8. Ilyana Shahida - I personally think music and sound effect are important in radio drama because they help maintain listener interest. Sound effects make stories more lifelike and help listeners imagine the scenes, while music keep the program lively and helps move smoothly between segments.
- R11 *For me, personally, the sound effects and music plays a big role in radio dramas is because of they had been considered as an instrument to generate the emotion to the audience. It's not that without them, your emotion can't be defined or emerged. But, to enhance the mood in the most profound way. Whether it's anger, sad or happy. It has been used to draw the attention of the audience since we know that humans are emotional beings which tends to be dramatic most of the time.*
- R12 *Sound effects and music help shaping the mood and allow listeners to connect with certain emotion in the story better*
- R13 *Listeners can imagine the scene clearly and understand the story better.*
- R14 *More immersive, emotional and engaging for the audience.*
- R15 *It makes people/watchers/readers feel and connect more with the scene in act as it controls the overall mood*
- R16 *It gives people more clues as to what's going on in every moments*
8. Sound effects in radio dramas can give enjoyment to the audiences, letting them imagine the scene, and even shock factor (if its horror/action).
- R17 *will make the scene more emotional and can made the viewer remember the specific scene when they hear a sound effect or background music*
- R18 *Sound effects and music aren't always necessary in a radio drama, but they make everything feel more alive. They bring out the emotions, add tension or excitement, and help listeners get into the mood of the story. It's kind of like putting a cherry on top of a plain cupcake. The cupcake is still there, but the extra touch makes it way more enjoyable.*
- R19 *it a flat lifeless thing without soundtrack*
- R20 *will make the scene more emotional and can made the viewer remember the characters dialogue*

Thematic Analysis of audio elements in radio dramas reveals their critical role in shaping listener experiences across multiple dimensions. First, sound effects and music significantly enhance emotional engagement by intensifying suspense, sadness, joy, or tension; without these audio components, radio dramas risk feeling flat and lifeless. Second, these elements strengthen imagination and visualization, enabling listeners to construct vivid mental imagery and perceive actions clearly without any visual input. Third, music and sound effects play a crucial role in establishing atmosphere and mood, setting emotional tones that range from calm to tense or joyful, and creating immersive environmental contexts. Fourth, audio contributes to a heightened sense of immersion and realism, allowing listeners to feel present within the scene, while realistic soundscapes render the drama believable and vivid. Finally, audio supports narrative clarity by providing cues through sound effects and guiding transitions or mood interpretation via music, thereby enhancing overall comprehension of the story. Collectively, these findings underscore the indispensable role of sound in shaping the emotional, cognitive, and perceptual experiences of radio drama audiences.

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Interplay of Sound Effects and Music in Mood Creation

The findings above underscore that sound effects and music are not merely technical add-ons but core storytelling components in radio dramas. Their interplay can greatly influence listener immersion. Sound effects provide realism and direct narrative cues, while music often operates on a more subliminal level to reinforce mood. When used cohesively together, they create an audio-rich environment that can fully immerse listeners in the narrative. Cohen et al. (2006) describe how the congruence of music and sound effects with a narrative can increase audience absorption in audiovisual media. By analogy, in radio drama, the alignment of background music with sound effects and dialogue likely amplifies the emotional and cognitive impact on the listener. For example, a scene of rising tension might employ both ominous music and intensifying sound effects (such as an accelerating heartbeat or a ticking clock) to compound the suspense. Morris and Kelly (2016) emphasize that sound in radio drama plays a crucial role in conveying visual imagery, especially for student producers learning to build immersive scenes. They note that even in the absence of sight, sound continues to reach the listener's awareness, allowing stories to unfold vividly in the mind. Conversely, cheerful music and playful sound effects can establish an upbeat tone in a light-hearted scene. The literature suggests that producers should consider sound effects and music in tandem when designing a production's soundscape. Both elements should complement each other, music filling the gaps that literal effects cannot, and vice versa, to maintain a consistent mood. If either element is incongruent (for instance, a somber musical score in a scene meant to be optimistic), it can confuse or disengage the audience. Thus, achieving congruence between sound effects, music, and narrative context is crucial for creating an effective mood.

5.2 Best Practices and Challenges in Audio Mood Design

Reviewing sources and industry practices also reveals several best practices for leveraging sound to address the moods and challenges that radio drama creators face. One best practice is the judicious use of sound effects. While sound effects are invaluable, they must be used purposefully rather than excessively. Overloading a scene with unnecessary sounds can overwhelm listeners or distract from dialogue. Experienced producers follow scripts that specify where an effect is needed and ensure that each sound serves a

straightforward narrative or emotional purpose. As Murbaningsih and Wahyudin (2020) point out, the success of a radio drama depends not only on technical sound design but also on thoughtful planning, character casting, and production strategy. Maintaining each character's consistency and emotional tone requires careful coordination between directors, writers, and sound artists to ensure the drama resonates with listeners and maintains its relevance. Another practice is maintaining balance and clarity: sound effects and music should generally augment, not drown out, the dialogue and narration. Volume levels are adjusted to make important speech intelligible, with sound effects supporting in the background unless a particular effect is meant to take center stage for dramatic impact. The goal is a harmonious mix where all audio elements work together seamlessly.

Achieving coherence and unity in sound design proves to be a recurring challenge. Every sound introduced into a drama must align with the story's setting and mood to avoid jarring the audience out of the experience. For instance, an out-of-place sound effect or a mismatched musical cue can break the illusion of the drama's world. Sound designers stress the importance of consistency if a scene's ambiance is established as a rainy night, all accompanying sounds (footsteps, doors, etc.) should reflect that environment in tone and quality. Modern digital technology has made it easier to source or create almost any sound through expansive sound effect libraries and sophisticated audio editing software. This abundance is a double-edged sword: on one hand, it provides creators with great flexibility and precision; on the other, it requires skill to select only those elements that enhance the story meaningfully. Training and creativity are paramount in this regard. Foley artists and sound designers must possess technical proficiency and a deep understanding of storytelling to select or craft sounds that genuinely enhance the narrative. They face the challenge of anticipating how an audience will interpret a sound without visuals, which requires empathy and insight into human cognition and emotion. The discussion in the literature makes it clear that when these challenges are met, the result is an immersive audio experience where the combined power of dialogue, sound effects, and music transports the listener.

5.3. The role of Sound Effects and music

The respondents' reflections strongly suggest that sound effects and music are essential elements in radio drama. They transform simple dialogue or narration into an immersive experience, allowing listeners to "feel present," imagine vivid scenes, and emotionally connect with the story (e.g., R1, R2, R6). This aligns with empirical evidence from recent research: a mixed-methods study on immersive audio storytelling found that audio quality, cognitive absorption, emotional engagement, and narrative content significantly predicted a listener's sense of presence ("being there") (Verhulst et al., 2024).

Moreover, neurophysiological research confirms that music paired with imagined scenes triggers increased activity in brain regions associated with emotion and memory which suggests that audio can intensify emotional arousal and deepen the listener's affective experience even in the absence of visuals (Li & Tsai, 2019). This neuroscientific insight gives weight to respondents' observations that music and sound effects heighten emotional states whether calmness, sadness, tension, or excitement (e.g., R4, R5, R11). From a narrative and design perspective, this further supports these findings. According to a comprehensive review on the role of audio in immersive storytelling (across cultural heritage, VR, and audio media), soundscapes, music, and non-verbal audio cues serve as core elements that shape presence, emotional tone, and narrative comprehension; it is not merely a decorative background (Privitera & Geronazzo, 2025). Similarly, targeted experimental work integrating sound effects and background music in storytelling across various genres has shown that such audio design significantly enhances listener enjoyment and reduces fatigue, especially in emotionally charged or horror narratives (Steinhaeuser & Lugin, 2024).

Taken together, the convergence between respondents' lived experiences and academic evidence from neuroscience, media studies, and user experience research underscores a clear conclusion that sound design, comprising sound effects and music, plays a foundational role in audio storytelling. It facilitates immersion, stimulates mental imagery, evokes emotion, supports narrative clarity, and ultimately transforms listeners from passive recipients into emotionally and cognitively engaged participants. Therefore, producers and creators of radio drama should treat sound design as a core component in the creative process, not merely as an afterthought or optional enhancement.

6.0 Conclusion& Recommendations

Radio drama remains a distinctive storytelling medium that uses sound to activate the listener's imagination, crafting a vivid internal experience often described as the "theatre of the mind." This study reaffirmed the critical role that sound effects and music play in shaping the mood and emotional resonance of radio dramas. Sound effects construct the narrative world, signaling action, setting, and transitions, while music and vocal performance add emotional texture and atmosphere. Together, these elements guide listener perception and immerse them in the drama's unfolding events, making audio narratives as engaging and emotionally powerful as their visual counterparts. Despite competition from television and digital content, radio drama remains a valued medium for audiences drawn to its immersive and intimate auditory experience. Sound effects and music play a crucial role in radio drama, enhancing emotional engagement, supporting narrative clarity, and fostering listener immersion. These audio elements transform stories from simple verbal narratives into vivid, emotionally resonant experiences, enabling audiences to visualize scenes, connect with characters, and feel present within the story world. Far from being optional, sound design is a core component of compelling audio storytelling, shaping both the cognitive and affective experiences of listeners.

Several recommendations are offered for producers and creators to preserve and elevate this tradition. First, thoughtful sound design should be prioritized in pre-production, ensuring every audio element aligns with the script and enhances immersion. Maintaining coherence and balance is essential to ensure that music and effects support rather than overwhelm the dialogue. Leveraging modern audio tools and libraries can enrich soundscapes, provided they are used with creative intention and restraint. Furthermore, investing in

skilled voice actors and Foley artists through training and collaboration will elevate emotional authenticity. Finally, broadening accessibility through strategic scheduling and multi-platform releases, such as podcasts or streaming, can expand radio drama's reach to new, digitally engaged audiences. In mastering these elements, creators ensure that radio drama remains relevant and deeply resonant in the modern media landscape.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper contributes to media and communication studies specifically audio storytelling by reaffirming the critical role of sound effects and music in enhancing mood, narrative clarity, and emotional engagement within radio dramas. Through a focused review of literature and analysis of production techniques, the study highlights how auditory elements function as narrative tools and cognitive and emotional triggers that shape listener perception. By emphasizing the interplay between sound design, vocal performance, and music, the paper provides valuable insights for radio producers, sound designers, and scholars, offering practical guidance on creating immersive audio experiences in an era increasingly dominated by visual media.

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