

The podcast as a sound experimentation tool for brands: The immersive narrative in Endesa's *Sonidos que nos transforman*

El pódcast como herramienta de experimentación sonora para las marcas: la narrativa inmersiva en *Sonidos que nos transforman* de Endesa

O podcast como ferramenta de experimentação sonora para as marcas: a narrativa imersiva em Sonidos que nos transforman de Endesa

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ABSTRACT | The podcast has become an emerging audio format for advertising usage through the branded content technique, which uses content to transmit brand values without intrusive messages. The technique applied to the sound medium represents added value for brands because of the sound's sensory power. In this unisensory context, sound immersion narratives can further enhance the listening experience by making the listener an integral part of the storytelling. Through the study of *Sonidos que nos transforman* (Sounds that transform us), the first and only immersive branded podcast produced in Spain to date by Endesa, we will analyse how the brand integrates into the narrative. We will also study to what extent the podcast is configured as an appropriate format to transmit the brand message through sound immersion. The methodology is completed with exploratory interviews with those responsible for the project. The results confirm that immersive sound techniques are not mere technical-sound ornaments applied without casuistry, and that they contribute to increase engagement with the brand due to the intensity with which the listener lives the experience. In addition, the podcast highlights the existence of its own narrative, which finds its methodology and production sources in the radio, the sound medium par excellence, but opening up possibilities thanks to the absence of space-time limits and to its recorded nature.

KEYWORDS: advertising; podcast; branded content; branded podcast; sound immersion; binaural sound; immersive storytelling.

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RESUMEN | El pódcast se ha convertido en un formato de audio emergente para la explotación publicitaria mediante la técnica *branded content*, empleando el contenido para transmitir los valores de la marca sin hacer uso de mensajes de carácter intrusivo. La técnica aplicada al medio sonoro supone un valor añadido para las marcas gracias al poder evocador del sonido. En este contexto unisensorial, las narrativas de inmersión sonora incrementan la experiencia auditiva convirtiendo al oyente en parte integrante del *storytelling*. A través del estudio de *Sonidos que nos transforman de Endesa*, el primero y único *branded pódcast* inmersivo producido en España hasta la fecha, analizaremos cómo se integra la marca en la narrativa y hasta qué punto el pódcast se configura como un formato adecuado para transmitir el mensaje de la marca a través de la inmersión sonora. La metodología se completa con entrevistas exploratorias a los responsables del proyecto. Los resultados constatan que las técnicas sonoras inmersivas no son un mero ornamento técnico-sonoro aplicado sin casuística, sino que favorecen notablemente el incremento del engagement con la marca debido a la intensidad con la que el oyente vive la experiencia. Asimismo, pone de relieve la existencia de una narrativa propia para el pódcast, que encuentra su metodología y fuentes de producción en la radio –el medio sonoro por antonomasia–, pero amplifica sus posibilidades debido a la ausencia de límites espacio temporales y a su naturaleza grabada.

PALABRAS CLAVE: publicidad; podcast; *branded content*; *branded pódcast*; inmersión sonora; sonido binaural; narrativa inmersiva.

RESUMO | O podcast se tornou um formato emergente de áudio para a exploração publicitária por meio da técnica de *branded content*, utilizando o conteúdo para transmitir os valores da marca sem recorrer a mensagens intrusivas. A técnica aplicada ao meio sonoro traz um valor adicional para as marcas devido ao poder evocativo do som. Nesse contexto unissensorial, as narrativas de imersão sonora aumentam a experiência auditiva tornando o ouvinte parte integrante da história. Através do estudo *Sonidos que nos transforman de Endesa* (*Sons que nos transformam*), o primeiro e único podcast de marca imersivo produzido na Espanha até a presente data, analisaremos como a marca se integra na narrativa e até que ponto o podcast se configura como um formato adequado para transmitir a mensagem da marca através da imersão sonora. A metodologia é completada com entrevistas exploratórias aos responsáveis pelo projeto. Os resultados confirmam que as técnicas sonoras imersivas não são meramente ornamentos técnicos aplicados sem casuística, mas favorecem significativamente o aumento do engajamento com a marca devido à intensidade com que o ouvinte vivencia a experiência. Além disso, destaca-se a existência de uma narrativa própria para o podcast, que encontra sua metodologia e fontes de produção no rádio o meio sonoro por excelência, mas amplifica suas possibilidades devido à ausência de limitações espaciais e temporais e à sua natureza gravada.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: publicidade; podcast; *branded content*; podcast de marca; imersão sonora; som binaural; narrativa imersiva.

INTRODUCTION

With the emergence of new distribution platforms and new professional profiles a new content creation industry has developed around podcasting (Piñeiro-Otero & Pedrero-Esteban, 2022). The surge in recent years is largely due to listeners' interest in this new form of on-demand audio, that allows them to entertain, inform, and educate themselves on a variety of topics. Daily podcast consumption reached 22 million listeners in 2022 (Dentsu, 2022).

The digital audio format “allows good stories to be told, which translates into an enriching experience for the listener and provides moments of reflection” (Ira Glass in Dowling & Miller, 2019). It has fostered the art of constructing narratives that make use of sound language in all its dimensions, as well as experimental sound techniques that, as we will see, elicit physical and emotional responses from the listener.

These techniques lead to an overwhelming experience for the listener. The concept of awe, introduced by Waqas and colleagues (2021), occurs when users experience an amazing or wonderful feeling, supported by subliminal symbolic meanings in the content they interact with and related to their personal and social circumstances. From this perspective, the podcast is a valuable format for brands to reach new consumers through content creation and make it an overwhelming experience.

BRANDED CONTENT IN THE NEW COMMUNICATION SCENARIO

In the so-called post-advertising era (Solana, 2010), characterized by the influx of brands into the advertising market and the various media in the world of communication, branded content has become an effective tool to engage audiences (Serrano et al., 2023). The overuse of traditional advertising formats, the interruption of editorial content, and its constant repetition lead to audience disapproval.

The use of traditional advertising formats is ineffective in this new scenario (Paz Aparicio et al., 2000; Castelló-Martínez, 2014), where consumers now have the ability to block advertising messages on their devices. Brands are forced to rethink their advertising model in this context to transform their advertising outlays into customer engagement. They are aware of how important it is to have a strategy that effectively communicates values, emotions, and feelings, as these elements can mobilise the target audience (Sebastián-Morillas et al., 2020).

Branded content technique consists of brands adding value to users by creating informative, entertaining, or educational content (Asmussen et al., 2016). Branded content aims to “connect with the consumers in more relevant, less disruptive ways” (Dens & Poels, 2023, p. 142), acquiring the appearance of editorial content (Hardy, 2018).

The Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB) summarises it as "relevant, entertaining or interesting non-advertising content generated by a brand to create an audience and connect with them. The content implicitly communicates the values associated with the brand; however, the brand itself takes a back seat" ("Presentación...", 2020).

In this advertising technique, the focus is on the experiences offered (Martí, 2010) rather than the features and benefits of the brand's products or services. Over time, the brand becomes more of a provider of experiences (Muñoz & Martí, 2006) than a seller of its products or services. In this regard, its presence becomes symbolic (Rogel del Hoyo Molano & Marcos-Molano, 2020). It is not essential that the brand is mentioned in the content, it is sufficient if it reflects its values and personality is (De Aguilera-Moyano et al., 2015). Thus, even if the brand is not mentioned, it is still present through the values it conveys in the content. In terms of its nature, according to Sánchez-Olmos, the technique of branded content "is advertising, but the audience does not have to perceive it as such, rather as entertainment and as an experience" (2020, p.17).

Any intrusive advertising of this type weakens the effectiveness of unbranded technique. Interesting content to consumers and their affinity for the values it conveys are the catalysts that foster this technique's success, allowing the brand to remain embedded in their memory (Rodríguez-Rabadán, 2021). Branded content makes brands known, gives them a good reputation, and creates a community. Through this technique, promotional content becomes friendly because the brand creates content consumers' enjoyment without being intrusive. It also positions itself as a valued benchmark in its sector. The brand becomes associated with positive content, which directly impacts its reputation. In some cases, the technique can even be used for brand-washing (Molina Osorio et al., 2022). In essence, in the era of new advertising, content is king (Del Pino-Romero & Castelló-Martínez, 2015). As stated by Fernández-Blanco and colleagues "the protagonist of the messages is no longer the product itself or the brand that supports it, but the recipient of the communication, who can live the brand experience" (2011, p. 119). The brand is not selling tangibles, but selling itself –the brand is selling the brand– through a strategy designed to position itself in the marketplace, provide positive experiences, gain reputation, create a community, and achieve long-term results. Everything suggests that "the transformation in advertising paradigms points towards content, or branded content, as the present and future in brand communication" (Sánchez-Serrano et al., 2023, p. 12).

BRANDED CONTENT IN THE SOUND MEDIUM

Branded content technique speaks many languages. It is able to adapt to any medium using its own resources, formats, and language. This versatility has helped to the technique's spread across all mediums, especially in the last decade. According

to Digiday+ data, in 2021 the second source of revenue for 88% of the media was branded content, followed by display advertising (“El Branded Content...”, 2021).

The sound medium is synonymous with intimacy. It is produced in terms of both content and the voice that conveys the message. It is a medium designed to be consumed individually, addressing the listener in the first person. The use of direct speech creates a sense of belonging to a community. The personal nature of radio –the spoken sound medium par excellence– generates an up-close and personal quality that most other media do not have (Russell et al., 1993). The intimacy it creates can be compared to credibility. Méndiz states that “the feeling of intimacy lends credibility to messages and facilitates audience engagement” (2001, p. 148). Moreover, the sound medium is the one that most encourages creativity. Since only auditory information is available, the recipient must reconstruct the lack of visual elements on his/her own (Rodero Antón, 2008). Finally, sound fulfils a mnemonic function. It improves the memory of the content because the listener experiences listening more intensely (Balsebre, 2006; Sánchez-Cid, 2006; Romero-Valdecabres, 2017; Vidal-Mestre, 2018). From this perspective, the branded content technique applied to the sound medium adds value to brands because the evocative power of sound helps to increase recall.

PODCAST SETUP FOR BRANDS

On-demand consumption of podcasts allows users to listen to audio content at a time and place of their choice through a digital device. In addition, they have the option of subscribing to the content through an RSS code or tag having to access the source where the content is hosted (Nafría, 2007). This possibility contributes to the listener's loyalty to the format, while promoting the formation of a community (Barbeito-Veloso & Perona-Páez, 2019).

In terms of reach, it is a borderless format with global territorial coverage, which is very positive for brands. Thanks to the segmentation capacity of the digital media, podcast platforms also provide brands with consumer data through data mining, which in turn allows brands to plan their advertising campaigns according to the brand's target audience.

The podcast allows full use of sound language and techniques without the spatial and temporal limitations of radio. It uses the elements of audio –words, music, sound effects, and silence– and its journalistic genres. In addition, regarding the technical execution of the format, its recorded nature contributes to its perfection in the post-production phase.

Brands recognise the podcast as a unique way to connect with a diverse but loyal audience, which allows them to incorporate promotional messages adapted

to the format's communication style (Roca-Bardají, 2023). For all these reasons, podcasts are a suitable format for commercial use, through advertising techniques such as branded content. The result of applying this technique to the digital audio format is a branded podcast. It "increases corporate identity beyond the sale of the product" (Sellas et al., 2021), creates an emotional connection with the target audience, generates an interesting topic of conversation, and helps position the brand as an expert in the field of such topics (Geets, 2019). García-Estévez and Cartes-Barroso (2022) state that "the intention of a branded podcast is not as a mere advertisement by brands to sell or create an image but rather for the brand to be heard" (2022, p. 4).

IMMERSIVE SOUND TECHNIQUES APPLIED TO BRANDED PODCASTS

According to Vidal-Mestre, "sound has implicit properties that can serve as leverage for brands in the media ecosystem" (2018, p. 29). Immersive sound –also called surround sound or binaural sound– makes it possible to add authenticity to an artificial scenario, by creating sensations and environmental stimuli in the listener during the narration, allowing them to get the same sound perception as if they were physically in the place where the events take place (Erbes & Figueroa, 2021). Slater and Wilbur compare immersion with presence, defining it as "a state of consciousness, the -psychological- sense of being in the virtual environment" (Slater & Wilbur, 1997).

As for the reception of the immersive content, the listener can perceive its dimensionality when using standard stereo headphones or speakers with integrated spatial audio technology. A hi-fi sound system "creates an undeniable pull on the listener's consciousness, creating a sense of presence" (Calleja, 2012). The listener hears different frequencies in each ear, that must exceed 30 Hertz for the brain to decode them. Decoding allows the listener to determine the position, distance, and intensity of the sound sources.

Pueo and Sánchez-Cid state that surround sound has "the desire for a realistic construction or simply for maximum expressiveness" (2011, p. 167). The use of this technique helps the listener to feel part of the narrative, because they are always at the right spot of listening. The perspective of the spatial dimension allows the listener to imagine his/her movement in the soundscape, and thanks to the mental images created by the brain, the immersion in the narrative is enhanced (Romero-Valdecabres, 2017).

The use of binaural recordings creates a strong connection with the narrative's content (Street, 2014), which helps the listeners to remember because of the intensity with which they feel the experience. Thus, the more intense the sound experience, the more it will leave an impression on the receiver.

Other techniques for constructing experiential narratives are Autonomous Sensory Meridian Responses (ASMR) and alpha waves. ASMR occurs when listening to soft voices and certain soothing sounds. It creates a pleasant feeling of relaxation in the listener, which, depending on the person, can manifest itself in a tingling sensation in the neck and scalp. Cheadle (2012) refers to the sensory phenomenon as “the good feeling that no one can explain”, as a response of the sympathetic nervous system (Copeland, 2017). Alpha waves, in turn, are electromagnetic oscillations in the frequency range of 8 to 14 hertz that induce a state of relaxation in the listener. They are emitted by our brain when we are awake and enter a state of relaxation. They help to develop part of the potential of the human mind, which, in the term leads to in an improvement in memory and concentration (Makada et al., 2016). The technique is part of the so called binaural beat. Using two tones of different frequencies, one in each ear, the brain interprets them together. The result it perceives is the difference between the two tones. Binaural beats, also known as digital drugs, trigger certain cognitive or emotional states in the recipient. The recreational use of sound drugs and their effects have been the subject of several studies. The most recent study, by Barratt and colleagues (2022), confirms the value of the technique as an enriching experience for users. Depending on the sensitivity of the individual, they contribute to effects similar to psychoactive substances that produce an out-of-body sensation.

In addition to physical responses, immersive techniques also evoke emotions in the listener. Interest in the content is maintained and increased by the emotions. In front of an advertising product, emotion create a greater likelihood that the brand will be remembered (Ausín-Azofa et al. 2022).

These techniques are not usually used in radio because most of them can only be applied in the post-production phase, while the content of the radio medium is usually live. Podcasts, on the other hand, allow for the full implementation of immersive techniques because they are recorded. Combined with their digital nature and the absence of time constraints not imposed by a radio broadcast schedule, they can create more sophisticated products that experiment with setup and editing. Moreover, they represent a novelty, as it is not common to use these techniques in the creation of podcast narratives. They are more typical of other disciplines, such as the film or music industries.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY, METHOD AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research aims to approach the study of the podcast as a tool for delivering immersive branded content experiences. The objectives we pursue are the following:

- a. To assess the extent to which the immersive podcast is configured as a suitable format to deliver Endesa’s message to its audience through sound emission.

- b. Analyze and quantify the mechanisms Endesa uses to integrate it into the immersive narrative.

To achieve this objective, we used a mixed methodology. First, we conducted a case study, which allows obtaining qualitative and quantitative data. It focuses on the analysis of contemporary issues in which the researcher has no direct control (Yacuzzi, 2005). It allows us to answer the questions of why and how of a specific reality (Yin, 2014). The selected case was the first season of eight episodes of the documentary podcast *Sonidos que nos transforman* (Sounds that transform us) by Endesa, a Spanish company dedicated to the generation, distribution, and sale of electricity and gas. The podcast was produced by Godó Strategies –Godó Group– and published in the digital newspaper *La Vanguardia* from September to November 2021. The format is intended as a mouthpiece for the company's values, to promote its projects to create a more sustainable planet, and its commitment to people. It is an initiative by Endesa to disseminate the company's social and environmental sustainability projects (Endesa, 2021). It was selected due to the novelty of using sound immersion techniques in a branded podcast format. The second season is currently available.

It is important to stress that the lack of similar cases on podcast platforms is considered a limitation for this study. This prevents us from making comparisons and contrasting results. Therefore, in this paper we approach the topic without being able to draw generalizable conclusions. The branded podcast is a relatively new format as a brand communication strategy. Therefore, there are only a few the case studies in the scientific literature. From the searches on Google Scholar and the Scimago Journal Rank (SJR) indicator, the following contributions of interest to our research are highlighted:

- The study by Gülmez (2023), which analyses branded podcasts produced in Turkey, considering the brand, publication date, topic, podcast type, and number of episodes.
- The study by Fernandes and Morais (2021), which examines podcasting in fashion communication, considering the variables of content, topic, host, authorship, and entity.
- The paper by Barbeito-Veloso and Perona-Páez (2019) for the study of BBVA's Blink, which uses references to the brand, the issue number, date, title, duration, announcers, sound resources, and genres as indicators.
- The study by Sellas (2018) for the study of Aerolínea Momentos by Iberia, which analyses the content, the podcaster, interactivity, participation,

context of the podcast and its technical execution, replicating the PodCred Framework matrix, for analysis by Tsagkias and colleagues (2010).

Based on the review of the above-mentioned studies, a content analysis was designed including four analysis categories, considered the most appropriate to achieve the intended objectives:

1. Identification of the study units: title, duration, location, and description.
2. Content: program genre, topic and scenario, and content structure.
3. Qualitative and quantitative presence of the brand in the content.
4. Technical execution: immersive techniques, sound effects, and music used.

Internal work sheets were created for each chapter to systematically arrange the data.

Second, direct observation of the branded podcasts was complemented with two undirected exploratory interviews to ensure the rigor of our research. The interviews served to deepen our understanding of the topic and thus facilitated the analysis of the phenomenon. They allowed us to gather detailed information for the study that might appear opaque from direct observation, (De Miguel, 2005). Two professionals responsible for the production of the podcast were interviewed, namely Sílvia Resola, the project director, and Jordi Pascual, the sound engineer responsible for the technical supervision. Both interviews were conducted by telephone in August 2023.

RESULTS

The immersive narrative of *Sounds that transform us* takes place in different regions of Spain to provide audiences with information about Endesa's various social and sustainability projects that have a positive impact on the community and the environment (table 1). One of the main challenges was “how to provide audience with branded content that addresses a niche topic in the most attractive way possible, in order to reach as many listeners as possible” (S. Resola, personal communication, 10 August, 2023). Therefore, they decided to create an emotional connection with the listeners by explaining the brand's projects through experimental sound techniques (J. Pascual, personal communication, 10 August, 2023).

Based on the analyzed categories, the case study provides the results described below.

Regarding the content

The genre chosen by the brand is the sound documentary. The narrative is constructed through a narrator and voice clips of the project participants are used in each episode.

Throughout the content, the cities of Madrid and Barcelona are visited, as well as numerous municipalities of great ecological value, so that the local audiences can identify them. The narrative takes us to each of these places and lets us discover different geographical environments and their people in their sound dimension.

The narrative structure is repeated in each episode: intro, main content, and outro. These segments are used to identify the owners of the production: the brand (Endesa) and the publisher (*La Vanguardia*).

The narrative is shaped through the use of a narrator and the statements of the initiatives addressed.

The length of the episodes ranges from nine to 13 minutes.

| Episode | Duration | Location | Description |
|--|----------|---|--|
| 1. <i>Behind the scenes</i> (September 2021) | 13'47" | Madrid | Two Paralympic sportswomen tell their stories of overcoming their challenges at the Teatro Real. |
| 2. <i>Swim in a river with what you're wearing</i> (October 2021) | 12'44" | Mollera d'Escalarre and Sort, Lleida | Regulating the flow of the Noguera Pallaresa river is key to tourism and the sustainability of the area. |
| 3. <i>Soar over the Catalan Pyrenees like a vulture</i> (October 2021) | 9'25" | Senterada, Lleida | In the Catalan Pyrenees, it has been possible to recolonize the habitat of the black vulture. |
| 4. <i>Transitioning from counter service to online sales</i> (October 2021) | 9'33" | Barcelona | Centuries-old establishments are recovering from the effects of the pandemic by opting for digitalization. |
| 5. <i>This is what a sustainable day in Barcelona sounds like</i> (November 2021) | 11'39" | Barcelona | A tour of Barcelona to learn more about sustainable mobility. |
| 6. <i>How does a lignite mine transform into a blue lake?</i> (November 2021) | 11'24" | As Pontes, Galicia | A disused coal mine turned into a lake thanks to an environmental cleanup. |
| 7. <i>The solar bees that bring happiness to the town of Carmona</i> (November 2021) | 12'17" | Carmona, Sevilla | Bees contribute to the development of the city of Carmona. |
| 8. <i>Logrosán, the town that shines with its own light</i> (November 2021) | 9'09" | Valdecaballeros and Logrosán, Extremadura | Solar power plants contribute to local development while generating renewable energy. |

Table 1. Chapter, date, location and description of the podcast

Source: Own elaboration.

Results related to technical execution

The intro to the podcasts includes a call to action and recommends the use of a headphone system for listening to fully enjoy the immersive experience.

The narration of all episodes was created with sounds from reality recorded by binaural microphones. In the editing phase, and “the audio extracted from reality was processed with 3D audio panning software to increase the emotional intensity of certain sounds,” (J. Pascual, personal communication, 10 August, 2023). The editing of the series was done in the multitrack environment of the digital audio software Reaper.

Some of the effects were recorded using binaural microphones with recordings made on location in each episode, as well as unconventional microphone techniques such as underwater hydrophones or contact microphones. The rest of the effects came from commercial audio libraries.

Both pre-existing and newly created compositions were used for the music. Music production took place in a studio with analogue and digital synthesizers and effects units, sequencing was done with Reaper. Four independent interpretations of the *Lacrimosa* segment –Mozart, K. 626– were remixed for a continuously moving soundscape (episode 7, 1:16, table 1). This technique was also used in *Hildebrand* von Bingen's Hymnal (episode 7, 6:50, table 1). The newly created compositions were composed using external sources and remixed using 3D positioning, such as a rhythmic crescendo from the sounds of a basketball court (episode 1, 2:45, table 1), and an algorithmic composition using the sound of a piece of chalk writing on a blackboard (episode 8, 2:45, table 1). In these passages, “conventional radio language is replaced by a less literal and more evocative experience of writing that gives the listener the freedom to imagine” (J. Pascual, personal communication, 10 August, 2023).

As an alternative to music, silence was used as a metaphor to illustrate that, without the process of bee pollination, planet Earth will cease to exist and, silence will reign (episode 7, 2:20, table 1).

A deep male voice was chosen for the narration. Occasionally, the narrator's voice was also digitally processed to achieve positional impressions for the listeners, such as their distance, closeness and -side, front and back- position, or filters were used to give a mechanical, futuristic perception, or the feeling of hearing the narrator's voice in the background (episode 7, 2:28, table 1).

In addition to surround sound techniques, the ASMR technique was used with the sound of an aspirin effervescent tablet (episode 5, 06:36, table 1) and binaural beats were utilized with the ambient sounds in the high mountain regions (episode 3, 08:52, table 1).

Regarding brand presence

The brand is also mentioned throughout the content in different ways, either by the narrator, testimonials, collaborators and beneficiaries of the projects carried out by the brand. The brand is mentioned in the intro and outro of the podcasts as follows: “*La Vanguardia* and Endesa present: *Sounds that transform us.*” As for the appearance of the brand in the content, “thorough work is done on the script to subtly integrate it into the narrative so as not to interrupt the immersive atmosphere experienced by the user” (S. Resola, personal communication, 10 August, 2023).

In quantitative terms, the brand was found to appear between two and nine times in each episode (figure 1).

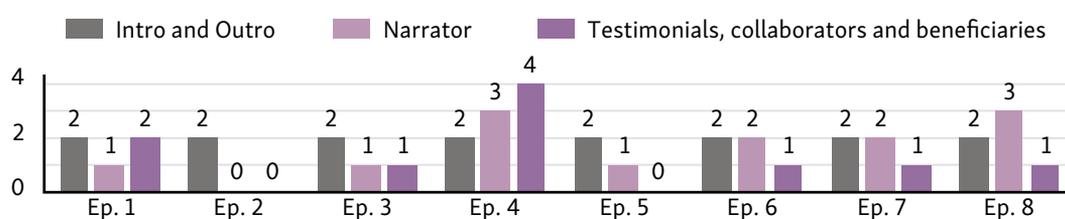


Figure 1. Presence of the brand name

Source: Own elaboration.

DISCUSSION

The sounds extracted from reality were taken from the core of the narrative. It is not a narrative supplemented by sound effects. The sound effects were the foundation on which the narrative was built. The traditional narrative, expressive, and ornamental function of sound effects is inverted to become the starting point of the narrative. The acoustic reality of the place where the action takes place is imposed on the other elements, acquiring a highly significant presence.

Experiential marketing is thus not only a creative process, but also requires an implementation methodology (Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2013; De Garcillán López Rúa, 2015). The extraction of sounds from reality should be of high quality, using appropriate recording systems that allow the sounds to be captured in such a way that they appear authentic. Their effectiveness depends on their appropriate use in the narrative and their technical execution. They should meet a communicative need, and not merely serve an ornamental function. Each element of the narrative –music, sound effects, speech, and silence– should be the result of their logical application, giving the content the character of a complete and meaningful sound puzzle. A balanced use of the elements in the various sounds is also necessary. An excess of any one of these elements can lead to a sensory overload, and a lack of their non-use results in a loss of meaning in the narrative. Their role is to complete the

content, and provide information through sounds that allow for correct decoding in the context of the narrative. The actual sounds must therefore be retrieved with suitable recording systems. Only in this way is it possible for the human brain to correctly decode the sound content. Sounds that do not correspond to reality are not perceived as such, so that the intended information does not achieve the desired effect. A coherent and balanced use of immersive techniques, a correct extraction of reality using appropriate systems, and accurate technical post-production are the key to a high-quality sound product. When these conditions are met, the content arouses emotions similar to those the listeners would experience if they were to have the experience physically. In such cases, the listener is no longer just listening, but takes an active role, and becomes part of the narrative.

Immersive techniques were applied to the documentary genre, lending credibility and rigor to the stories told. According to Panarese and Suárez-Villegas, branded content through narrative –referred to as docu-advertising by the authors– "seems more honest and transparent, more useful and sensitive to the social problems relevant to its target audience, closer to their everyday life and reality" (2018, p. 75). A journalistic narrative was chosen to match the rigorous context of the format that houses *La Vanguardia* digital, the leader of the digital press in Spain ("La Vanguardia vuelve"..., 2023).

To ensure optimal reception of the content, listeners are advised to use headphones, to ensure that the listeners can fully enjoy the techniques used and that no auditory information is lost. The use of headphones also creates an appropriate atmosphere to immerse listeners in a high-quality sound experience, that ensures the emotional value of the branded podcast and optimal results for the brand. When listening without headphones it is difficult for the human ear to detect the frequencies used to achieve the binaural effect. As a result, the listener misses out on valuable information needed to fully decode the content, which is detrimental to the intended goal: the immersive sound experience.

Regarding the music, it was almost exclusively composed and recorded specifically for each episode. Composing music in accordance with the content made it possible to match the emotional intensity of each narrative passage.

It must be said that the absence of sound has the ability to capture the listener's attention (Balsebre, 1995). While in the radio medium it is usually associated with a technical failure, in this case it was used as a creative weapon. Pure silence was deliberately used to give meaning to the narrative.

All these sound details, which may seem insignificant, enhance the content and help to improve the listener's experience.

As for brand presence, no persuasive messages are used that aim to promote the services offered by Endesa. The nature of the branded content advertising technique, in which the value of the content takes precedence over the commercial objective of the brand, is respected. The content that reflects the values the brand pursues through its sustainability plan. Listeners are also properly informed of content ownership. Even if this is not done explicitly, the message allows the listener to recognize the brand.

Another aspect that is considered is that episodes are no longer than 13 minutes. The *State of Branded Podcasts 2022 Report* (CoHost, 2022) confirms that branded podcasts that last between 21 and 30 minutes are the ones most appreciated by listeners. The short format is more appealing to listeners who are short on time, and especially to new generations who thrive in the so-called snack culture, consuming short communication formats and jumping from one piece of content to the next (Scolari, 2020).

Direct listening to the podcasts and reviewing the scripts provided by the producer verifies the absence of indications of technical and narrative errors. Proper methodological implementation, through an orderly narrative structure, careful editing of the podcasts, and the value of the journalistic content itself producing high-quality results.

CONCLUSIONS

In the context of our research, the sound immersion techniques used in *Sounds that transform us*, are presented as an emotional engagement tool that adds value to the narrative, but also to the brand and to audience. For the listeners, it is an enriching experience as they are captivated by the effects of sound immersion and become part of the narrative. For the brand, it helps position itself in the market as a provider of innovative sound content. In addition, the image the audience has of the brand is positively influenced when offering attractive and innovative experiential content, based on the positive actions the brand develops in and for the community.

Sound immersion techniques are not mere technical-artistic embellishments applied without casuistry. They aim to create an emotional connection between the listener and the brand through the experienced sound narrative –narrative engagement– leading to a high level of engagement and enjoyment. In short, binaural audio manages to generate higher levels of listener attention and interest, thanks to break from uniformity and innovative contrast (Rodero, 2015).

Through the analysis of the case study we were able to verify that sound immersion techniques help to increase the experiential character and value of Endesa's branded podcast, and that it is a suitable format to be implemented and transmitting brand values. The use of surround sound techniques transforms the podcast into an experience of emotional intensity for the listener, creating a lasting memory thanks to the greater sensory-perceptual impact with which the experience is felt. The value that the technique give to the narrative is beneficial to the brand because it strengthens the bond with the listener. Unlike radio, there are no time constraints imposed by the radio broadcast schedule, and the recorded nature of branded podcast allows for careful post-production and full use of immersive sound techniques.

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