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## Miscellaneous

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## Branded Podcast Classification Proposal Based on Brand Presence in the Narrative: From Brand-Free to Persuasive

### Abstract

The creation of branded content through the podcast is gaining weight in brand communication strategies. With branded content, brands reach new consumers with contents imbued with their values and personality and no persuasive intrusions. However, there are branded podcasts with a marked brand presence aimed at the selling or contracting of the products or services the brand represents. The main aim of this study is to propose a classification of branded podcasts based on the presence of the brand in the audio narrative and to analyse whether a high degree of branding in the branded podcast undermines the unintrusive nature of branded content and whether this converts the format into one of conventional advertising. To this end, we developed a proprietary qualitative-quantitative deductive method adapted to the research subject with which we examined 10 branded podcasts. Among the main conclusions, we highlight that the presence of a high degree of branding in the content undermines the brand-free nature of the branded content technique. When the brand's presence is high and its persuasive intention is perceived, the branded podcast acquires the intrinsic character of conventional advertising.

### Keywords

**Branded content, audio branded content, branded podcast, brand narrative, publipodcast.**

### 1. Branded content, the friendly advertising technique

Content creation has become the epicentre of integrated communication management for brands (De Miguel *et al.*, 2022). In 2021, branded content was the second most important source of revenues for 88% of media outlets after display advertising, according to data from Digiday+ (Puro Marketing, 2021). And earnings are forecast to increase fivefold over the next three years (IP Mark, 2022). In the audio medium, branded content is rarely implemented in radio, while in podcasting we observe exponential growth in the production of branded podcasts. In 2022, it was the second most chosen format for brands for the development of branded content audio actions, representing 34.7%; in comparison, in 2020, this figure stood at 30.8% (Scopen, 2022).

Despite the rise in branded podcasts, brands have been linked to content from the start. Through product placement, considered the origin of branded content by authors such as Lehu and Bressoud (2009) and Hudson and Hudson (2006), brands made their first foray in the Lumière brothers' short films in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as well as radio programmes and television series in the 1950s. However, in most cases, brands had yet to make their own contents, instead integrating themselves into preexisting contents that they used to reach new consumers.

In the hybrid technique of branded content, the content is newly created, being produced by the brand –effectively through third parties– and imbued with the brand's values and philosophy without the use of intrusive messages. The brand endures in the minds of consumers by creating content that is friendly and useful to the audience, without provoking the same level of rejection as conventional advertising because “it does not aim to directly provoke the desire to purchase a product” (Rodríguez-Rabadán, 2022, p. 35). The brand thus becomes a provider of experiences rather than a marketer of the product or service that it represents (Martí & Muñoz, 2008), fuelling conversations and sustaining audiences (Zomeño & Blay, 2021). Caro points out that when brands do not seem to be trying to sell anything, they force us to look for their meaning in other areas (1994, p. 38). In our view, branded content allows brands to show themselves as being humanized, working in the interest of the audience to provide friendly, advertising-free content and taking into consideration their interests without, apparently, asking for anything in return. The audience perceives it as an enriching experience aimed at providing them entertainment, information and education that is important to them despite being a brand message.

What is certain is that in the so-called post-advertising era, “content is king” (Del Pino & Castelló, 2015, p. 110). With the non-advertising technique of branded content, it no longer sells tangibles, it sells itself –the brand sells the brand– with a friendly, brand-free strategy. Offering positive experiences allows it to position itself in the market, earning a reputation and creating a community among its audience.

As we stated, branded content formats are created, generated, produced or co-produced by a brand based on its values and philosophy (Valiquete, 2013). It creates content to meet the consumer's entertainment, information or educational needs. The content becomes a “medium to transmit the brand's message” (Arroyo & Baños, 2018, p. 247).

Authors are unanimous about the unintrusive nature of the branded content strategy. Content created by the brand takes precedence over its commercial interests. The brand is placed in the background and on occasions does not even appear in the course of the content. Its presence becomes symbolic (Del Hoyo & Molano, 2020). There is no need for it to be explicitly mentioned (Castelló & Del Pino, 2014), as the nature of branded content is to reflect its values in the content, i.e. imbue the message with the brand without using intrusive language aimed at selling or contracting the products or services it represents. Thus, the presence of the brand is channelled through its values and personality and not through intrusive messages, as is the case with conventional advertising formats. With the strategy, the brand apparently abandons its economic interests and sheds the traditional persuasive nature to which we have become accustomed. All this contributes to establishing a more direct relationship with the consumer (Lehu & Bressoud, 2009; Martí, 2010; Nelli, 2012).

The mission of the branded content strategy is to connect with the audience by offering value for the consumer that has a lasting impact on their memory. Méndiz and García-Avis state that “branded content emerges as an effective formula to connect with the public and establish a medium- to long-term link” (2017, p. 346). The aim is not to achieve immediate sales or contracts, as is usually the case for conventional advertising, but to gain market notoriety, positioning itself as a brand of reference for consumers.

The core idea of branded content is to offer an experience for the audience. Brands seek to entertain, amuse, excite or surprise the public to create an emotional bond with them (Llorente *et al.*, 2021) and achieve the desired engagement with the consumer. If the experience is satisfactory, users will remember the brand for the content they have consumed, or, in other words, for what the brand did not want to sell them.

We observe that branded content possesses two fundamental characteristics that are configured as intrinsic conditions of the format: providing a benefit for the audience (either by informing, entertaining and/or educating) and prioritizing the content over the brand's commercial interests. In some instances, the presence of the brand is non-existent or minimal, while in others it can be more intrusive. Ultimately, the brand may or may not be present in the format to a greater or lesser degree, but it should always limit itself to offering content related to it, placing emphasis on the value of the content to its genuinely commercial interest.

In the last decade, branded content has become an established strategy for advertisers. The hybridization of the brand message in the narrative allows the brand to convey its principles and values through the content, offering the audience a less intrusive experience than conventional advertising (Rodríguez-Rabadán, 2022). The brand, aware of consumer fatigue in the face of advertising intrusions, focuses its efforts on creating content that allows it to achieve lasting, quality engagement. We are no longer dealing with advertising in its purest form with a call to action aimed at the selling or contracting of its products or services, but of friendly value proposals designed for the audience's enjoyment, information and education. In short, branded content allows the brand to transmit a positive, humanized image of itself (Aatker, 1997; Grillo, 2023) without seemingly seeking customers for its products or services, but rather an audience for its contents.

## **2. The power of sound applied to branded contents**

To the positive aspects that branded content contributes to brands as a communication strategy, we should add the value of its development in the audio medium. All audio content produced by and for a brand forms part of the construction its audio identity, a discipline known as audio branding (Allan, 2015). Audio branded content contributes to the creation of the brand's auditory landscape. Moreover, sound contributes to establishing an intimate relationship between the listener and the content and the voice that conveys the message (Bottomley, 2015; Barbeito & Perona, 2019). This occurs because it is designed to be consumed individually. Furthermore, the intimacy that it generates is synonymous with credibility.

To Vidal-Mestre (2018) sound is replete with functions that favour brands. It mainly contributes to the memorability of the contents –the mnemonic function– and awakens emotions in the recipient –the emotional function–. In addition, sound is the medium that most encourages creation. The listener, lacking visual elements, mentally constructs the images evoked by the sounds (Rodero, 2008; Méndiz, 2001).

Branded content is a flexible strategy, capable of being adapted to all media and constructing the narrative through its own tools and formats. As Llorente *et al.* (2022) state, “branded content supports many languages” (p. 130). The audio medium uses its own language: sound. The raw material of audio language manifests itself through words, music, sound effects and silence. These categories constitute the language of sound, commonly referred to as radio language due to radio's heritage (Balsebre, 1995; Romo, 1998; Rodero, 2005). With the arrival of digitalization, spoken audio consumption channels are expanding with podcasting, the new digital medium that allows spoken audio to be listened to based on the personalization of the contents and their on-demand consumption (Gallego, 2010; Barrios-Rubio, 2021). Thus, understanding that the language used by the audio medium goes beyond radio, in this study we will refer to it as audio language.

## 2.1. *Audio branded content: from radio to podcasting*

The production of branded spaces in the radio medium –entire programmes or programme sections– is residual in comparison to the rest of the advertising possibilities offered to advertisers. Our research effort has allowed us to document one of the first antecedents of branded content in Spanish radio broadcasting, Consultorio para la mujer Elena Francis [“Elena Francis’ Clinic for Women”], in addition to Consultori femení de Bellesa Eupartol [Bellesa Eupartol’s Clinic for Women”], on Radio Associació de Catalunya in 1936, a programme of the same genre that was also aimed at a female audience (Espinosa-Mirabet, 2010). Although semantically these programmes are not defined as branded content, in practice they cater to the nature of the technique. Consultorio para la mujer Elena Francis was broadcast for the first time in 1947 on Radio Barcelona. The station created the space at the request of Bel Cosmetics, owner of the Instituto de Belleza Francis. The brand’s aim was to connect with the female audience by offering advice on beauty and the home and by responding to their most intimate concerns through a clinic. To this end, the advertiser devised the fictitious character Dr Elena Francis, who answered the listener’s enquiries. The brand actively participated in the creation of content, as Francisca Elena Bes Calvet, wife of the owner of the beauty institute and its director, acted as the scriptwriter, being responsible for answering the letters written by listeners about their worries. From 1965 to its conclusion in 1984, Juan Soto Viñales took over the writing of the scripts.

As regards the programme’s internal structure, it was divided into a section on beauty advice in which the brand’s cosmetic products made their presence felt through commercial breaks (*El País*, 1984; Balsebre & Fontova, 2018) and another in which listeners’ letters were read out along with their corresponding answers. Due to time constraints, only seven letters could be answered in each programme, the rest being answered by post. Balsebre and Fontova (2018) point out that it was “one of the largest personalized mailing projects in Spain” (p. 48). Each letter received became a way to promote its products, which many listeners ended up buying (Porto Artal, 2020). This strategy makes the brand one of the pioneers in employing the technique of audio branded content on the radio. Although the brand is present in the first five minutes of the programme –in the beauty advice section with product spots– it creates and offers friendly, entertaining content, which prevails over the purely commercial intention.

Damas and Castellano (2006) state that the clinic started out as a sponsor, an assertion that we do not share, as the content was not pre-existing. It was the owners of the brand, friends of the station’s director, who requested the creation of a space to reach its target audience. Moreover, the brand actively participated in the creation of the content through the figure of the scriptwriter. With the exception of one commercial break in the beauty section, the brand’s cosmetic products were not mentioned on air but recommended later through personalized mailing, using the addresses the senders had provided in their letters. After listening to several programmes that have been preserved, we did not observe any audio identification elements such as intros, inserts or outros that indicate the programme to the audience with the sponsor’s formula. The only moments in which the brand is mentioned is in the jingle at the beginning of the programme and in the first part of it when it appears in a commercial break.

It is not until our era that branded content takes on a certain prominence in broadcast radio. Grupo PRISA led the way in staging the technique on radio in the entertainment programme *Yu no te pierdas nada* in *Los 40 Principales* (2012). The space was created by Vodafone’s sub-brand, Vodafone Yu, to connect with the teenage target audience. The brand created content designed for young audiences through humour and music. The programme succeeded in getting the listener to associate the Internet with the brand thanks to the programme’s extensive presence on social media and the call for audience participation through Twitter with the creation of a daily hashtag. The space created a community among

the listeners, which was reinforced through the use of their own language (Clementine, 2015) and favoured by the option of consuming the space through video streaming. The brand's visual presence was also reinforced, as its logo appeared in the roll-ons and on the microphones' covers or station banners. In 2013, following Vodafone's approach, Europa FM premiered *Un lugar llamado Mundo*, a content from the brewing company San Miguel. With this content, the brand was associated with leisure and fun. For Sánchez-Olmos (2020) the programme manifested "the brand's capacity to improve the music industry rather than generate experiences through the consumption of beer" (p. 24). With the aim of achieving greater audience participation (Balsebre-Torroja *et al.*, 2023), both programmes extended the cross-media story through other channels such as YouTube in the case of *Yu no te pierdas nada*, and television -Canal + 1 and Sexta- in the case of *Un lugar llamado mundo*. In addition, they were complemented with transmedia narratives through videos on social networks "open to incorporating the user experience in which the boundary between the product and consumer dissolves" (Martínez-Costa, 2015, p. 169). In contemporary audio branded content, cross-media extension and the creation of transmedia stories through other codes is a common phenomenon.

In the field of podcasting, digitalization has favoured the development of new commercial formats, a phenomenon that has only just begun (Piñeiro-Otero & Pedrero-Esteban, 2022). In this respect, the branded content technique has received a boost through the podcast.

The podcast brings together the positive aspects of the audio medium and those of the format itself. The digital format allows the contents to be exploited without time limits, the full use of audio language, the monetization of the content and its on-demand consumption, and enjoys global reach. With regard to its nature, the podcast has a radio soul and a digital body. The main differences between podcasting and radio lies in their recorded nature and on-demand consumption. Both use audio language to build the message and the podcast's structure corresponds to that of a radio programme. Consequently, it makes use of internal formal elements of identification and delimitation of radio continuity (jingle, intros, outros, inserts). However, it provides semantic and expressive innovation, recovering narratives recently forgotten by radio, such as those of fiction (Piñeiro-Otero & Pedrero-Esteban, 2022).

The advertising technique of branded content applied to the format is referred to as the branded podcast. The branded podcast brings in new consumers, who come to it as they are interested in content that provides them information, entertainment and education. Moreover, they can subscribe to the branded podcast. This favours listener loyalty (Barbeito & Perona, 2019), which translates into increased engagement and helps maintain the audience's top-of-mind awareness. In this direction, the study on the factors that determine podcast engagement carried out by García-Marín (2020) shows that atemporal content with no expiry date generates greater listener participation, as well as content that provides an answer to the doubts of the user community, especially on technological content.

Regarding the brand's presence in the branded podcast, in addition to being reflected in the audio content through its values and in the continuity elements, it can make use of the visual support provided by the digital medium. The visual support is usually used in two ways. First, the podcast has a main cover, like a record, and may have a specific one for each episode (Riaño, 2021) and, secondly, by describing the podcast through a brief textual synopsis. There is also the video podcast modality, which enables the visualization of the brand's audio narrative in the scenarios in which it takes place, either in the foreground or the background (Calvo, 2022). This cross-media option, referred to as audio image by López-Villafranca (2024), is becoming a valuable option for brands on the rise, as the visual resources that can appear in the video allow the brand to be associated with the content, reinforce the advertising nature of it and extend the communicative strategy beyond the audio medium.

The strengths of podcasting as a new spoken audio medium are not overlooked by brands, who take advantage of the effectiveness of the digital audio format for their commercial

exploitation through the technique of branded content. Along this line, the study by *The Guardian* (2022) on *Levels of attention of podcast advertising*, carried out by Tapestry, corroborates its effectiveness, revealing that for 51% of podcast consumers, branded content increases their opinion and motivates them to learn more about the brand.

### **3. Objective and research questions**

The main objective of this research is to propose a classification of branded podcasts based on the presence of the brand in the narrative and the mechanisms used through the analysis of study units. In turn, it seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. Does the presence of conventional or unconventional advertising in the narrative of the branded podcast undermine the brand-free nature of branded content?

RQ2. Does the branded podcast thus become an advertising format?

With this objective in mind, and with the two questions guiding the research, we now turn to the question of methodology.

### **4. Method**

The branded podcast is a recent phenomenon that is still little studied in the literature. Therefore, our work had to necessarily be of an exploratory nature. Specifically, the following steps were taken:

1. A review of the previous literature on studies on podcast and branded podcast classification, which helped us to establish the most suitable analysis indicators and parameters to derive a proposal for classifying branded podcasts and answer the research questions.
2. Direct observation of branded podcast cases for the selection of the study sample.
3. Analysis of the study cases based on the established indicators and parameters.

We believe that in order to obtain the desired results, this mixed approach method is the most appropriate, as it involves a detailed, comprehensive and systematic of enquiry into the object of interest.

#### **4.1. Literature review**

The classifications of podcasts and branded podcasts by academia were reviewed to extract those elements that may be useful for this study. Based on the key research taxonomy – podcast and branded podcast–, we used the Scimago Journal Rank (SJR) and Google Scholar databases. The first search engine is validated in all scientific fields, providing a well-recognised series of indicators on the quality and impact of publications and journals based on information from Scopus. The selection of the second scientific search engine was determined by the evidence that “Scholar provides citation counts that are broader than those covered by controlled databases” (Halevi, Moed & Bar-Ilan, 2017).

Proposals for classifying podcasts according to different criteria were extracted: the proposal of Tenorio (2019), with a classification according to funding; that of Cabeza de Vaca (2019), based on thematic criteria; and that of Piñeiro-Otero (2020), who classifies feminist podcasts, among others. With regard to the proposed classifications of branded podcasts, only one study by García-Estévez and Cartes-Barroso (2022) was identified, which groups several previous classifications and applies them to branded podcasts, establishing three large groups of indicators: formal (periodicity, duration and distribution platform), content and storytelling (content function, theme, podcast format, hosts and multiplatform or transmedia) and the nature of the company (professional sector, company size, podcast production, podcast’s brand-theme relationship).

#### 4.2. *Sample materials*

For the analysis of the study units, 10 branded podcasts were selected based on the following qualitative criteria:

1. Accessibility for the public: openly available podcasts on the most listened to audio platforms in Spain during the period 2017 to 2022 (Spotify, iVoox, Apple Podcast and Podium Podcast).
2. Geographical location of the production source and language: Produced in Spain in Spanish.
3. Time frame: Published between 2017 and 2022.
4. Notoriety: That they have been recognised as relevant cases by the branded content and marketing professional sector (BCMA, IAB Spain and IPMark, AEBrand, leading entities on the study of branded content).
5. Case study: to avoid the random selection of episodes available of each series, we studied episode 1 of each case. Taking these variables into consideration, the following podcasts were chosen (in brackets, the brand name): *Bebé a Bordo* (Fisher Price); *Pienso luego actúo* (Yoigo); *Sonido Morse* (Mahou); *Crónicas del futuro* (Coca-Cola); *Abrimos la ópera* (Endesa); *Start* (Correos); *Compartiendo conocimientos* (BBVA); *Cuando el descanso es sueño* (IKEA); *Encuentros* (Fundación Telefónica) and *¿Quién decide?* (Seagram's Gin).

#### 4.3. *Analysis indicators and parameters*

In order to be able to determine the extent of the brand's presence in the content and the mechanism employed to do so, and taking the literature consulted as a reference, the following indicators and parameters were taken into account:

- i) Title, season and episode number;
- ii) Brand;
- iii) Audio genre employed: report (Legorburu *et al.* 2021), fiction (Pedrero-Esteban *et al.* 2023; Rodero, 2004), interview, talk show or debate;
- iv) Description of the content: brief synopsis of the content;
- v) Dissemination of brand values and description: specifies whether the format disseminates or not the values the brand champions and describes them;
- vi) Purpose of content: determines what the brand's intention is in offering the audience content, namely, to inform, entertain and/or educate;
- vii) Brand's audio presence: specifies the mechanism used by the brand for its audio integration into the content. Observes the presence of conventional brand advertising (spot or mention), the integration of the brand through continuity elements (intro, outro and/or insert) or through spontaneous allusions by the branded podcast host, brand representatives or testimonies. In addition, the duration of the brand's audio presence in the format is included; and
- viii) The brand's visual presence: specifies the brand's name and/or logo in the episode cover and/or the brand's name in the episode's descriptive text, as well as the number of visual impacts.

For the coding and classification of the data, an analysis sheet was created that took into account the aforementioned study indicators and parameters:

**Figure 1.** Analysis sheet for audio branded content formats.

Indicators	Study Parameters			
Title / Season / Episode Number				
Brand				
Gender Used				
Content Description				
Dissemination of brand values	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	Brand values description:	
Purpose of content	Inform <input type="checkbox"/>	Entertain <input type="checkbox"/>	Form <input type="checkbox"/>	
Brand's presence	Mechanism used		Number of appearances	Duration
	Conventional Advertising	Spot	<input type="checkbox"/>	00'00'00 "
		Mention	<input type="checkbox"/>	00'00'00 "
	Audio Presence	Intro	<input type="checkbox"/>	00'00'00 "
		Outro	<input type="checkbox"/>	00'00'00 "
		Insert	<input type="checkbox"/>	00'00'00 "
	Allusions	Anchor	<input type="checkbox"/>	00'00'00 "
		Brand representative	<input type="checkbox"/>	00'00'00 "
		Testimony	<input type="checkbox"/>	00'00'00 "
	Total		<input type="checkbox"/>	00'00'00 "
	Visual Presence	Cover	<input type="checkbox"/>	
		Named / Logo	<input type="checkbox"/>	
		Chapter Text	<input type="checkbox"/>	
		Total		<input type="checkbox"/>
	Total brand presence		<input type="checkbox"/>	

Source: Own elaboration.

## 5. Results

The results reveal that brands are present throughout the branded podcast narrative to varying degrees, using different formula:

- a) On the one hand, by means of the brand's audio presence, through its values in the body of the content; with the inclusion of the brand's name in the intros/outros; through allusions to the brand by the podcast hosts; with the allusions of the testimonies; with the participation of the brand in the construction of the narrative through representatives.
- b) On the other, by means of visual elements consisting of a general description of the podcast, descriptive text of the episode, the brand's logo in the branded podcast's cover.

### 5.1. Results related to the brand's audio presence

In all the cases in the sample, the core idea of the branded content technique was fulfilled: the content is used to disseminate the brand's values and personality without the appearance of intrusive commercial messages aimed at the purchase or contracting of the products or services the brand represents. In addition, we observed coherence between the brand's values and those of the content produced.



**Table 1.** Gender, content, and values of the sample materials.

PODCAST	GENDER	CONTENT	VALUES
Bebé a Bordo (Fisher Price)	Fiction	Children’s entertainment through a story.	Grow up playing. Toys stimulate the imagination.
Pienso luego actuó (Yoigo)	Documentary	Presentation of a self-employment project aimed at people with intellectual disabilities.	The brand is committed to breaking down the communication barriers of people with limitations.
Sonido Morse (Mahou)	Fiction	Narrative about the last derby played at Calderón Stadium.	Linking to moments of leisure; Sporting Successes.
Crónicas del futuro (Coca-Cola)	Fiction	A girl’s awareness of pollution in the seas.	Commitment to a sustainable planet.
Abrimos la ópera (Endesa)	Documentary	Travel back in time to the 14 <sup>th</sup> -century Spanish court against the backdrop of a Donizetti opera.	Dissemination of operatic culture.
Start (Correos)	Documentary	The members of a <i>start-up company</i> talk about their initiative.	Brand that supports entrepreneurs.
Compartiendo conocimientos (BBVA)	Documentary	Guides to growing digital business.	Brand that supports SMEs.
Cuando el descanso es sueño (IKEA)	Interview	Chapter dedicated to neuroscience and rest. Interview with a brand representative and an educator.	Brand that looks after the well-being of consumers.
Encuentros (Fundación Telefónica)	Documentary	Broadcast of primatologist Jane Goodall’s lecture.	Commitment to science and the advancement of society.
¿Quién decide? (Seagram’s Gin)	Talk show	Connecting to current affairs through relaxed conversations in a bar.	A moment of calm, of reflection.

Source: Own elaboration.

In general, two radio continuity elements were observed –the intro and outro–, which were used as a tool to inform the listener of the branded nature of the content. Specifically, 70% of the podcasts made use of both or one (Table 3) in which the brand is identified as the content generator. We note that none of the podcasts selected included inserts to delimit the format’s advertising nature, a common feature of radio continuity elements.

With regard to brand naming, in 30% of the sample productions, the brand is named throughout the narrative. Of the same percentage, the podcast host reinforces the brand’s nature by informing the audience that it is listening to content produced by it.

We did not observe any persuasive advertising intrusions through the subjects that construct the narrative, nor through conventional advertising formats such as spots or mentions.

A more explicit presence of the brand was heard in the Fundación Telefónica podcast, followed by Endesa and Fisher Price. In the cases of Ikea and BBVA, the brand constructs the narrative with the help of a company representative, who acts as an expert in the subject matter addressed in the podcast. In the remaining cases, the subjects were external to the

company. In all cases, with the exception of Ikea, the brands limited themselves to transmitting their values and personality through related content without offering their products or services. In Ikea's branded podcast, the brand is discussed when the representative describes the functions they perform in the company and the benefits their work brings to customers.

With regard to the Fisher Price branded podcast, the audio design is based on the sounds made by its toys. In this way, the brand is present in the narrative through sound elements that convey its personality and that the audience can associate with its products.

There is a low temporal presence of the brand names over the total content length (Figure 2). In 2 of the 10 study cases, the brand producing the content is not named. These are the paradoxical cases of Mahou's Sonido Morse podcast and Seagram's ¿Quién decide? podcast, which, despite being an audio format, only uses the visual support to inform of its advertising nature in the episode covers.

**Figure 2.** Temporary presence of the named brand in the podcast episodes.



Source: Own elaboration.

## 5.2. Results related to the brand's visual presence

All of the branded podcasts in the sample employed visual support to transmit the content's branded nature to the audience. The brand is present through its logo on the podcast's main and/or specific cover or in the general textual description of the podcast and/or in every episode.

**Table 2.** Visual and audio presence of the brand in Sonidos que nos transforman.

PODCAST	Visual presence		Audio Presence				Brand representative
	Cover	Text	Continuity elements	Content	Anchor	Testimonies	
Bebé a Bordo (Fisher Price)	YES	NO	INTRO	NO	-	NO	-
Pienso luego actuó (Yoigo)	YES	NO	INTRO OUTRO	YES	YES	NO	-
Sonido Morse (Mahou)	YES	NO	-	NO	-	NO	-
Crónicas del futuro (Coca-Cola)	YES	YES	INTRO OUTRO	NO	-	NO	-
Abrimos la ópera (Endesa)	YES	NO	INTRO OUTRO	NO	NO	NO	-
Start (Correos)	YES	YES	INTRO OUTRO	YES	YES	YES	-

Compartiendo conocimientos (BBVA)	YES	YES	SALIDA	YES	NO	YES	YES
Cuando el descanso es sueño (IKEA)	YES	YES	INTRO OUTRO	NO	YES	NO	YES
¿Quién decide? (Seagram's Gin)	YES	YES	NO	NO		NO	-

Source: Own elaboration.

## 6. Discussion

One of the main characteristics of branded content is its brand-free nature, understood as the absence of intrusive brand messages aimed at the selling or contracting of the commercial asset the brand represents. Our analysis of 10 branded podcasts reveals that all of the sample units conform to the advertising discipline, offering content that distances itself from the intrusive promotion of any type of product or service. The analysis has allowed us to establish that the presence of the brand in the audio narrative can be manifested through different scenarios, and mechanisms to achieve it may present distinct scenarios and mechanisms. The detailed observation of these scenarios leads to a proposed branded podcast classification based on the brand's presence.

Firstly, we observed branded podcasts in which the brand is absent throughout the narrative (Seagram's Gin and Mahou). In these cases, the brand chooses to forego a nominal audio presence in favour of content creativity and only identifies its authorship through continuity elements –intros/outros– external to the narrative.

Secondly, we identified branded podcasts in which the brand's presence is minimal (Fisher Price, Endesa, Coca-Cola, Yoigo and Correos), in which, in addition to presenting itself through continuity elements, may also do so through the hosts or testimonies that participate in the narrative. These two scenarios would be classified as pure branded podcasts, as they fulfil the technique's brand-free nature by having no or low brand presence with no persuasive messages.

And finally, we identified branded podcasts in which the brand is present in the content through the mechanism of representation (Ikea and BBVA). In this category, a brand representative participates in the construction of the storytelling and transmits the brand's values. The participation of the representative, generally an expert in the subject matter, is usually identified as such. Although the content offering prevails over the brand's commercial intention, its presence increases in the narrative. This category could be called participative branded podcast because the brand's narrative is constructed through subjects who represent the brand, the brand's presence increases and there are no persuasive messages.

To this proposed classification should be added the category of branded podcast to refer to those that integrate in the narrative messages aimed at persuading the audience about the brand's products or services, either by including conventional advertising, such as spots or references, or unconventional, such as spontaneous allusions. We could refer to this case as an intrusive branded podcast, defined by the presence of commercial messages with a clear persuasive intention.

**Table 3.** Branded podcast classification proposal based on brand presence.

	PURE	PARTICIPATORY	INTRUSIVE
<b>Content</b>	Unbranded content	Brand-centric content	Content about the brand
<b>Level of brand presence</b>	Low	Middle	High
<b>Comercial purpose</b>	Zero	Middle	High
<b>Brand Presence</b>	Through its values	Through Brand Representatives	Intrusive messages
<b>Brand identification</b>	Optional	Yes	Yes

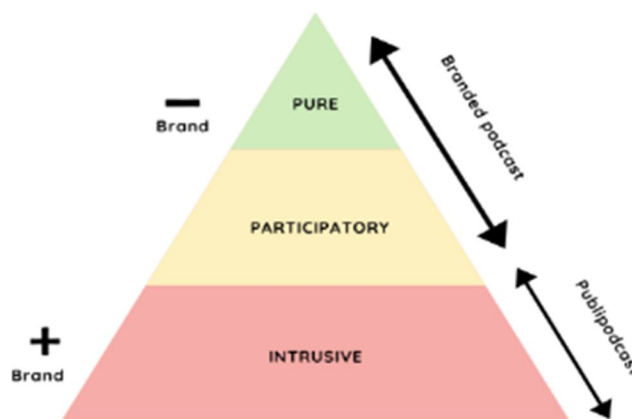
Source: Own elaboration.

Regarding RQ1, which considers whether the inclusion of conventional or unconventional advertising in the course of a branded podcast undermines its brand-free nature, we contend that any message with a commercial intention distances the branded podcast from the technique of branded content, shifting it closer to the persuasive nature of conventional advertising.

In this context, the brand moves from its original role of entertaining, informing and educating to also persuading, and transforms the focus from offering content based on its *raison d'être* to selling the brand. Consequently, in answer to RQ2, the intrusive branded podcast would acquire the characteristic of advertising and lose its status as a branded content asset. In this respect, we suggest that it would be appropriate to revise its taxonomy and refer to the result as a pseudo-format, calling it a *publipodcast*, for example

It is important to note that the intrusive branded podcast should not be confused with the corporate podcast. The latter is configured as a tool aimed at communicating a company's corporate identity (Sellas, 2018) without the purpose of directly promoting the products or services it represents. Its main role is "to add value to the strategic-communicative management of corporations and to reinforce the emotional value of their intangible assets" (Barbeito-Veloso & Perona-Páez, 2019, p. 1). However, if it goes beyond this by resorting to persuasive brand messages, it could also be considered as acquiring the traditional value of conventional advertising.

**Figure 3.** Branded podcast categories and taxonomy proposal.



Source: Own elaboration.

The presence of the brand in the branded content narratives analysed is practically symbolic, as "its essence lies in the subtlety with which the brand is presented, ceding to the content itself" (Rogel del Hoyo & Marcos-Molano, 2020, p. 69). Tuomi (2010) argues that in some situations it may be necessary to turn to conventional advertising so that the audience associates the content with the brand. We do not agree with this argument, as we believe that the presence of any form of advertising that is intrusive, conspicuous and evident to the listener undermines the brand-free nature of branded content. Beyond the conventional advertising formats such as spots or product references (audio product placement) and unconventional formats such as interviews with a high commercial content, there are unintrusive ways of informing the audience about the nature of the format. It is important to point out that, by law, the creator of the content must identify the commercial nature of the branded podcast to avoid incurring in misleading advertising (Art. 3 of the General Advertising Law, Law 34/1988, of 11 November). In order to comply with this regulatory requirement, as all of the branded podcasts in the sample make clear, the listener is informed of the brand's nature through intros and/or outros. These include semantic formula such as "a content by" or "a content by ... for." Moreover, the podcast hosts can also underline the ownership of the content throughout the storytelling (Yoigo, Correos and Ikea).

## 7. Conclusions

The method put forward in this study has allowed us to derive a proposed classification of branded podcasts based on the presence of the brand in the content. As a result, we have identified three categories of branded podcast, which we term pure, participative and persuasive.

We have also identified the mechanisms the brand uses for this purpose, including continuity elements –intros/outros and inserts–, podcast host, the brand’s voice in the form of a representative, or with participants in the narrative, such as testimonies. And beyond the audio narrative, through the visual dimension, with the inclusion of the brand’s logo on the branded podcast’s cover. The cover not only reinforces the brand’s identity but also provides the listener valuable information in order to complete the understanding of the story (Calvo, 2017). In addition, we have gathered quantitative data on the time dedicated by the brand to demonstrate the ownership of the content it has created, observing a proportional increase as a function of the branded podcast category.

With regard to the research questions, we can state that the presence of conventional or unconventional advertising with a high degree of persuasion during the course of the branded podcast dilutes its brand-free nature. This is logical considering that the advertising intrusion undermines the base on which the technique of branded content is constructed, thus turning it into an advertising pseudo-format.

However, the limitations of this study need to be taken into account. Firstly, we have been confronted with a subject almost unexplored in the academic literature. Unsurprisingly, the lack of research on the presence of brands in branded content and to an even more limited extent in podcasts, represented a significant challenge for our research. Secondly, the proposed classification is based on only 10 study units, which makes it impossible to generalize the results obtained and obliges us to present these results as an approximation. Thirdly, despite the existence of cases considered branded podcasts that incorporate intrusive messages, this category was not identified in our study. We believe this is due to the fact that one of the criteria used to define the research sample was the branded podcast’s notoriety, i.e. that it is recognized as a representative case of branded content by the branded content creation and marketing professional sector. This obliged us to establish a non-empirical definition of the category.

Finally, regarding future lines of research, we note the need for an in-depth analysis of persuasive branded podcasts, as we have only managed to touch on this phenomenon. It would also be interesting to expand the research to branded content in radio in order to identify their patterns and compare them with podcasting.

Despite these limitations, this study represents an initial step by presenting, for the first time, a proposed classification of branded podcasts based on the presence of the brand in the narrative. This classification can serve as a basis for future research and contributes to literature specializing in the advertising discipline of branded content in the field of podcasting.

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