

# *The intimacy factor: How podcast parasocial relationships shape advertising*

*O fator intimidade:  
como as relações parassociais dos podcasts  
moldam a publicidade*

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## *Abstract*

In an era where people are connected almost 24/7, individuals seek to know what their favorite media personas are experiencing. Parasocial relationships thrive in this digital landscape, fostering connections without physical proximity. This phenomenon is notably evident in podcasting, where audiences forge intimate connections with hosts. Having realized this, every day, more marketers are now choosing this medium to advertise their brands throughout. The influence of parasocial relationships on podcast ads is a complex interplay where fostering connections and potential consumer manipulation meet. Understanding how and why individuals trust podcast hosts regarding their consumer behavior is an advantage to any brand.

**Keywords:** Podcast advertising; parasocial relationship; persuasive communication; trust and credibility; consumer behavior

## *Resumo*

Numa era em que as pessoas estão conectadas quase 24 horas por dia, sete dias por semana, os indivíduos procuram saber o que as suas personas favoritas dos meios de comunicação social estão a experimentar. Num mundo cada vez mais digital, que promove conexões sem proximidade física, as relações parassociais tendem a prosperar. Este fenómeno é muito evidente nos *podcastings*, onde não raras vezes o público estabelece conexões íntimas com os apresentadores. Tendo percebido isso, cada vez mais profissionais de marketing estão a escolher esta ferramenta de comunicação para anunciar as suas marcas. A influência que as relações parassociais têm nos anúncios de *podcast* é uma interação complexa onde o fomento de conexões e a potencial manipulação do consumidor se encontram. Compreender como, e por que os indivíduos confiam nos apresentadores dos *podcasts* é hoje uma vantagem para qualquer marca, no que diz respeito ao comportamento do consumidor.

**Palavras-chave:** Publicidade em podcast; relacionamento parassocial; comunicação persuasiva; confiança e credibilidade; comportamento do consumidor

## Introduction

Contrary to many of the new digital mediums, whose launch and rise look like a rocket, the implementation of the podcast industry in the market can be compared to the take-off of an A380 airplane. It took a while to get up without that much noise, buzz, or word-of-mouth (WOM), but it probably stood visible and at the top for a much longer period. After a launch that was not so popular and decades of almost exclusivity to some niche audiences, it seems that podcasting has finally reached general public recognition, with millions of daily users all around the globe. Moreover, companies, brands, and marketers are now also aware of the power of this medium and acknowledge how “podcast hosts are becoming trusted influencers with loyal communities, offering greater opportunity for consumer engagement and positive brand outcomes” (Brinson & Lemon, 2023, p. 558). But is it all good news?

To answer that, one should examine constructs like the parasocial relationships created between hosts and their audiences, trust, authenticity, transparency, credibility, and

the moral issues raised by the (more or less) ethical use of this tool in the advertising industry. The goal of this article is to explore the relationship between these concepts and their impact on consumers’ behavior from a commercial communication point of view.

## *The rise of podcasts*

A podcast is an audio digital communication channel broadcast in the form of an individual (Swiatek, 2018) that enables the sharing of information with individuals across various regions of the country and the globe. It consists of audio-based content organized into episodes, which can either be streamed or downloaded for listening anytime and anywhere (Rime et al., 2022).

Podcasts have emerged as a game-changer in the media world, redefining how people access and engage with news and information (Dhiman, 2023), and evolved as a powerful method for reaching individual listeners (Rajput & Gandhi, 2024, p.593). Much of their popularity lies in the fact that podcasts offer a variety

of content in several presentation formats, such as interviews, monologues, panel discussions, factual and fictional stories, or information recycling.

Moreover, podcasting emerges as a unique way of communicating, as it enables not only individual creators but also bigger companies to establish a direct communication channel with all their stakeholders that can be easily distributed through social media (Marx et al., 2021).

Motivations for using podcasts, compared to other media, according to McClung and Johnson (2010), include entertainment, time change, building libraries, a favorable view of advertising, and a social aspect that revolves around discussion of the programs with other listeners.

In terms of marketing, Podcasts are also considered a very effective tool, as they can reach a specific audience and create value for listeners by being both informative and educational (Dhiman, 2023).

According to the website Backlinko<sup>1</sup>, there are currently 546.7

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<sup>1</sup> - <https://backlinko.com/podcast-stats#podcast-growth>

million podcast listeners worldwide, and this number is growing, with a forecast that it will reach 651.7 million by 2027. As of 2024, 47% of the 12+ population in the US are monthly podcast listeners, showing an all-time high share to date.

Some hosts have many thousands or millions of followers, which makes them very important influencers, a fact that brands and marketers are naturally aware of.

#### ***What is podcast advertising?***

According to McClung and Johnson (2010), podcast advertising is the strategy of endorsing products, services, or brands through audio commercials embedded within podcast episodes. This type of advertising has grown rapidly in recent years, with content creators realizing its ability to attract an engaged and loyal audience (Rajput & Gandhi, 2024). They can be presented in a variety of ways, such as pre-roll ads, that are played before the podcast episode begins, mid-rolls, played during the episode, or post-roll ads,

for those played after its conclusion (Bulakh et al., 2023). Advertising through podcasts, in contrast to the world's most important audio medium, the radio, which caters to a wide audience, allows a more precise reach of a specific target (Schultz, 2023). For Rajput and Gandhi (2024), podcasts are the exact location for organizations to reach clients essentially due to their private traits and involvement.

Regarding the overall perception of this type of advertising among consumers, the response is positive. According to a survey done in the United States in 2023, a significant majority of the individuals who listen to podcasts described podcast ads as captivating, pertinent, and unforgettable (Majidi, 2023). Notably, the study found that "6 out of 10 podcast listeners said they purchased from the advertiser" (Majidi, 2023, p. 4).

Podcast advertising allows, therefore, to reach and engage with the audience in a very effective way, in part by tapping into the trust and connection that have been built between the host and the listeners (Bezbaruah & Brahmbhatt, 2023).

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### ***Parasocial relationships***

The concept of Parasocial Relationships (PSR) was initially introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956), defining it as a phenomenon wherein individuals perceive a sense of face-to-face connection or closeness with performers or media personalities through a mass communication platform, such as television, radio, or movies. More recently, Marx et al. (2021) defined the PSR as a psychological relationship experienced by a consumer of a mass medium.

Despite being a one-sided relationship in which the individual is only familiar with the persona through media, the persona remains unaware of the individual's existence. This perception of intimacy is established through the performer's direct engagement with the audience, the inclusion of personal stories, and the active involvement and response from the audience (Xiang et al., 2016). Thus, parasocial engagement blurs the line separating authentic social connection from mediated identification with the persona.

In recent times, the emergence of social media platforms has disrupted

the traditional concept of the "fourth wall" and uncovered a previously unexplored opportunity to enhance the communication dynamics between media personas and the individuals watching, which contributes not only to stronger parasocial relationships but also allows for them to be established more easily (Hoffner & Bond, 2022). Regarding podcasts, Perks and Turner (2019, p.13) refer to them as "pathways to parasocial relationships".

Moreover, the definition provided by Horton and Wohl (1956) also states that individuals who engage in PSR may express their loyalty through a range of activities, which can subsequently influence their behavior, such as the acquisition of products recommended by those personas.

### ***Influence of parasocial relationships on consumer behavior***

Extensive research has focused on this capacity to influence individuals, specifically when considering influencer marketing and social media. For Campbell and Farrell (2020), influencer marketing "is the

practice of compensating individuals for posting about a product or service on social media" (p. 469). As public personas, sometimes with millions of followers, and therefore often elevated to the status of rising stars (Dias & Duarte, 2022b), these SMIs are increasingly being approached by brands to enhance the visibility of their products and stimulate their sales. Moreover, several studies have shown that parasocial relationships with SMIs significantly influence consumer behavior, leading to changes in expectations, brand evaluations, and purchase intentions (Aw et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2021; Dias & Duarte, 2022a; Tran et al., 2019). Nevertheless, Audrezet et al. (2020) found that besides taking advantage of their awareness and influence to obtain gains through brand partnerships, SMIs should know that followers also value their intrinsic motivations and noncommercial orientation.

When individuals develop a PSR they experience a feeling of connection, trust, and familiarity towards an influencer (a media persona), even though the relationship is unidirectional. And it is this sense of

connection that can lead to several effects on consumer behavior. Specifically, considering the positive correlation between the concept and the effectiveness of persuasive communication (Breves et al., 2019), where recommendations, endorsements, and product placements carry greater weight when done by the persona, seeing as the individuals perceive them as trustworthy sources of information, potentially leading to the adoption of opinions and behaviors (Breves & Liebers, 2022). Rajput and Gandhi (2024) also demonstrated that the information shared by podcasters and their likability significantly influence how listeners perceive podcasts and the brands they endorse, particularly when it comes to purchasing products. Furthermore, this connection has a substantial influence on the assessment of brands. Consumers tend to link brands that are supported by their favored persona with positive characteristics and values, which in turn enhances their brand loyalty and their inclination to interact with the brand's products and services (Aw et al., 2023). Finally, according to Kay et al. (2020), when advertisements are

explicitly disclosed as such, there is a potential for further enhancement of trust in both the persona and the endorsed brand since this practice is perceived as a sign of transparency and integrity. Audrezet et al. (2020) referred to two authenticity management strategies for SMIs, which are increasingly being approached by brands to promote products, that emerged from their research: passionate and transparent authenticity.

### ***Effectiveness of parasocial relationships in podcast advertising***

When considering parasocial relationships between podcast hosts and their audience, Daniela Schlütz and Imke Hedder (2022) emphasize three crucial elements that play a significant role in its formation: genuine interest in the listeners by the host, social and behavioral attractiveness of the host, and the conversational tactics employed. This is supported by the studies of Rajput and Gandhi (2024), which revealed positive interactions between podcast influencers and viewers, and Nadora's (2019)

research, which proved that the behavior of podcast hosts can influence how listeners respond to them.

Results from Brinson et al. (2023) indicate that the parasocial relationship (PSR) with the podcast host reduces the impact of the persuasive evaluation concerning the promotional message, which indirectly increases their intention to seek more information about the advertised brand. Additionally, when hosts engage in parasocial interactions, listeners may feel that their investment in the parasocial relationship (PSR) is recognized and valued, causing them to feel an even stronger physical and emotional connection with the hosts.

As addressed before, this connection leads to feelings such as trust towards the host, as their endorsements connect with audiences who see them as reliable allies rather than traditional marketers. Hence, podcast ads can be particularly more effective when the message is presented by the hosts themselves (Schlütz & Hedder, 2022), given that individuals who were exposed to a message from the host indicate an inclination to actively pursue additional details

regarding the promoted brand (Brinson et al., 2023). That is, even when listeners understand the persuasive tone of the message, they may still prioritize their PSR with the host over their recognition of marketers' intention to persuade them. On the other hand, individuals who lack a sense of connection with the host can have negative feelings towards the promotional message, seeing it as a covert attempt to persuade, heightening their skepticism and persuasion coping defenses, and even impacting their purchase intentions (Brinson et al., 2023).

Regarding the ad itself, its effectiveness could be enhanced by departing from a scripted approach and allowing the host to integrate the ad seamlessly into their content. This approach preserves the integrity of the host-listener relationship, avoiding the potential damage caused by scripted ads. Moreover, this strategy enhances the credibility of the message, creating a perception of a personalized recommendation rather than a rehearsed advertisement (Moe, 2023). Nevertheless, this situation highlights a delicate balance, as

ethical concerns arise concerning distinguishing between authentic content and persuasive communication.

#### ***Ethical considerations and transparency***

From an ethical standpoint, leveraging parasocial relationships for advertising in podcasts, as in all other forms of commercial communication, raises concerns about transparency, consumer manipulation, and the blurring of boundaries between entertainment and commercialized content. Transparency in sponsored content within podcasts is crucial for both brands and hosts.

For this reason, the majority of countries worldwide have statutory laws or industry organizations—or often both—to oversee advertising conduct and content. In the UK, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), an independent industry-established organization, serves as the regulatory body responsible for creating and enforcing advertising codes of conduct across various media and platforms. These codes are developed by the Committees of Advertising

Practice (CAP). The ASA collaborates with the European Advertising Standards Alliance (EASA), which adheres to the “blue book” guidelines governing advertising practices across Europe. In the United States, the Association of National Advertisers (ANA) partners with the American Advertising Federation (AAF) and the Council of Better Business Bureaus (BBB) (Franklin et al., 2009).

The disclosure of the promotional nature of the content is vital to inform listeners and create awareness when hosts endorse products or services. This way, it is possible to not only foster trust between hosts and their audience but also safeguard the integrity of the podcast industry (Tran et al., 2019). Without proper disclosure and context, the potential for consumer manipulation becomes a significant concern. Moreover, podcast hosts need to understand that they must prioritize the well-being and trust of their listeners above monetary benefits, emphasizing the need to refrain from exploiting the established trust and connection with the audience when creating sponsored content (Schlütz & Hedder, 2022).

Furthermore, it is imperative that brands do not consider manipulating the PSR between host and listeners within podcast ads, refraining from taking advantage of the established trust and connection with the audience when creating content (Tran et al., 2019). Lastly, from a business point of view, it's fundamental to take into account potential negative outcomes, if listeners perceive the commercial tone of the message as manipulation, it can lead to significant adverse effects on brand perception (Tran et al., 2019).

## Discussion

While the positive influence of parasocial relationships on consumer behavior is proven by several authors, it raises questions that deserve a broader and deeper discussion. A good example of the potential danger that this type of persuasive communication could have is related, for instance, to children, due to its high vulnerability, a consequence of their immaturity and advertising illiteracy. Pinto et al. (2022) analyzed and discussed the power of Youtubers

on children between 8 and 12 years old and concluded that their influence goes far beyond the promotion of products, services, and brands. Due to a strong PSR, kids trust them, and use them as a source of information, guidance, and social role models, following their suggestions and almost blindly believing in their opinions and advice.

Regarding the specificity of the podcast industry, it lives in an ambiguous realm. Authors like Moe (2023) argue that when podcast hosts integrate ad messages seamlessly into their content, it enhances the credibility of the message and fosters a perception of personalized recommendations, which can lead to a stronger connection with the audience. Tran, Yazdanparast, and Strutton (2019) see this integration as a covert manipulation of the audience where the content is no longer authentic but persuasive communication. So, while this strategy works where is the line that draws the ethical boundaries? The ethical implications and transparency considerations surrounding the utilization of PSR for advertising, also in this context,

raise questions regarding the need for clear disclosure of sponsored content. Its absence not only poses ethical dilemmas but also has the potential to undermine the trust established between the audience and the hosts, ultimately impacting the credibility of the podcast industry. Through this is clear that there is a need to establish clear ethical guidelines that allow for a balance between using PSR for effective advertising and maintaining transparency and integrity among all parties involved.

From a favorable standpoint, it is important to further understand to impact that PSR with podcast hosts has on brand loyalty.

Podcasting, like many other social network sites (SNS), is a medium that heavily relies on the host's personality and the relationship they create and maintain with their audiences. Moe (2023) expresses that close relationship between listeners and host, delving into how listeners view the host as a close friend often using expressions such as "my" when referencing them, and truly trust their opinion and experience. Nevertheless, as Abidin and Ots (2015) cleverly pointed out,

many of these new influencers are now facing the dilemma of assuming one side of the coin: credibility or commerce? Keep their authenticity or adapt themselves to the advertisers' requests, even if it means say, showing or behaving differently of their personality? And brands also should choose a side. As Brinson and Lemon (2023) remind us, although marketers have the power (at least financial) to impose their will, they should prefer or, at least, consider using a personal approach or a conversational tone of the host, with his/her specificities, instead of using host-read commercial messages, to enhance authenticity. Additionally, Aw et al. (2023) shed light on the potential that PSR with influencers has in brand loyalty. Considering the unique nature of PSR between host and listeners it is possible that brands can gain loyal consumers more easily and without having to be present through every point of contact with potential consumers. This can lead to a sense of participation in a community/team (of the host) which consequently leads to direct satisfaction of the consumers because they feel part of something,

and these feelings transfer not only to their relationship with the host but also to the brands.

Nevertheless, one should bear in mind that the fit between the podcast host (and its content) and the brand should exist and be verified, to ensure that the brand message is aligned with the type, style, and tone, but also the perception and expectations of the audience.

Having lots of followers or being very popular shouldn't be enough for a brand to choose a host, as a misfit choice could lead to potential negative implications for those parasocial relationships.

### **Conclusion**

By navigating the complex connection between parasocial relationships (PSR) and podcast advertising, this article discusses their impact on consumer behavior, ethical considerations, and implications for commercial communication. PSR, which involves a sense of intimacy and trust between host and listeners, holds significant sway over brand perceptions and consumer behaviors.

While podcast advertising capitalizes on these relationships for effectiveness, concerns arise regarding transparency, authenticity of content, and potential manipulation of consumers. The integration of advertisements within podcast content requires a delicate balance between persuasive communication and preserving audience trust. Several authors assert that authenticity holds much greater significance than an influencer's endorsement, as it is intricately linked to how the endorsement is delivered. Moreover, the opportunity for a positive influence of PSR on brand loyalty and community engagement underscores their value in commercial communication. However, it is crucial to always have in mind ethical boundaries to ensure the responsible utilization of PSR in podcast advertising, to strike a balance between effective advertising strategies and maintaining transparency and trust within parasocial relationships.

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