



STRAT 7



# Ad Labelling in Podcasts

Qualitative Research Report

May 2024



# Contents

- 1. Executive summary ..... 4**
- 1.1. Summary of Findings ..... 4
- 2. Introduction ..... 7**
- 2.1. Research background..... 7
- 2.2. Research objectives ..... 8
- 2.3. Research methodology ..... 8
- 2.4. Research sample ..... 8
- 2.5. Stimulus material ..... 9
- 2.6. Pre-task..... 10
- 2.7. Focus group discussion structure ..... 10
- 3. Spontaneous perceptions of advertising in podcasts ..... 12**
- 3.1. Podcasts as a uniquely intimate space ..... 12
- 3.1.1. Relationship with the host ..... 12
- 3.1.2. Perceptions of the industry ..... 13
- 3.1.3. Listening habits ..... 14
- 3.2. Initial reactions to advertising ..... 14
- 3.3. Perceptions of host-read advertising ..... 16
- 4. Effective demarcation of advertising ..... 20**
- 4.1. The spectrum of effective demarcation ..... 20
- 4.2. Use of terms in distinguishing advertising from editorial content ..... 22
- 4.3. Other useful markers to distinguish advertisements..... 24
- 5. Other regulatory considerations ..... 26**
- 5.1. Regulation of personal testimony in host-read advertising..... 26
- 5.1.1. The role of listener age..... 26
- 5.1.2. The role of trust ..... 27
- 5.1.3. The position of the host as an ‘expert’ ..... 27
- 6. Conclusions ..... 29**
- 7. Appendixes ..... 31**
- 7.1. Case studies ..... 31
- 7.1.1. Shxtsnngigs; HelloFresh: Least clear and distinct ..... 31
- 7.1.2. The Sam and Billie Show; Trip CBD: Somewhat clear and distinct ..... 32

7.1.3. The Rest is Politics; BetterHelp: Most clear and distinct.....	33
7.1.4. Katharine Ryan Telling Everybody Everything; Fitbit: Personal testimony .....	34
7.1.5. Feel Better Live More; Athletic Greens: Expert recommendation.....	35
7.2 Stimulus table .....	37
7.3 Sample breakdown .....	41

# 1. Executive summary

The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) is the UK's independent regulator of advertising. It applies the UK Code of Non-broadcast Advertising and Direct & Promotional Marketing and the UK Code of Broadcast Advertising (the Advertising Codes) written by the Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP) and Broadcast Committee of Advertising Practice (BCAP). The ASA ensures ads across all media are legal, decent, honest and truthful, and takes action where advertising is misleading, harmful, offensive or otherwise irresponsible.

Section 2<sup>1</sup> of the CAP code requires that marketing communications are obviously identifiable as such. Most ads are obviously recognisable as advertising by virtue of their content and the context in which they appear – for example, ad breaks on TV, billboard displays and 'promoted' posts on social media. Some ads, due to close resemblance to editorial content, may be less readily identifiable, including, for example, advertorials, advertisement features and 'influencer' ads on social media.

The podcast medium is growing in popularity and economic potential. As many ads in podcasts are read by hosts and are therefore more difficult to distinguish, the ASA has been exploring how it can provide greater clarity to stakeholders to ensure host-read podcast ads are sufficiently distinguishable from editorial content. In June 2023, the ASA set out an investigation into the clarity and identifiability of commercial content with regards to host-read ads in podcasts to help establish appropriate guidance in this area.

The ASA commissioned a qualitative study, consisting of nine focus groups with a total of 47 participants, conducted across the four nations of the UK. The sample included participants from different demographic groups, locations and varying levels of engagement with podcasts. A detailed breakdown of the sample can be found in Appendix 7.3.

## 1.1. Summary of Findings

### Spontaneous perceptions of advertising

There was an initial tension between participants' desire for ads to be 'easy to listen to' and closely related to the podcast genre or topic, and the need for podcast advertising to be clear and distinct. However, on further reflection participants supported the need to ensure ads in podcasts were sufficiently distinguished from editorial content in podcasts.

Unprompted reactions to advertising in podcasts were negative, with listeners often looking for ways to 'tune out' or skip ads where possible (particularly when read by hosts). This reaction was often tied to three core perceptions and/or behavioural features related to podcasts as a medium, including:

- **The relationship between listener and host:** there is a perceived, uniquely intimate and personal bond between podcast hosts and their listeners with participants often feeling they were getting 'exclusive' and/or 'unfiltered' insights into the 'world' of the host, leading to a strong sense of trust in the host's integrity and opinions.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.asa.org.uk/advice-online/recognising-ads-advertisement-features.html>

- **Perceptions of the industry:** the podcast industry is perceived as a 'cottage industry' (i.e., in its early stages/ less commercial than TV, radio, film, etc.), increasing the sense of trust placed on podcast hosts and advertisers.
- **Listening habits of audiences:** participants perceived podcasts as a medium they can seamlessly integrate into everyday life, often listening at the same time as completing other tasks, and that they provide a space for listeners to engage with a broad range of interests because of the large number and variety of podcasts out there.

Advertising that felt far removed from the podcast genre, host or episode topic was felt to infringe on or disturb these initial perceptions.

However, when explored further, most participants could recognise the need for advertising in podcasts to enable listeners to access content for free – and many felt if they had to be included, it should be clear when they were taking place. Without sufficient markers to ensure ads are clear and distinct, participants felt advertising could become unethical and/or even coercive in nature.

### Effective demarcation of advertising in podcasts

The use of a signifying term was considered the most essential marker to ensuring commercial content was sufficiently distinct from editorial content in podcasts. Some terms were considered more effective at signalling that an ad was taking place, as well as indicating the monetised relationship between the host and advertiser:

- **'Paid advertisement'** felt straightforward, factual and left little room for misinterpretation. This term made it clearest that the content of the advertisement was dictated by the advertiser, not the host
- **'Sponsored by'** was also considered effective and was the most familiar across all audiences. Most participants could recognise this meant the advertiser had influence over the content of the ad
- **'Partnered with' or 'brought to you by'** implied a two-way relationship between the host and advertiser that was not necessarily transactional
- **Other terms or phrases**, such as 'made a little better by' or 'friends of' felt least effective at signifying commercial content, and for some, the phrases did not feel genuine and it was not clear if the host was being paid to advertise the product/service

Most participants felt a signifying term should be coupled with other markers to ensure ads are fully clear and distinct, including:

- **Music or a jingle** at the start and end to separate the types of content and function as a 'shorthand' for knowing an ad is taking place
- **A distinct change in the hosts' tone** to be more robotic, animated, or scripted so it is clear the ad is not part of the editorial content
- **Ensuring the length of the ad is short** to ensure the focus can stay on the advertiser and avoid the host weaving commercial content into perceived editorial content.

### Other regulatory considerations

Whilst out of the immediate remit of this study, there was also a strong call from participants for stricter regulation on the use of personal testimony in host-read ads.

Participants were concerned about hosts falsely claiming to use the products or services they were advertising to influence listeners into purchasing the product/service. Some also assumed regulation already existed – but acknowledged the potential difficulty in enforcing this.

Without stricter regulation, participants were concerned unqualified host claims in advertising could lead to perceived ‘false’ and/or ‘coercive’ advertising. There was also a sense it could impact on the distinctiveness of an ad as listeners may interpret the content as a genuine recommendation rather than an advertisement.

This felt particularly important for certain genres where the listener was perceived to be in a more ‘vulnerable state’ when listening (e.g., health/wellbeing and finance).

## 2. Introduction

### 2.1. Research background

The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) is the UK's independent regulator of advertising. It applies the Advertising Codes<sup>2</sup> written by the Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP) and Broadcast Committee of Advertising Practice (BCAP). The ASA ensures ads across all media are legal, decent, honest and truthful, and takes action where ads are misleading, harmful, offensive or otherwise irresponsible.

Section 2<sup>3</sup> of the CAP code requires that marketing communications are obviously identifiable as such. Most ads are obviously recognisable as advertising purely by virtue of their content and the context in which they appear – for example, ad breaks on TV, billboard displays and 'promoted' posts on social media. Some ads, because of close resemblance to editorial content, may be less readily identifiable, including for example, advertorials, advertisement features and 'influencer' ads on social media. The CAP Code requires that marketers make clear that advertorials are marketing communications, for example by heading them 'advertisement feature'.

The Code requires ads to be designed and presented in a way that makes them distinct and separate from the surrounding content, so that it's easy for consumers to recognise what is and isn't advertising. The elements that make an ad obviously identifiable will vary depending on the medium and where in the medium, it appears – but, irrespective of the media or platform, it needs to be easily identifiable to its audience.

Podcasts, as a relatively new and emerging medium, are increasingly popular in terms of overall content and listenership, as well as commercial expenditure. According to Ofcom's Podcast Survey<sup>4</sup> published in April 2023, 25% of UK adults are regular listeners to podcasts (and 50% say they have "ever" listened to a podcast).

Podcasts present several novel challenges for ad regulation. These are primarily focused around identifiability and distinction from any editorial content because of several factors, including:

- **Podcast ads are often read out by the podcast host.** This can make it more challenging to demarcate effectively and clearly the start and end of an ad
- **Podcasts are a unique and intimate medium.** Podcast hosts can occupy a strong emotional and influential relationship with their listener. This can lead the listener to retain greater trust in products the host advertises (as these can be mistaken for 'recommendations')
- **Podcasts are an audio-based medium.** This means producers and hosts cannot rely on visual cues (such as '#ad' or scene cuts) to signal when an ad is taking place
- **Podcasts currently fall under the Non-broadcast Advertising Code.** This means that although podcasts carry many similarities to radio content as an audio-based medium (and many are produced by the same producers that work in radio), they are not regulated in the same way. ASA guidance for non-broadcast ads, such as social media ads, very strongly

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.asa.org.uk/codes-and-rulings/advertising-codes.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.asa.org.uk/advice-online/recognising-ads-advertisement-features.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/data/statistics/stats23>

advises the use of the *#ad* label, which unambiguously conveys the commercial and persuasive intent of the content

In response to these challenges, the ASA decided to undertake an investigation into the clarity and identifiability of commercial content with regards to host-read ads in podcasts in order to help establish appropriate guidance in this area and provide greater clarity to relevant stakeholders.

Jigsaw Research was commissioned to conduct this qualitative study on behalf of the ASA to build a base of knowledge on consumer attitudes, understanding and needs in this area. This report outlines the findings from this study.

## 2.2. Research objectives

**The specific objectives of this research were to:**

- understand how audiences perceive and interpret advertising in podcasts, and what styles/terms/labels provide additional clarity in identifying commercial content
- understand the extent to which audience interpretation and the ability to identify commercial content can differ depending on age and podcast usage
- draw out insights as to what helps audiences understand they are listening to commercial references rather than editorial content

## 2.3. Research methodology

A qualitative approach was felt to be the most appropriate given the objectives of the project. The discursive nature of qualitative research is better suited for exploratory studies where the goal is to understand behaviours and attitudes, rather than simply to describe them. As the relationships between podcasts, audiences and advertising are relatively novel, it was believed an exploratory approach would yield the richest findings.

The two most common methodologies in qualitative research are the group discussion and the one-to-one in-depth interview. Group interviews were selected for this study rather than an in-depth discussion, as group interviews can be a better forum to allow broader audience consensus, as well as generate potential solutions. Further, a group discussion can allow audiences to articulate better their attitudes toward complex or novel topics, to which they may not have previously given strong or direct consideration.

The discussions were held online to ensure the greatest possible breadth and precision of sample coverage. The sessions lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and followed a discussion guide agreed upon in advance with the ASA. Fieldwork took place between 11<sup>th</sup> September and 16<sup>th</sup> October 2023.

A pre-task was undertaken ahead of the group interviews to gather individual, spontaneous and authentic reactions to the stimulus material explored. More information about the stimulus material is covered in Section 2.5 and the pre-task is covered in Section 2.6.

## 2.4. Research sample

The objective of qualitative research is not to generate statistically valid findings but to ensure the sample is broad enough to capture the range and variety of potential responses. The appropriate sample size in a qualitative study should be sufficient to allow for confirmatory findings without generating overly repetitive data (saturation).



The project comprised of a total of nine group interviews of between five and six participants each, with a total of 47 participants being included across the research.<sup>5</sup>

The structure of the sample was designed to mirror the UK demographic makeup, including an appropriate spread of life stage and family household. The nine groups were segregated by age, socio-economic group and podcast usage (based on self-reported listenership), to include a broad range of audience type and to capture potential differences deriving from these factors.

The nine groups comprised:

- **3 x groups of 18- to 25-year-olds (18–25 yr old)**
  - 1 x group with no/low podcast usage
  - 2 x groups with medium/high podcast usage
- **3 x groups of 26- to 40-year-olds (26–40 yr old)**
  - 1 x group with no/low podcast usage
  - 2 x groups with medium/high podcast usage
- **3 x groups of over 40-year-olds (41+ yr old)**
  - 1 x group with no/low podcast usage
  - 2 x groups with medium/high podcast usage

Additionally, the sample incorporated the following criteria:

- **Locations:** Fieldwork was conducted across the four nations with the number of interviews broadly proportionate to the population and included a mix of urban and rural locations.
- **Ethnicity and gender:** An even split of gender and representation of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups were included
- **Preferred genre:** A mix of preferred podcast genres amongst reported users were included
- **Preferred streaming platform:** A mix of preferred podcast streaming platforms amongst reported users were included, including Spotify, Apple Podcasts, BBC Sounds, YouTube, Audible and others

Full details of the sample achieved can be found in Appendix 7.3.

## 2.5. Stimulus material

The ASA provided a broad range of clips from a selection of popular British podcasts, all of which included at least one host-read ad. The stimulus used ensured each participant listened to a range of:

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<sup>5</sup> In a few cases where a participant was unable to join a group discussion at the last-minute due to a change in personal circumstances, an in-depth interview was conducted to ensure the full range of voices and opinions was captured.

- **Podcast genres**, allowing for a natural diversity of advertising sectors
- **Signifying terms used to distinguish ads from editorial content**, with particular focus on the terms 'sponsor', 'brought to you by', and 'partnered with' and other terms (e.g. 'made a little better by'). Also included were some ads where no term was used at all
- **Position of advertising**, including a spread of pre-roll, mid-roll and end-roll ads
- **A variety of creative styles**, for example, some more formal, others more playful

There were 24 pieces of stimulus in total. A rotation was designed to ensure balanced coverage across the sample. Each piece of stimulus was listened to approximately four times.

During the pre-task, participants were given longer versions of the clips to allow for more natural engagement and reactions to the advertising material. In the group discussions, the stimulus was shared on-screen and shortened to retain focus on the advert itself. Participants were asked to join the sessions using a laptop or tablet to ensure they could engage with the audio content properly.

The stimulus is referenced throughout this report, and a summary of each advert can be found in Appendix 7.2. References to specific ads are denoted by the podcast name, the advertised brand name and a number corresponding to the relevant ad in the stimulus table, for example, 'Enterprise ad, Big Fish with Spencer Matthews<sup>1</sup>' refers to the Enterprise ad listed as number 1 in the appendix.

## 2.6. Pre-task

The pre-task was designed to capture spontaneous, individual and authentic responses to the set of stimulus material. Participants were not made aware of the commercial focus of the research ahead of this task. The pre-task was designed to show a range of longer-form clips to participants with clips drawn from a range of genres and with a range of signifying terms.

The task was undertaken over the course of three days. For the first two days, participants were asked to listen to three clips ranging between 3 and 10 minutes each. Participants were told to listen to the clips in whichever environment they would most frequently or naturally listen to podcasts and/or similar formats (e.g., radio, audio books, music, etc.), to ensure as authentic an experience as possible.

Following each clip, participants were asked to record their general reactions to the content of the clip without any direct probing on the presence of advertising, to understand whether participants were picking up on the ads in the clips.

On the third day, respondents were asked about one or two of the clips, before being directly probed on whether they'd noticed the presence of advertising in some or all the clips they had listened to over the course of the pre-task.

If the participant said they had noticed ads in the clips, they were sent a further set of questions exploring their initial responses to the ads in greater detail, including their impressions about the clarity and identifiability of the advertisements.

## 2.7. Focus group discussion structure

The focus group discussions were designed to gain insight into participants' ability to identify and respond to commercial references in podcasts.

Being qualitative in nature, the sessions were flexible, allowing the conversation to be responsive to the attitudes and interests of the group. However, a consistent outline flow was adopted, as follows:

- After introductions, the groups began with a brief exploration of each participants' podcast listening habits. This was followed by a general discussion about the participant's observations and/or responses to the pre-task material, including overall attitudes toward advertising in podcasts more generally
- Much of the group discussion then was spent listening and responding to shortened clips from the stimulus shared as part of the pre-task. Half of the group had heard one half of the longer-form versions of these clips in advance, and half had heard the other half, to ensure that a range of both spontaneous and more considered views were captured within the group setting
- Discussions allowed for general and top of mind responses to the advertising content, with initial light probing on terms, signals or other mechanisms which distinguished the ad from the editorial content
- This was followed by more direct probes to explore the understanding of each term, as well as the perceived effectiveness for demarcation compared to one another
- The group discussion ended with participants collaboratively generating a set of potential regulatory guidelines for ensuring host-read ads in podcasts are clear and readily identifiable from editorial content.

## 3. Spontaneous perceptions of advertising in podcasts

*There was a tension between participants' desires for advertising in podcasts to be easier to listen to and the need for commercial content to be clear and distinct. Podcasts were felt to play a unique and intimate role in the lives of listeners. Many felt a close affinity to podcast hosts, and often consistently followed their favourite podcasts. Within this context, advertising was viewed negatively (particularly when read by the host), as it jarred with the perceived intimate and uncommercialised relationship between listener and host. However, the presence of advertising content was accepted when it was understood to ensure free access to the podcast.*

### 3.1. Podcasts as a uniquely intimate space

As a medium, podcasts were perceived as having strong potential to create a sense of trust and intimacy between audiences and hosts – more so than other media formats. This was largely due to three key factors:

- The relationship between listener and host
- Perceptions of the industry
- The listening habits of audiences.

These three factors are explored in more detail below



*Most of the podcasts I watch on YouTube of comedians and stuff feels more intimate. It's as though you are having a conversation with these people ... unlike the radio.*

**26–40 yr old, Med/High listener**

#### 3.1.1. Relationship with the host

Podcasts were often considered 'conversational' in tone, building an increased sense of intimacy that brought down the 'barrier' between audience and entertainer. Podcast hosts were perceived to be speaking largely unscripted (and unedited), making them feel more natural and authentic than other media formats, such as TV and even radio.

Hosts also often shared aspects of their own lives, adding to the sense of intimacy. Participants therefore believed they were entering the 'unfiltered' and 'authentic' world of the host, leading to a closer relationship, that could even sometimes feel like friendship.

This intimacy was based on a sense of 'exclusivity' and 'loyalty' – particularly when hosts were admired 'influencers' or public figures outside of the podcasting industry. Participants often listened to podcasts hosted by personalities they previously knew and respected outside of the podcast medium,

and therefore relished the opportunity to 'get to know them' on what felt like a deeper and more personal level.

Participants who listened to podcasts often had a selection of podcast hosts they followed closely and consistently, strengthening their perceived relationship over time as they shadowed the host's personal and professional life developments.

This exclusivity and intimacy were deepened when podcasts provided an option to listen via pay-in access (e.g., to get additional/exclusive content), such as a 'friends of the podcast' platform. For those who chose to pay for extra content, they felt part of an even closer-knit, 'exclusive' group, as they were exposed to information and updates the wider, non-paying audience were not.

As the intimacy and personal bond between listener and host was felt to be strengthened, so too was the listener's sense of trust in the host. For many participants, this manifested in a strong belief in the host's integrity. Participants often assumed hosts they frequently listened to were acting in good faith, including when the host read commercial content. This belief was also felt to add credibility to perceived host 'recommendations' and advertisers whom participants often perceived the host to have intentionally 'chosen' to work with because they believed in the quality of the product/service.



*In podcast there is trust ... it's not like watching the TV.*

**41+ yr old, Med/High listener**

### 3.1.2. Perceptions of the industry

The podcast industry is perceived as still early in its development – and can be considered a kind of 'cottage' industry (i.e., in its early days/ more amateurish and less commercialised than other media formats such as film, TV or radio). Participants often perceived the industry as working 'on a budget'.

This perception of the industry impacted how hosts and advertisers were viewed. Participants often saw hosts as 'amateurs' in the industry even if they were considered professional public figures in other mediums (such as reality TV, sports personalities, politicians or field experts). This perception could increase the sense of relatability and trust endowed in hosts. Participants also used this to justify why some ads could feel 'unpolished' and/or amateurish – and even that the advertisement 'has to' be delivered by the host due to the 'shoestring' budget they were operating within.

These perceptions further reinforced the sense that the advertiser had a closer or more personal relationship with the host, and that it was not just a 'money making exercise', but more of a considered partnership between advertiser and host compared to advertising in other media formats.



*It's different to a TV advert because the people on a podcast who are advertising a product, it feels like they are personally endorsing it.*

**41+ yr old, No/Low listener**

### 3.1.3. Listening habits

Podcast listening is often more seamlessly integrated into everyday life than other media formats, such as TV and radio. Participants often listened to podcasts at the same time as completing mundane tasks, for example when commuting, cooking or cleaning. Engagement therefore felt more fluid and intermittent, with listeners dipping in and out of active and passive listening, even within the context of a single episode.

Participants also felt an increased sense of choice and control over how they listened and engaged with podcasts compared to other media formats. As there is a perceived plethora of available podcasts to choose from on various streaming platforms, participants felt they could easily find, explore and build allegiance to, niche content that serves an extremely broad range of interests.

This variety enabled listeners to fully tailor their media intake to their personal needs and could even emphasise the sense of 'exclusivity' and intimacy with hosts, as participants felt they could develop stronger bonds with hosts seen as more 'underground' or unknown. Unlike radio and live TV, participants were able to personalise their listening habits to cater to their schedule.

Many participants had integrated podcast listening into their regular weekly – or daily – schedule, meaning dedicated listeners closely followed favourite hosts/programmes, tuning in regularly or even following host's social media channels.



*I can get on and do the tasks that I need to do in the home or when I'm moving around, and just have something on in the background.*

**26–40 yr old, Med/High listener**



*I listen to podcasts about metal detecting ... you just don't hear much about the hobby anywhere else really.*

**26–40 yr old, Med/High listener**

## 3.2. Initial reactions to advertising

Participants' reactions to advertising in podcasts tend to be very negative. Both users and non-users of podcasts described advertising as 'the worst' part of podcasts.



*I'm not a big fan of adverts. It's pretty much just to get to the content that I want to watch.*

**41+ yr old, No/Low listener**

**Negative perceptions of advertising in podcasts were primarily driven by two key features:**

- **Frequency of ads:** Participants often felt there were too many ads in podcasts, which ultimately detracts from the enjoyment of listening
- **Length of ads:** Participants could often perceive podcast advertising to be longer than advertising on other media formats, which can feel excessive and lead to boredom and greater passive listening

For many, the least appealing aspect of advertising in podcasts was felt to be the robotic or 'cheesy' format that ads can take when read by the host. This format, coupled with the perceived lengthy and high frequency of ads, created some hostility toward advertising in podcasts.

This was exacerbated when ads felt more obviously 'like an advert', such as when the advertiser was entirely unrelated to the host, genre or topic being discussed in the wider episode. This had the effect of jarring with perceptions of the more considered and close relationship between host and advertiser (e.g., British Army ad, Sisters in the City<sup>12</sup>).

As a result, some participants (particularly high and medium podcast listeners) reported actively avoiding listening to ads. Many have learned how to skip individual ads on their preferred streaming platform – with some proudly honing their skill of skipping with perfect timing so as to miss the advert without missing editorial content.

Others explained they used the 'ad break' as an opportunity to step away and perform other tasks (such as making a cup of tea). A smaller number of participants avoided ads altogether by opting into a paid membership plan with preferred podcasts that offer exclusive, ad-free content.

For those who don't avoid the ads altogether, many said they 'tuned out' when they were playing, signalling a switch to passive listening. This can make it more difficult for listeners to accurately discern when an ad starts and ends, as they are not actively listening. This felt especially challenging for listeners when distinguishing host-read ads that followed the natural tone and cadence of the editorial content.



*I wasn't clear with some of them what was podcast and what was an ad. And then some of them just went on way too long, and it kind of put me off, I then didn't want to listen to the podcast. I just thought it was blending into the podcast ... it took me away from it.*

**41+ yr old, No/Low listener**

Whilst not always initially appreciated, when probed, most participants could recognise the need for advertising in podcasts. For some, they were seen as a 'necessary evil', enabling free access to podcasts. Others were more accepting of advertising as they perceived sponsors to be more invested in the podcast (i.e., viewed as a collaboration with the host to enable them to exist and thrive), rather than just necessarily a transactional role.



*I see [ads] as a necessary evil.*

**41+ yr old, No/Low listener**

From the point of view of the listening experience, many participants preferred advertising that felt like part of the podcast itself and that followed the natural tone or cadence of the conversation. However, this made it more challenging to demarcate ads from editorial content – and many could appreciate the need for this line to be clear. As such, participants could sometimes struggle to reconcile regulatory need and personal preference when considering the most impactful and/or effective demarcation of advertising in podcasts.



*From an advertising point of view, I could tell I was more engaged with the ones that had ads that were more interesting and less scripted. The ones that were scripted I found quite difficult to go back into listening to the host.*

**18–25 yr old, Med/High listener**

A tension therefore existed between a participant’s desire for advertising to be easier to listen to, and the need for commercial content to be clear and distinct from editorial content.

### 3.3. Perceptions of host-read advertising

Host-read advertising raised several concerns. The ads could feel jarring for some participants as the injection of commerciality could dilute the valued sense of personal relationship. There was also some feeling that the ads could feel more like a personal recommendation than a paid-for commercial promotion – even when hosts make no reference to personal usage or testimony.



*The guy talking about “If you ever see me, I’ll be wearing this hoodie, go to this website and there will be a code waiting for you” ... it was quite chatty and, in a way, it felt more like a personal endorsement than a more structured advert.*

**41+ yr old, No/Low listener**

#### **Older audiences and less frequent podcast users were most negative about host-read ads.**

Older audiences and audiences with lower podcast engagement were the most critical toward host-read ads. For these participants, the host-read format was felt to break with the traditionally strict boundaries between editorial and commercial content that they had grown up with (such as, clearly distinguishable TV ad breaks or strict regulation against product placement).



*It’s different in a way from a TV advert because it’s like the people talking on the podcast are kind of advertising a product, and it’s like they’re personally endorsing it. I’m not really convinced by that.*

**41+ yr old, No/Low listener**





*It is an ethical conundrum ... if there is trust and they make a recommendation ... is that like being coerced?*

**41+ yr old, Med/High listener**

### **Younger audiences by comparison were less fazed by host-read ads, with many comparing them to social media advertising.**

Younger audiences and audiences with more frequent interaction with podcasts were less put off by host-read ads, and some even expected their presence on certain shows (e.g., where the host is a social media influencer, such as TRIP CBD ad, The Sam and Billie Show<sup>19</sup>). Younger audiences often regarded this form of advertising as more commonplace and have grown used to viewing ads like this with a sense of light scepticism, and an increased likelihood to take the claims ‘with a pinch of salt’.

Host-read advertising could feel analogous to social media advertising. Younger audiences see content creators in social media as occupying a similar role to hosts in podcasts (and sometimes those social media content creators *are* podcast hosts), meaning they are more aware of the potential for a commercialised relationship. These younger audiences equate it with independent content creators discussing and showing off products on their social media pages, but that it is clear the relationship is monetised between the content creator and advertiser.



*You never really know if what they say is true. If they say they use it, I'd hope it was true but it feels like they are probably just doing it for the money.*

**18–25 yr old, Med/High listener**

### **The industry or genre of the advertised product/service could impact how audiences felt about the host-read format.**

The risk of audiences not being able to differentiate between editorial and commercial content was seen as more problematic in certain industries. Products or services which have higher potential to impact a consumer’s life – particularly negatively – could be especially concerning. The risks could be compounded by a host’s perceived expertise in a field, or by endowing the product/service with personal testimony. Certain examples of these industries were:

- Health and wellness
- Finance
- Self-help/ development



*If it is a health programme you obviously care about your health ... then you are more vulnerable if someone [host] talks about “these vitamins being good” ... that might be coercive.*

**41+ yr old, Med/High listener**

**Some participants preferred host-read ads, though, when probed, could recognise the potential dangers.**

For some, host-read advertising tended to be less irritating and disruptive than alternatives, and the more ingrained in the natural content the better. This could manifest in a desire for ads to feel personalised and to include personal host testimony and recommendations. This was especially true for those who admired and followed ‘favourite’ hosts and had therefore developed stronger bonds and increased trust in the hosts’ recommendations.

These participants felt certain recommendations could be useful, and assumed the host would only promote the product/service if the host genuinely believed in it or used it themselves. This seemed to be especially true when the host was considered an expert in a given field and advertised a product or service related to that field (e.g., Athletic Greens ad, Feel Better Live More<sup>5</sup>).

Some participants also preferred host-read ads that more closely follow the tone and cadence of the editorial content, as it made the advert feel less commercial and more in line with their perceptions of the industry as a more ‘amateur’ and ‘creative’ space.



*[Compared to pre-recorded ad] It was more personal, it seemed a lot calmer, their tones were a lot calmer. It wasn't like a sales pitch. It felt like [Katharine Ryan] was giving her personal story... It all just flowed really nicely.*

**41+ yrs old, No/Low listener**



*I prefer the less scripted ads. The ones that sound more genuine. Otherwise, I just switch off.*

**18–25 yr old, Med/High listener**

However, once probed, most felt there was potential for ethical concern if the lines between commercial and editorial content became too blurred.



*I actually preferred the way they positioned the ad, it wasn't right at the start, you were already engaged ... but yeah, it should've been more clear that it was an ad at the start.*

**25–40 yrs, No/Low listener**



*I think you can be unsure sometimes whether they are still talking and doing the show and just chatting or whether they are now selling something. It can be hard to tell, they might just be*

*talking about a product or something they really like, like a normal conversation so I think it has to be clear when it is an ad.*

**25–40 yr old, Med/High listener**



*If they are laughing and joking about it and it just pops up in the conversation you can just be listening along and not necessarily pick up that it is an advert, especially if they are talking in the same way they were before.*

**26–40 yr old, Med/High listener**

## 4. Effective demarcation of advertising

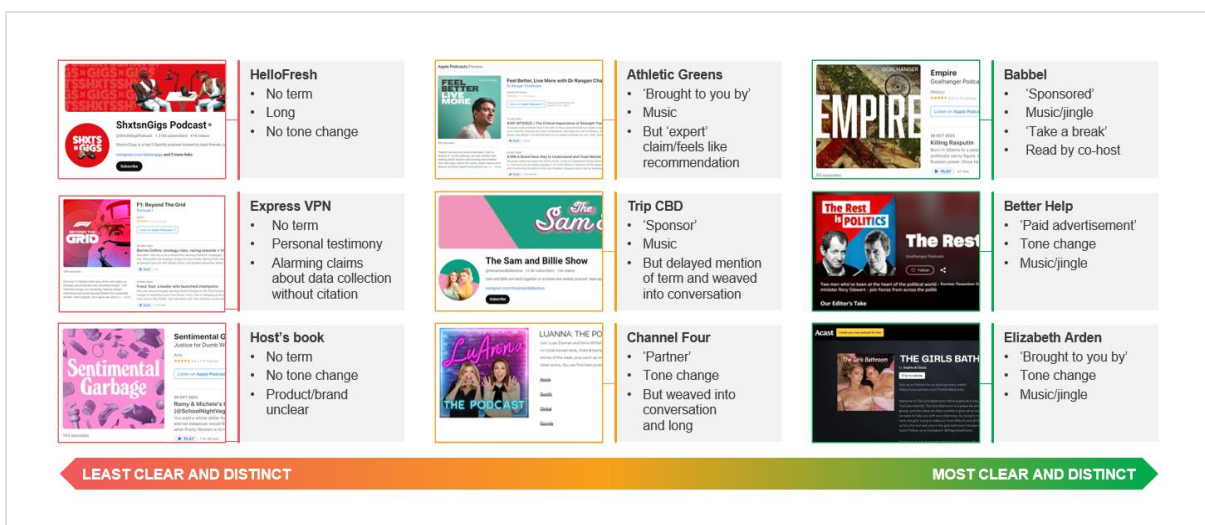
Using the phrases ‘paid advertisement’ or ‘sponsored by’ was considered the most important and effective way to distinguish commercial from editorial content and signal the monetised relationship between the podcast host and advertiser. However, most felt signifying terms should be coupled with other markers to sufficiently demarcate ads – including use of jingles, monitoring of ad length, a distinct change in the host’s tone and early and/or repeated use of the advertiser’s name.

### 4.1. The spectrum of effective demarcation

#### The effective demarcation of ads falls on a perceived spectrum

The diagram below includes examples of ads identified as ‘best’ and ‘worst in class’ by participants when considering how clear the clips explored in the research were from the editorial content. See Case Studies in Appendix 7.1 for further detail on these examples.

Figure 1 – Examples of ads falling on the ‘spectrum’ of effective demarcation



Ads perceived as most obviously distinct from editorial content in the examples provided included several key features:

- A term to signal the monetised relationship between the podcast host and advertiser
- Some music or a short jingle to indicate the start and end of the advert
- A change in the podcast hosts’ tone or use of a different voice (e.g.. Babbel ad, Empire<sup>33</sup> where the co-host read out the ad rather than the host who was presenting the editorial content directly before the ad)
- Short length with a sharp focus on the advertised product or service
- Early and repeated mention of the advertised brand name.

A small number of participants also felt the placement of the advertising was important. Pre-roll ads were deemed most expected and therefore clearer than mid-roll or end-roll ads.



*I think with a podcast that conversation flows just that little bit more freely. With an ad, you can tell they're reading from a script.*

**41+ yr old, No/Low listener**

**Advertising that falls in the middle of the spectrum** often featured one or more of the above features, but where they did exist these tended to be implemented less effectively and/or clearly which led to overall confusion and/or blurred lines.

For example, the Trip CBD ad read out in the Sam and Billie<sup>19</sup> podcast, said the word 'sponsor' and played a jingle at the very start. However, the word 'sponsor' was mentioned after several minutes of conversation between the hosts and as a result sounded like editorial content, and the subsequent content was weaved into conversation in a manner that sounded like the regular podcast, causing confusion about when the ad started and ended, as well as which parts of the content were monetised. See Appendix 7.1.2 for more detail on this case study.



*It reminds me of the Truman show. Just placement advertising, blatantly. It's annoying.*

**25-40 yr old, Med/High listener**

**The least clear ads often had a combination of features.**

- **No signifying term:** Advertising without a term to clearly indicate both that it was starting and that the proceeding content was monetised, were hardest to identify
- **Weaving in and out of conversation:** Where a host was perceived to weave commercial content into editorial content, participants found it difficult to identify when an advert started and ended
- **No clear change of tone:** As the host is reading the advert, it was challenging to recognise when it was taking place where hosts used the same conversational tone as the rest of the podcast
- **Extended length:** Listeners were more likely to 'tune out' and/or forget or potentially miss the fact an advert was taking place when it was perceived to be longer than usual (i.e., around three or more minutes). This was exacerbated when coupled with the above features of weaving in and out of conversation and no clear change of tone
- **Delayed mention of the advertiser:** Where the advertiser is not mentioned right at the start of the advert, participants felt unsure when the content moved from editorial to commercial. Several participants also felt frustrated when they were led to believe they were listening to podcast content, and then realised it was part of an advertisement



*I didn't realise it was an ad. It just felt like part of the podcast. It could use a bit of terminology.*

**18–25 yr old, Med/High listener**



*I'm really confused. It felt as if it was a conversation? I don't really know exactly what they were advertising?*

**41+ yr old, Med/High listener**



*Clearly mentioning the brand name or the product name [would help].*

**18–25 yr old, Med/High listener**



*I think the ads should go on for 30 seconds, 40 seconds max. The ones that go on for a minute and a half, that's just too long... it's blurring the lines, it becomes more of a conversational thing than a transaction.*

**41+yr old, No/Low listener**

**Sections 4.2 and 4.3 explore the most effective features for making podcast advertising sufficiently clear and distinct.**

## 4.2. Use of terms in distinguishing advertising from editorial content

We explored the use of several different signifying terms with participants, including 'sponsored by', 'paid advertisement', 'brought to you by', 'partnership with' and others (e.g., 'made a little better by').

All participants felt every ad in podcasts should include a term to signify when a podcast episode was monetised. There was a strong sense a term should be mentioned at the very start of the ad to ensure the relationship is made clear from the outset, and that it should be repeated if the advert was particularly long.

Initially, there were less strong opinions about which term should be used. Some participants felt it was important for regulation to allow for more than one term to be used across podcasts as variation was perceived to encourage active listening.

However, once explored in more detail, it was clear that some terms were considered more effective or appropriate than others for signalling the start of an ad, and/or the monetised relationship between the podcast host and advertiser.

**'Paid advertisement' and 'sponsored' were considered the two clearest terms.**

Use of the phrase 'this is a paid advertisement' was felt to leave little room for misinterpretation. It was the most precise term. The language felt straightforward and factual, clearly indicating that the podcast host had been paid to read the advertisement out. Most participants were then able to recognise that the content of the ad was dictated by the advertiser, rather than the host.

Older audiences particularly liked the phrase 'this is a paid advertisement' as it felt to the point, removed all doubts about the relationship between the host and the advertiser, and aligned to their experiences of strict advertising regulations in other media formats.



*I like 'this is a paid advertisement' because the message is very clear.*

**41+ yr old, Med/High listener**

The term 'sponsored' was also considered an effective distinguisher, as well as a familiar term which was easy to understand. Participants felt they understood what 'sponsorship', meant, namely pointing out the commercial relationship between advertiser and the podcast host. Whilst it did not spell out that the content of the advert would be dictated by the advertiser as clearly as 'this is a paid advertisement', it was clear to most.

For younger audiences in particular, the term 'sponsor' felt familiar and aligned with their expectations given it is a term often used by independent content creators on social media.

It was also felt to occupy an appropriate 'middle ground' between ensuring distinctiveness and transparency around the transactional relationship between podcast and host, without disrupting listeners' perception of the industry as less commercial and more creative than other media formats.



*You knew it was 100% an ad, because they said, 'our sponsor' and then at the end they had an indent of their own show title. So, you knew it was an ad.*

**26-40 yr old, Med/High listener**

**The terms that were deemed less clear implied a genuine and potentially non-transactional relationship between the host and advertiser, and as a result it was not always clear that advertising was taking place.**

Phrases such as, 'made a little better by' or 'our good friends' were considered the least effective. Whilst some recognised an ad was taking place after hearing these phrases, most were left confused about what the relationship was between the host and advertiser. Many felt the phrases were too vague and were insufficient for indicating the monetised relationship between podcast host and advertiser.

Several participants were irritated by phrases like these as they obscured the transactional relationship between the host and advertiser, and therefore felt disingenuous.



*I don't like the one that said, 'Let's hear from our friends at so and so'... that just felt less clear that it's an advert. They are paying these people. It's not a friend.*

**41+ yr old, No/Low listener**

The phrases 'brought to you by' and 'partnered with' (whilst slightly clearer and more genuine than 'made a little better by' and 'our good friends') were considered less effective at signalling an ad was taking place, particularly when used without any other features such as a change in tone or a musical signifier.

When hearing these phrases, participants often assumed there was a closer and potentially non-transactional relationship between the podcast host and advertiser. There was a sense that if a host used this phrase, they had a closer, more genuine connection to the advertiser that extended beyond the advertiser paying the host to read the ad (for example, Channel 4 ad, LuAnna<sup>7</sup>)



*She mentioned "I partnered up with". I thought that makes you feel like that person has chosen to go with that advertiser. It's not like a forced thing. It's like the brand has gone to her specifically.*

**18–25 yr old, Med/High listener**

### 4.3. Other useful markers to distinguish advertisements

Alongside use of a term, participants felt the addition of additional markers made the distinction between advertisement and content even clearer.

**Use of music or a jingle** was felt to be the most important and useful accompanying marker (e.g., Better Help ad, The Rest is Politics<sup>17</sup>). To be most effective, participants felt the jingle should:

- **be placed at the start and end of the advertisement.** This not only ensured the commercial content was clearly ring-fenced from the editorial content, but it also switched listeners from passive to active listening. This was felt to be particularly important for mid-roll ads given they have editorial content either side
- **be distinctive and unique to the podcast** so the same jingle could be used every time and function as a shorthand for listeners to know when an advert is starting and ending



*It was obvious it was an advert because of the little jingle. I think that jingle is important because it switches you out from listening to them chat.*

**41+ yr old, Med/High listener**

**Tone of voice** was also felt to play an important role in demarcation for host-read advertising specifically. Much like a jingle, a clear difference in the host's tone of voice was felt to switch listeners from passive to active listening.



Whilst less enjoyable to listen to, a robotic, clearly scripted, and/or overly animated tone of voice was also recognised to be most effective at signalling when the host was moving from editorial to commercial content. This switch in tone aligned to the experience of advertising on other media formats (e.g., on the radio or TV ad breaks) and helped contrast with the more conversational tone of most podcasts.

A switch to a more scripted tone also felt helpful for indicating that the content was monetised and dictated by the advertiser (e.g., Elizabeth Arden ad, The Girls' Bathroom<sup>16</sup>).



*The tone made it really clear. It felt like an ad. It was animated.*

**18–25 yr old, Med/High listener**

**The length of an advertisement could also** impact on its clarity. There was a real desire for ads to stay short, sharp and to the point to avoid commercial content becoming woven into perceived editorial content, as this was a key contributor to blurring the lines between the two. For example, the advert for HelloFresh in the ShxtnGigs<sup>11</sup> podcast felt overly long and as though it dipped in and out of conversation and commercial content repeatedly, leaving listeners confused as to whether it was an advert by the end.

Several participants felt this approach was particularly important when several ads were played in succession, especially when this involved host-read, amongst non-host read, ads. Keeping the ads short and to the point would make it easier to stack ads on top of one another and create an 'ad break' which many were familiar with from TV or radio.



*I think don't go on and on about something. Don't have something that sounds like you are just talking.*

**18–25 yr old, Med/High listener**

**Placement of the advertiser's name** was also considered important. Participants preferred it when hosts mentioned the advertiser at the very start of an ad so it was clear from the outset that the following content was from the advertiser, and not part of the podcast host's conversation.

There was a sense that if an ad was particularly long, the brand name should ideally be repeated multiple times to re-emphasise this was still part of the ad and avoid listeners thinking the content had moved back to being editorial.



*It felt like every other minute they were throwing [the brand name] in there. It was obvious it was being sponsored by these people to me.*

**41+ yr old, No/Low listener**

## 5. Other regulatory considerations

*Beyond the core focus of the research objectives, participants called for clearer and more stringent regulation around the use of personal testimony in host-read advertising to avoid any untruthful and/or dishonest and potentially 'coercive' advertising (and many felt this was and/or should already be happening). This felt particularly important for the podcast medium given the unique and intimate role podcasts play in listeners' lives.*

### 5.1. Regulation of personal testimony in host-read advertising

In some of the stimulus examples shown during the research, podcast hosts included personal testimony within the content of the advert, claiming to use the product/service being advertised. Participants often readily trusted the podcast host when they claimed to use a product/service, and felt that, given the role and relationship between hosts and listeners, these claims possessed considerable power and influence.

Participants spontaneously raised concerns about the ethics of personal testimony if the hosts' claims were false or exaggerated. However, many assumed host claims were regulated by an organisation like the ASA – though some did acknowledge that regulating this may be prohibitively difficult to enforce. The assumption of regulation itself made the claims more likely to be accepted at face value.

Irrespective of the legitimacy of the claim, there was a sense that inclusion of personal testimony could impact how effectively advertising content is discernible from editorial content, by casting doubt on the commercial nature of the recommendation. If it was a genuine recommendation by the host, based on use or trial, participants could question whether the relationship was a commercial one. In addition, some wondered how this product endorsement would be defined if it was the case, questioning whether it would be classified as advertising or not.



*They've got to be telling the truth if they've actually tried this stuff.*

**41+yr old, No/Low listener**

Perceptions of personal testimony varied depending on several key factors, including the:

- **listeners' age**
- **trust endowed in the host**
- **occupation of the host**

These three factors are explored further.

#### 5.1.1. The role of listener age

Younger audiences were more sceptical of personal testimony. This was in large part due to the prevalence of personal testimony in social media advertising, which younger audiences felt familiar with and 'switched on' to. Younger audiences, therefore, felt they were more aware of how the

commercial relationships between advertisers and influencers can be depicted as a potentially exaggerated personal and/or collaborative partnership.

Older audiences on the other hand felt most put-off by host-read claims (even if they were true) as it jarred with their expectations for regulation around advertising. Furthermore, they felt personal testimony, if not properly regulated, could lead to potentially false and/or coercive advertising. This was particularly true where the tone and content closely mimicked the wider editorial content of a podcast as this could make it increasingly difficult for the listener to identify if and when an ad was taking place.



*There was a lot of references to “I” and “my,” which can put you off a wee bit as well. For me, I find it a bit questionable.*

**41+yr old, No/Low listener**

### 5.1.2. The role of trust

Participants felt the strong relationships that could develop between podcast hosts and listeners (particularly when those hosts are public figures outside of the podcast domain) could lead to a heightened sense of trust in what the host says or claims.

As a result, claims that were perceived to be host ‘recommendations’ could be particularly impactful with some participants really listening and following the advice and/or guidance of the host akin to guidance/advice they might receive from a friend, or another person without commercial incentive.

Where participants started to question whether the host claim was true, they found it increasingly distasteful if the host was indeed ‘lying’ and were concerned it was ‘false advertising’ to claim to use something if they didn’t.



*I feel like if you are going to do something like that, and somebody who listens to you and goes on to purchase that, and it turns out that was a load of rubbish, again your credibility, they can write reviews about you, the whole thing can just blow up in your face.*

**41+ yr old, No/Low listener**

### 5.1.3. The position of the host as an ‘expert’

Participants were particularly concerned where hosts who were perceived as ‘experts’ in certain fields claimed to use products and services (particularly where the advertised product directly correlated to the podcast genres). The key genres of concern included those listed below as they all felt like areas where the impact on consumers could be particularly troubling if following unregulated ‘advice’:

- Health and wellness
- Finance
- Self-help/development

Across these genres, participants felt particularly concerned that hosts could be financially incentivised to make untrue or misleading claims in these genres, as it could put consumers in potentially risky situations (e.g., following investment advice in a financial podcast).



*I feel like it's a bit misleading when they say, "oh this is the best thing I've ever tried" and then it turns out they are not actually using it.*

**18–25 yr old, Med/High listener**

## 6. Conclusions

*Despite initially preferring advertising that felt more natural and blended with editorial content, participants supported the need for stronger regulation of advertising in podcasts to ensure they are clear and distinct from editorial content – and that the listener is aware of the monetised relationship between the host and advertiser. Use of the terms ‘paid for advertisement’ and ‘sponsored by’ felt strongest and most effective at distinguishing commercial from editorial content.*

**Listeners start from a point of negativity about advertising leading to a tension between their desire for advertising to be tolerable to listen to and the need for regulation.**

As a uniquely intimate format, participants valued the perceived ‘creative’, ‘authentic’ and ‘non-commercial’ podcast industry and hosts. Within this context, advertising was therefore instinctively viewed as the worst part of podcasts, spoiling the ‘intimate’ and ‘personal’ connection listeners feel with hosts – primarily due to the perceived high number and long length of ads in podcasts.

As a result, most instinctively want commercial content to blend into wider editorial content – following the same theme, tone and cadence to avoid jarring the listener. In addition, there is little spontaneous recognition of the role advertising plays in ensuring podcasts can be accessed for free. This creates a tension between a spontaneous desire for advertising to be as natural as possible and the need for regulation to ensure clarity and distinctiveness.

**Listeners support stronger regulation of advertising in podcasts to ensure ads are clear, distinct and transparent in communicating the monetised relationship.**

Once explored in more detail, most participants felt it was important for advertising to be made clear and distinct in podcasts to ensure transparency for the listener and avoid any ethical concerns.

The most important marker was use of a signifying term to be mentioned at the very start of every advert. ‘Paid for advertisement’ and ‘Sponsored by’ were considered the two most effective terms as they were well-understood by audiences of all ages and podcast engagement levels. These terms were felt to be the clearest for indicating that there was a transactional relationship between the podcast host and advertiser.

Most participants felt the use of a term should be coupled with other markers to make sure any advertising was sufficiently signposted, including:

- use of a jingle at the start and end of the ad (particularly when the ad is mid-roll)
- a clear change in tone of voice into something more clearly scripted/animated/robotic
- a short, sharp length to retain focus on the advertised product/service and avoid the ad weaving in and out of the more natural conversation

**Beyond direct demarcation, there was a call for greater regulation on host-read claims to avoid unethical and/or ‘false’ advertising – ads perceived as recommendations can also impact on the effectiveness of demarcation.**

Participants typically assumed regulation already existed to monitor hosts claiming to use products and services as part of any advertising – though most were unsure of how this would be done. As they

started to question if this regulation was in place, most spontaneously and consistently raised concerns about the potential for 'misleading', 'dishonest' (and even 'coercive') advertising where hosts claimed to use a product or service without verification.

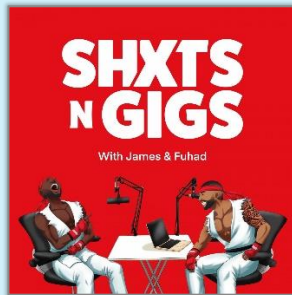
These concerns were exacerbated for certain genres where listeners might be deemed more 'vulnerable' due to the nature of the podcast – for example, podcasts about health and wellness or finances, particularly where the host is considered an 'expert' on the topic.

There was also a sense that hosts claiming to use products or services could impact on effective demarcation of any advertising as it was felt to blur the lines between perceived commercial content and the more conversational and personal tone of the editorial content.

## 7. Appendixes

### 7.1. Case studies

#### 7.1.1. Shxtsnigigs; HelloFresh: Least clear and distinct



**Ad was woven into conversation and lasted a very long time, blurring the lines between commercial and editorial content**

**Key features:**

- No term
- Long
- No tone change

The HelloFresh ad in the Shxtsnigigs podcast was one of the least discernible ads explored in the research. Throughout and by the end of the clip, most participants were unsure if it was an ad or just a recommendation from the hosts.

No signifying term was used, and the ad was embedded in the hosts' natural conversation with heavy use of personal testimony. They integrated the mention of the HelloFresh Father's Day special into their conversation about Father's Day and discussion around their love of cooking/food, and also did not change their tone throughout.

Beyond this, participants were put off by the length of the ad (it lasted for around 4 minutes) and felt this blurred the lines further as it sounded as though the ad was just part of the discussion until the host said at the very end "Right guys, let's get back to the podcast episode."



*The Shxtsnigigs podcast was a little unclear. I wasn't sure if it was an ad or if they were genuinely just talking about HelloFresh or not? I had to listen to it a couple of times before I realised that the whole clip was an advert.*

**18–25 yr old, No/Low listener**



*In the podcast about HelloFresh, it wasn't overly clear it was an ad. They brought it in about Father's Day and picking gifts and things like that and then when they gave the code it became clearer it was an ad ... it should've been clearer that it was an advert before.*

**26–40 yr old, No/Low listener**

### 7.1.2. The Sam and Billie Show; Trip CBD: Somewhat clear and distinct



**Used some markers to signal commercial content, but was unclear at the start.**

**Key features:**

- 'Sponsor'
- Music/jingle
- Delayed mention of term
- Weaved into conversation

Several of the ads had one or two markers which helped distinguish it from editorial content, but also contained features which left the ad's commercial nature ambiguous.

For example, the Trip CBD ad in The Sam and Billie Show<sup>19</sup> podcast felt initially clear and distinct. The ad included the signifying term, 'sponsor', and segregated the end of the ad from the editorial content with a jingle. Further, the main body of the ad was considered tonally distinct from the editorial content of the podcast.

However, there was a delay in the mention of the word 'sponsor'. The ad started in a more conversational tone and was in the pre-roll content with no jingle or other introduction. This meant that from the outset participants were unsure if they were listening to editorial or commercial content.

As well as being unclear, several participants also found the initial ambiguity frustrating, as they perceived the conversational tone as a 'trick' to keep them switched onto the content and from skipping the ad.



*They kind of bounced off each other, it made it seem like there was a conversation going on, even though you could tell they were reading from a script. It seemed a bit more genuine.*

**25–40 yr old, Med/High listener**



*At the beginning, it felt like it was just a sisterly chat, then [the advert] kind of blended in. You could tell after a while that it was scripted, but it was kind of blended in.*

**25–40 yr old, Med/High listener**



### 7.1.3. The Rest is Politics; BetterHelp: Most clear and distinct



**Best practice advert that is clear, distinct and succinct.**

**Key features:**

- “Paid advertisement”
- Tone change
- Music/jingle

The BetterHelp ad in the Rest is Politics<sup>17</sup> podcast was frequently identified as an example of best practice for both distinctiveness and transparency due to combined use of several markers:

- The signifying phrase “this is a paid advertisement” at the very start of the ad
- A tone that is distinct from the editorial content from the start and throughout
- A short jingle segregating the start and end
- Short length – particularly compared to many of the other ads in the stimulus
- No personal testimony from the host

The clarity and transparency of the ad led some participants to have a more positive impression of the host and advertiser as a result.



*They made it very clear what we were getting from the get-go. It was going to be an advert, and then another advert, and then you were going to get to the podcast... He spoke kind of neutral, like he was presenting it in an unbiased way.*

**41+ yr old, No/Low listener**



*It was pretty black and white. It was very, this is what we're doing, then we're going to get on to the podcast ... to a certain degree, I kind of respect that.*

**41+ yr old, No/Low listener**

#### 7.1.4. Katharine Ryan Telling Everybody Everything; Fitbit: Personal testimony



**Advert uses frequent personal testimony and is considered overly lengthy – blurring the lines between editorial and commercial content**

Many ads used aspects of personal testimony within the content on the advert which not only felt ethically challenging for participants, but also impacted on demarcation.

The Fitbit ad in Katharine Ryan's Telling Everybody Everything<sup>14</sup> podcast was considered one of the most jarring examples, with the host's personal testimony making up most of the content.

There were several factors which made it challenging for participants to distinguish the ad from editorial content, including:

- perceived conversational tone throughout
- use of the term 'brought to you by', which was felt to imply a partnership (but not necessarily a transactional relationship)
- referred to the ad as a 'story' rather than defining its commercial angle – this also meant some missed mention of the signifying term ('our sponsors') at the very start of the clip
- length compared to other examples explored – the ad lasted approximately 4 minutes 30 seconds
- use of personal testimony throughout – participants perceived editorial content to be woven into the commercial content, blurring the lines between the two

Beyond this, several participants felt ethically challenged by the use of personal testimony, particularly as they were unable to verify it. Some participants were trusting of the claims made and felt the content could be valuable to those new to motherhood. But others questioned how genuine the host was being and worried the content could be misleading and even damaging for those new to motherhood if it was not verified.



*It was just very, very longwinded, and was just a sales pitch ... She was trying to throw in a little bit of humour. So, maybe, if you'd zoned out and came back into it while she was talking about her family life, then yes you could probably mistake that for being the content of the podcast.*

**41+ yr old, No/Low listener**



*I just didn't believe her, that she used it. I'm a bit cynical about it. It feels like they're just trying to sell something, and she's just going on about how amazing it is, and I just don't think she's ever looked at it.*

**41+ yr old, No/Low listener**

### 7.1.5. Feel Better Live More; Athletic Greens: Expert recommendation



**Health and wellness expert advertises a meal supplement and includes personal testimony in claim**

Some participants felt the Athletic Greens ad in the Feel Better Live More<sup>5</sup> podcast was 'coercive' in nature. This was largely due to the ad being a meal supplement with claimed health/wellness benefits, and the host's position as an 'expert' in the health/wellness industry, and therefore the potential for increased trust placed in him.

Participants were concerned by the lack of verification of the host's claims – particularly as the host claimed to use the product 'daily', which many perceived as a personal recommendation rather than a commercial relationship with the advertiser.

Further, the ad contained a promo code, which a number of participants felt could be 'coercive' (particularly if the host claims were not true), as it could encourage listeners to make impulse purchases under false pretences.



*When you're listening to a health podcast, you're obviously concerned about your health. And then to advertise health supplements, I think there's an ethical conundrum about that, really... I think there needs to be consideration in that for people with vulnerabilities.*

**41+yr old, No/Low listener**



*If they said they use a product, they're putting their stamp of approval. So they have to be shown to be using it ... It's got to have some truth. Especially if you're following this guy and listening to everything he says, and he's giving advice for health, you want what he's saying to be genuine ... I'm assuming there's a group that would fact check it, especially since it's something you ingest.*

**25-40 yr old, Med/High listener**



## 7.2 Stimulus table

No.	Podcast	Genre	Location	Advertiser	Key word	Description
1	Big Fish with Spencer Matthews	Business/Life style	Pre-roll	Enterprise	Other	Big Fish is a podcast hosted by Spencer Matthews which features various guests to understand how they have overcome obstacles and achieved success. The advertiser in this clip is Enterprise Car Rentals.
2	Diary of a CEO	Business/Life style	End-roll	Blue Jeans	Sponsor	The Diary of a CEO is a podcast hosted by Steven Bartlett where he shares his personal insights and experiences with his listeners. He also interviews experts on topics including personal growth, mental health and entrepreneurship. The advertiser in this clip is Blue Jeans, an online video conferencing tool. Steven shares his personal testimony about how he and his team utilise the service and the benefits of it.
3	Empire	History	Mid-roll	Babbel	Sponsored	Empire is a history-based podcast, hosted by William Dalrymple and Anita Anand, which explores events of empire over the course of history. The advertiser in this clip is Babbel, the language platform. The host offers a promo code for listeners when subscribing to Babbel.
4	F1: Beyond the Grid	Sport	Mid-roll	Express VPN	None	F1: Beyond the Grid is a sports related podcast hosted by Tom Clarkson who is passionate about sports and Formula One. He interviews a variety of personalities who share stories and insights that provide listeners with a deeper understanding of people behind the scenes at Formula One. The advertiser in this clip is Express VPN. Tom shares his personal testimony, features and benefits of the service.
5	Feel Better, Live More	Health and wellness	Pre-roll	Athletic Green	Brought to you by	Feel Better, Live More is hosted by Dr Rangan Chatterjee and features interviews with health experts offering advice on health and wellbeing. The advertiser in this clip is Athletic Greens, a wholefood supplements company. Dr Rangan Chatterjee shares his personal testimony with the product and how he takes the supplements regularly.

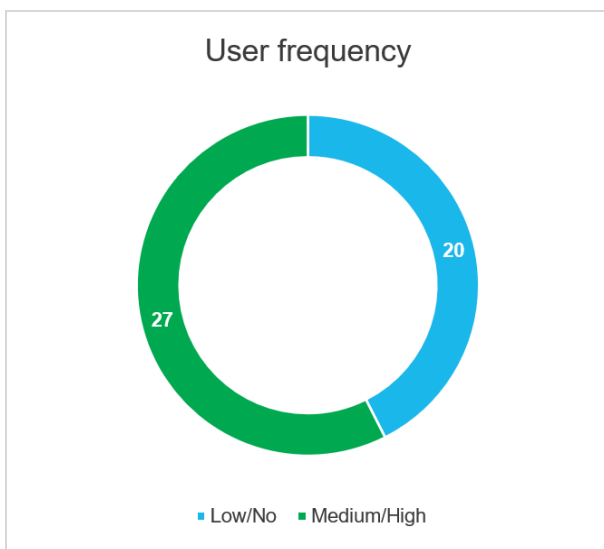
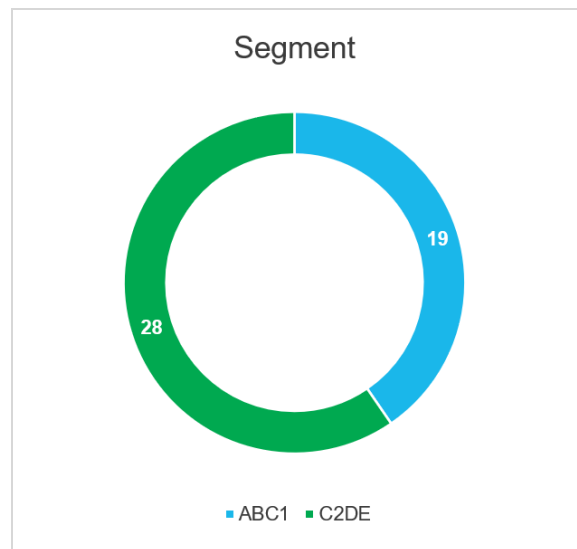
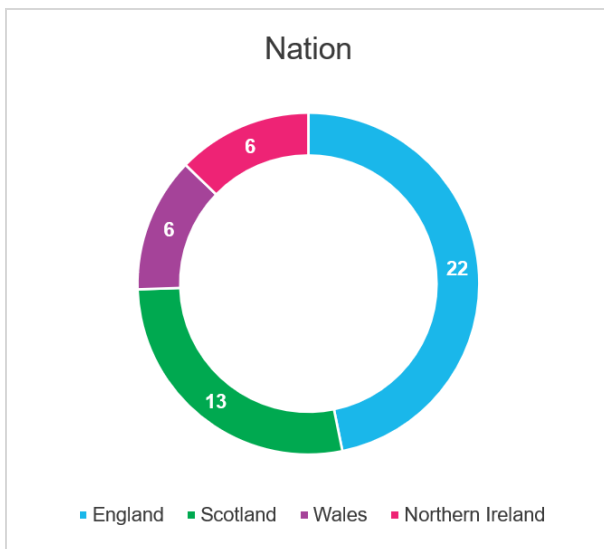
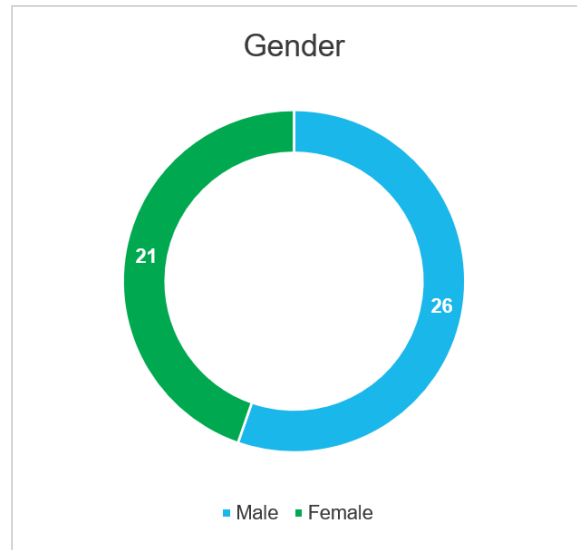
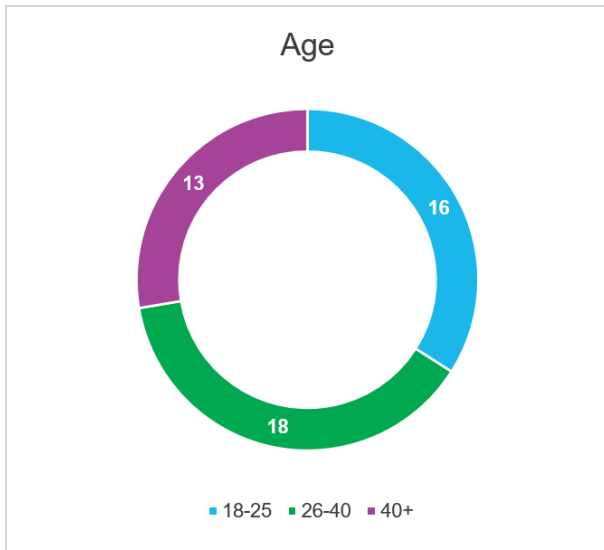
No.	Podcast	Genre	Location	Advertiser	Key word	Description
6	Help I Sexted My Boss	Comedy/ Lifestyle	Pre-roll	WhatsApp	Brought to you by	Help I Sexted My Boss Is a comedy podcast hosted by William Hanson and Jordan North in which they help their listeners navigate everyday problems of modern life. The advertiser in this clip is WhatsApp. The hosts express their personal insights and perceived benefits of using the service.
7	LuAnna	Lifestyle	Pre-roll	Channel 4	Other	LuAnna is hosted by friends Luisa Zissman & Anna Williamson. They engage in open conversations sharing stories and opinions. The advertiser in this clip is Channel 4. The hosts discuss their shared love for the broadcaster.
8	Modern Wisdom	Self-help/ aspirational	Pre-roll	Gymshark	Brought to you by	Modern Wisdom is a podcast hosted by Chris Williams. He interviews experts from various fields, exploring a diverse range of topics including personal development, health, and fitness. The advertiser in this clip is gym retailer, Gymshark. Chris shares his personal experience with the brand and the products he personally loves. He explains how he has created a product page of the products that anyone can access and a discount code for his listeners.
9	NearlyWeds	Lifestyle	End-roll	Heineken Silver	Sponsored	NearlyWeds is hosted by Jamie Laing and Sophie Habboo speaking about their experiences of planning their wedding day. The advertiser in this clip is Heineken Silver. Jamie explains his love for the product and Sophie tries the product.
10	Sentimental Garbage	Culture	Pre-roll	Host's book	None	Sentimental Garbage is a culture-based podcast hosted by Caroline O'Donoghue. The product advertised in this clip is Caroline's own book titled, The Rachel Incident. Caroline expresses the benefits she gets from listeners pre-ordering the book.
11	ShxtnGigs	Comedy/ Lifestyle	Mid-roll	HelloFresh	None	ShxtnGigs is a podcast featuring friends James and Fuhad. They share unfiltered insights and opinions on various topics. The advertiser in this clip is HelloFresh. The hosts share three top dishes that they personally love and encourage listeners to subscribe to HelloFresh for Father's Day.

No.	Podcast	Genre	Location	Advertiser	Key word	Description
12	Sisters in the City	Lifestyle	Pre-roll	British Army	Sponsored	Sisters in the City is hosted by sisters Anna & Mandi Vakili sharing their experiences and insights into living life in the city. The advertiser in this clip is the British Army and the hosts share their interests in the Army and promote job opportunities/benefits of working for them.
13	Socially Distant Sports Bar	Comedy/ Sports	Pre-roll	NordVPN	Other	Socially Distant Sports Bar is a comedy podcast about sports hosted by Elis James, Mike Bubbins and Steff Garrero. The advertiser in this clip is NordVPN, an online VPN service. The hosts discuss the benefits of the service through their experience of utilising it.
14	Telling Everybody Everything	Comedy/ Lifestyle	Mid-roll	Fitbit	Sponsor/ Brought to you by	Telling Everybody Everything is a podcast hosted by comedian Katherine Ryan covering a range of topics. The advertiser in this clip is Fitbit, who sponsored the podcast. The host promotes the brand by sharing the features and health/lifestyle benefits she claims to have experienced as a mother since using the product.
15	That Peter Crouch Podcast	Sport/Comedy	Pre-roll	BrewDog	Other	The Peter Crouch Podcast is hosted by Peter Crouch, Tom Fordyce, and Chris Stark. It's a comedy/sports podcast that guides people on how to be a professional footballer. The advertiser in this clip is BrewDog – the hosts share their first experience with the product and relate the experience back to sport.
16	The Girls' Bathroom	Lifestyle	Pre-roll	Elizabeth Arden	Brought to you by	The Girls' Bathroom is a lifestyle podcast hosted by friends Sophia & Cinzia. The podcast focuses on gossip and solving listener dilemmas. The advertiser in this clip is Elizabeth Arden. The hosts share insights into a range of products and share their family's personal interaction with the brand.
17	The Rest is Politics	Politics	Pre-roll	BetterHelp	Other	The Rest Is Politics is hosted by Alastair Campbell and Rory Stewart, offering an insider's view on politics and Westminster. The advertiser in this clip is BetterHelp, an online mental health service.

No.	Podcast	Genre	Location	Advertiser	Key word	Description
18	The Sam and Billie Show (Canva)	Lifestyle	Mid-roll	Canva	Sponsor	The Sam & Billie Show is hosted by the sisters, Sam and Billie Faiers, who share insights into their everyday lives. The advertiser in this clip is Canva, an online graphic design platform. The hosts share how they use Canva for their social media content and discuss the different features and benefits of the platform.
19	The Sam and Billie Show (Trip CBD)	Lifestyle	Pre-roll	TRIP CBD	Sponsor	The Sam & Billie Show is hosted by the sisters, Sam and Billie Faiers, who share insights into their everyday lives. The advertiser in this clip is TRIP CBD. The hosts share their personal testimony with the drinks.
20	They Walk Among Us	True crime	Pre-roll	Sky & Netflix	Brought to you by	They Walk Among Us is a true-crime podcast covering a variety of cases. The advertiser in this clip is Sky & Netflix. The host promotes the service as good value for money, as well as his personal use of the services.
21	UK True Crime	True crime	End-roll	Bloodhound Gin	None	Adam Lloyd, host of the UK True Crime Podcast gives his listeners insights into true crime stories. The advertiser in this clip is host's own product, Bloodhound Gin. He mentions that he will be participating in a distillery tour where he encourages his listeners to join him.
22	We Have Ways of Making You Talk	History	Pre-roll	Wine 52	Other	We Have Ways of Making You Talk is hosted by comedian Al Murray and historian James Holland discussing the Second World War. The advertiser in this clip is Wine 52, a wine discovery club. The host shares his personal testimony and offers his listeners a promotion.
23	Wolf and Owl	Comedy	Pre-roll	Fosters	Brought to you by	Comedians Tom Davis and Romesh Ranganathan host this comedy podcast. The advertiser in this clip is Fosters, and the ad includes a competition to win a prize.
24	Working Hard, Hardly Working	Business/Life style	Pre-roll	Revolut	Other	Grace Beverley hosts the podcast Working Hard, Hardly Working in which she gives listeners insights into the lives of people who have achieved success in different fields. The advertiser in this clip is Revolut – the host shares that she uses Revolut herself whilst sharing some of the main features.



### 7.3 Sample breakdown





# THANK YOU

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