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**How Podcast Media Content Marketing Shapes Consumer
Brand Perception and Favorability**

MSc IN BUSINESS RESEARCH

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Abstract:

With the rise of digital media, podcasts have emerged as a portable, on-the-go medium that offers a brand-new channel of communication. The commercial value of podcasts has attracted widespread attention in the industry, with many brands still in the observation and evaluation stage, not yet ready to invest or take action. This study will investigate the relationship between consumers brand perception, consumers brand favorability, and the Podcast Media Content Marketing (PMCM). By establishing a framework to describe the pathway of PMCM on consumer brand perception and favorability, this aims to provide brand owners and podcast content host with new perspectives and strategies.

Keywords: Podcasts; Podcast marketing; Content marketing; New marketing trends; Brand advertisement

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1. Introduction

With the prevalence of visually impactful mediums such as social media and short videos, the prominence of sound is further "masked." Compared to receiving "visual information," people can more flexibly obtain the desired information through their ears, without being constrained by time and space. The portability, availability at any time and place, and integration into the listener's daily life are unique strong accompanying attributes of audio. These make it have a significant advantage in the media field. Podcasts, as a deeply engaging media form, have distinct characteristics and advantages. They create a special connection with the audience by slowly building narratives, allowing the voice to convey emotions more effectively and create an emotional atmosphere. The immediate responses in podcasts, such as laughter, silence, and catchphrases, make the audience feel as if they are interacting with real people, rather than just listening to a voice. According to Hunter (2021), this sense of intimacy and emotional transmission helps to establish a feeling of companionship and trust. Additionally, modern consumers desire to interact with brands in an unobtrusive and genuine way. Traditional advertising methods are no longer effective and may be counterproductive. The advent of the digital age has created a new type of consumer, which requires a new marketing strategy (Hunter, 2021). Considered an emerging art form and the latest phenomenon produced by brands, celebrities, and ordinary people together, the podcast advertising space has tremendous growth potential. In the podcast medium, the resonance of the advertisement is crucial along with the brand's recognition and emotional identity. If brands are able to create resonance and recognition among listeners through their advertisements, they may be able to perform better in the podcast market and win consumer favorability and loyalty (Lee, 2017; Acklin, 2019). Through this platform, the work of podcast host can be disseminated internationally, becoming a highly recognized and valued business activity and opportunity (Spinelli & Dann, 2019). In recent years, podcasts have experienced rapid growth and have become one of the most effective ways for marketers to reach new customers and drive business growth. According to Pew Research Center (2023), nearly one-third of podcast listeners have purchased products they heard about on podcasts.

However, simply launching a podcast is not sufficient for promoting products. While podcasts can increase product exposure as a marketing tool, successful marketing also requires strategies and methods to enhance brand awareness. For brand advertisers, the high engagement and loyalty of podcast fans are crucial factors to consider (Brinson et al., 2023). Moreover, podcast listeners often develop a special relationship with the podcast host, which can make them more engaged and loyal. Therefore, for advertisers, understanding and leveraging this relationship can help them better connect with their target audience (Lin, 2023). In some cases, hosts play an important role in influencing listeners' perceptions of the audience's perception of advertising content and behavioral intentions. According to the findings of Brinson et al. (2023), if there is a closer social interaction between the audience and the podcast host, then their evaluative persuasion knowledge about the advertisement or promotional message might decrease. Whether this situation is beneficial or not depends on the specific goals of the brand and advertiser. If they are more focused on increasing brand awareness, establishing emotional connections, or attractiveness, then the situation may be favorable. Therefore, if brands integrate with podcasts and fully leverage these advantages in terms of depth, intimacy, and emotional communication, it is highly likely that brands can establish connections with their audience in a more personalized and emotional manner. This also more likely to effectively convey brand values, ultimately influencing listeners' brand perception and favorability.

In this sense, our research aims to understand how brand through Podcast Media Content Marketing (PMCM) influences brand favorability and brand perception. Specifically, the main research questions addressed in this paper are as follows, where we assume podcast listeners are consumers: (1) Does PMCM affect consumers' favorability towards advertised brands? (2) Does PMCM affect consumers' awareness of advertised brands? (3) Does PMCM trigger deeper audience reflection on brands advertised in the podcast medium, thereby influencing their brand perception and favorability?

To answer these questions, we have defined a theoretical framework based on a review of academic literature. We have proposed six hypotheses based on the selected variables

and tested and validated these hypotheses through empirical research on podcast users. We aim to fill the current knowledge gap in the field of podcast content marketing and provide insights for brands to leverage the potential benefits of podcasts in their marketing strategies.

2. Literature review Podcast

Podcasting, once regarded as a commercial "wasteland," seems to be finding its appropriate connection with business in the last five years. Measured by traditional content platform monetization methods, the commercialization process of podcasts appears to progress slowly and with little discernible effect. Content providers seek to maximize direct and indirect revenue through content sales. For example, most revenue-generating podcasters primarily rely on customized ad placements and accept paid donations for content. However, online advertising profits are slim, and consumers generally lack the willingness to purchase online content compared to physical content and free content substitutes (Berger et al., 2015). Additionally, paid content may reduce viewership and decrease online advertising revenue (Chiou & Tucker, 2013). Podcasters who can consistently earn income are quite rare.

Currently, there is a gradual shift occurring where brands, especially consumer brands, are starting to pay attention to podcasts. One of the main reasons for this change may be the continuous increase in the quantity of podcast content, leading to an expansion on the supply side. However, a more significant reason is that we believe brands have discovered the value of podcasts, or more precisely, the value of audio media. In other words, sound provides brands with a completely new mode of expression.

2.1. Podcast content marketing

According to Rowles and Rogers (2019), podcasts are a highly persuasive yet underutilized channel, accessed by affluent and influential demographics. From the perspective of audience consumers, their main reasons for listening to podcasts are primarily for entertainment (60%), to discover new things (55%), to understand new perspectives (30%), or to stay informed on the latest news and events (29%) (Lin, 2023).

The purpose of podcast marketing is to utilize the medium of podcasts to communicate information related to a company's products or services to consumers, or to provide relevant entertainment content. Businesses can establish deeper relationships with their target audience, offering educational information about their services or products, catering to specific needs (Hunter, 2021). These listeners can independently choose the podcasts they want to listen to, and this flexibility provides them with more autonomy and personalized choices. Based on 50 different studies conducted in the United States, The Nielsen Research (2019) concluded that podcast advertising is critical to increasing brand awareness and brand engagement. Therefore, as a relatively new form of digital media, effective use of podcast content marketing is likely to increase brand perception and favorability.

2.2. PMCM and brand favorability

Researchers believe that content marketing is a method of creating and disseminating educational, interest-relevant, and engaging content to attract and retain customers (Pulizzi, 2011). Companies build brand personality by emphasizing the uniqueness of their products, which helps enhance consumers' brand experience (Coelho et al., 2019). It also helps build stronger brand perception while stimulating positive consumer sentiment toward the brand. Content marketing in the form of podcasts has received more and more attention from brands and businesses in recent years. The interview format is a common podcast method, in which a company's guests are invited to talk about its products or services. If necessary, the podcast host can help the guests ask guiding questions (Rowles & Rogers, 2019). When brands use dialogue to show that they are listening to and communicating with consumers, this kind of interaction and attention may be perceived as positive behavior by consumers, resulting in consumers having a better impression and attitude towards the brand, while building brand credibility (Hunter, 2021). Therefore,

H1.a. Conversational Interview form of PMCM has a more positive effect on consumer brand favorability than a general introduction.

Research shows that content centered around a storytelling theme can evoke strong emotional reactions, as its narrative approach triggers narrative transportation (Lund et al., 2018). This means that listeners engage their imagination while hearing a story, thus forming a deeper connection with the content. This depth of emotional involvement often has more impact than simple, direct presentations of facts, leading consumers to experience joy and happiness (Lim & Childs, 2020). Through effective storytelling, brands can establish a positive image and attitude in the minds of consumers (Escalas, 2004). Advertisements read by podcast hosts have become a common feature of the podcast experience, with more brands choosing to have podcast hosts advertise their products or services directly or indirectly. If podcast host can cleverly integrate brand advertising content into their shows, ensuring that the ads align with the podcast's theme and do not disrupt the listener's experience, audiences may be more receptive to these advertisements. It might even develop a positive perception in listeners while alleviating advertising fatigue. When leveraging the host's endorsement and narrative personality, using verbal cues to deliver promotional messages can make the advertising content feel more natural and aligned with the host's style. However, this also necessitates that podcast content creation maintains a high quality to ensure the effectiveness and attractiveness of the advertisements (Moe, 2021; Resilient et al., 2022). At the same time, this also incentivizes podcast host to carefully design and market their content. Therefore,

H1.b. Thematic Content form of PMCM has a more positive effect on consumer brand favorability than a general introduction.

2.3. PMCM and brand perception

We will also examine another aspect of PMCM's impact on consumers, their perception of brand. The theory of parasocial interaction (PSI) can explain how these two forms of content marketing shape consumers' perception of a brand's personality.

PSI refers to the perception consumers have when interacting with media figures, feeling as if they are engaged in a direct two-way conversation with these mediated personalities.

This virtual interactive experience occurs even if the actual communication is one-sided or two-sided (Horton and Wohl, 1956; Houlberg, 1984; Levy, 1979). Marketers capitalize on these PSI experiences to link brands with a personified image, shaping the brand's personality (Aaker, 1997). This may influence consumers' perceptions of the brand's overall personality, as well as potentially increase their involvement and engagement with the content (Horton and Wohl, 1956; Houlberg, 1984; Levy, 1979; Rubin et al., 1985; Grant et al., 1991).

Host-read ads have become a common feature of the podcast experience, with more brands choosing to have podcast hosts advertise their products or services directly or indirectly (Shelton, 2021). Different types of content marketing vary in their levels of interactivity, openness, and authenticity (He et al., 2021). With conversational interview form podcast, when consumers hear brands responding to the host's questions, they can sense the brand's interactive signals. They might also use the podcast platform to ask questions about the brand, expecting responses directly from the brand. This way may enhance consumers' perception of the brand. Therefore,

H2.a. Conversational Interview form of PMCM has a more positive effect on consumer brand perception than a general introduction.

Thematic Content serves as a storytelling tool employed by brands to engage their audience. Storytelling has the power to evoke authenticity and intimacy in consumers, allowing them to immerse themselves in the narrative (Granata & Scozzese, 2019).

Hosts have the ability to deliver these ads in their familiar tone, offering a personalized service to their audience without disrupting the podcast experience, unlike standard ads. Listeners are likely to accept and remember these adverts, thereby enhancing their awareness and impressions of the brand (Shelton, 2021). According to He et al. (2021), The form of storytelling in media marketing can strengthen brand personality perceptions. Therefore,

H2.b. Thematic Content form of PMCM has a more positive effect on consumer brand perception than a general introduction.

2.4. PMCM and audience deep reflection

In the era of radio broadcasting, many companies chose to advertise on central or local radio stations. According to Wang and Chan-Olmsted (2023), traditional radio was considered as setting the mood and accompanying daily tasks as "aural wallpaper." Many advertisements aired on radio stations were straightforward promotional messages, simply informing listeners of discounts at certain department stores or directly inserting TV ad soundtracks into radio broadcasts. In many cases without even stand-alone audio material, let alone deeper thinking about the medium of sound.

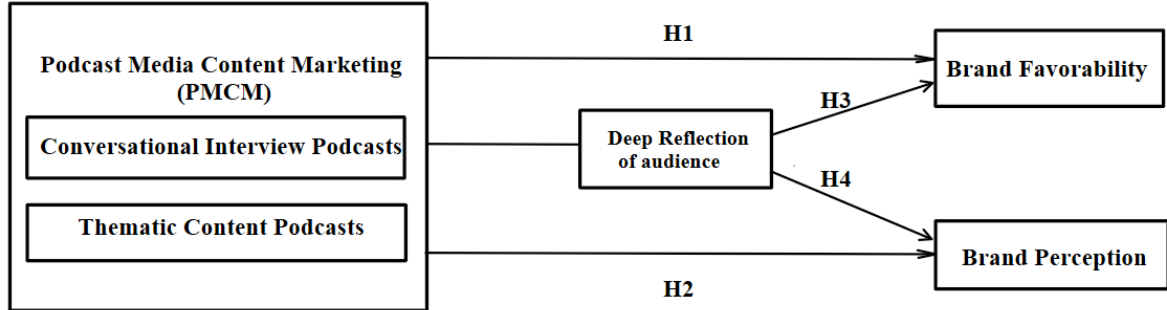
However, unlike traditional radio, podcast consumption is typically more active, engaged, and focused (Wang & Chan-Olmsted, 2023). Therefore, what we want to emphasize is that by utilizing the medium of podcasts, brands have a great opportunity to provide richer and deeper content, which is more likely to attract listeners and stimulate them to have a deeper understanding of the brand's core values, beliefs, and history. Whether through interview-style or thematic content creation, podcasts have the potential to immerse listeners, prompting them to engage in profound reflection, thereby contributing to enhancing listeners' favorability and perceptions of the brand. Therefore,

H3. The effect of PMCM on consumers' brand favorability is mediated by the depth of listeners' reflection while listening to the podcast.

H4. The effect of PMCM on consumers' brand perception is mediated by the depth of listeners' reflection while listening to the podcast.

In summary, the following conceptual model has been developed to examine the impact of PMCM on consumer brand favorability and brand perception.

figure 1 conceptual model of PMCM



3. Research methods

Our research method combines qualitative and quantitative methods, using one-on-one in-depth interviews and questionnaires.

Currently, the main platform for most Chinese podcast programs is *Small Universe*. Therefore, we recruited 230 listeners from this platform to participate in the online survey. And we found that this group (Table 1 for sample profile) showed a high demand for education and had a certain economic ability, confirming the previous research results of scholars (Hunter, 2021; Rowles & Rogers, 2019).

Quantitative data collection was divided into two stages: (1) Before collecting information, we conducted a pre-test on a sample of 10 people through focus group discussions to assess the reliability and validity of the questionnaire used in the experiment. (2) Subsequently, we screened listeners with a total listening time of more than 50 hours from the podcast comment area of the platform, that is, by controlling this variable to ensure the representativeness of the sample and the accuracy of the research. We sent invitations to 250 potential respondents and used standardized questions in the questionnaire to quantify and verify our hypotheses. We encouraged them to answer the questions honestly and spontaneously. The 20 respondents who gave up the survey midway and filled out the questionnaire incompletely were excluded from the study.

Therefore, the final sample included 230 questionnaires suitable for data analysis. Respondents were guaranteed anonymity of their responses and were informed that the information would be aggregated and used for academic purposes only. As shown in Table 1, the respondents were listeners and creators of podcasts, including those with higher education and middle- and high-income classes. By engaging in one-on-one conversations with five actively participating interviewees, our goal is to deeply gather their insights to supplement and enrich our quantitative data, providing more detailed context and explanations, making our findings more comprehensive and in-depth.

Table 1 Sample profile

Characteristics	Item	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	88	38.43%
	Female	141	61.57%
Age	18-24 years	105	45.85%
	25–36 years	124	54.15%
Education	High School	7	3%
	Graduates	92	40.2%
	Post graduates	115	50.2%
	PhD or above	14	6.6%
Job	Employees	79	35%
	Professionals	75	33.2%
	Unemployed	3	1.3%
	Students	69	30.5%
Average time spent on podcasts	Less than 2 hours	38	16.8%
	2-5 hours	96	42.5%
	More than 5 hours	92	40.7%

3.1. Quantitative Study

To ensure the quality and validity of the research results, we described the proposed hypothetical variables, forming unified themes for each. We invited 10 voluntary participants from the previously selected respondents, aged 24-28, to participate in the preliminary experiment. All variables were measured using items adapted from existing scales and assessed using a Likert-type seven-point scale and related sources (Table 2,3,4,5,6). By calculating the Cronbach's α coefficient, the results show that the Cronbach's α values of these scales are all greater than 0.7. According to Bujang et al. (2018), for small sample sizes of less than 30, achieving a minimum expected effect size of 0.7 for the Cronbach's alpha coefficient indicates that the scale is reliable.

Table 2 Validity test of PMCM scale on conversation interviews

Form of PMCM	Items CI	Cronbach's α
<i>Conversational Interview form of PMCM</i>	1. Compared with general introductions, I can focus on their questions and answers and easily absorb relevant information from their conversations	0.7962
	2. Compared with general introductions, the 1v1 conversation format deepens my trust and intimacy with the person speaking in the podcast.	
	3. This conversation format is more interesting and attracts my attention more than general introductions.	

Table 3 Validity test of PMCM scale on thematic content

Form of PMCM	Items TC	Cronbach's α
<i>Thematic Content form of PMCM</i>	1. The podcast title catches the eye, the thematic story draws me in, and I become immersed in the host's narration.	0.7370

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2. I become immersed in the stories surrounding the theme and establish a deeper connection with the storyline.
 3. I find that the brand advertisements are well-integrated with the thematic content of the podcast series, which does not disrupt my listening experience.
 4. I find the thematic content valuable, making it easier for me to remember the plot and resonate with it.
-

Table 4 Validity test of Brand Perception

Affects	Items BP	Cronbach's α
<i>Brand perception</i>	1. I became familiar or reacquainted with the brand	0.7975
	2. I remembered its name and some related aspects.	
	3. I learned about the brand's related products or services.	

Table 5 Validity test of Brand Favorability

Affects	Items BF	Cronbach's α
<i>Brand favorability.</i>	1. I have a positive attitude towards this brand.	0.7669
	2. I think this brand is worth looking forward to.	
	3. This brand is attractive.	

table 6 Validity test of audience's deep reflection

Affects	Items DR	Cronbach's α
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<i>Stimulating audience deep reflection</i>	1. I often find myself thinking deeply while listening.	0.7854
	2. I analyze and evaluate the information presented in the podcast.	
	3. I frequently resonate emotionally with the podcast content.	
	4. I develop a deeper understanding and broader associations with the content.	

After confirming the high reliability of the measurement tool (questionnaire) through Cronbach's alpha analysis, we proceeded to use descriptive analysis and charts (table 7, 8, 9, 10, 11) to display the characteristics of the collected data.

Table 7 Descriptive statistics for Conversational Interview form of PMCM

Items	Mean	SD	Number of Cases	Mean VIF
Compared with general introductions, I can focus on their questions and answers and easily absorb relevant information from their conversations	5.27	0.084	230	1.03
Compared with general introductions, the 1v1 conversation format deepens my trust and intimacy with the person speaking in the podcast.	5.46	0.061	230	
This conversation format is more interesting and attracts my attention more than general introductions.	5.29	0.070	230	

Table 8 Descriptive statistics for Thematic Content form of PMCM

Items	Mean	SD	Number of Cases	Mean VIF
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The podcast title catches the eye, the thematic story draws me in, and I become immersed in the host's narration.	5.40	0.062	230	1.05
I find that the brand advertisements are well-integrated with the thematic content of the podcast series, which does not disrupt my listening experience.	5.38	0.074	230	
I become immersed in the stories surrounding the theme and establish a deeper connection with the storyline.	5.31	0.057	230	
I find the thematic content valuable, making it easier for me to remember the plot and resonate with it.	5.45	0.23	230	

Table 9 Descriptive statistics of Brand Perception

Items	Mean	SD	Number of Cases
I remembered its name and some related aspects	5.06	0.067	230
I became familiar or reacquainted with the brand	5.17	0.073	230
I learned about the brand's related products or services	5.45	0.064	230

Table 10 Descriptive statistic of Brand Favorability

Items	Mean	SD	Number of Cases
I have a positive attitude towards this brand.	5.13	0.059	230
I think this brand is worth looking forward to.	5.37	0.060	230
This brand is attractive.	4.83	0.068	230

Table 11 Descriptive statistic of Audience's Deep Reflection

Items	Mean	SD	Number of Cases
I often find myself thinking deeply while listening.	5.63	0.080	230
I frequently resonate emotionally with the podcast content.	5.08	0.068	230
I analyze and evaluate the information presented in the podcast.	5.02	0.065	230
I develop a deeper understanding and broader associations with the content.	5.13	0.071	230

The collected data were analyzed using SPSS and Stata programs. The results from the 230 subsamples used to test the hypotheses are shown in Table 12. The positive impact of interview-style and thematic podcasts on brand favorability and brand awareness has been confirmed. In other words, the influence of these two forms PMCM (Podcast Marketing Content Marketing) formats on consumers' brand perception and favorability shows significant differences. Firstly, the hypothesis regarding conversational interview podcasts on brand favorability, as well as thematic content podcasts on brand favorability, has been verified (H1.a, H1.b). Similarly, the hypothesis regarding conversational interview podcasts on brand perception and thematic content podcasts on brand perception has also been confirmed (H2.a, H2.b). This impact is due to users or perceiving these two podcast formats as effective ways to learn about, recognize, and create a positive impression of the brand.

Table 12 Hypotheses validation

Hypothesis	T value	Sig	Validation
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<i>H1.a. Conversational Interview form of PMCM → brand favorability</i>	4.18	0.000	√
Items CI.1.	2.78	0.006	√
Items CI.2.	1.43	0.154	×
Items CI.3.	1.97	0.050	√
<i>H1.b. Thematic Content form of PMCM → brand favorability</i>	3.53	0.001	√
Items TC.1.	3.26	0.001	√
Items TC.2.	3.90	0.000	√
Items TC.3.	3.05	0.003	√
Items TC.4.	-0.4	0.691	×
<i>H2.a. Conversational Interview form of PMCM → brand perception</i>	3.93	0.000	√
Items CI.1.	1.11	0.266	×
Items CI.2.	2.19	0.029	√
Items CI.3.	2.96	0.003	√
<i>H2.b. Thematic Content form of PMCM → brand perception</i>	5.56	0.000	√
Items TC.1.	5.46	0.000	√
Items TC.2.	3.52	0.001	√
Items TC.3.	3.36	0.001	√
Items TC.4.	1.24	0.217	×

Secondly, a four-step regression analysis (path effect) was used to examine the mediating role of consumers' ability to reflect deeply on podcast content in the relationship between PMCM format and consumers' brand perception and favorability.

To test the mediating variables, we used the three-step method recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986). Based on this method, (1) the mediating variable is regressed on the independent variable; (2) the dependent variable is regressed on the mediating variable; (3) the dependent variable is regressed on both the independent variable and the mediating variable. We then added the above-mentioned verified dependent variable to regress on the independent variable and tested the four models by estimating four separate equations.

Mediating role of DR in PMCM (CIP & TCP) --Brand favorability relationship

For the verification of H3, we use the mediation regression method and correlation test results of Baron and Kenney (1986) to test. According to the results of Table 13, it can be considered that the four mediation conditions are established. However, in the fourth equation, the CIP concept is still significant (sig. $t = 0.029$). This shows that the assumption of complete mediation does not hold. According to Suliman (2002), when the effect of the independent variable decreases, it indicates that the mediation effect is partially present. In model A, the impact of CIP on brand favorability and brand perception in the fourth equation is weakened, that is, the beta weight decreases from 0.25 in equation (3) to 0.18 in equation (3). Therefore, it indicates the possibility of partial mediation. The same reason can also explain the conclusion of model B in Table 14. Therefore, hypothesis 3 is supported.

Table 13 Testing for mediation effects model A

Test Path (model A)	β	SD	t	Sig	Mediating Effect
CIP → DR(M)	0.46	0.055	8.43	0.000	
DR(M) → Brand favorability	0.29	0.061	4.74	0.000	partial mediation
CIP → Brand favorability	0.25	0.059	4.18	0.000	

CIP--(M)--Brand favorability	0.18	0.067	2.20	0.029
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Note(s): CIP is Conversational Interview Podcast, DR is Deep Reflection, M is Mediator

Table 14 Testing for mediation effects model B

Test Path (model B)	β	SD	t	Sig	Mediating Effect
TCP→ DR(M)	0.2	0.039	5.06	0.000	partial mediation
DR(M)→ Brand favorability	0.29	0.061	4.74	0.000	
TCP→ Brand favorability	0.25	0.059	4.18	0.000	
TCP--(M)--Brand favorability	0.09	0.041	2.23	0.027	

Note(s): TCP is Thematic Content Podcast, DR is Deep Reflection, M is Mediator

Mediating role of DR in PMCM (CIP & TCP) --Brand perception relationship

For the verification of hypothesis 4, we still use the mediation regression method and correlation test results of Baron and Kenney (1986) to expand. According to the fourth equation of Model C in Table 15, the concept of CIP is not significant (sig. T = 0.46, $p < 0.644$). This shows that the hypothesis of full mediation is established.

In Table 16 Model D, the four mediation conditions are established, and the effect of the independent variable in the fourth equation is reduced (from 0.23 to 0.15), indicating that the mediation effect is partially present.

Therefore, the results of deep reflection ability as a mediator show that the audience's deep thinking can partially mediate the relationship between PMCM (CIP & TCP) and brand favorability; and the relationship between TCP and brand perception. On the other hand, the audience's deep thinking can also fully mediate the relationship between CIP and brand perception. Therefore, hypothesis 4 is supported.

In addition, the maximum variance inflation factor (VIF) of the independent variables in each regression model is only 1.31 (less than 10 means there is no multicollinearity).

Table 15 Testing for mediation effects model C

Test Path (model C)	β	SD	t	Sig	Mediating Effect
CIP→ DR(M)	0.46	0.055	8.43	0.000	Full mediation
DR(M)→ Brand perception	0.49	0.062	8.00	0.000	
CIP→Brand perception	0.25	0.065	3.93	0.000	
CIP--(M)--Brand perception	0.031	0.067	0.46	0.644	

Note(s): CIP is Conversational Interview Podcast, DR is Deep Reflection, M is Mediator

Table 16 Testing for mediation effects model D

Test Path (model D)	β	SD	t	Sig	Mediating Effect
TCP→ DR(M)	0.2	0.039	5.06	0.000	partial mediation
DR(M)→ Brand perception	0.49	0.062	8.00	0.000	
TCP→Brand perception	0.23	0.041	5.56	0.000	
TCP--(M)--Brand perception	0.15	0.040	3.64	0.000	

Note(s): TCP is Thematic Content Podcast, DR is Deep Reflection, M is Mediator

3.2. Qualitative Study

Additionally, we conducted in-depth one-on-one phone interviews with five participants (one of whom is both a podcast listener and a podcast host), with each interview lasting

about two hours. To facilitate the interviews, we prepared a semi-structured questionnaire containing open-ended questions to suit the exploratory nature of the research. This approach provided firsthand support and impact on the data (Shahri & Sarvestani, 2020). Just like traditional interviews, sampling is important to generate diverse responses on the research topic (Wiegmann et al., 2024). When selecting samples, we invited participants with different backgrounds and experiences, encouraging them to discuss based on their actual experiences, thereby obtaining more diversified responses and more authentic insights. The open-ended nature of the questions allowed for deeper and richer answers because it enabled respondents to discuss the topics from their own perspectives and experiences (Lopes et al., 2022). It is also important to emphasize that to protect the privacy of the respondents, all names were anonymized, and the interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese. Each participant voluntarily and actively participated in the study due to their interest in the field of podcasts.

When designing the interviews, we focused on the personal experiences and scenarios of the respondents. Experience can stimulate these respondents to extend and deepen the discussion of related research topics, arousing great interest and attention from the respondents (Wiegmann et al., 2024). We explored and further stimulated the respondents' thought processes based on the podcast content they had listened to and found impressive. The authenticity of our research can also be enhanced in this process (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). We focused on semi-structured and open-ended interviews around two content marketing issues in the podcasts they listen to regularly, and discusses the ability to think deeply within it. During the discussions, the respondents reflected on their listening experiences, commenting that these two forms of podcasts were very common and noted their experiences of being prompted to think deeply, including the content expressed by many hosts and the provocativeness of some viewpoints. The respondents did not particularly reject the brand advertisements appearing in podcasts and had a deeper memory of the related podcast content that triggered their deep thinking. They also showed some interest and impression in the information related to brand product features presented in the podcasts. The respondents also acknowledged that

interview-style programs were a more direct way for them to understand third parties, belonging to a consciously chosen listening. On the other hand, thematic topics were an indirect way to understand brands, more often unconsciously learning about them because they did not know third-party brand endorsements might appear in the programs. From each interviewee's interviews, we obtained very specific and in-depth responses. As participant *Yuan* in Study 1 commented in an interview:

“I just listened to a podcast interview with singer ZS yesterday. I think ZS is like a brand, and his new album is like the product of this brand. This interview gave me a better understanding of ZS, his image became more three-dimensional in my eyes, and my impression of him became more positive. To be honest, I was interested in his new song because he shared an interesting personal experience in the podcast, which inspired his creation. (Study 1, Participant Yuan, 25 years, Master's degree, from Zhejiang)”

The participant *Amanda* in Study 2 commented in an interview:

“I enjoy listening to educational content. A memorable brand for me is Duolingo. In a one-hour podcast, the host interviewed a Duolingo executive in China, discussing the brand's background and strengths. The host also shared personal experiences using the product, making the brand feel endorsed. On the other hand, I also run a podcast myself, and as a podcast host, I believe hosts today avoid endorsing poor-quality products to protect their reputation. This makes me feel more trustworthy about the brands that appear in the podcast. (Study 2, Participant Amanda, 27 years, Master's degree, from Guangdong)”

She also mentioned that:

“Regarding the podcast with thematic content, I was deeply impressed by the host's topic of traveling abroad with family on Father's Day. In fact, our parents generally have poor foreign language skills and have certain difficulties in traveling. And I have always planned to take my parents on a trip abroad. It happened that the podcast promoted the brand Q of portable translators, which precisely addressed my concerns and stimulated

me to learn about this brand and purchase this translator. (Study 2, Participant Amanda, 27 years, Master's degree, from Guangdong)”

In our interviews, we also found that many high-end brands prefer to engage in brand marketing through podcasts, primarily by collaborating with well-known podcast hosts for interviews or appearing as sponsors. By talking about the brand's corporate social responsibility, they have gained the favor of the audience. This aligns with our user profile survey results and Rowles and Rogers (2019), who found that podcast listeners are typically high-income, highly educated individuals. These demographics are precisely the main target customers for high-end brands. As participant *shirley* in study 3 commented in an interview:

“I am a non-marriage advocate and a feminist. I was particularly impressed by a Cadillac-sponsored thematic podcast titled: ‘Modern Women: Choosing to Drive or Sit in the Passenger Seat’. Initially, I was drawn to the podcast because it discussed women's rights and encouraged women to make autonomous life choices. As I listened further, I noticed that Cadillac's brand values and corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives were interwoven into the podcast, including efforts to create more job opportunities for women in certain regions. This deeply moved me and left me with a very positive impression of Cadillac. (Study 3, Participant shirley, 36 years, PhD degree, from Shanghai)”

Regarding the open-ended question of whether deep thinking ability can help the audience deepen their liking and understanding of the brand. Respondents agreed that podcasts are a rare platform capable of fostering deep thinking. Specifically, they noted that podcasts allow brands to express their in-depth content more completely and thoroughly. Furthermore, most podcast audiences are those who are willing to spend their attention and time to acquire knowledge and who have their own deep insights into the content. As participant *Yuan* in study 1 and participant *Alin* in study 4 commented at the end of the interview:

“When I discuss the podcast medium, it's like being in a centered processing system. Within this system, voices and perspectives resonate deeply with me, forging strong cognitive alignment and resonance that often immerse me in a state of mind stream. (Study 1, Participant Yuan, 25 years, Master's degree, from Zhejiang)”

“Podcasts, unlike short videos, don't have the nature of ‘quick screening’. I have to take the time to listen for at least ten minutes before deciding whether to subscribe. The duration of around an hour also allows podcasts the possibility of expressing depth. At the same time, podcasts give me a sense of unconscious trust. The personal expression of the host's beliefs also serves as an extension of the brand's values. Sometimes, I also record some of my thoughts and reflections in my personal notebook. (Study 4, Participant Alin, 27 years, Master's degree, from Inner Mongolia)”

Alex believes that podcasts are a medium that easily facilitates a return to rationality, which is quite similar to Yuan's idea of a "central processing system." However, Alex also introduces the importance of storytelling:

“When content takes the lead, rationality starts to re-emerge. Podcasts become somewhat of a more rational vehicle for content when exploring complex topics. The storytelling format becomes a lever, and the value of podcasts lies in telling and amplifying stories in depth. (Study 5, Participant Alex, 29 years, Master's degree, from Beijing)”

Therefore, if brands are able to capitalize on this feature of podcasts and skillfully integrate them with the content of the show, brands will have the opportunity to connect with their audience on a deeper level.

After concluding an in-depth interview, we summarized some unique characteristics of podcast content marketing from the responses of the interviewees. From a marketing effectiveness perspective, podcasts may have inherent limitations. They lack the eye-catching visual effects and still lack a complete consumer conversion funnel, making it challenging to achieve effective advertising through podcasts.

However, looking at it from a different perspective, podcasts possess advantages that other content forms do not. Podcasts connect with users through content, and users find their preferred programs through content as well, highlighting the significance of content. Unlike visual communication mediums such as television or short video, which are saturated with information and tend to stimulate transient attention and emotional responses, podcasts require individuals to concentrate to understand the meaning of words, fostering critical thinking (Strate, 2003). This aligns closely with the human central processing system, showing the unique advantages and appeal of podcasts.

4. Conclusions and Discussion

Based on the quantitative results of this study, two main conclusions can be drawn. First, both forms of PMCM (Podcast Marketing Content Marketing) have a significant positive impact on consumers' brand perception and brand favorability. Specifically, conversational interviews have a greater impact on brand favorability compared to thematic content form (T value: $4.18 > 3.53$), while storytelling podcasts improve brand favorability more effectively than interview podcasts (T value: $5.56 > 3.93$). Furthermore, both quantitative and qualitative study findings suggest that consumers are generally highly engaged with both CI and TC podcasts. These forms allow brands to efficiently participate and utilize the podcast medium.

Second, the listeners' personal depth of reflection mediates the impact of PMCM on consumer brand perception and favorability. When podcast content is compelling to the audience, consumers are likely to process and reflect deeply on the information, which can enhance their brand impression and positive influence. Therefore, podcasts, as a rare medium that unconsciously stimulates self-reflection among listeners, offer an opportunity for brand marketers to enhance consumers' brand perception and favorability through podcast marketing.

Theoretical implications

This study has several theoretical implications. First, in the relatively new field of podcast marketing, we propose a framework that describes how Podcast Media Content

Marketing (PMCM) influences consumer brand favorability and perception. We also incorporate the concept of consumers' depth of reflection within this medium. The research confirms that when brands communicate through conversational interview, consumers tend to form more favorable impressions and attitudes toward the brand (Hunter, 2021). Additionally, through thematic podcasts, when brand content is seamlessly aligned with the podcast theme without disrupting the listener's experience, audiences are more likely to accept these advertisements, resulting in positive emotions toward the brand (Resilient et al., 2022).

Secondly, we identify and provide two specific forms of PMCM, suggesting that conversational interview podcasts and thematic content podcasts are likely to have a positive impact on the brand. The results indicate that the impact of interview and thematic storytelling on consumers' perception and favorability toward the brand is similar. Therefore, this study emphasizes the importance of using these two forms in PMCM, which not provided in earlier research.

Thirdly, we introduce the concept of the depth of reflection experienced by listeners within the podcast medium, exploring how this deep reflection of podcast content affect brand perception and favorability. The quantitative and qualitative results confirm that the podcast's impact on stimulating thought and content engagement is crucial for enhancing brand perception and favorability. This highlights the mediating role of deep reflection consumer brand perception and favorability.

Managerial Implications

Through this study, we aim to provide new insights for brand owners and podcast hosts, highlighting the numerous benefits of adopting podcast content marketing.

First, the operational costs are low. Whether for operations or advertising, marketing through podcasts incurs very low costs.

Second, podcast is a good medium for conveying comprehensive and in-depth information. Hosts can use lengthy episodes to deliver valuable content, providing brands

with an opportunity to output relevant information. This allows brands to expand communication with podcast listeners, attract more loyal customers, and offer products and services that match specific segments. For instance, brands can use profiles of highly educated and high-income users to promote knowledge-based paid services and luxury goods.

Additionally, we provide a practical guide for brands looking to enter the podcast medium: We confirm that both interview podcasts and story-themed podcasts can deepen consumers' awareness and favorability of brands, and the impact of these two methods is almost equally important. Brands interested in interview podcasts should find podcast hosts for direct chat, or podcast hosts will invite capable brands to have a interview. This might require brand to personally record podcasts and share their stories. For thematic content podcasts, brands need to choose podcast accounts they recognize and take advantage of the podcast's own advantages, such as a large number of highly sticky listeners and the host's high-level content creation skills. Brands can sponsor these podcasts and integrate mentions of the brand into the content as soft advertising, without having to talk directly to the host. The effect depends on the value of the content and the seamless integration of advertising and the host's strong creative ability. At the same time, the deep-thinking ability of users in these two forms can also improve the communication effect between the brand and the audience, and have a positive impact on brand perception and favorability.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has its limitations: First, the podcast medium, compared with other media forms, is still a relatively niche group, and the popularity of podcasts may be low in some regions, which limits its coverage and influence as a marketing tool. Second, it is difficult to quantify the effect of podcast content marketing. Although the popularity of podcasts can be evaluated through indicators such as user listening data, it is very challenging to directly measure its specific impact on brand favorability and awareness. Third, we studied the impact of podcast content marketing on brand favorability and awareness, and

the measurement of results is actually a process involving time factors, that is, it changes over time. Therefore, the cross-sectional data collected in this study may not take into account the time factor, and time dependence and persistence effects are very important for marketing measurement (He et al., 2021).

As a relatively new field, podcast content marketing has attracted little research attention so far. There is many potential richness in the contribution of this topic to business that deserve further research. We believe that future research may focus on the following areas: First, comparative analysis of the differences between podcast media and other media, especially the differences in consumers' emotional and stimulus responses to them. Secondly, the research should focus on the long-term impact of podcast content on listeners, tracking how podcast content subtly affects listeners' psychology and behavior over a period of time, and focusing on the consumer journey within the podcast. Fourth, more actual sample data needs to be collected and analyzed to verify and measure its specific impact on consumer cognition and attitudes.

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