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CATÓLICA
PORTUGUESA

THE ETHICS OF USING PARASOCIAL BONDS WITH
PODCAST HOSTS TO ADVERTISE THERAPY APPLICATIONS

Dissertation to Universidade Católica Portuguesa to obtain
a Master's Degree in Communications, Marketing, and
Advertisement

By

Jordan Silva-Benham

Faculty of Human Sciences

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Resumo

Este estudo procura investigar quais são as implicações éticas decorrentes da publicidade de plataformas de ciberterapia em podcasts e qual é o papel das relações parassociais nesses anúncios. Especificamente, este estudo centra-se na empresa de ciberterapia BetterHelp porque é consistentemente classificada como o maior investidor de publicidade em podcasts.

Para investigar os tópicos mencionados anteriormente, este estudo empregou um plano de pesquisa de métodos mistos com um design de pesquisa exploratório, principalmente sequencial. Incluiu a realização de entrevistas semi-estruturadas, um inquérito e uma análise ao conteúdo de perguntas de resposta aberta.

Através da investigação, de estudos anteriores e de teorias da publicidade, este estudo concluiu que as relações parassociais criam um sentimento de confiança entre os ouvintes e os apresentadores de podcasts e que essa confiança pode aumentar a probabilidade de uma pessoa experimentar a BetterHelp. Além disso, verificou-se que as pessoas encaram os anúncios de podcasts mais como recomendações ou sugestões do que os anúncios tradicionais.

Palavras-chave: relações parassociais, marketing de influência, ciberterapia, podcasts, publicidade em podcasts

Abstract

This study seeks to investigate what ethical implications arise from advertising cybertherapy platforms on podcasts, and how, if at all, parasocial relationships play a role in those advertisements. Specifically, this study focuses on the cybertherapy company BetterHelp because it consistently ranks as the top spender for podcast advertising.

To investigate the previously stated topics, this study employed a mixed-methods research plan with a primarily sequential exploratory research design. It included semi-structured interviews, a survey, and a content analysis of open-answer questions.

Through research, previous studies, and theories in advertisement, this study found that parasocial relationships create a sense of trust between listeners and podcast hosts and that trust can make a person more likely to try BetterHelp. Further, it found that individuals view podcast advertisements more like recommendations or endorsements than traditional advertisements.

Keywords: parasocial relationships, influencer marketing, cybertherapy, podcasts, podcast advertising

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Introduction

This dissertation delves into the ethical implications of advertising cybertherapy platforms on podcasts, and how parasocial relationships impact those advertisements. Specifically, this study focuses on the cybertherapy company BetterHelp because it consistently ranks as the top spender for podcast advertising (Magellan AI, 2023).

In this dissertation, podcasts are defined as content that is “episodical, downloadable, or streamable” content and distributed online (Rime et al., 2022 p.1270). This type of content has grown exponentially in popularity over the last two decades (Götting, 2022). With the growth of podcasting, leveraging the medium for advertising became especially popular and lucrative (Snyder & Cistulli, 2023; Bersch, 2021).

Podcasts are especially ripe for the curation of parasocial relationships. Parasocial relationships, first described as “intimacy at a distance” are the relationships that form from parasocial interactions (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Parasocial interactions are the interactions that fans have directly with media personas through sports games, on television, on the radio, on the stage, or on a podcast (Slater et al., 2017; Horton & Wohl, 1956). A long-standing connection after multiple interactions is classified as a parasocial relationship (Schramm & Liebers, 2019; Horton & Wohl, 1956).

Podcasting is known to encourage intimacy between hosts and listeners (Adler Berg, 2023). Podcasts typically employ a conversational tone, which makes audience members feel closer to the hosts; and podcasters and their guests are more likely to share personal information as the medium is faceless and casual (Shah et al., 2023; Adler Berg, 2023; Clarke & Bjork, 2023). Listeners express gratitude towards podcasters who share information about their mental health problems, as it makes them feel less alone in their struggles (Soto-Vásquez et al., 2022).

Parasocial relationships with podcast hosts have been shown to lead to a stronger belief in the podcasters’ authenticity, more positive opinions of podcast advertising, and a greater desire to purchase products advertised (Moe, 2021). Perceived authenticity, or the belief that

the way a media personality presents themselves is true to who they are, increases the success of advertising (Um, 2022; Haimson et al., 2021). This authenticity leads individuals to believe that the personality is authentic in their advertisements and trustworthy in recommendations (Um, 2022). Aw & Chuah (2021) explain the success of these advertisements through the influence framework and the attribution framework. The influence framework theorizes that people are influenced by those with more power than them, in the case of media personalities it relies on attractiveness, prestige, and expertise in a certain subject. The attribution framework simply states that individuals assume that media personalities are advertising a product they approve of (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016; Aw & Chuah, 2021).

The persuasion knowledge model and the schema theory are two theories that can explain why podcast advertising is so successful. The persuasion knowledge model theorizes that individuals learn how to respond to advertisements after repetitive targets (Brinson et al., 2023). Podcasting is a relatively new medium, so, under this model, listeners cannot distinguish between content and advertisements (Brinson et al., 2023). Similarly, schema theory says people build cognitive maps, or schemas, through experience to understand how advertisements should be (Martins et al., 2023; Hoofnagle & Meleshinsky, 2015). Podcast advertisements can work around any pre-developed advertising schema because listeners trust the hosts and the advertisement is delivered in the same tone as the show (Hoofnagle & Meleshinsky, 2015). The ability for podcast ads to skirt around pre-existing notions of what advertisements should be brings up some ethical issues. In particular, podcast advertisements are unregulated by the United States Federal Communications Commission, which requires a clear line between content and marketing (Grandoni, 2015).

As previously mentioned, BetterHelp is the highest-paying advertiser on podcasts (Magellan AI, 2023). BetterHelp is a cybertherapy platform or an online platform that delivers psychotherapy through messaging, video, or audio calls, using freelance therapists hired by the company (Jo et al., 2023). These platforms aim to make it easier for individuals to access mental health support at a lower cost and in areas with limited access to therapists (BetterHelp, n.d.). BetterHelp is not free from controversy, especially in its advertising methods. The United States Federal Trade Commission finalized a 7.8 million USD lawsuit

in 2023, finding that the company violated its privacy policy and shared the personal data of about 7 million users with social media applications for advertising (Fair, 2023). The company has been further criticized for utilizing trust influencers to leverage their parasocial relationships to advertise their services (Schofield, 2023). Previous coverage of this issue tends to focus on YouTube creators, but due to the high levels of parasocial relationships between listeners and podcast hosts, the issue should also apply to podcasters.

This study seeks to understand how parasocial relationships between podcast listeners and hosts impact a person's decision to try BetterHelp. It also aims to enhance the preexisting conversation surrounding the company's use of influencers to advertise its product by including podcasters by delving into any ethical implications that arise from that use.

In investigating the above statements, this study was driven by the following two research questions:

1. *In what ways do parasocial relationships influence a person's decision to use BetterHelp?*
2. *What are the ethical implications of using parasocial relationships between podcast hosts and listeners to motivate listeners to try BetterHelp?*

To answer the research questions, this study employs a mixed-methods research plan with a primarily sequential exploratory research design (Saunders et al., 2016). A sequential exploratory design describes a study that uses qualitative data collection before collecting quantitative data (Saunders et al., 2016). This setup was chosen for this study so that qualitative interviews could inform the creation of the survey for quantitative data collection (Creswell, 2009; Fox, 2023). Both qualitative and quantitative data collection employed a concurrent embedded design (Saunders et al., 2016). That is, there are quantitative questions included in the interviews and some opportunity for qualitative data within the survey.

The following research shows that parasocial relationships influence a person's decision to use BetterHelp. Participants showed a sense of trust towards podcasters, viewing the advertisements for BetterHelp as a sort of recommendation. It raises a significant ethical question surrounding advertisements disguised as endorsements or recommendations, as

consumers may be unfairly led to trust a company. It contributes to the fields of both podcast advertising and influencer marketing and introduces podcasters to the conversation surrounding using influencers to advertise cybertherapy applications.

Part I. Conceptual Framework

1. Parasocial Relationships

1.1 Background and Historic Relevance

In 1943, American radio entertainer Kate Smith ran an 18-hour war bond fundraiser for the United States of America's efforts in the Second World War (Merton et al., 1946). During the 18 hours, Smith asked her 23-million-person audience to buy war bonds 65 times. At the end of the drive, she had successfully raised 31 million USD (McGranahan, 1947; Merton et al., 1946). McGranahan, 1947). A book by Robert King Merton (1946) revealed that listeners responded to Smith's call for funds as they would respond if a friend asked them to buy war bonds (Brown, 2015; Merton, 1946). Interviewees at the time reported thinking about Smith throughout the drive, including wondering if she would be able to make it all 18 hours, and whether the drive would be successful (Merton, 1946). Listeners reported being persuaded to donate due to the chance that their donation phone call may be broadcast as well. Smith was chosen over celebrities such as Frank Sinatra due to her projected personality, which appeared to listeners to be sincere, patriotic, and down to earth (McGranahan, 1947). These traits were vital for her ability to connect to the audience and persuade them to buy war bonds. This study would be the first insight into how audiences move to trust media personalities and provide insights into what would later be referred to as parasocial interactions and relationships (Brown, 2015).

It took nearly a decade for the phenomenon of these relationships to be classified. Parasocial interactions and relationships were first theorized in the mid-1950s when psychologists Donald Horton and Richard Wohl (1956) first presented the theory to describe "intimacy at a distance." This theory was born out of the proliferation of radio and television in nearly every household (Horton & Wohl, 1956). They point out the especially pertinent way people interacted with media characters or personas. These personas are the "typical and indigenous

figures of the social scene presented by radio and television,” such as actors, athletes, television and radio presenters, and musicians (Horton & Wohl, 1956). They define these interactions as “parasocial interactions” - which encompass the interactions fans have directly with personas whether at sports games, on television, on the radio, at theater productions, or concerts (Slater et al., 2017; Horton & Wohl, 1956). Parasocial interactions have become more commonplace with social media, video-sharing platforms, and podcasts (Brown, 2015). A relationship that develops into a long-standing connection due to multiple interactions is classified as a parasocial relationship (Schramm & Liebers, 2019; Horton & Wohl, 1956). These relationships can be either platonic friendships or romantic in the form of a crush. There are four stages of parasocial relationships, as defined by Tukachinsky and Stever (2019). However, not all parasocial relationships consist of all four steps, and a parasocial relationship can exist in different stages.

Stage	Definition
1. Initiation	The point at which a person finds a media figure attractive physically or psychologically and starts to pay more attention to them.
2. Experimentation	When an individual starts to put more effort into learning more about the person through the internet, or by engaging in more of the person’s content to see if the figure shares the person’s beliefs.
3. Intensification	A person becomes more interested in the media figure to the point of thinking about them outside of interacting with their content.
4.Integration/Bonding	The parasocial relationship becomes a part of the person’s identity, and they want to be socially recognized for this relationship.

Table 1. Parasocial relationship stages adapted from Tukachinsky and Stever, 2019, p. 297-308

Studies on parasocial relationships lagged for the decades following its classification but have increased substantially since the mid-1970s with a height of three published studies a year until 1996, when seven were published (Schramm & Liebers, 2019). With the

introduction of social media, interest in these relationships has increased exponentially, with a height of 30 studies published between 2014 and 2015 (Schramm & Liebers, 2019).

In a review of 261 studies on parasocial relationships, Schramm & Liebers (2019) found that most surveys done to study parasocial relationships are quantitative and performed through surveys, with less than a quarter of the reviewed studies using experiments. Multiple scales were developed to study parasocial relationships and include questions regarding whether they would share honest secrets with the persona, go to them for emotional comfort, or believe the persona could be trusted (Tukachinsky, 2010; Schramm & Liebers, 2019). Most research has been conducted on nonfiction television personalities, but there is a growing interest in relationships with fictional characters especially new media influencers and celebrities (Schramm & Liebers, 2019).

In many ways, these relationships mirror traditional ones through maintenance, benefits, and even breakups (Hartmann et al., 2008). People tend to form relationships with people who have “attractive traits” whether psychologically or physically, as demonstrated above by the case of Kate Smith who was chosen to lead the war bond drive, because of her traits that could easily persuade people to purchase bonds (McGranahan). These traits often correspond with the types of people the person would consider when choosing a friend or partner in real life (Hartmann, 2016; Li et al., 2023). Eyal and Dailey (2012) reported similar maintenance needs for parasocial relationships as for friendship. Both types of relationships were stronger when there was significant commitment and identification and if the “friend” or media character was relevant in the person’s larger social group so that the character was a part of the person’s everyday life (Eyal & Dailey, 2012).

For these relationships to occur, there must be acceptance of the interaction. Audience members need to accept the character the persona is presenting to them, and the persona needs to fit the role they are playing (Horton & Wohl, 1956). The decision to form a parasocial relationship is also a conscious effort, with the actions that go toward forming one like the actions needed to form personal relationships – like consciously choosing the person, going through the effort to learn more about the figure, and spending time with them through observing their content (Scherer et al., 2021). A 1996 German study found that a sample of

people rated their favorite media personas as having a higher relationship quality than they have with their good neighbors (Giles, 2002). One of the most attractive parts of these connections is the certainty in the relationship, because parasocial relationships have the added benefit of only one person, the viewer, needing to put in effort to make the relationship work. In their original paper, Horton & Wohl state that:

“The persona offers, above all, a continuing relationship. His appearance is a regular and dependable event, to be counted on, planned for, and integrated into the routines of daily life. His devotees 'live with him' and share the small episodes of his public life - and to some extent even his private life away from the show. Indeed, their continued association with him acquires a history, and the accumulation of shared past experiences gives additional meaning to the present performance” (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 216).

Even further, viewers show emotions like a breakup when a character on their favorite TV show dies or leaves the program (Giles, 2002). For real-life personas, parasocial breakups can occur following a scandal involving the targeted character (Hu, 2016). These scandals, which involve any sort of action that produces negative press coverage, can result in similar outcomes as real-life relationship fallouts due to the persona disappointing the fan (Hu, 2016). Much like people in their everyday lives, have other people they like and people they dislike, it is also possible to have negative parasocial relationships where people feel hate or disgust when thinking of a certain persona (Hartmann et al., 2008). The affective disposition theory simply proposes that viewers enjoy watching characters they like to experience positive events, and characters they dislike experience negative events, thus making them more invested in what that persona does and spending more time observing these events (Raney, 2017). Hartmann et al (2008), found that parasocial relationships precede the affective disposition. That is, the stronger the positive relationship, the stronger the interest a person has in the person's success and vice-versa— like the way that people hope to see their real-life friends succeed and those they dislike falter.

The late 20th century and early 21st century have offered a plethora of additional opportunities for parasocial relationships with the spread of the internet and easily accessible films, television shows, music, and live sports (Brown, 2015). More so with the introduction of social media – which include Twitter/X, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook – and blog sites that allow fans to form a community with like-minded individuals and interact directly with celebrities (Schramm & Liebers, 2019; Tufts University Relations, 2022).

These platforms provide unique ways in which celebrities can interact personally with their fans without any organization mediating the conversations, as opposed to communicating through newspapers and magazines (Kim & Song, 2016). People on social media sites can also foster more parasocial interactions through live streams, Q&As, and responses to comments – creating a “trans-parasocial relationship,” or one that moves beyond a regular parasocial relationship into one with more interaction and stronger emotional connections with their fans (Hudders & Lou, 2022; Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2023). These relationships are impacted by how honest and open the celebrity is perceived. The more a celebrity appears to disclose things about themselves on social media, the stronger the perceived relationship becomes (King & Song, 2016). Social media content is especially apt for feigning a connection between influencers and followers, especially through smaller, more niche creators (Aw & Chuah, 2021). These smaller creators foster greater relationships than more globally famous individuals, likely due to a deeper feeling of connection and the ability to interact with a greater proportion of their fans (Aw & Chuah, 2021).

With each new media, there are more opportunities for media personas to connect more with their fans – increasing parasocial relationships, especially with independent content creators (Giles, 2002; Leith, 2021). Video content has become more prevalent in recent years through YouTube videos, video podcasts, and live streaming – all mediums that involve extensive face-to-face parasocial interactions between audiences and creators (Leith, 2021). In 2016, 40% of surveyed millennials stated that their favorite YouTuber understood them more than their friends, and 70% reported relating to YouTubers more than traditional celebrities (O’Neil-Hart & Blumenstein, 2016). Live streaming on websites such as Twitch is also a powerful medium for forming parasocial relationships, as streamers share intimate details of their lives, interact with their audience through chat features, and stream from their own homes or even bedrooms (Sherrick et al., 2022). Vital in cultivating relationships on these sites is the live chat option which allows people to communicate directly with the streamer and with other fans (Leith, 2021). Because parasocial relationships are often stronger when the persona is relevant in a person’s life, the ability to connect with other fans is a contributor to the parasocial relationship built on these platforms as well as all social media sites that rely heavily on interacting with others with common interests.

The build-up of parasocial interactions (i.e. chatting somewhat face-to-face with a streamer), tends to lead to stronger parasocial relationships (Horten & Wohl, 1956). A 2020 study found that parasocial relationships are directly involved in whether a viewer will return to a live stream, or give money to the streamer (Lim et al., 2020). These one-sided relationships are not just formed through video. Audio podcasts have also been extremely successful at facilitating parasocial bonds listeners use podcasts to help them feel less lonely while completing tasks and listeners view the hosts as “conversational partners” instead of random entertainers (Soto-Vásquez et al., 2022). Parasocial relationships explicitly tied to podcasters will be covered more extensively in the next chapter.

1.2 Parasocial Relationships Associated Traits

In an examination of 60 years of research on parasocial relationships, Schramm and Liebers (2019) found multiple studies pointing to an increased propensity for these relationships in individuals with psychosocial vulnerabilities and older adults and adolescents (McCutcheon et al., 2003). Furthermore, those who rank as having high personal distress identify more with having parasocial relationships (Scherer et al., 2021). Personal distress is like social anxiety, as people develop discomfort during social interactions. The reason older adults tend to form more parasocial relationships is likely tied to increased television consumption due to lower mobility and dwindling social connections (Schramm & Liebers, 2019; Grant et al., 1991; Eggermont & Vandebosch, 2001). This pattern follows the disengagement theory – or the idea that the elderly slowly withdraw from social interactions as they age, thus turning more to television and other forms of entertainment as a substitute for social interaction (Eggermont & Vandebosch, 2001; Cumming et al., 1960). Television, like all entertainment, helps those who feel isolated to disconnect from their current reality, distract themselves, and connect with characters without leaving their homes (Eggermont & Vandebosch, 2001). Extrapolating these ideas beyond the elderly, we can infer that those who lack a full life, feel uncomfortable in social settings, or are isolated due to other reasons, and need something to fill that gap would be more likely to form parasocial relationships (Schramm & Liebers, 2019). Adolescents are theorized to form these relationships as they begin developing their own identities and start to find personas they identify with (Giles & Maltby, 2004).

The parasocial compensation theory supports the ideas mentioned above. It theorizes that individuals look to parasocial relationships to fill the gaps in their real-life relationships, or in their lives, such as a lack of fulfillment of social bonds, companionship, and personal identity (Sherrick et. al, 2021; de Bérail et al., 2019). These three categories fit with the types of people who tend to form more parasocial relationships, as the elderly lack social bonds, adolescents lack personal identity, and those with psychosocial vulnerabilities may lack all three traits due to isolation and disconnect from others and themselves. Those who feel ostracized from social groups or feel they have unmet needs in their lives may compensate for their lack of belonging by forming parasocial relationships (Hartmann, 2016). The unmet needs vary depending on the type of person experiencing them and may be based on psychological differences. For example, people with anxious attachment styles tend to form more parasocial relationships than those with avoidant attachment styles (MacNeill & DiTommaso, 2021; Rosaen & Dibble, 2015). Anxious attachment can be described as the desire to form relationships, but the fear of failure to maintain the relationships. In contrast, people with an avoidant attachment style tend to be more independent and fear emotional intimacy, while people without strong avoidant or anxious attachment have high attachment security and experience relatively calm, healthy relationships (Hartmann, 2016; MacNeill & DiTommaso, 2021). Those with anxious attachment styles tend to be “preoccupied” with their relationships and engage in behaviors “that involve energetic and excessive reassurance seeking” (MacNeill & DiTommaso, 2021). The anxious person may also gravitate towards any relationship they can get and tend to experience them more intensely and with greater fear of them ending, perhaps leading them to parasocial relationships that can offer consistent connection (Bond, 2021; MacNeill & DiTommaso, 2021; Rosaen & Dibble, 2015).

By applying the parasocial compensation theory to this phenomenon, it can be deduced that parasocial relationships compensate for the volatility of real-life relationships. Although those with an anxious attachment tend to report stronger levels of parasocial relationships, MacNeill and DiTommaso (2021) found that those with anxious attachments are more likely to form relationships with media personalities who are more anxious and, thus, more like themselves as opposed to those characters who may seem more reassuring and calmer. This finding was unexpected, as the authors assumed anxiously attached individuals would develop relationships with comforting characters as opposed to those with less comfortable

traits. However, the findings do correspond to real life where people tend to seek out relationships with people like themselves, presenting the idea that parasocial relationships in anxiously attached individuals supplement real-life relationships (MacNeill & DiTommaso, 2021; Bond, 2018).

There are several neutral and positive consequences of these relationships. Horton & Wohl (1956) theorized that parasocial relationships are a natural progression as young people move from being attached to their parents to being attached to their peers, with celebrities being a sort of “pseudo-friend” between the two (Giles & Maltby, 2004). In adolescents, these relationships are seen as a normal part of development as they develop emotional autonomy (Giles & Maltby, 2004; Schramm & Liebers, 2019). A perceived relationship with a celebrity helps adolescents find their own identity, or comfort themselves in their isolation during the turbulent adolescent years. Stever (2010) states that it makes sense for adolescents to look for media personalities to satisfy psychosocial needs since the modern age sees much of its information coming from film, television, and the internet.

Those with mental illnesses can also find solace and reduce their anxieties or insecurities about their disorder when they form parasocial relationships with creators with the same illness (Lotun et al., 2022). It is also possible to use social media drawn from parasocial relationships to interject resources for psychological help through algorithms by splicing advertisements for mental health services in content from these media personas who have greater relationships with those with mental illness (Balcombe & De Leo, 2023). On the flip side, individuals without those disorders reported decreased levels of prejudice towards people with the specific mental illness that their parasocial relationship suffered from (Lotun et al., 2022). Viewers of the television show *Monk*, which focuses on the fictional detective Adrian Monk who lives with extreme obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), saw those with parasocial relationships to the main character report lower levels of stereotyping and bias towards individuals living with OCD in the real world (Hoffner & Cohen, 2012). Those with OCD who had a parasocial relationship with Monk were more accepting of their diagnosis and more likely to be open about their experience (Hoffner & Cohen, 2012). For depression, a study of attitudes toward depression and suicide prevention following the death by suicide of actor and comedian Robin Williams found that those with strong parasocial bonds to the

actor showed a higher chance of being comfortable with and accepting people with depression (Hoffner & Cohen, 2017).

Additionally, Scherer et al (2021) suggest that people with more empathy, or the ability to identify with another person's experience, tend to self-identify themselves as having a parasocial relationship and report stronger relationships. The study examined four subsections of empathy: 1) empathetic concern; 2) caring for other people; 3) personal distress, perspective taking, and fantasy, and 4) the ability to self-identify with media characters. Aside from personal distress, which was already discussed, fantasy was the only subsection with a significant impact on identifying parasocial relationships, likely due to the ability to envision what it would be like to be a certain media persona (Davis, 1983; Scherer et al., 2021). Empathy also corresponds to how likely someone is to be biased towards parasocial relationships. Those with less empathy show more judgment toward these relationships than those with higher levels of empathy (Scherer et al., 2021).

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic caused significant mental health distress in a large portion of the population due to financial stress, isolation, uncertainty about the future, and health-related fears (Sherrick et al., 2021). It also offered a unique perspective on parasocial relationships (Bond, 2021). Parasocial behaviors increased significantly during the pandemic and social distance adherence (Bond, 2021). That is, as people could not interact with their friends in person, the more they formed relationships with celebrities and fictional characters. Media personalities were also more reliable than the real world, as the restrictions and situation of the pandemic were ever-changing (Bond, 2021). At the time, parasocial relationships offered a type of control over an individual's perceived "social life" as opposed to their real-life social lives that were no longer in their hands (Soto-Vásquez et al., 2022). Parasocial relationships with favorite media personae grew in intensity over time, particularly for those who may have been using media experiences to compensate for social deficiencies brought on by the pandemic. Parasocial engagement did not require audiences to wear facial coverings while flipping through magazines, to keep at least 6 feet away from their televisions, or to avoid viewing film scenes depicting large gatherings (Bond, 2021).

One theory that could explain the increase in parasocial relationships due to the pandemic is the self-determination theory (Sherrick et al., 2021). Self-determination theory, simply put, argues that people are motivated by three psychological needs: 1) competence; 2) autonomy, and 3) relatedness (Klein, 2019; Sherrick et al., 2021). All three of these needs were threatened by the pandemic. People felt less competent due to changes in work structure, such as reliance on video conferencing software, restrictions in social activities hampered relatedness, and were prohibited from taking part in the activities they wanted to, threatening their autonomy (Sherrick et al., 2021). With all these restrictions in place, many individuals went to the media and parasocial relationships to fill those needs (O'Grady, 2020; Sherrick et al., 2021; Bond, 2021).

For lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans (LGBT) youth, the need for connection increased exponentially during the pandemic compared to heterosexual youth due to a lack of support outside of the home. A 2020 study found that parasocial relationships on social media offered comfort and support for LGBT individuals (Woznicki et al., 2020). Even before the pandemic, youth who identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual without other LGBT friends were more likely to report parasocial relationships with non-heterosexual personas, as they try to fulfill necessary compatible social bonds outside of their direct community where there may be no other LGBT youth (Bond, 2018). Additionally, loneliness among adolescents was correlated to stronger parasocial relationships across gender identities, but non-heterosexual youth reported higher levels of parasocial relationships when compared to their heterosexual counterparts.

There are concerns that the increase in parasocial relationships to cope with the difficulties and loneliness of the pandemic could lead to further disconnection from the world at large primarily for people who are already predisposed to mental health issues (Balcombe & De Leo, 2023). As noted above, Balcombe and De Leo (2023) further noted that using YouTube or other social media to form parasocial relationships could harm the mental health of viewers. This harm comes from the understanding that those who use social media excessively, defined as over five to six hours a day, are more likely to be asocial than those who have a regular relationship with social media, defined as around two hours a day (Balcombe & De Leo, 2023). Mental health may have a significant impact on the forming of

parasocial relationships with a connection found between social anxiety and these relationships (Bérail et al., 2019). Parasocial relationships also contribute to YouTube addiction (de Bérail et al., 2019). The Displaced Social Behavior Theory states that “sedentary behaviors” (including social media use, like YouTube addictions) decrease real-life interactions, and real-life interactions protect against the development of mental health problems (Balcombe & De Leo, 2023). Considering this, we can assume that parasocial relationships can lead to social media addiction, and this addiction potentially increases the chance of developing mental health problems (Balcombe & De Leo, 2023). In addition to mental illness, cognitive abilities correlate to celebrity worship, an extreme form of parasocial relationship, as these people are less inclined to understand that the idea of celebrity is mostly designed to “sell a product,” and can lead to a limited ability to notice an advertisement involving a celebrity (McCutcheon et al., 2003).

1.3 The Roles of Persuasion and Marketing

Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* described three technical “pisteis” of persuasion, or methods of persuasion: ethos, pathos, and logos (Rapp, 2022). Ethos represents the credibility curated through their intelligence, competence, good character, and good intentions. The persuasion theory reflects this. The theory states that the person communicating the message is extremely important in how the message is perceived and how persuasive it is (Schlütz & Hedder, 2021). Pathos is the appeal to an audience’s emotions because a person’s judgment can become clouded when they are emotional. Last, Logos represents the logical argument (Rapp, 2022). These methods seemingly target the three pieces of a speech: the speaker (ethos), the speech (logos), and the listener (pathos) (Rapp, 2022). In Aristotle’s time, rhetoric was an essential part of society with entire schools being dedicated to the best way to communicate a message and a rhetorician was a genuine descriptor of public servants (Burke, 2008). The emphasis on rhetoric as a precursor for a career path as a politician or a lawyer is no longer relevant, as Burke (2008) explains:

“The arenas of oratory and the occasions to partake in persuasive discourse in these professions have been drastically reduced. The inclusive model of democracy practiced in ancient Athens is not the same as the ones currently in use in the states of the Western world. Thus, the profession of the rhetorician is to all intents and purposes a thing of the past” (Burke, 2008, p. 296)

However, Burke (2008) argues that rhetoric and persuasion are still relevant to the advertising world. The tools and tricks for persuasion that Aristotle laid out in Ancient Greece are regularly employed in advertisements. Successful advertisements should: come from a credible source (ethos), entice the viewer's emotions (pathos), and show how the product would improve the person's life (logos) (Harris, 2018). The leverage of parasocial relationships for advertisement would be primarily utilizing ethos by using a trustworthy spokesperson in the advertisement of their product, but the other two techniques likely come into play depending on the advertisement.

Influencers are seen as both friends and authorities on topics ranging from food and fitness to socio-political issues (Yuan & Lou, 2020). With this authority, influencers can have a significant grip on the behavior and attitudes of their fans, where influencers become a sort of "opinion leader" (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2023; Um, 2022). As a parasocial opinion leader, an individual has a significantly higher influence over their followers due to their perceived trustworthiness (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2023). This is especially pertinent to modern-day influencers who tend to have stronger parasocial relationships with their followers (Aw et al., 2022).

Parasocial relationships are extremely effective at changing behaviors. As mentioned in the first portion of this chapter, the story of Kate Smith is a key portion of the study of the ability of media figures to influence the public (McGranahan, 1947; Merton et al., 1946). While Kate Smith was not around during social media, the ability of social media influencers to persuade audiences is still the same, if not stronger than it was in 1943. For example, young people who regularly consume content from influencers who focus on the environment are more likely to act politically, such as by contacting their representatives or attending a protest, or in their private lives through boycotts of companies whose practices harm the planet and reducing waste (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2023).

During COVID-19, these relationships changed behaviors in some cases as creators pivoted to provide things such as emotional support, exercise tutorials, and mindfulness courses (Balcombe & De Leo, 2023). In some cases, individuals formed these relationships with positive role models. A German study found that parasocial relationships with German

virologists on social media saw significant changes in how people felt about and dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic and that those who had a parasocial relationship with a virologist via social media or podcasts showed higher amounts of knowledge about the virus and took more preventative action against the virus (Utz et al., 2022). On the other hand, those with reported parasocial relationships with former United States President, Donald Trump and trust in his brand were less likely to seek more information about COVID-19 (Kelly et al., 2020). This connection could be attributed to the fact that Trump regularly downplayed the effect that COVID-19 would have on society, thus his followers did not think it was something they should be aware of (Kelly et al., 2020). These relationships also impacted how people handled their time in isolation, as those with stronger relationships with fitness influencers also contributed heavily to how often they worked out during the pandemic stay-at-home orders (Li et al., 2023).

Of course, the ability of influencers to persuade their audiences extends to marketing and advertisement. Influencer marketing is the practice of using online influencers to sell a product and was first explored academically in 2003 (Ye et al., 2021; Leung et al., 2022). Since that first paper, the practice has become increasingly popular as the broader public becomes wearier of traditional advertisements, and traditional advertisements become less popular (Leung et al., 2022). It can be described as a new form of “embedded marketing,” like product placement in that the advertisement or endorsement is embedded into the content being consumed as opposed to separating it from it, as advertisements are spliced in with regular content on social media accounts (Ortová et al., 2023). It started with marketers jumping on the ability to advertise with popular bloggers when the medium was first becoming popular and has since grown to include social media influencers, YouTubers, and Podcasters (Hudders & Lou, 2022). By 2020 the influencer marketing industry was valued at 9.7 billion USD (Geyser, 2020). This valuation is not without reason as in 2020, influencer marketing had an average earned media value of 5.78 USD for every 1 USD spent (Geyser, 2020). Organizations must choose the right influencers to partner with, and the level to which parasocial relationships occur with an influencer is important to consider (Ye et al., 2021). Parasocial relationships are important tools to leverage for both influencers and marketers as they contribute to a sense of trust for the product their “friend” recommends (Ye et al., 2021, Bi & Zhang, 2022). Because of the sense of stronger parasocial relationships formed

between smaller influencers and their fans, followers tend to trust their recommendations more. Individuals are also more aware of marketing cues for macro-influencers as opposed to nano-influencers, or those with lower follower counts (Aw & Chuah, 2021; Boerman & Muller, 2021).

Relationships with influencers lead to higher purchase intentions and a more positive brand image of the brands that the influencers advertise. These relationships can form a sort of “halo effect” where everything that is attached to the influencer is seen as good (Breves et al., 2021). Multiple attributes help to improve parasocial relationships and thus, advertising success. How active the person is as well as how much prestige and expertise they appear to have, and how much they interact with their audience, the more followers trust them (Aw et al., 2022). And trustworthiness can be more important than expertise in influencer marketing (Xiao et al., 2018). It is also extremely beneficial for influencers to be attractive. Followers of fitness influencers that they perceived as attractive showed higher rates of parasocial relationships, and higher rates of intent to exercise (Li et al., 2023). Influencer marketing is especially successful in consumers who have “low self-discrepancy,” meaning those who believe their “ideal self is attainable” (Aw & Chuah, 2021 p. 153). Thus, the consumer believes the advertised product can work for them (Aw & Chuah, 2021). In line with the importance of low self-discrepancy, is the importance of congruence, or compatibility. Contrary to past studies, Koay et al. (2023) found a limited connection between the strength of a parasocial relationship and purchase intention, but they did find a significant relationship between congruency and purchase intention. This finding suggests that the strength of the relationship does not matter as much as the similarities that consumers see between themselves and the influencer. Thus, influencer marketing is most effective when advertising to an audience most like the influencer (Koay et al., 2023).

Authenticity is an incredibly important aspect when employing influencer marketing (Um, 2022). Authenticity can be described as the act of presenting oneself as they are inside. However online authenticity can be curated and depends on how authentic a person is perceived depending on what they share (Haimson et al., 2021). The perceived authenticity of an influencer leads to long-term, committed, and trusting relationships with their audiences (Nichols & Shapiro, 2023). Additionally, those who experience parasocial

relationships or parasocial interactions with an influencer tend to attribute a higher level of authenticity to them (Nichols & Shapiro, 2023). Nichols & Shapiro (2023) explain this phenomenon through the attribution theory. This theorizes that the behavior of an individual is indicative of their true self if their behavior is consistent (Kelley, 1973). For social media influencers and celebrities, this means that followers will attribute authenticity to a person who remains consistent in interviews or online posts (Nichols & Shapiro, 2023). For advertising, authenticity is how much an influencer appears to believe in their advertisement (Um, 2022). Just as parasocial interactions and relationships increase the perceived authenticity of an individual, parasocial relationships have been shown to increase the perceived authenticity of an advertisement (Um, 2022). Perceived authenticity sells, as consumers who see an advertisement as authentic are more likely to report higher purchase intentions than those who do not (Nichols & Shapiro, 2023).

Endorsements are also an important tool for brands to leverage parasocial relationships. Endorsements, simply put, are when a celebrity or influencer claims to approve of a certain product (Cambridge, n.d.). Consumers' perceived relationships with endorsing celebrities can impact how the consumer views a brand after a brand falters (Aw & Labrecque, 2022). Multiple big-name athletes endorse Nike, a way for the company to garner trust in consumers and move past alleged slave labor used to produce their products (Aw & Labrecque, 2022). Aw & Labrecque (2022) found that parasocial relationships lead to the ability to forgive and forget a brand's transgressions. However, it is more helpful if the endorsed company's scandal is uncontrollable as opposed to entirely its fault (Aw & Labrecque, 2022). It is typically ideal for a brand to conceal the endorsement or advertisement, as consumers are less likely to view brands positively when they are aware that they are viewing an endorsement (Bi & Zhang, 2022). But parasocial relationships help to offset that negative reaction. If an endorsement is obvious, parasocial relationships have been shown to help make the influencer and the brand seem more trustworthy in their endorsement and increase its effectiveness (Aw & Chuah, 2021).

The success of these advertisements cannot yet be explained through theory, according to Aw and Chuah (2021). However, the influence framework and attribution framework can help to provide insight into why (Aw & Chuah, 2021). The influence framework states that

individuals are more likely to be influenced by those with more power than them (Scheer & Stern, 1992; Aw & Chuah, 2021). In the case of new media influencers, this power can be things like how attractive they are, or how much prestige and expertise they are presumed to have on a certain subject (Aw & Chuah, 2021). The attribution framework proposes that individuals assume that influencers and endorsers are advertising a product that they use and enjoy (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016; Aw & Chuah, 2021). Consumers are less likely to view brands positively when they are aware that they are viewing an endorsement (Bi & Zhang, 2022). However, parasocial relationships have been shown to help make the influencer seem more trustworthy in their endorsement, which can be explained by the attribution framework as consumers attribute genuine intentions to influencers they follow (Aw & Chuah, 2021; Kapitan & Silvera, 2016). The attribution framework is especially pertinent to this paper, which assumes that podcast listeners will assume that the advertisements delivered by the hosts are genuine endorsements.

Influencer marketing does not come without concerns. In recent years, the practice has been a point of concern for communications professionals, primarily because influencers may not disclose paid content because of fear of losing their authenticity to their followers (Ortová et al., 2023). In 2023, Nina Ortová, Denisa Hejlová, and David Weiss created an influencer code of ethics for the Czech Republic in partnership with industry professionals and academics (Ortová et al., 2023). According to the code, influencers must:

1. Disclose the partnership.
2. Guarantee the content is adapted for the target group. For example, if the influencer has a significant number of followers under 18, the content must be written in a way they will understand.
3. Refrain from concealing their experience with the product. For example, they need to state if the product was given to them for free and if they use the product.
4. Keep collaboration info on the content. For a video, the information needs to be on the screen long enough for it to be comprehended.
5. Should respect any recommendations from the authorities and take the advice to ensure it fits within the guidelines.
6. If the audience of an influencer is primarily underage, the influencer cannot advertise items such as alcohol or tobacco.

These rules are like those of the United States, which regulates influencer marketing in the same way as they regulate other advertisements. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) regulates influencers in the country. It states that disclosures need to be placed where everyone can see them and that influencers should be honest about their experiences with a product (Burclaff, n.d.). Unlike most countries, the FTC is not a self-regulatory body and has legal standing to institute fines on those who produce deceptive advertising (Asquith & Fraser, 2020). However, fines are rarely ever instituted due to limited resources and lobbying pressures, and the FTC regularly punishes violations committed by high-profile advertisers with a public settlement demanding they change their advertising practices (Asquith & Fraser, 2020).

Despite the regulations, a study using eye-tracking technology to explore when and how people recognize paid sponsorships on Instagram found that participants incorrectly identified one out of three paid sponsorships as non-paid (Boerman & Muller, 2021). Participants also believed that 17% of the non-sponsored posts were advertisements. The study also found that tagging the brand on an Instagram post or using the “paid partnership” option on Instagram was the most effective at helping audiences understand that they are viewing an ad (Boerman & Muller, 2021). Influencer marketing on YouTube – which hosts video podcasts as well as other forms of video content – is incredibly successful (Xiao et al., 2018). YouTube influencers, who create and distribute their content, have the highest reach of all social media influencers (Rohde & Mau, 2021). The most successful forms of these brand sponsorships are those advertisers who allow YouTubers to have creative control of the ad to make it appear more authentic and genuine (Fidelman, 2017; Xiao et al., 2018). When the YouTuber can create their ad content in their voice, it helps the audience perceive the advertisement as regular content and a serious recommendation as opposed to a paid advertisement. Just as with Instagram, YouTube viewers and podcast listeners may not notice they are viewing an advertisement that is embedded into a video or podcast and performed by the host (Rohde & Mau, 2021).

2. Podcasts, Parasocial Relationships, and Advertisements

2.1 Background

In the simplest terms, podcasting can refer to “media content delivered automatically to a subscriber via the Internet” (Berry, 2006, p. 144). The term “podcast” was first coined in 2004 by Ben Hammersley, a writer for *The Guardian* (Bonini, 2015). It is a combination of the words “broadcast” and “iPod” used to describe online radio programs distributed using products like the Apple iPod following its release in 2001 (Hammersley, 2004; Apple Media Newsroom, 2022).

Rime et al. (2022) goes further than Berry’s definition above, noting that the understanding of podcasting has expanded exponentially over the last two decades. The authors proposed the following definition with a note that the medium has changed drastically since its conception in the early 2000s and will likely continue to change: “A podcast is a piece of episodic, downloadable, or streamable, primarily spoken audio content, distributed via the internet, playable anywhere, at any time, and produced by anyone who so wishes” (Rime et al., 2022 p.1270).

The current study will follow this definition, as it encompasses the flexibility of what a podcast is. However, it fails to fully encapsulate the increasingly prevalent concept of video podcasting, (Cumulus Podcast Network & Signal Hill Insights, 2022). Thus, this study will follow the definition set forth by Rime et al. (2022), with the caveat that the content is “mediated through audio or video platforms,” which was proposed by Balanuta (2021, p. 38).

In defining podcasts, Rime et. al (2022) explore six tensions in podcasting. Tensions represent two competing concepts. The following tensions help to understand the complexities of podcasting and the vast amount of content the industry contains.

Personalization and Automation	Listeners are in control of what they listen to, but machines distribute the content.
Independent and Mainstream Production	Podcasts are typically produced independent from large media corporations, but it is those large corporations (Apple, Spotify, etc) that monopolize the distribution of the shows.
Unique and Universal Content	There is a vast number of podcasts focused on niche and unique content, but they feature universally enjoyed formats (such as interviews, discussions, storytelling)
Current Audience and Possible Demographic	Podcasters need to focus on keeping current listeners engaged, but also on capitalizing on possible new listeners with innovative ideas.
Immersion and Interactivity	Producers of podcasts need to keep their shows immersive for people to pay attention to them, but they also need to figure out ways to adjust the format of the show to fit an individual listener.
Art and Technology	Creativity is essential in podcasting, but so is technology. The medium was established through discovering and creating new technologies to distribute their content.

The six tensions of podcasting. Adapted from Rime et. al 2022 p. 1262-1275

Looking back at the beginning, the first podcast is attributed to former MTV host and radio broadcaster, Adam Curry, who wanted a way to host his broadcasts on the web, and the inventor of the RSS stream, Dave Winer. The RSS – an acronym for “Really Simple Syndication” or “Rich Site Summary” -- feed allowed users to “subscribe” to websites and be alerted to site updates. (Doree, 2007). For podcasts, RSS feeds simply required users to download some sort of feed reader software to monitor the feeds of their favorite audio

programs, download the episodes when they were released, and then back them up onto a portable listening device (Berry, 2006). According to Berry (2006, p. 145), this was “a move in power from programmers to listeners. Although the producers still maintain(ed) control over the content listeners (made) decisions over scheduling and the listening environment.” The independence and shift in power dynamics also applied to the hosts. Podcast hosts have reported interest in entering the medium due to the freedom of producing content without being held back by corporate and legal regulations (Markman, 2011). The medium is especially useful for “long tail distribution” (Schlütz & Hedder, 2021, p. 460). That is the benefit of many podcasts that serve smaller, niche communities (Schlütz & Hedder, 2021). These niche shows increase the probability of returning listeners, because of the difficulty to find content regarding their niche interests elsewhere (Schlütz & Hedder, 2021).

The boom of podcast listening came with the addition of the medium to iTunes in 2005 – making podcasts much more accessible to the general public who could now access the content without having to go through the trouble of setting up the RSS stream (Markman, 2011). After two days of the addition, Apple reported over one million podcast downloads (Apple Newsroom, 2005). By 2010, Edison Research found that 23% of Americans over 12 had listened to a podcast and 12% had listened in the last month before they were surveyed (Webster, 2010). Despite this success being supported by the Apple iPod, the biggest push for Podcasts into the mainstream came in 2014 with the podcast, *Serial*.

Ten years after a term for the medium was coined, in October 2014, podcasting saw its first mainstream hit with *Serial* (Bonini, 2015). The show was a spinoff of *This American Life* – a weekly radio show-turned-podcast that has run since the mid-1990s and topped the podcast charts before *Serial*’s release (Berry, 2015b). *Serial* captivated fans through the story of 18-year-old Adnan Syed, an American teenager who was sentenced to life in prison in 2000 for the murder of his ex-girlfriend, Hae Min Lee (Serial, 2014). The series reached 72 million downloads by January 2015 and was downloaded over 300 million times by 2022 (Bonini, 2015; Blair, 2022). It was the first podcast to receive a Peabody Award – an American award for those who tell stories that reflect modern social issues and highlight new voices (The Peabody Awards, 2014).

Serial was released weekly over a few months (Berry, 2015b). Each episode examined the facts of the case and the possible holes in Syed's conviction through both the reading of documents and personal interviews with those involved, including Syed who called in from prison (Locker, 2014). In an article published in *Time*, the creator of the show, Sarah Koenig, stated that the idea came from her reservations surrounding the conviction. She was not convinced he was innocent nor guilty either – giving the show a murder-mystery-like quality, a genre that has always been popular (Locker, 2014). Jason Mittell (2014), writing for the blog *Antenna*, argued that the show's main character is reporter Koenig and her journey of investigation with the curiosity and obsession that listeners can all relate to. According to Berry, this form of “drip-feeding” drew audiences in. These serialized shows encourage repeat listenership as the storyline is a continuous arch that one can be drawn into (Schlütz & Hedder, 2021). As far as *Serial* was concerned, this method allowed listeners to become completely enthralled in this mystery.

“Listeners became so engaged that many woke early to listen as soon as new episodes went online, with some going as far as running listening groups in bars and cafes to share the experience. These online activities spilled out into the real world as listeners started to do their detective work. They visited locations and started to point very public fingers at those they felt were not telling the truth” (Berry, 2015b, p 302).

The podcast and the surrounding public interest in the case likely played a part in the 2022 court decision to overturn Syed's conviction due to possible oversights in the prosecution and a lack of DNA evidence, a display of how much the show influenced society. However, Koenig's show was not the last true-crime podcast that impacted a real-life case or the last show that went mainstream from the medium (Victor, 2022; Paul, 2022).

Serial, a production of *This American Life* and the radio station WBEZ in Chicago in the United States was one of many podcasts that branched off public radio (Serial, 2014). The podcast industry was championed by young former public radio reporters and producers (Laughlin, 2023). Most producers cited a long-term love of the radio medium, particularly the public American broadcaster, National Public Radio (NPR), that pushed them to break into the scene. However, unfair labor practices, poor pay, and old-fashioned reporting guidelines pushed a lot of young journalists out (Laughlin, 2023). With the influx of young talent into the podcasting scene, the medium grew, perhaps because listeners prefer young and energetic voices (Shah et al., 2023). These young, passionate individuals led to a sort of

celebrity-like status for podcast hosts unlike that of public radio, only increasing the popularity of these shows and building loyal fanbases (Laughlin, 2023). Close to a decade after the mass exodus of young reporters and producers to the podcast scene, NPR now boasts 42 different podcasts under its brand (NPM, n.d.). Across these shows, the brand reports 18 million listeners (NPM, n.d.).

Since the release of the first season of *Serial*, podcasting has grown significantly. In 2014, when the show was released, 48% of Americans surveyed stated that they knew what a podcast was. By 2022, that number increased substantially to 79% (Götting, 2022). By the beginning of 2023, Forbes reported about 2 million podcasts online and over 400 million podcast listeners worldwide, with 100 million in North America (Marshall, 2023). In 2020, podcasts seemed especially apt for the world during COVID-19 due to the intimate nature of the medium, and the agency that users felt because of its on-demand nature when people felt a lack of control over their lives (Robson, 2021). Podcast listenership increased by 40% during the first three years of the pandemic alone (Turner, 2023). For those stuck at home, it offered companionship and entertainment while people attempted to live their daily lives. Listeners stated that they consumed podcasts for a distraction while doing menial tasks, for education, and because they felt they had agency over when and how they listened (Turner, 2023). A survey of American podcast listeners found that 51% of them increased their podcast consumption during the pandemic, with 21% stating that they listened “much more than before” (Tran, 2020). These habits carried over to life as the pandemic restrictions were lifted as people used podcasts for their daily commutes or continued listening while doing household chores. Lin & Huang (2023) apply the users and gratifications theory to podcast listening. This theory examines why people use things for enjoyment (or gratification) (Lin & Huang, 2023). For podcast listening, they theorize that users are moved by entertainment and narrative transport. Narrative transport describes the act of telling a story, and “transporting” the listener out of their current reality (Lin & Huang, 2023). Audio in particular supports narrative transport, as well as narrative absorption, and increased focus (Lin & Huang 2023; Schlütz & Hedder, 2021).

In more recent years, podcasting has transitioned to a video format (Spotify, n.d.-b). Video podcasts are any podcast that contains accompanying visuals whether on YouTube, Spotify,

or a live streaming application (Spotify, n.d.-b). A 2022 research survey found a significant increase in podcast listeners visually consuming podcasts instead of only auditorily (Cumulus Podcast Network & Signal Hill Insights, 2022). This survey saw an increase in the percentage of respondents who consumed podcasts on YouTube from 14% in the summer of 2019 to 25% in the spring of 2022 (Cumulus Podcast Network & Signal Hill Insights, 2022). This interest was especially found in regular podcast listeners, with those who listen weekly stating that they preferred video podcast options (Cumulus Podcast Network & Signal Hill Insights, 2022). According to Spotify, the opportunity for video podcasting allows creators to connect more deeply with their listeners through visual elements (Spotify, n.d.-b).

As a representation of the lucrative growth of podcasting, one need not look further than the notorious *Joe Rogan Experience* (Rae, 2023). Joe Rogan, an American television host, martial arts fighter, and comedian launched his podcast in 2009 and started uploading a video version to YouTube in 2013 (Rae, 2023). Rogan is well known to host a myriad of different voices from the conspiracy theorist Alex Jones, and members of the far-right, white supremacist group, the Proud Boys to the American Democratic Socialist Senator, and two-time Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders (Murray, 2023a; Rae, 2023). In a controversial business choice, Spotify struck a deal with Rogan to have exclusive rights to his podcast for 200 million USD through 2023 with the opportunity to earn more over time (Bissada, 2022). Rogan's deal was the highest in a string of deals made by the streaming company that totaled 1 billion USD by 2022 (Spangler & Spangler, 2022).

2.2 The Podcast in the Context of Convergence Media Culture

Podcasting and its success are a key example of media convergence – or the flow of content throughout different platforms, with the input of different media industries, and the willingness for consumers to go to any platform to find the content they desire (Jenkins, 2006). Convergence involves adapting old media types to fit modern technology and the different ways to distribute that media (Holliman, 2010, p. 1; Nováčiková, 2021). For example, older mediums, like radio, television, and films have not disappeared, rather they have adapted to be distributed through modern technology in the form of cellphones, computers, and the internet (University of Minnesota, 2016). De Castell and Droumeva (2022, p.10) suggest that convergence “invokes a discursive and conceptual space where

ideas, modes, and forms of presentation can co-occur, intersect, inform, complement, or battle each other.” That is, media is no longer a standalone thing, but an ever-changing environment where media professionals use a variety of different distribution options to change how the viewer experiences a piece of content.

Participatory culture is a massive part of media convergence (Jenkins, 2006). Audiences are no longer at the behest of the media industry regarding the time, place, or speed at which they consume, or how they engage with content. Instead, consumption patterns, such as when and where content is consumed are in the hands of the user, and users can interact with media in ways that were never possible before. Additionally, listeners are free to stop watching or listening whenever they want, making it extremely important for professionals to ensure they create engaging content (Rime et al., 2022). Now, audiences are free to interact with other fans on social media, leave online reviews, or create content based on any piece of media, such as through fanfiction (University of Minnesota, 2016).

Podcasting is a convergent medium because, in the most basic forms, it is an adaption of radio broadcasting and the blogs of the early 2000s – combining both traditional and digital media (Nováčiková, 2021). And, for video podcasting, it is the convergence of traditional podcasting with video broadcasting. Podcasts are consumed auditorily, visually, or read as some programs offer readable transcripts of the shows – exemplifying the ability for the same content’s distribution across different mediums (Nováčiková, 2021). A significant component of media convergence is the ability for consumers to go across different mediums to find the entertainment they prefer. Instead of being confined to what is being shown on television, at the movies, or on the radio, listeners can access any content they want at any time through their smartphones or computers (Nováčiková, 2021; Rime et al., 2022). This is a large part of the success of podcasts (Schlütz & Hedder, 2021). Instead of being beholden to what most consumers would like to listen to, independent podcasters create extremely niche shows, giving listeners what they want (Schlütz & Hedder, 2021).

One major effect of media convergence is the ability to consume multiple different types of content at the same time, or the ability to multitask while consuming content (University of Minnesota, 2016). In an article for *The New York Times*, Lewin (2010) reports that, on

average, young people spend seven and a half hours consuming media daily. But, through multitasking, they can consume a combined 11 hours daily. Now, people send text messages, browse the internet, or discuss media on online forums while viewing the respective piece of media (University of Minnesota, 2016). Podcast listeners report multitasking as one of the reasons they prefer to consume the medium (Turner, 2023). They can listen while performing menial tasks, working, doing household chores, or browsing the internet (Turner, 2023).

In writing for *Frames Cinema Journal*, O'Meara (2015) explores how convergence led to the virality of the *Serial* podcast. Virality, according to O'Meara (2015), is content that stands out in a world flooded with multiple forms of content. *Serial* combined the production quality and storytelling of cinema, the seriality of prestige television, radio journalism production, and digital content to create a piece of media that captivated millions of listeners (O'Meara, 2015). Participatory culture is essential for media convergence. Not only can listeners choose what they want to consume, but they can also consume when, how, and where they consume it (Nováčiková, 2021). Furthermore, listeners can leave online reviews and interact with other fans, contributing to the participatory culture (Nováčiková, 2021). *Serial* capitalized on this aspect and the ability to distribute through different channels. Audio content is limited in the ability to describe visual evidence, an issue for a show describing mountains of evidence in a criminal trial (O'Meara, 2015). The show solved this problem by adding photos of physical evidence to its website. Even better than evidence shown for a few seconds on a television screen, users could fully engage with the evidence – encouraging a participatory culture (O'Meara, 2015).

Jenkins further explores the importance of collective intelligence in media convergence. Collective intelligence is the ability of individuals to share their knowledge through different mediums (Jenkins, 2006). That is, no one knows everything, but the ease of communication through new media tools means that every person can share what knowledge they have. With the availability of online evidence, discussion boards, and presentations by the host and producers, *Serial* encouraged collective intelligence (O'Meara, 2015). Listeners no longer felt like passive listeners, rather they felt that they were a part of solving the mystery alongside the show (O'Meara, 2015).

2.3 Parasocial Relationships in Podcasts

The successful nature of the podcasting medium is supported by the high level of parasocial relationships between hosts and listeners (Moe, 2021). Because parasocial relationships rely on the individual putting effort into learning more about a person and spending more time with their content, podcasting is an incredibly apt medium for them to develop (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2018). A recent survey of podcast listeners found that 78.9% of respondents either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that they felt a relationship with their favorite podcast host. Additionally, 81% stated that they had an emotional connection with the host (Moe, 2021). During COVID-19, individuals used podcasts as a replacement for their social lives that they no longer could participate in (Soto-Vásquez et al., 2022). This is reflected in the further trend of parasocial relationships increasing during the pandemic as a fill-in for what individuals lacked, whether in social relationships or in staying up to date on the news and pop culture (Bond, 2021; The Guardian Advertising, 2022).

There are many reasons as to why these relationships are cultivated through the medium. Adler Berg (2023) explains how podcasting, like radio, encourages intimacy, which he defines as communication that implies physical or emotional closeness. Following McLuhan’s (1964) idea that each technology is an expansion of another, it can be assumed that podcasts are an extension of the radio. Following his logic, this extension provides the podcast with the ability to provide nearly ubiquitous content to be consumed everywhere and at any time – making podcasts a medium that transformed how content could be consumed, as it was no longer tied to a certain space or time (McLuhan 1964). Podcasting does, perhaps because of this ubiquitous nature, foster more relationships than radio with 80.2% of respondents stating that they knew their favorite podcaster better than their favorite radio host (Moe, 2021).

Further, he notes that the human voice is “essential for parasocial relationships,” as each person’s voice is unique, and helps to convey emotions (Adler Berg, 2023 p. 3). Audio mediums foster intimacy because sound waves create a feeling of closeness and fully immerse the listener in the media (Clarke & Bjork, 2023). The habit of “close mic-ing,” where the host speaks closely into the microphone, has long been known as a practice in radio that mimics closeness between the host and the listener (Clarke & Bjork, 2023 p. 821).

Additionally, speech-based media encourages listeners to create their mental images of the topics being covered and allows listeners to create alongside the podcaster, absorbing them into the story (Adler Berg, 2023). The ease of access and direct delivery of podcasts also increase the level of intimacy, as it gives the listener a feeling of agency and the illusion of being involved in the conversation (Adler Berg, 2023; Clarke & Bjork, 2023). Adler Berg (2023, p. 4-10) laid out four perimeters of intimacy in podcasting.

Parameter	Action
Listening circumstances (when & how)	- Releasing episodes on specific days: Reliable scheduling makes listening to a podcast a part of a person's routine, whether as a part of their weekend or week. - Listeners using headphones: With headphones, sound is delivered directly into the listener's ear. This is even more pertinent with noise-canceling headphones as background noise is blocked out and the focus is on the podcast.
What is said	Sharing more intimate details and discussing taboo topics: The more the host shares about themselves, the more intimate the listening experience.
How it is said	Speaking informally: Podcasts feel more real than traditional radio because podcasters are not trained to speak a certain way and instead bring an authentic voice. Hosts and guests also express themselves through their voices with laughs, sighs, and vocal changes.
Cross-media interactions	Building closeness: Intimacy is fostered between interactions between podcasters and their fans on social media, and between fans who build a community surrounding a specific podcast.

Table 2: The four parameters of podcast intimacy adapted from Adler Berg, 2023 p. 4-10

Lin & Huang (2023) found that wishful identification and parasocial relationships positively impact the chance that a person develops a long-term relationship with the show – or increases the stickiness of the podcast. In this case, wishful identification describes a person's desire to become like a certain media character (Lin & Huang, 2023; Lim et al., 2020). Wishful identification is related to identity similarity or the amount that a person's self-identity matches that of the media character, such as social class, education level, interests, and ethnicity (Lin & Huang, 2023). Stickiness exists on two different plains: physical characteristics, like identity similarity and wishful identification, and podcast content. (Lin & Huang, 2023). The content most valuable to podcast listeners is entertaining, allows for flexible listening, and media curation or quality (Lin & Huang, 2023).

Media figures can curate parasocial relationships by demonstrating an interest in their audience, communicating informally, and disclosing personal information (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Schlütz & Hedder, 2021). Shows that employ the use of listener communication whether through emailed questions, call-ins, or voicemails increase the level of intimacy perceived by the listener. (Schlütz & Hedder, 2021; Adler Berg, 2023). These fan-focused conversations help to demonstrate that the host is interested in their audience both for the fan in question and for other audience members who believe they too could be a part of the show (Schlütz & Hedder, 2021; Adler Berg, 2023).

Hosts also increase the levels of parasocial relationships by interacting with their audience on social media (Schlütz & Hedder, 2021). Podcasting is unique in the level of cross-media interactions (Adler Berg, 2023). Podcasters release their media on dedicated podcasting platforms or video-sharing sites, but the discussion and interactions take things further (Lin & Huang, 2023). Both hosts and listeners collide on social media sites to build strong communities around a shared interest (Clarke & Bjork, 2023). This allows for the piece of content to be not only consumed when it's released but also to remain relevant outside of listening. And, as noted in the previous chapter, the more the target of a parasocial relationship is relevant in a person's larger social group, whether in person or online, the stronger the relationship becomes (Eyal & Dailey, 2012).

As previously discussed, the more a celebrity discloses about themselves, the deeper the relationship becomes (Kim & Song, 2016). These avenues of encouraging parasocial relationships are very relevant to that of podcasters as the most popular podcasts employ a conversational tone, making audiences feel closer to the hosts (Shah et al., 2023; Adler Berg, 2023). Podcasting is specially designed for the disclosure of personal information, as hosts and guests feel a sense of anonymity because it is typically a faceless, more casual medium (Adler Berg, 2023; Clarke & Bjork, 2023). Listeners also express gratitude to podcasters who are open about mental health challenges, as it makes them feel less alone in their struggles (Soto-Vásquez et al., 2022). The level of disclosure from podcast hosts also increases wishful identification in listeners and identity similarity, and the level of sincerity the audience perceives from the host is also paramount in both wishful identification and parasocial relationships.

Listeners have even stated that they identified with the hosts before the content (Soto-Vásquez et al., 2022). Lin & Huang (2023) found that the more distinctive a podcaster's identity is, the greater wishful identification is in listeners. However, a distinct identity does not increase parasocial relationships (Lin & Huang, 2023). Similar to influencers, podcasters can be seen as authorities in their respective niche (Aw et al., 2022). The level of authority a podcaster is seen as having, as well as their competency, increases the level of both wishful identification and parasocial relationships (Schlütz & Hedder, 2021; Lin & Huang, 2023). Listening to a podcast, of course, is not inherently intimate, because the audience member is a commercial product for the host, but listeners still perceive intimacy (Adler Berg, 2023). Podcast listeners tend to be highly educated, and they understand that their relationship with the podcaster is not a two-way street (Lin & Huang, 2023; Soto-Vásquez et al., 2022). Yet, they reported still finding their parasocial relationship fulfilling (Lin & Huang, 2023).

2.4 Advertising

In the modern age, media has become a central part of life as it is responsible for guiding the economy, distributing advertisements, and promoting consumer culture (Kellner, 2003). According to Igani (2012), consumer culture or consumerism is the culture that is built around consumption that is seen in most developed or developing nations. The media have

only helped to push this culture, as consumerism is “disseminated and taught to individuals in a society” through media figures (Rendeci, 2022, p. 83). Both consumption and media have infiltrated a significant portion of human life with the near-ubiquitous use of the internet, computers, and cell phones where consumerism and advertisements are pushed onto the public constantly (Rendeci, 2022). As with all media, podcasting is not immune to being a large part of consumer culture. As a form of entertainment that can be highly personalized, and intimate, and encourages relationships between hosts and listeners, it is almost inevitable that it is also impacted by consumerism.

In 2005, the company Podtrac announced the launch of the first podcast advertising platform (Bersch, 2021; Podtrac, 2005). The software was free to use for podcasters and provided data to marketers to support their decision-making through listener surveys (Podtrac, 2005). One year after Podtrac’s announcement, Podbridge created a browser plug-in that collected user demographics, fed them tailored advertisements, and tracked how many times an episode was played (Cubrilovic, 2006). Tailored and targeted advertisements, according to Bersch (2021), could help introduce a stable revenue stream with the ability to target consumers depending on their interests, locations, and the date and time downloaded. These advertisements could be embedded in the episode depending on the listener’s location, age, or interests. Nearly two decades after the launch of the first podcast advertising platform, there are now over a dozen advertising agencies to connect companies and podcast hosts (Dunn, 2023). Hosting companies like Spotify offer self-service software for advertisers (Spotify, n.d.). Spotify Ad Studio allows advertisers to produce their ads for free, run them for as low as USD 250, and provide data on the success of those advertisements.

Serial can illustrate this success best through the ability to interweave content with advertisements. A 2014 advertisement for the newsletter company MailChimp featured a young girl pronouncing the brand as Mail “Kimp” (Bersch, 2021, p. 97). The mispronunciation became a sort of inside joke for podcast listeners, with *The Guardian* counting 1,500 #MailKimp hashtags on Twitter and the MailChimp company gaining a total of 6,891 followers on the site in less than two months (Parkinson, 2014). This was not the first time an advertisement crossed into the zeitgeist (Feloni, 2019). But most well-known

advertisements are visual, and the famous *Serial* advertisement opened the door for a new type of advertising to expand into the public.

At the peak of its success, *Serial* was averaging a CPM – the cost per 1,000 listeners or viewers – of 25 to 40 USD (Perlberg, 2014). This is a much more lucrative cost when compared to the average CPM of YouTube at the time, which was between 2 and 17 USD (Green, 2015; Bersch, 2021). Advertisers pay a lot for their ad space on podcasts but also receive a larger return on their investments. A 2018 Midroll survey of 150,000 podcast listeners found that 81% reported always paying attention to podcast advertisements, with over 60% reporting that they bought something from an ad they heard. Comparatively, 63% of respondents reported rarely paying attention to digital ads (Washenko, 2018). The podcast advertisement field is expected to reach 4.3 billion USD in 2024 (Snyder & Cistulli, 2023).

Podcast advertisements have proven extremely successful in persuading audiences (Brinson et al., 2023). As was already established, parasocial relationships increase the ability to persuade (Schlütz & Hedder, 2021; Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2023). The persuasion knowledge model theorizes that as consumers become accustomed to marketing avenues, they understand how and why the marketer is targeting them and how they should respond, whether by ignoring the persuasion attempt or by seeking more information (Brinson et al., 2023). By examining podcast advertisements through this mode, Brinson et al. (2023) theorized that podcast advertisements could significantly affect a consumer's persuasion knowledge, as the medium is relatively new and parasocial relationships can support persuasion. Additionally, these relationships elicit a level of trust between listener and host, which can also increase the opportunity of persuasion through advertising (Brinson et al., 2023).

Moe (2021) found a slight connection between the reported level of parasocial relationships and the listener's perceived view of podcast authenticity, a positive view of podcast advertising, and a desire to purchase advertised products. Because of these relationships, 35% of listeners reported purchasing from podcast advertisers to support the show (Moe, 2021). Listeners also stated that by purchasing these products, they were able to feel connected to the podcast between episodes, much like those who interacted with hosts on

social media (Soto-Vásquez et al., 2022). Wang & Chan-Olmsted (2023) also concluded that the personality of the host could matter more than the content of the show when it comes to selling advertisements. They stated that “hosts have become an indispensable part of the podcasting experience and could exert considerable influence on advertising outcomes” (Wang & Chan-Olmsted, 2023, p. 15).

There are two different types of podcast advertisements: host-read and produced spots (Podtrac, 2005). Though the produced spots are more akin to traditional radio advertising, host-read advertisements are more personal, allowing the advertisements to flow with the rest of the show (Bersch, 2021). Host-read advertisements are the most popular advertising option. A FiveThirtyEight survey of the top 100 podcasts found that 87% of all 186 recorded advertisements were host-read (Alcorn, 2015). Furthermore, host-read ads comprise the majority of podcasting advertising revenue at 56%, followed by announcer-read ads at 35% and supplied ads at 9% (Moe, 2021). These types of advertisements are highly successful, likely because listeners trust the host or hosts of their favorite podcasts and the blurred line between content and advertisement (Bersch, 2021). Because of this, listeners showed higher levels of persuasion knowledge for produced advertisements compared to host-read (Brinson et al. 2023). Listeners with stronger parasocial relationships had a decreased ability to recognize persuasion during podcast advertising (Brinson et al., 2023). With this in mind, it can be deduced that parasocial relationships combined with host-read advertisements are extremely effective at persuading audiences.

Listeners have reported a preference for more flexibly read advertisements, as opposed to ones that stick with the script handed down from the advertising or marketing department (Moe, 2021). To consumers, these advertisements feel like more of a recommendation that comes directly from the host with some being unable to distinguish between podcast content and advertisement content (Moe, 2021). This inability leads to a greater ability to persuade audiences to pay attention to advertisements. Host-read advertisements show an ability to generate 91% more leads than announcer-read ones, as well as 66% more brand recall for established brands and 59% for emerging brands (Riismandel, 2021). Brand recall, simply put, involves whether a person remembers the brand that was advertised to them (Riismandel, 2021).

Host-read podcasts are another form of native advertising, which is a type of advertising that seeks to blend in with media (Martins et. al, 2023). As people develop tactics to avoid traditional advertising, native advertising is quickly moving to replace it (Martins et al., 2023). Instead of focusing on the credibility of the advertisement, in native advertising “marketers use the credibility of the original publisher by producing content that uses a format and location identical to the host” (Martins et. al, 2023, p. 52).

Hoofnagle and Meleshinsky (2015) use the schema theory to describe why this form of advertisement is so successful at getting around people’s preconceived notions and can rely on the credibility of the publisher. Schema theory explains that people develop cognitive maps through experience and socialization of how things should be (Hoofnagle & Meleshinsky, 2015). In advertising, like the persuasion knowledge model, schema theory implies that individuals know when and how advertisements occur, and native advertising breaks our preconceived notions of what advertisements should be (Martins et al., 2023; Hoofnagle & Meleshinsky, 2015). Furthermore, Hoofnagle and Meleshinsky (2015) discovered that, on blog posts, a sponsored post tag is not enough to convince readers that they are reading an advertisement, and instead consumers require advertising context clues within the story. In podcasting, this theory describes how podcast advertising can get around the pre-developed advertising schema. Because listeners trust the hosts, and the advertisement is delivered in the same tone as the show, it is difficult for consumers to recognize that they are listening to an advertisement. The authors claim that native advertising is dangerous, as consumers are unaware of the advertisement, and state that there is reasoning to ban the use of advertorials, or native advertisements written in the same style as editorial content (which can also be applied to podcast ads that blend into the show), or at least introduce significant requirements that provide advertising schema (Hoofnagle & Meleshinsky, 2015).

In news reporting, these advertisements blur the line between fact-based reporting and advertisement by using the journalists as both the hosts of the show and the advertisers (Grandoni, 2015). The United States Federal Communications Commission (FCC) typically regulates advertising and requires a clear line between content and marketing, but the FCC

does not regulate podcasts (Grandoni, 2015). Instead, reporters will create journalistic-like advertisements to insert into their episodes, breaking through preconceived schemas of what audiences expect of journalism and advertisements (Grandoni, 2015; Hoofnagle & Meleshinsky, 2015). In an article for *The New York Times*, Grandoni (2015) told the story of a young boy who had created a website using the web builder Squarespace and was interviewed for an advertisement for that company. However, due to the journalistic way in which the interview was conducted, neither the boy nor his mother knew it was for an advertisement (Grandoni, 2015). The mother conveyed that when her son found out he had been used for an ad he said “I’m in an ad? But I hate ads! I skip them on YouTube all the time” (Grandoni, 2015 pg. 3).

Overall, podcast advertisements report a higher level of attention when compared with other advertising avenues, with The Guardian Advertising (2022) finding that about 65% of people either pay a lot or full, undivided attention to the advertisement. Podcasting is unique in the virtually ubiquitous ability to skip advertisements. Because of this, advertisers need to keep a listener’s attention, leading to a need to maintain that attention (Snyder & Cistulli, 2023). Host-read advertisements are an important part of that maintenance, with 44% of listeners paying a lot of or undivided attention to host-read ads when compared to 38% paying attention to ads read by someone else (The Guardian Advertising, 2022). The only medium that reported higher attention rates was print newspapers, perhaps because these advertisements require reading the advertisement, which is an active form of consumption (The Guardian Advertising, 2022).

The Guardian Advertising (2022) further found that 51% of listeners of podcast advertisements wanted to purchase something from the advertised brand, compared to 38% of radio listeners. Podcasts are especially good for purchase intention and recommendation of products, due to how personal the medium is and how much host trust exists (The Guardian Advertising, 2022). NPR podcasts have even more promising numbers with 71% of listeners preferring to buy from NPR sponsors, and 75% holding positive views of those sponsors because of their sponsorship (NPM, n.d.). Even more so, a staggering 82% of listeners report having acted due to an advertisement on an NPR podcast (NPM, n.d.). Where an ad is placed also has a marginal impact on its success. Listeners reported paying greater

attention to an advertisement at the beginning of a podcast than part way through (The Guardian Advertising, 2022). Although highly successful on its own, podcast advertising is the most successful when mixed with either digital or print advertising (The Guardian Advertising, 2022).

The tone of the advertisement matters, with the attitude a person has towards an advertisement significantly impacting the attitude that a person has towards a brand and their purchase intentions (Bezbaruah & Brahmhatt, 2022). One way that podcasters attempt to improve the attention paid to an advertisement is by implementing humor into the ad. Some shows take advantage of insult advertising, or a host mocking or poking fun at the advertised product during the ad read (Snyder & Cistulli, 2023). Listeners state that these types of ads do increase the level of trust they have towards the host because they view the host as being honest about their feelings towards the product (Snyder & Cistulli, 2023). Similarly, these ads do not change the podcaster's credibility, nor do they hurt brand perception, but they do decrease purchase intentions (Snyder & Cistulli, 2023). Listeners overwhelmingly report the desire to purchase from a brand advertised without humor than a brand advertised with humor, and ads that are more informative than entertaining are more successful (Snyder & Cistulli, 2023; Bezbaruah & Brahmhatt, 2022).

In the end, advertising with podcasts is an incredibly profitable way for brands to get consumers interested in their brands – by using host-read advertisements (Riisman, 2021). And the high level of parasocial relationships between hosts and listeners is incredibly beneficial for advertising (Moe, 2021). However, podcasting is a relatively new form of media, and listeners have not yet developed coping skills to deal with these advertisements, especially those that present as content (Brinson et al., 2023). Because of this lack of understanding, these advertisements can convince listeners that the ad is more of a recommendation from their good friend as opposed to an advertisement (Brinson et al., 2023).

3. BetterHelp

3.1 Technology in Therapy

The first recorded circumstance of using new technology for psychology was in 1966 with ELIZA – a name for a group of computer programs created to converse with users (Weizenbaum, 1966; Hanley, 2020). This program was developed by renowned computer scientist and cultural critic, Joseph Weizenbaum to investigate the Turing Test (Brown, 2008). The Turing Test, invented by Computer Scientist Alan Turing, involves using a human interrogator to communicate with both a human and a machine. The test is successful if the interrogator is unable to distinguish between the human and the machine (Brown, 2008). One of those programs, DOCTOR, was created to replicate the conversations that could take place between a patient and a psychiatrist (Weizenbaum, 1966). DOCTOR worked by taking messages that were fed to it and using keywords to simulate responses, using the psychotherapy teachings of Carl Rogers, who encouraged open-ended questions to foster self-analysis within patients (Weizenbaum, 1966; Klaus Fuchs-Kittowski, 2023). Despite the extreme simplicity of this program, users were able to interact with the computer in meaningful ways, showing a promising future for the introduction of technology to the psychotherapy space (Hanley, 2020).

Typically, cybertherapy does not involve the use of chatbots but instead with real people in different locations. The therapy and counseling sector took advantage of the proliferation of technology in the late 1990s and the early 2000s (Hanley, 2020). There are multiple terms for cybertherapy, such as virtual therapy, online psychology, and teletherapy that all correspond to similar practices. Cybertherapy can be defined as traditional psychotherapy practices that are mediated through technology (Suler, 2008).

If viewing therapy as a type of content, these alternative ways of psychotherapy using new technology are an example of convergence culture. Therapy still exists in its most basic forms (face-to-face), but continues to adapt to modern technologies (Jenkins, 2006). Additionally, the aspect of convergence culture where consumers have a significant say in which platform they prefer to access the “content” is reflected in the growth of digital psychotherapy (Jenkins, 2006). As more and more people moved to the online space, therapy did too – giving consumers a choice in how they could be treated.

Online counseling started to take place through email, online messaging applications, live chatting, web-based audio calls, or video calls (Chester & Glass, 2006). In the early 2000s, the most popular way counseling was provided was through email, where both participants could reply at their leisure (Rochlen et al., 2004). There were many benefits from these early forms of text-based therapy (Rochlen et al., 2004). First, email therapy did not require in-person meetings and did not restrict people to only therapists in their immediate area. Counselors could reach more rural areas, and it was more convenient for both therapists and clients – as it only required a few minutes out of one’s day to write an email or send a message (Rochlen et al., 2004). It also allowed for those in isolation due to anxiety, disabilities, or lack of transportation to access some sort of counseling (Chester & Glass, 2006). Rochlen et al. (2004) noted that some clients felt more comfortable expressing their emotions over text and that clients didn’t have to worry about superficial issues – creating a feeling of closeness to their therapist, and making sessions feel less threatening (Reynolds et al., 2013). Text therapy also allows for the “zone of reflection,” or the ability for clients to understand and process their emotions while writing, as well as the ability to work through a problem on their own (Rochlen et al., 2004; Suler, 2008).

Furthermore, communication online triggers the online disinhibition effect, which describes how people tend to do things online that they would not do in person (Suler, 2004). This effect comes from anonymity, invisibility and not seeing the people the user is interacting with, removing the ability to receive facial cues or to understand that the person they are interacting with is a real person (Suler, 2004). Online, the disinhibition effect can result in negative actions, like cyberbullying, but it can also allow people to open up more about their emotions when they do not worry much about how they are being perceived (Suler, 2004). In therapy, the disinhibition effect is extremely beneficial, as it allows clients to feel more open and freer with their communication, perhaps sharing things online they would not share in face-to-face communication and allows for clients to avoid the stigma attached to seeking mental health care (Suler, 2008; Java et al., 2021). The online disinhibition effect contributes to the online comfort hypothesis, which posits that both therapists and clients feel more comfortable online, and the sessions feel less threatening (Suler, 2008).

There have also been several issues and concerns with these types of therapies. In 2003, a study found that less than 25% of websites that advertised online counseling stated that they used proper encryption software – raising privacy concerns (Chester & Glass, 2006). For clients who show more symptoms of mental illness, text conversations can be concerning because clients could feel more uncomfortable and have a hard time connecting (Reynolds et al., 2013). Also, for clients in crises, text conversations can be extremely damaging as a client message that indicates they could be a risk to themselves, or others may not be read in time (Rochlen et al., 2004). While it is possible to notice changes in a person's pace or tone over text, it is not as easy as noticing body language and tonal shifts in person as well as noticing absence (Suler, 2008). Over time, online therapy shifted from email and text-based forms to videoconferencing (Hanley, 2020). Video therapy is similar in efficacy when compared to traditional face-to-face mental health care (Aboujaoude et al., 2015). A 2013 review of telemental healthcare found evidence that these services are “unquestionably effective” across different ages and backgrounds (Hilty et al., 2013).

Suler (2008) proposed the cybertherapeutic theory as a new framework that can explore different types of psychotherapeutic practices that take place in the online space. The cybertherapeutic theory posits that the internet can be incorporated with preexisting clinic practices and that new terms and intervention systems can be created, but it is still psychotherapy (Suler, 2008). In the cybertherapeutic theory, there are six competing components.

Synchronous/Asynchronous	Synchronous psychotherapy involves the counselor and patient interacting at the same time. Asynchronous communication revolves around disconnected time frames. There is a delayed viewing of the text, audio, or video messages.
Text/Sensory	With text-based approaches to psychotherapy, there is little opportunity for sensory experiences, but it exists within video or internet call options.
Imaginary/Realistic	Fantasy worlds and virtual reality can help professionals conduct therapy, whether by encouraging role-playing, creating a relaxing environment, or exploring dreams, fantasies, and childhood memories.
Automated/Interpersonal	Computers can help automate interventions or assessments, are unbiased in their analysis, and have better memories than people. But the human reaction and intimacy are lost. A computer also can't catch body language.
Invisible/Present	Some clients may open more when they are not aware there is a therapist there, this can involve a therapist "listening in" to another colleague interacting with their patient, listening to a group session, or reading over an email list. Clients can be invisible by listening to, but not participating, in group sessions. In these cases, it is essential to have informed consent from everyone involved.
Individual/Group Work	This aspect of cybertherapy reflects traditional therapy. Group work allows patients with similar issues to discuss their experiences together. Online group sessions are beneficial for people with rare issues who cannot find anyone to relate to in their day-to-day lives.

Table 3 The six frameworks of the cybertherapeutic theory. Adapted from Suler, 2008 p. 103-110.

When viewing the therapy process of adapting to and incorporating new technologies, it is possible to fit McLuhan's theory of each new medium simply being an extension of an old one or an extension of man (McLuhan, 1964). McLuhan (1964, p. 3) states that the 19th century was the age of the "editorial chair" which is an extension of the human body and an "ablation of the posterior." He continues by stating that the 20th century was the age of the couch as an extension of the chair, concerning the whole body. The psychiatrist, he states "employs the couch, since it removes the temptation to express private points of view and obviates the need to rationalize events" (McLuhan, 1964, p. 3). Extrapolating on the idea of the couch as a tool that allows for more free-flowing information and openness between psychiatrists, psychologists, and patients, one can view technology as doing the same thing. Psychotherapy has moved to utilizing new tools, text, video chat, and internet calls, to break down the inhibitions that come with traditional in-office therapy.

Online therapy experienced a renaissance in 2020 when the world was hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, forcing nearly all forms of therapy to a virtual setting (Burgoyne & Cohn, 2020). Citizens of the United States were reported to have experienced the most mental health damage during the pandemic, and it opened the need for more therapists to adapt to a virtual environment (Java et al., 2021). A report from the Family Institute at Northwestern University in the United States analyzed how the organization went from 2% virtual therapy sessions to 100% at the onset of the pandemic (Burgoyne & Cohn, 2020). The institute managed the transition but noted a few difficulties including the inability to read body and facial cues, the difficulty of remaining focused in sessions, and privacy regarding others living in the house listening in (Burgoyne & Cohn, 2020). Furthermore, poor internet service can disrupt sessions and make sessions frustrating to complete (Suler, 2008). However, 86% of clients at the Family Institute either "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that they received good care with teletherapy, and 80% of therapists "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that their sessions were successful as well (Burgoyne & Cohn, 2020). Although therapists overwhelmingly prefer to conduct their sessions face-to-face, Java et. al (2021) found that 86% of their respondents offer sessions via video conferencing, followed by voice calls at 38%, and online chat, text messaging, or email all under 30% of respondents.

3.2 Cybertherapy Platforms

Cybertherapy platforms came into being in the 21st century along with the rise in platform capitalism (Goldkind et al., 2023). Platform capitalism describes an economy that provides ideas, knowledge, and labor across geographic barriers using online platforms, or technical intermediaries between customer and provider (Langley & Leyshon, 2017). When it comes to psychotherapy platforms, they fit in with what is described as the sharing economy and the gig economy (Langley & Leyshon, 2017; Liang et al., 2022). The sharing economy references the “marketplace for hire of assets and services that would be underused or not even recognized as such, normally at a discount to those charged by traditional incumbents and is populated by well-known companies such as Uber and Airbnb (Langley & Leyshon, 2017, p. 16). Similarly, the gig economy involves using platforms to connect consumers to individual workers (Liang et al., 2022). The platforms work to maximize the control they have over their workers while minimizing the responsibilities they have to consumers. Gig economy workers are typically freelance workers with erratic schedules who are only paid for the time they are directly performing their job duties (Liang et al., 2022).

Participatory culture is described by Jenkins as when the media landscape changes from a relationship between producers and consumers to a relationship between participants, where consumers produce their content and influence how media is created (Jenkins, 2006). In platform capitalism, participatory culture manifests as a culture market where everyone can connect, share resources and ideas, and provide services (Langley & Leyshon, 2017). Langley & Leyshon (2017, p. 17) describe this as a “participatory economic culture.” In this economic culture, businesses provide the platforms to connect individuals with those able to provide goods and services as opposed to offering those goods and services themselves (Langley & Leyshon, 2017). Similarly to how content is created, transformed, and consumed by participants, goods and services are provided by and consumed by participants – with organizations serving to connect them (Langley & Leyshon, 2017; Jenkins, 2006).

Within the sharing and gig economy, mental health companies are platforms connecting freelance therapists with patients (Jo et al., 2023). Social workers stated that they enjoyed the ability to set their hours and to work from home, although they noted they made less

money on these platforms than they would in private practice (Goldman et al., 2023). Additionally, they faced significant issues in curating relationships with their clients than they would in private practice. Goldman et al. (2023, p. 3) describe the difficulty professionals face in creating “digital intimacy” with their clients. Digital intimacy in medicine is defined as a thoroughly formed relationship that is “made possible by electronic devices” (Piras & Miele, 2019). Professionals in the mental health space foster this intimacy through “crafting thoughtful emails, creating introductory videos, offering a free service to facilitate engagement, or responding with emotionally sensitive language in texts,” although nearly all these tasks go unpaid (Goldman et al., 2023, p. 5).

A significant 21% of American adults experience some sort of mental illness – accounting for over 50 million individuals (Reinert et al., 2022). Of those 50 million, 55% report not receiving any care (Reinert et al., 2022). There are multiple reasons for the lack of treatment, including stigma, cost of services, lack of awareness, and lack of access (National Council for Mental Wellbeing, 2022). The cost of mental health support is one of the top concerns for Americans. A survey of 5,000 American adults found that 25% reported having to choose between psychological help and necessities (National Council for Mental Wellbeing, 2022). As a country without a guarantee of healthcare, the cost of mental healthcare depends on the type of insurance that individuals have access to whether through government programs, employers, or private insurance. Insured individuals pay anywhere from 0.98 USD to 97.84 USD for a 60-minute session (Davenport et al., 2023). Uninsured individuals can pay up to 286.89 USD for one session (Davenport et al., 2023).

The inability to find qualified mental health professionals compounded with long waits for services or long commutes for face-to-face counseling is the second-most reported concern (National Council for Mental Wellbeing, 2022). In the United States, there are 350 individuals for every qualified therapist – a significant barrier to access (Reinert et al., 2022). Moreover, only 7.2% of Americans live in areas that are not experiencing a shortage of mental health providers while the majority, 52.7%, live in officially designated shortage areas (Modi et al., 2022). Digital cybertherapy practices are one remedy curated to solve these issues (Ferguson, 2016).

The COVID-19 pandemic also significantly boosted business for new gig economy-like psychotherapy startups (Jo et al., 2023). During the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent social distancing protocols, the United States Federal Drug Administration (FDA) relaxed its ability to conduct oversight of mental health apps – increasing the reach of these companies (Jo et al., 2023). This relaxation, combined with the previously noted rise in demand for therapy that can be delivered remotely created the perfect environment for therapy platforms to thrive (Jo et al., 2023; Java et al., 2021). A 2021 report predicted a rise in the digital mental health platform market from 2.57 million USD to a staggering 18.72 million USD by 2030 – a demonstration of the increasingly lucrative nature of the market (Ltd, 2021). Talkspace, a cybertherapy platform founded in 2012, has begun to shift its business from direct-to-consumers to a business-to-business model following a decrease in stock price after the company's public listing to the United States stock market (Blumberg, 2023). As part of this shift, the company has partnered with multiple insurance companies and signed a 26 million USD contract with New York City to offer free therapy to teenagers between the ages of 13 and 17 – increasing their profitability (Blumberg, 2023).

Digital mental health platforms can help alleviate depression symptoms in users, like other forms of digital therapy (Darnell et al., 2022; Marcelle et al., 2019). Marcelle et al (2019) specifically studied how symptoms changed over time in 318 BetterHelp active users who showed signs of mild to severe depression. At the end of the 3-month study period, 99.8% of participants reported either clinically significant or partially significant improvement in their symptoms, with 19.8% of them meeting the criteria for being in remission (Marcelle et al., 2019). A review of Talkspace clients found that those with clinical depression, on average, dropped to non-clinical levels of the disease by week six of participating in therapy (Darnell et al., 2022).

Other reports show a different story. An article in *The Cut* stated that text-based therapy through mental health platforms tended to take much longer for progress to show (Fischer, 2021). Furthermore, anecdotal reports describe therapists replying to clients' messages with copy-and-paste responses, or not replying at all – an issue when apps promise message responses five days a week (Fischer, 2021). Therapists who worked for the platform Talkspace described a company that did not prioritize patient safety, refusing to give contact

information for patients whom the therapists believed could be harmful to themselves or others (Ferguson, 2016). Therapists and clients alike note a much less formal, committed, and thus less effective version of therapy using mental health platforms (Fischer, 2021). As many platforms advertise themselves as clients have unlimited access to, professionals on them stated a frustrating pattern of clients not having time to think through things on their own, instead sending messages that could be described as “spewing” their emotional state (Goldkind et al., 2023).

Jo et al. (2023) examined reviews of the mobile apps for a variety of platforms regarding six themes for ethical and effective psychotherapy: professionalism, continuity of care (ensuring there is a plan in place in case the client or professional is unavailable or relocated), affordability of access, cost fairness, cost transparency, and access to care. The results showed a range of opinions and experiences with mental health platforms across the themes.

Professionalism	• Most users saw their therapists as acting professionally. • Others reported unprofessional activities from their therapists, such as: performing sessions from a car, not showing up to the appointment, not replying within the guaranteed response time, and repeatedly canceling an appointment.
Continuity of Care	• Many users faced glitches, therapist unavailability, or “abrupt” termination. • One BetterHelp user stated that they had emergency financial problems and were distressed that they couldn’t say goodbye to their therapist after being locked out of the app.
Affordability of Access	• Platforms can be more affordable than traditional face-to-face therapy. • One user left a review saying they got a discount due to financial hardship.
Cost Fairness	• Users did see the apps as being fair in their pricing. • Subscription models mean clients will pay even if there are no appointments.
Cost Transparency	• Users stated they did not feel that the pricing was transparent, as it requires the user to fill out a full questionnaire before being told the price.
Access to Care	• Users stated they were happy to be able to connect with a therapist when they couldn’t find one near them, such as in small towns. • They were happy to be able to continue therapy during the COVID-19 pandemic. • Some users stated they were scared to go to therapy because of social anxiety, and the apps helped.

Table 4 Results from Joe et. al, 2023, p. 7

The authors recommended several changes to improve digital mental health platforms, including paying professionals more so they can focus on a digestible number of clients -- one therapist was quoted as seeing approximately 65 clients at a time split between BetterHelp and Talkspace, much more than the 25 to 30 clients she would see in private practice -- platforms accepting health insurance, offering flexible payment options, having ways to compensate for missed appointments in subscription models, and guaranteeing app stability (Joe et. al, 2023; Fischer, 2021). Further, they suggest the reasons platforms fall short in offering therapy in line with the above themes may be the quick way that these apps grew during the pandemic, stating that “the rapid proliferation of teletherapy apps has occurred in an environment in which development has outpaced the various regulatory and ethical considerations of this space” (Joe et. al, 2023, p. 1).

The self-reported most popular therapy platform, and the focus of this study, BetterHelp, was founded in 2013 in Mountain View, California, United States (Acosta, 2021). According to founder Alon Matas, the idea for the company came from his own difficult experience trying to find mental health care in the United States (Fader, 2017). In 2017, he stated how psychotherapy is delivered in the country.

“I was surprised to find out that most people who need help are not getting it. Many people don’t like the way therapy is delivered, and when you add the challenges of cost, stigma, and convenience, they stay away from traditional face-to-face counseling even when they can definitely use professional help” (Fader, 2017).

Matas’ solution to this problem was BetterHelp, which, like other providers, offers online access to professional therapists and social workers via its mobile and desktop app (BetterHelp, n.d.). Consumers can speak with a licensed therapist through chat messaging, video conferences, and audio calls (Stanek, 2021). The company claims that it makes therapy more accessible for those who don’t have insurance and/or live in rural areas or areas with limited access to mental health support (BetterHelp, n.d.). Pricing ranges from USD 70 to USD 100 per session, compared to the above-listed pricing for uninsured individuals of up to 286.89 USD (BetterHelp, n.d.; Davenport et al., 2023). Therapists are thoroughly vetted and hired as hourly workers and paid according to their workload (BetterHelp, n.d.). The company is now the most ubiquitous of online therapy companies (BetterHelp, n.d.; Novotney, 2017). While they operate worldwide, the majority of BetterHelp clients and

therapists are in or licensed in the United States of America (BetterHelp, n.d.). In 2015, the company was purchased by the online medical company, Teladoc for 17.2 million USD (Lovett, 2023). From 2019 to 2020, the company increased its user base from 158,000 users to 641,000 in the United States alone (Khan et al., 2023). BetterHelp reported earnings of 345 million USD in 2020, 720 million in 2021, and 1 billion USD by 2022 (Khan et al., 2023; Lovett, 2023).

3.3 BetterHelp & Data-Driven Capitalism

The company faced a massive scandal and setback when it was found it was sharing user data with big advertising agencies. In July 2023, the United States Federal Trade Commission (FTC) banned the company from sharing user data with advertising agencies and finalized a 7.8 million USD lawsuit (Fair, 2023). BetterHelp was accused of violating its privacy policy and sharing the personal data of about 7 million users with social media applications like Facebook and Snapchat (Fair, 2023). These data came from required questionnaires, which asked users if they were taking psychiatric medications or if they were experiencing suicidal ideation (Fair, 2023). The lawsuit stated that BetterHelp's questionnaires were typically only used – with exceptions for extreme circumstances – for matching clients to the right therapists (Fair, 2023). Furthermore, the lawsuit claimed that the website implied that they were compliant with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) – an American law designed to protect sensitive health data – by using the HIPAA logo on their website when the company had never been certified or checked by a third-party company or a government agency (Khan et al., 2023).

The FTC complaint states that from 2013 to 2020, BetterHelp used shared customer email addresses, IP addresses, use of the platform, and certain questionnaire answers to: retarget previous users, find individuals with similar traits to BetterHelp users to target, and optimize targeting to those with similar traits to those who had previously clicked on an advertisement (Khan et al., 2023). The complaint alleges that the company spent 10 to 20 million USD on Facebook advertising in 2020 and was gaining 30,000 to 40,000 new users per quarter in 2021 through Facebook alone (Khan et al., 2023). The resulting FTC ruling required the company to pay the 7.8 million USD for partial refunds to consumers, not use customer data for retargeting, and provide explicit estimations regarding their data collection and

advertisement methods (Fair, 2023). As of 2023, the company's privacy policy states that consumers who opt-in for advertising cookies may have some data shared with third-party websites to provide optimized advertisements (BetterHelp, 2023).

The sale and use of consumer data – known as datafication – for advertising or marketing is not rare. Datafication is the quantification, recording, and analysis of human data, and monetization of that data (Livingstone, 2019). Datafication is a key component of data-driven capitalism, which is the phenomenon where data is seen as a form of capital and impacts how companies behave (Sadowski, 2019). Like regular capitalism, data extraction systems can be full of inequity and exploitation. Sadowski (2019, p.1) emphasized this idea by stating that “deleting data because of storage costs would be like burning piles of money or dumping barrels of oil down the drain because renting a warehouse was too much trouble.” Data-driven capitalism directly relates to surveillance capitalism, a concept created by Zuboff (2019) in which data is collected and sold. The ubiquity of technology and the value of data create a world in which the human experience can be extracted and sold for advertising and product research purposes, without a lot of opportunity for consumers to refuse (Zuboff, 2019). There are several cases of scandalous use of data, including for advertising and political propaganda (Zuboff, 2019). In the case of BetterHelp both data-driven capitalism and surveillance capitalism can be shown through the extraction of data from potentially vulnerable individuals to profit from the sale of data and for targeting advertisements.

Gross & Mothersill (2023) studied 11 different mental health apps, including BetterHelp, to see how data are used within these apps. Through an examination of the terms and conditions and privacy policies of these apps, the authors found that personal data, such as “name, DOB (date of birth), phone number and email, home address, social media info to log in, feedback, goals, reflections, biomedical info like weight and moods, etc.” as well as “usage data, transactional data, log data, device data, recorded phone and video, location, analytics, and cookies data” could be shared (Gross & Mothersill, 2023, p.9). In BetterHelp's terms of service, the company specifically states that it is authorized to share user data with service providers, such as data hosting and storage providers (Gross & Mothersill, 2023). Furthermore, companies under surveillance capitalism may express ownership of data

harvested by their company (Zuboff, 2019; Gross & Mothersill, 2023). BetterHelp currently states that they do not sell any user data (BetterHelp, 2023). Yet, Gross & Mothersill (2023) cite BetterHelp's privacy policy as claiming ownership of user data by stating that data may be shared if the company is sold, bankrupt, or a merger takes place.

3.4 BetterHelp's Advertising Methods

BetterHelp advertises across social media, search engines, television, radio, and podcasts and relies heavily on social media influencers, spending over 100 million USD on advertising in 2023 alone (Khan et al., 2023;). Influencer-based advertisements often involve influencers sharing their struggles with mental health, what BetterHelp does differently than other brands, how BetterHelp can support their viewers with common problems, and how ubiquitous and popular the brand is (Deltombe & Bachmann, 2021; Hoos, 2023). Further, the brand consistently offers discounts off the first month for users who sign up with BetterHelp through the creator's referral link (Hoos, 2023).

Olivia Simone Reed (2023) explored the impact of social media influencers' statements about therapy on users through the social cognitive theory. This theory analyzes when and how an individual will model behaviors observed in media (Bandura, 2001; Reed, 2023). The social cognitive theory behavior replication process consists of four steps: attention, retention, production, and motivation (Bandura, 2001; Reed, 2023). The attentional process describes how much a person pays attention to a certain behavior or message, and is influenced by personal values, functional values, or attractiveness of the behavior (Bandura, 2001). Retention depends on the individual remembering the behavior through "transforming and restructuring" the information (Bandura, 2001, p. 272). The production stage requires a person to decide whether they can reproduce the behavior (or self-efficacy), which can be influenced by the perceived similarity with a media persona (Reed, 2023; Moyer-Gusé, 2008). Last, the motivational portion of the behavior replication process depends on what the result of the behavior would be (Reed, 2023; Bandura, 2001). Of the processes, Reed (2023) found that those who viewed a social media influencer's positive experience with therapy were more likely to believe that they too would have a positive experience and had a slightly higher chance of intention to try therapy. BetterHelp's consistent use of positive testimony is in line with these findings.

Due to this influencer marketing, some criticize the company as utilizing trusted creators to leverage their parasocial relationships for the sale of their product (Schofield, 2023). In 2018, an article published in *Polygon* discussed how YouTubers were being used to refer people to the company amidst a scandal involving their terms of service (Alexander, 2018). At the time, the terms of service stated that BetterHelp did not verify counselors and that it was the customer's "responsibility to conduct independent verification regarding any Counselor that provides (them) with Counselor Services" (Alexander, 2018, p. 1; Wayback Machine, 2018). Because of this wording and controversy throughout the internet, many YouTubers paused or stopped doing sponsorships with BetterHelp – a deal that paid an estimated 100 USD per user who signed up (Alexander, 2018).

BetterHelp's founder took to *Medium* to discuss the controversy, stating that the company did verify all the counselors and that the disclaimer in the terms of services was only cautioning users to guarantee their counselor's credentials themselves (Matas, 2018). Despite Matas' (2018) reassurance, the company removed the language from its terms of service nearly immediately following the controversy, and it now states that all therapists need to be licensed, accredited, and trained in the area(s) where they provide services (BetterHelp, n.d.). Further, he stated that the decision to use celebrities, including YouTubers, to market the product to destigmatize mental health care, stating that "There is no better way to give people the courage to seek help than knowing that other people — despite being famous and successful — may be struggling as well" (Matas, 2018, p.1). Matas' idea is not new, as previously stated, parasocial relationships with creators suffering from mental illness do help to destigmatize mental disorders (Lotun et al., 2022). However, the decision to utilize YouTubers as advertisers is not based on goodwill alone as these advertisements prove to be quite successful. Over 90 days in 2023, the company advertised on 1,914 videos, garnering 245 million views (Hoos, 2023).

Although there is a conversation surrounding BetterHelp's partnerships with YouTubers and other social media users, the company's use of podcast creators to advertise its product is rarely discussed. BetterHelp continuously tops the charts when it comes to ad spending on podcasts (Magellan AI, 2023). In December 2022 alone, they spent 7 million USD on 556

shows (Meyer, 2022). Even more, the company spent 29.6 million USD in the second quarter of 2023 on podcast advertising – 12.7 million USD more than the second-highest spender, Amazon (Magellan AI, 2023). Knowing the company’s popularity within the podcast advertising space and the success of podcast advertising, it could be assumed that these advertisements are highly successful (Washenko, 2018). Further, it is curious to know how the company’s use of influencer marketing can be applied to podcasters.

II. Empirical Study

4. Methodology

4.1 Study Relevance and Research Question

As established in the literature, it is well-known that parasocial relationships exist between podcast hosts and listeners (Soto-Vásquez et al., 2022). It is also understood that parasocial relationships are a beneficial tool to leverage for advertisements and that this applies to podcasts (Leung et al., 2022; Moe, 2021). Furthermore, BetterHelp remains consistently at the top of the list for ad spending on the podcast medium (Magellan AI, 2023). Although BetterHelp has been shown to have promising results in alleviating symptoms of mental illness (Marcelle et al, 2019), there is a myriad of concerns about its advertising methods and data collection (Schofield, 2023; Khan et al., 2023). While these concerns have been discussed in media regarding the company’s use of YouTuber influencers, there is minimal conversation about using podcast influencers as advertisers (Alexander, 2018). There is a significant gap in research into BetterHelp’s advertising. Because of this gap and the information given, this study will be guided by the following research questions:

1.) In what ways do parasocial relationships influence a person’s decision to use BetterHelp?

2.) What are the ethical implications of using parasocial relationships between podcast hosts and listeners to motivate listeners to try BetterHelp?

4.2 Research Objectives

Given the stated research questions and information gathered from the literature review, this study was driven by the following objectives:

- To analyze parasocial relationships between audience members and podcast hosts.

It is understood that parasocial relationships exist in the podcasting realm (Soto-Vásquez et al., 2022). This study aimed to analyze those relationships further and evaluate them.

- To observe how relationships between podcast hosts and listeners impact a person's decision to try BetterHelp.

Given BetterHelp's high spending on advertisements within the podcast medium, this study intended to investigate how parasocial relationships and podcast advertisements may play a role in a person's decision to use BetterHelp (Magellan AI, 2023).

- To study the ethical issues associated with using parasocial relationships for commercial advertising.

Only recently have people begun to develop concerns about the use of influencer marketing (Boerman & Muller, 2021). Partially because the population has not yet developed schemas to differentiate advertisements by influencers from regular posts (Hoofnagle & Meleshinsky, 2015), this study further explored potential issues arising when using these relationships to sell psychotherapy (Schofield, 2023).

- To identify potential ethical issues in leveraging parasocial relationships between podcast listeners and hosts to advertise BetterHelp.

The ethics of BetterHelp's advertisement methods have been questioned concerning influencers on YouTube (Schofield, 2023). This study sought to expand that conversation into the podcasting space.

4.3 Research Design

To research this topic, this study employs a mixed-methods research plan with a primarily sequential exploratory research design (Saunders et al., 2016). A sequential exploratory design describes a study that uses qualitative data collection before collecting quantitative data (Saunders et al., 2016). This setup was chosen for this study so that qualitative

interviews could inform the creation of the survey for quantitative data collection (Creswell, 2009; Fox, 2023). Due to a need for additional information during interview analysis, a second round of two interviews took place after the survey had launched. Both qualitative and quantitative data collection employed a concurrent embedded design (Saunders et al., 2016). That is, there are quantitative questions included in the interviews and some opportunity for qualitative data within the survey.

4.3.1 Qualitative Data Collection: Interviews

Exploratory interviews are often used for intellectual understanding – in this case, “understanding the particular context within which the participants act and the influence this context has on their actions” (Maxwell, 2012, p. 221). That is, to create an understanding of how individual people are affected by podcast advertising in the decision to use BetterHelp, whether parasocial relationships were a part of this decision, and what ethical issues arise from that. Interviews were mostly semi-structured, and involved preset open-ended questions (Jamshed, 2014). This type of interview was chosen to give freedom to the researcher to ask follow-up questions and adjust interviews on a case-by-case basis (Elhami & Khoshnevisan, 2022). The questions needed to be structured to ensure continuity in data, especially as the interviews were used to find the best way to further enquire about these notions in the survey (Elhami & Khoshnevisan, 2022). Each interview subject’s relationship with the podcast host or hosts was evaluated through an adapted version of the 13-question parasocial relationship scale developed by Hartmann et. Al (2008). More information regarding this scale will be included in the following section. The reason for including the objective parasocial relationship scale was to have a greater understanding of the depth of the interview subjects’ parasocial relationships when analyzing their answers to other questions. The interviews included four question groups: demographic questions, podcast listening habits, parasocial relationship assessment, and questions about BetterHelp.¹

Two sets of interviews took place during the study. Originally, the intention was to interview 10 individuals before curating the survey as that is the lower end of the recommended sample size (Cober & Adams, 2020). However, only seven interviews took place from 4 April to 29 April in the first section due to difficulty finding willing participants. During interview

¹ Appendix A: Interview Script

analysis, the need for more data was illuminated, and three additional interview subjects were found to expand on what was discovered during the first round of interviews and preliminary survey results. The second round of interviews took place from 26 May to 3 June. Interviews lasted between 20 and 30 minutes. Interview subjects were sourced from Facebook, Instagram, and Reddit, including the Facebook group for fans of the comedy podcast *Beach too Sandy, Water too Wet*² of which the researcher was a member. The decision to source interviewees from these sites can be seen as a form of convenience sampling. Convenience sampling is the practice of using sources simply because of convenience and accessibility (Maxwell, 2012, pp. 214–249). However, in these interviews, subject sourcing followed what Patton (1990) describes as purposeful sampling or choosing sources for a specific purpose. In this case, subjects were sourced via personal social media applications to produce familiarity between the subject and the researcher because the interviewees were expected to discuss their experiences in therapy, which strangers may be uncomfortable exposing face to face with the researcher.

Interviews were conducted solely with residents or nationals of the United States of America because that is BetterHelp's largest market and the unique mental healthcare situation in the United States regarding the cost of mental health services could be significant motivators for the decision to use BetterHelp (BetterHelp, n.d; Davenport et al., 2023). Aside from location, interview subjects needed to be over 18 to avoid ethical issues and have been motivated to try BetterHelp following a podcast advertisement. Because the interviewees needed to be residents or nationals of the United States of America and the researcher was in Portugal, the interviews took place online over the Zoom platform. The interviews were recorded and transcribed using the transcription software Otter.ai and transcriptions were then reviewed by the researcher to ensure there were no mistakes (Kowal & O'Connell, 2014).

Interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. According to Neuendorf (2019, p. 212), thematic analysis: “assumes that the recorded messages themselves (i.e., the texts) are the data, and codes are developed by the investigator during close examination of the texts as salient themes emerge inductively from the texts.”

² <https://www.facebook.com/groups/339882446860783/>

This process was chosen, because it allows for a more in-depth analysis that allows for each interviewee's experience to be reviewed and for the analysis to go beyond words and phrases and into common ideas (Guest et al., 2012, pp. 3–21). Thematic analysis requires six steps: 1.) becoming familiar with the data through rereading; 2.) developing codes, or repeated patterns, based on that data; 3.) reviewing codes to find meaning within the data through patterns; 4.) reviewing those patterns; 5.) Defining the themes; 6.) reporting the data (Neuendorf, 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Each interviewee's parasocial relationship was assessed through Hartmann et. al.'s (2008) parasocial relationship scale,³ which is further described in the next section. The two categories of the parasocial relationship include 1.) "Virtual friendship," which is described as a "friendship-like union" between an audience member and a media personality, and 2.) "Respectful interest," which involves admiration towards a media personality, not so much a relationship (Hartmann et. al, 2008). The mean of each category, which included answers answered on a scale of 1-5, was calculated.

4.3.2 Quantitative Data Collection: Survey

Survey questions were formed using information gleaned from interviews and the literature review. The survey sourced responses from the social media channels Reddit, Instagram, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and LinkedIn. Because the prerequisites of the survey – being from the United States, being over 18, and having used BetterHelp following a podcast ad – were quite specific, using a diverse array of social media sites was essential to receive as many responses as possible. The survey ran from 22 April to 17 May.

As of 2021, BetterHelp had registered 2 million users in the United States and had over 374,000 active US-based users (Khan, 2023). To find the population size for this study, the amount of that 2 million who have used BetterHelp following a podcast advertisement would need to be known. BetterHelp was contacted to see if that information could be shared, but the company declined to share it. If this study was focused on all people who had used BetterHelp, the ideal sample size would be 385 (Raosoft, 2004). However, the researcher faced significant resource constraints in garnering enough survey responses within the

³Table 6

deadline set for carrying out data collection (Lakens, 2022). The survey ran from 22 April to 17 June. At the time of closure, 214 people submitted a survey. However, only 148 of those were valid, as the remaining surveys were either incomplete or answered “no” to one of the preliminary questions and did not fit the perimeters of the survey.

Surveys were conducted on the Typeform⁴ platform, a website that seeks to create surveys that are easier for users to follow. Typeform was chosen because the researcher had previous experience with the platform and felt it was better suited for longer surveys. The survey consisted of 51 questions broken off into five parts: preliminary questions, demographic questions, podcast listenership, parasocial relationship analysis, and Betterhelp.⁵ The preliminary questions ensured that respondents fulfilled the abovementioned requirements. A total of five trial runs of the survey with five different people were conducted before distribution. These trial responses took place to understand whether the questions were interpreted as intended and whether anyone had any questions surrounding them (Mertler, 2021). The trial runs resulted in a few questions being adjusted slightly for ease of comprehension.

Like the interviews, this survey employed an adjusted version of the 13-question parasocial relationship scale developed by Hartmann et. Al (2008). The original scale was developed to study parasocial relationships with racing drivers, but the questions were adapted to be focused on podcasters. Answers are given on a five-point scale with 1 being “nonapplicable” and five being “very applicable” (Hartmann et al., 2008). In this scale, the first six questions cover the first factor, which the authors call “virtual friendship,” which was mentioned in the section covering the interviews (Hartmann et. al, 2008). The second factor, or “respectful interest” encompasses the next six questions. The last question – “I look forward to watching my favorite driver in the next race”- includes both factors.

⁴ www.typeform.com

⁵ Appendix B: Survey Structure

Item	Category
I think my favorite racing driver is like an old friend	Virtual Friendship
My favorite racing driver makes me feel as comfortable as when I am with friends	Virtual Friendship
I think about my favorite racing driver even when they are not on TV	Virtual Friendship
I miss my favorite racing driver if I do not see him on TV for a long time.	Virtual Friendship
I feel that I know my favorite racing driver very well	Virtual Friendship
I try to imagine what my favorite racing driver thinks about a race.	Virtual Friendship
The TV coverage shows me what my favorite racing driver is like.	Respectful Interest
I find my favorite racing driver to be likeable.	Respectful Interest
I mostly agree with the actions of my favorite racing driver.	Respectful Interest
If there were a story about my favorite racing driver in a newspaper or on TV, I would read or watch it.	Respectful Interest
I would like to meet my favorite racing driver in person.	Respectful Interest
I admire my favorite racing driver for his	Respectful Interest
I look forward to watching my favorite racing driver in the next race.	Respectful Interest and Virtual Friendship

Table 5 The original parasocial relationship scale developed by Hartmann et. Al, 2008, p. 28

In the adjusted scale, “racing driver” is replaced with “podcast host(s),” and mentions of television were changed to reflect podcast listenership. The statement “I try to imagine what my favorite driver thinks about a race” was also changed to refer to “an episode or certain topic” instead of a race. One question was added to ask whether respondents trusted their

favorite podcaster's recommendations, which is not included in either category, instead, it is in its category of "trust." Several interviewees were confused by the question "If there were a story about my favorite podcast host in a newspaper/online article/ on TV, I would read or watch it," modified only slightly from Hartmann's "If there were a story about my favorite racing driver in a newspaper or on TV, I would read or watch it" (Hartmann et. Al, 2008). Thus, for simplicity, the question in the survey was further adapted to say, "If my favorite podcast host were on a different podcast, I would listen to it."

Item	Category
I think my favorite podcast host(s) is like an old friend	Virtual Friendship
My favorite podcast host makes me feel as comfortable as when I am with friends.	Virtual Friendship
I miss my favorite podcast host(s) if they do not release an episode for a long time.	Virtual Friendship
I think about my favorite podcast host(s) even when I am not listening to him/her/them	Virtual Friendship
I feel that I know my favorite podcast host(s) very well	Virtual Friendship
I try to imagine what my favorite podcast host(s) thinks about an episode (or certain topic)	Virtual Friendship
Podcast episodes/interviews show me what my favorite podcast host(s) is like	Respectful Interest
I find my favorite podcast host(s) to be likeable.	Respectful Interest
I mostly agree with the actions/opinions of my favorite podcast host(s)	Respectful Interest
If there were a story about my favorite podcast host in a newspaper/online article/ on TV, I would read or watch it.	Respectful Interest
I would like to meet my favorite podcast host(s) in person.	Respectful Interest
I admire my favorite podcast host(s) for his/her/their achievements.	Respectful Interest
I look forward to the next episode released by my favorite podcaster(s).	Respectful Interest and Virtual Friendship
I trust the products my favorite podcaster(s) recommends.	Trust

Table 6 Adjusted parasocial relationship scale based on Hartmann et. Al, 2008, p. 28

For the sections on demographics, podcast listenership, and BetterHelp, the survey employed a mix of five-point scales, multiple choice, yes/no, and a few open-answer questions asking which podcasts they listened to, and asking if the person had anything else to say was included to see if any interesting insights were provided.⁶

Data was analyzed using exploratory analysis, which “emphasizes the use of graphs to explore and understand (the) data” (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 511). The parasocial relationship scale was analyzed strictly mathematically by finding each participant’s mean of all answers in each category to examine how a person’s answer to those questions may impact answers to other questions (Hartmann et. al, 2008).

The open-ended question at the end of the survey asked, “Is there anything else you want me to know?” and received 73 responses. Of those, 67 were pertinent to the study – with the remaining six being comments that did not concern the matters discussed in the survey. The 67 responses were analyzed similarly to the interviews using thematic content analysis.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

Because this study deals with sensitive data about mental health treatment, it was essential to uphold all ethical standards to ensure both proper privacy and comfort for participants. All interviewees signed an informed consent form⁷ alerting them to what the survey covered and what it was used for and ensuring that their interview answers would be safeguarded. The form notified interviewees that they would be recorded and transcribed with Otter.ai, a transcription and note-taking software that automatically joins meetings on Google, Microsoft Teams, or Zoom⁸. Survey respondents were alerted at the beginning of the survey that by starting, they understood that their information would be used for research purposes only, and all answers would remain completely anonymous.

⁶ Appendix B: Survey Structure

⁷ Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

⁸ <https://otter.ai/transcription>

5. Results

5.1 Interview Results

As discussed above, 10 individuals who had tried BetterHelp because of a podcast advertisement were interviewed. Their answers were analyzed to find similarities or differences in both experiences, words used, and opinions.

5.1.1 Population Characteristics

The interview subjects ranged in age from 25 to 55, all women. The reason for this gender disparity could be due to the stigma surrounding men's mental health – causing fewer men to seek therapy and perhaps making them less likely to want to be interviewed about it (Chatmon, 2020). Of the 10 interview subjects, all lived in the United States of America, and all but three were solely American nationals.

Interview Subject	Age	Nationality	Professional Sector	Education
Interviewee 1	26	Iranian	Health	Bachelor's
Interviewee 2	43	American	Education	Master's
Interviewee 3	25	American	Education	Master's
Interviewee 4	27	American	Judiciary	Bachelor's
Interviewee 5	31	American	Natural Science	Bachelor's
Interviewee 6	42	American	Media	Bachelor's
Interviewee 7	27	Italian/American	Media	Bachelor's
Interviewee 8	55	American	Judiciary	Doctorate
Interviewee 9	37	American	Medical	Bachelor's
Interviewee 10	26	Dutch	Student	Bachelor's

Table 7 - Interview subject traits

5.1.2 Podcast Listening Habits

Overall, interview subjects ranged from casual podcast listeners with one or two shows to serious listeners who followed up to 10 podcasts. Respondents overwhelmingly listed an

attribute outside of the show's content as what draws them to the show that advertised BetterHelp to them, whether 1) the conversational aspect; 2) humor, or 3) relatability.

1.) Conversational Aspect:

Interview subjects highlighted their enjoyment of podcasts that feel more like conversations between two or more people. For instance, Interview Subject Five stated that the conversational aspect of the true crime show *Morbid* helped keep her attention – mentioning her enjoyment of the conversation and humor before mentioning her interest in the topics themselves.

“I really can't do a podcast that is like, just one person talking. I lose (focus). Like I get distracted easily, easier. And then yeah, I like humor. I like funny. I like the conversation, but I mean, I also obviously find all the topics very interesting as well” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Five).

Further, Subject Ten reflected, “The in-depth, conversational feel of podcasts allows for more detailed explanations and personal anecdotes, which helped me feel a stronger sense of trust and connection with the hosts” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Ten).

2.) Humor

As noted in the previous quote from Subject Five, she is attracted to shows that are “funny” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Five). Subject Five was not alone. Half of the respondents mentioned either “humor” or “funny” to describe their favorite podcasts.

Interview Subject Eight highlighted the fact that she enjoyed the true-crime podcast *Mystery and Makeup* due in part to the fact that the host is “quirky” and “has a sense of humor” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Eight). In describing her interest in *The Mental Illness Happy Hour*, a show that features interviews with people surrounding mental illness,⁹ Subject Six stated that the humor surrounding the darker topics of mental illness is what draws her to the show.

“It's a comedian who got into, you know, therapy and support groups and stuff, and now, it's really fantastic. He interviews people who have mental illnesses, he interviews writers, he interviews doctors and it's very raw and like also just very off-the-cuff and humorous” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Six).

⁹ <https://mentalpod.com>

3.) Host Relatability

An ability to relate to the hosts was also a common theme, brought up by several interviewees. For example, Subject Two mentioned that the way the hosts of the true-crime podcast *Red Handed* communicated drew her into the show.

“So, they have these lovely British accents, and they curse just the right amount to make them relatable, but not so much like oh gosh, the one (podcast) that's super popular. They're like, they're cursing constantly and it's distracting. So yeah, I just kind of relate to them” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Two).

In analyzing individual listening habits, three reasons for listening were formed: 1.) multitasking, 2.) expanding upon a pre-existing interest, or 3.) distraction.

1.) Multitasking

All interview subjects mentioned multitasking, whether they listened to while commuting or doing chores. Subject Five reported a near-constant podcast presence in her life.

“But I listen all the time. I'll listen when I'm getting ready in the morning. I'll listen when I'm driving. I'll listen when I'm cleaning. Pretty much any time I have free time, I'm listening to a podcast over music” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Five).

Interview Subject Ten expressed a similar idea, stating “I mostly listen while doing something else, like I mentioned walking, commuting, stuff like that. I would never just listen to a podcast” (Appendix D: Interview Subject 10).

2.) Expanding upon a pre-existing interest

More than half of interviewees stated that they listened to podcasts that dealt with things they had a prior interest in, such as a television show or a something they're interested in learning more about. For instance, Subject Three mentioned that she solely listens to podcast that deal with the television show *The Office* due to her love of the show. Similarly, Subject Nine said she listens to both *The Bravo Docket*, which deals with legal challenges involving reality shows on the TV channel Bravo, and *90 Day Cray Cray*, a recap show for the reality television show *90-Day Fiancé* due to her love for reality TV.

“The third one I listen to weekly is *90 Day Cray Cray*. And because I also like *90 Day Fiancé*. I really like my trash TV. Yeah, and they just go over how ridiculous every episode is and I just laugh. I mean, I was single like during COVID and now I'm

engaged... (and) I won't make my fiancé watch (those shows) with me" (Appendix D: Interview Subject Nine).

A few interviewees also mentioned an interest in listening to shows that deal with topics they are curious about. For example, Subject Two said her interest in *Red Handed* stems from a longstanding interest in true crime, stating "I've been involved with researching missing and unidentified people since I was in high school. My dad was a police officer, and I've always enjoyed the whole true crime thing" (Appendix D: Interview Subject 2).

Further, Subject Six said her interest in *The Mental Illness Happy Hour* is driven from her own experiences with mental illness and a desire to learn more about the experiences of others.

"You know, I have lived with mental conditions for most of my life, and I'm really interested in learning about it and learning what other people's experiences about it are like. I'm really passionate about like, removing the stigma and you know, letting people know they're not the only ones and they can get through it" (Appendix D: Interview Subject Six).

3.) Distraction.

Two individuals said that they listened as a form of distraction from daily life with Subject Four saying "It's nice to listen to somebody talking but that's not my voice in my head" (Appendix D: Interview Subject Four).

Subject Nine was an overnight nurse during the COVID-19 pandemic, and noted that, during that time, listening to podcasts was one of the only reprieves she had against her isolating day-to-day life.

"I certainly don't want to say people can't put themselves in other's shoes, but I think it's an experience a lot of people don't understand.... And it was especially hard to do because there was such a huge wave of misinformation and disinformation. And people telling themselves or telling me that I signed up for this and that it you know, you signed up for this you're in health care you need to deal with this, and it was really bad. So, the things that I loved the most were my podcasts (and the only) resources.... were my podcasts" (Appendix D: Interview Subject Nine).

5.1.4 Relationships to Podcast Hosts

Two codes were curated when investigating how interviewees saw their relationships with their favorite podcast hosts – perceived authenticity and relational connection.

1.) Perceived Authenticity

Half of the participants mentioned the perceived authenticity of a podcast host when explaining why they liked a show, whether through words or phrases such as: “down-to-earth,” “real,” or “raw,” as was said by Subject Eight about the host of *The Mental Illness Happy Hour* in the quote included in the previous section regarding humor (Appendix D: Interview Subject Eight).

Further examples of perceived authenticity, include Subject Seven saying that she “trusted the hosts because they seemed real and down to earth” and Subject Eight stating that the host of the true crime show *Murder, Mystery, and Makeup* “seems really humble and real. It seems like she cares about other people” (Appendix D: Interview Subjects Seven and Eight).

Further, Subject Two said she connected with the hosts, Christine and Alex, of the comedy podcast *Beach too Sandy, Water too Wet* based on what they’ve shared about living with anxiety.

“I definitely relate to Christine and Alex when they talk about their struggles with like, you know, kind of taking everything personally and just generalized anxiety, some of the things they say I’m like, ‘Oh my gosh, that’s, yeah, that’s exactly how I am’” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Two).

2.) Relational Connection

Regarding the relationships that listeners form with podcast hosts, some interviewees saw their connection as something akin to an intimate relationship. For example, Subject Four highlighted her enjoyment of the true crime show *And That’s Why We Drink*, and her relationship with the hosts, saying “I’ve been listening since the beginning. So, I feel like they’re my friends. So, it’s just nice to catch up with them every week (which) is almost what it feels like” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Four).

Moreover, Subject One said that she viewed the hosts of the advice podcast *Oddvice* as a stand-in for an older sibling.

“I like this podcast because it feels like my big sisters are giving me advice or just talking through things. Growing up I didn’t have sisters or siblings to give advice or hear me out, therefore even though this is just a podcast, that part of me feels a bit more comfortable with this” (Appendix D: Interview Subject One).

Subject Nine singled out that she did not feel that a relationship with her favorite podcast host, but instead described her relationship with them as a “craving.”

“You know, I crave hearing from them. And if I, for example, I would love to go to BravoCon¹⁰ and meet the two lawyers from *Bravo Docket*, but I wouldn't, say, be like, ‘Oh, we should go to lunch’ and ‘You feel like friends’ then I would probably approach them and say, ‘I love your podcast, and I love your legal knowledge that you apply to this and it's just great’” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Nine).

5.1.5 BetterHelp Usage

Participants on average used the services provided by the company for about two to six months. The only outliers were Interview Subjects Six and Nine who used the company for a combined four to five years and two years respectively. Subject Six had used the company previously and returned during the last two years. “I mean, I used them for a couple of years and then took a break and have started using them again” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Six).

The majority completed therapy through video or voice calls, with only Subject One communicating with her therapist through text alone. However, the only reason she maintained text-only communication was due to an inability to figure out how to change her mode of therapy, stating that “I mostly used text even though I preferred talk or video calls I was not aware how to switch or change the methods at the time” (Appendix D: Interview Subject One).

Subject Nine had also begun seeing her therapist in person outside of BetterHelp, and found that her usage of the app was more expensive than seeing the therapist in person as her insurance covered part of her visits.

“Now that I see her in person, and my insurance covers it now I just have like a \$50 copay... So now it went from like, \$200 to \$100 because, I have the sessions with her twice a month. And then I've done some things virtually just because I have a pretty complicated schedule. So, I still primarily see her over FaceTime. But I've seen her in person, in the past year I want to say like, four or five times” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Nine).

When recalling their reason for choosing BetterHelp over a different way of therapy, interviewees overwhelmingly stated that convenience, whether by not having to go through insurance, not having to schedule appointments with multiple providers, or being able to access care in an under-served region, was a major contributing factor. Subject Five praised the ease of the company, especially as a person with a “crazy schedule.”

¹⁰ A convention for fans of the Bravo TV network <https://bravocon2023.com>

"A therapist is a therapist you can find one in person or online, but I think for me it was the easiness and being able to easily schedule it and you know jump on the computer real quick and do a video call versus having to go to an office" (Appendix D: Interview Subject Five).

The most common reasons for leaving BetterHelp, were the product cost and the inability to find the right therapist. The only other reason stated by more than one person was dissatisfaction, with two individuals.

5.1.6 Experience with BetterHelp

Interview subjects had a mix of experiences with BetterHelp ranging from fully negative to very positive.

1.) Negative

Several interview subjects felt that their experience with BetterHelp was primarily negative. Subject One stated that she felt extremely disappointed with her experience and felt that therapy had become overwhelming for her.

"It felt like a waste of money... It felt like he was providing pamphlets for anything and everything I had to say which like just led for me to do homework and read those pages. I wish discussions were held rather than for me to do it all at a time where I was already feeling overwhelmed. It was hard for me to put my mental health first because I was overwhelmed with the amount of packets and articles and files I read to try to make sense of it.... the only source felt like it was failing me" (Appendix D: Interview Subject One).

Further, Subject Three, who was having problems with her then-girlfriend recounted her experience with BetterHelp as being heteronormative. In particular, she said her therapist was more stuck on her being gay than her relationship issues.

"She, the therapist, was just really not having good practices because she'd be like 'well, if (the ex) were a man, how would you feel about this?'... And she would kind of be like, 'well, maybe it's because you're gay and maybe it's because of this and she would kind of bring up issues.' And I'm like, those aren't my issues. I don't have a problem with that. No one in my life has a problem with that" (Appendix D: Interview Subject Three).

2.) Mild

Those who had mild experiences primarily struggled with finding a therapist that "fit them correctly." For instance, Subject Two recalled starting off with a male therapist before trying female therapists, none of which were up to par for her.

“When they matched me with a male therapist, I was like, Cool. That's, you know, that'll work. It did not. I only spoke with him once. It was kind of an intake sort of thing, and I did not, um, I didn't connect with him. So I'm like, that's fine. Like, maybe a woman would be better. Both of the ladies that I had.... they were very kind. I think both of them were licensed clinical social workers. And they were both very kind, but they just were not what I was looking for in therapy. Not that I knew really what I was looking for” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Two).

Additionally, Subject Seven said “I think it's hard to find like a therapist that is good. I tried a few different ones and never quite like clicked with them” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Seven). Subject Ten had a bit more pessimistic view of her experience with the company, saying “My experience was fine, but I think disappointing. Nothing horrible happened, but the therapists I tried were usually unresponsive and came across as kind of amateur” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Ten).

3.) Positive

Subject Four said that she would continue to see her former therapist if she still lived in the area where the therapist was licensed to practice. In describing what she liked about BetterHelp, she said it felt like an easier way to get into therapy.

“We all need to think about our mental health. Here's kind of a casual approach to it. Which felt nice because I think sometimes therapy can seem like such a daunting thing and this was like a very approachable, non-aggressive type of therapy or at least it feels that way” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Four).

Subjects Six and Nine were the only interview subjects who were still using BetterHelp. Subject Six had been with her current therapist for two years at the time of the interview, and Subject Nine had seen the same person for three years. Subject Six recalled being uninterested in learning about BetterHelp's controversy regarding sharing data due to her current relationship with her therapist.

“I kind of didn't want to know, because I really enjoy (BetterHelp) and I was going to keep using (BetterHelp). It was something along the lines of like sharing data with other advertisers or something, something they should not have been doing. Not anything that to me means enough for me to let go of this counselor that I really liked so much” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Six).

5.1.7 Relationship to Advertisements

Of all the interviewees, five of them stated that the testimony of their favorite podcaster regarding BetterHelp or therapy, in general, influenced them to use BetterHelp. Several

respondents referenced their trust in a podcast host when asked about their feelings toward advertisements on podcasts. For instance, Subject Ten reflected on the difference she felt when viewing social media endorsements versus podcasts.

“Social media endorsements often feel more superficial and less trustworthy to me, maybe because the platform itself is more casual and used for promoting literally anything you can think of. For some reason, podcasts always seemed more trustworthy and credible” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Ten).

Subject Eight said that the podcast host’s statements surrounding BetterHelp were a large part of her decision to use the company. “She described exactly what it was and how it worked for her. Because I trusted her, I believed what she said, and I trusted the product” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Eight).

Interview Subjects Two and Seven both reported believing that BetterHelp would work for them because it worked for the hosts advertising it. Speaking on the hosts of the true-crime podcast *Red Handed*, Interview Subject Two stated:

“They’re both pretty down to earth, but they also speak on women's issues and things that I can relate to. Because they're so down to earth, I felt like if they're using this service, and getting something out of it, (and) I'm kind of neurotic, I could definitely benefit from this” (Appendix D, Interview Subject Two).

A few interview subjects noted that they were aware the advertisements were advertisements and were thus able to differentiate between a genuine endorsement and a paid one. Subject Five noted a shift in her opinion, originally believing that podcasts were accepting ads only for companies they approved of.

“I mean, I obviously they're ads, and they're scripted and you can tell that they are especially when each of your podcasts say pretty much the exact same thing. When I first started listening, I was excited because (it) felt like (the hosts) truly promoted brands and companies and things like that. I don't feel that way anymore. I feel like they're promoting McDonald's and crap. You know, it's like, all the big names that don't need it” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Five).

However, both reflected that the repetitive nature of these advertisements likely played a role in their decision to use the company.

“I think (advertisements) definitely put (BetterHelp) on my radar at the very least. But you know, nine times out of 10 I fast forward through the advertisements, but you still kind of hear those well ‘BetterHelp, BetterHelp’ and so I think it did definitely, at least somewhat, influenced me to start using that program” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Four).

Subject Five had a similar opinion to the statement above, saying “I do feel like the fact that all of my podcasts promoted BetterHelp definitely made me more inclined to try it” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Five).

5.1.8 Ethics in Advertisement

Despite the mix of experiences, most respondents did feel that BetterHelp had been fairly advertised to them. Although some interview subjects had mixed opinions. Subject Seven, for instance, said “It was advertised as like a low-cost option and easy to use. It was definitely easy to use, but I don’t think low-cost, considering like the costs ad up” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Seven).

Subject Ten echoed the point that the company was not as affordable as it made itself out to be, and further said that she felt the help given by the company was also not correctly characterized.

“I think it was advertised (as) a lot more affordable than it actually turned out to be. There was a big payment plan which pulled the entire fee at the start, which is not how it was advertised to me at all. It also sounded like you would get the service of a ‘regular’ therapist, who is knowledgeable and involved, but like I said the therapists were just not really up to par. It was advertised to me as the better alternative to in-person therapy, but I was definitely very disappointed with their services” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Ten).

Interview Subjects Three and Seven reported feeling that the advertisements were neither fair nor unfair.

“I guess yes and no... The ease of it. I think yes. It is very easy, things like that. I think all the help that it gives is inaccurate. Because (the podcast) still (has) the ads in their podcasts I cringe every time I have to hear the ad because I’m like, ‘oh my god, it’s false advertising’ and like it’s not as good as it’s cracked up to be, and (after) hearing other people’s real testimony, people who have been through (BetterHelp). I know that’s not true now. And it wasn’t like this platform that it wanted to be” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Three).

Further, one participant noted a mix of emotions “It’s hard for me to tell if it’s a good platform and my experience was like negative, or if everything I saw and heard was like pampered and fabricated” (Appendix D: Interview Subject One).

Interview Subject Six noted that she trusted the host of *The Mental Illness Happy Hour*, because she knew that the host of the podcast that advertised BetterHelp to her had used

BetterHelp for years. She said that she knew the company had been fairly advertised to her because the host stopped advertisements for the company after concern sparked over how BetterHelp handled customer data.

“He actually released like, a whole mini-episode that was like, ‘here's why I'm not using (BetterHelp) and it really was a hard decision and blah, blah, blah.’ But you know, like I said, I've enjoyed it so much that to me, it was just like, ‘I get why you're doing what you're doing. But this is a wonderful service for me and like I'm going to keep using it’” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Six).

A few interview subjects commented on the advertiser's use of BetterHelp. Subject Nine said she had never heard an advertiser say they used the company and that they generally speak about therapy and wrapping it into the show's content.

“I've never heard anyone on the podcasts... (say) that they've used it themselves. They just said it's helped, you know, millions of people. I know with like *Something Was Wrong*¹¹, and I know the *Bravo Docket* and I also think I listened to a podcast called *No One Should Believe Me*, which is about Munchausen by Proxy. And on that one, all of them have phrased it as you know, like, for *No One Should Believe Me*, *Something Was Wrong*¹², those ones that deal with like, like abuse, trauma, scamming, they'll say... you know, people face hardship, people, you know, things don't go well. The pandemic is such a tough time. Listeners know from the content of this podcast that people can really struggle with things and BetterHelp can help” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Nine).

On the other hand, interview Subject Five stated that she was unsure if podcasters who advertised BetterHelp saying “I do truly wonder if any of them actually use it. I mean, I think every podcast host that I listened to probably goes to therapy, but do I think that they're using BetterHelp? I don't know” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Five).

5.2 Survey Results

5.2.1 Population Characteristics

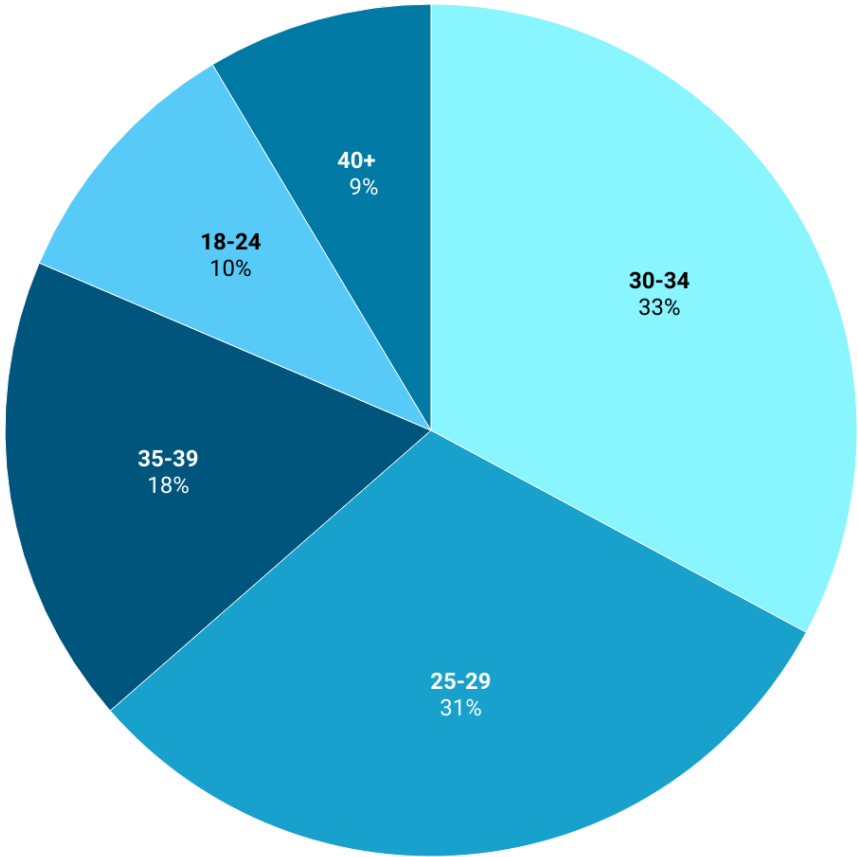
As seen in Graph 1, survey respondents' most common age range was 30 to 34 with 46 responses, followed closely by 25 to 29 with 43 responses – making most respondents between the ages of 25 and 34. Respondents were overwhelmingly female, as seen in Graph 2, which could reflect the gap in seeking mental healthcare between men and women

¹¹ <https://www.nobodyshouldbelieveme.com>

¹² A podcast about personal experiences with traumatic events and the recovery from them

(Chatmon, 2020). A total of 10 individuals identified as something other than a man or a woman, with eight identifying as “nonbinary” and two identifying as “other.”

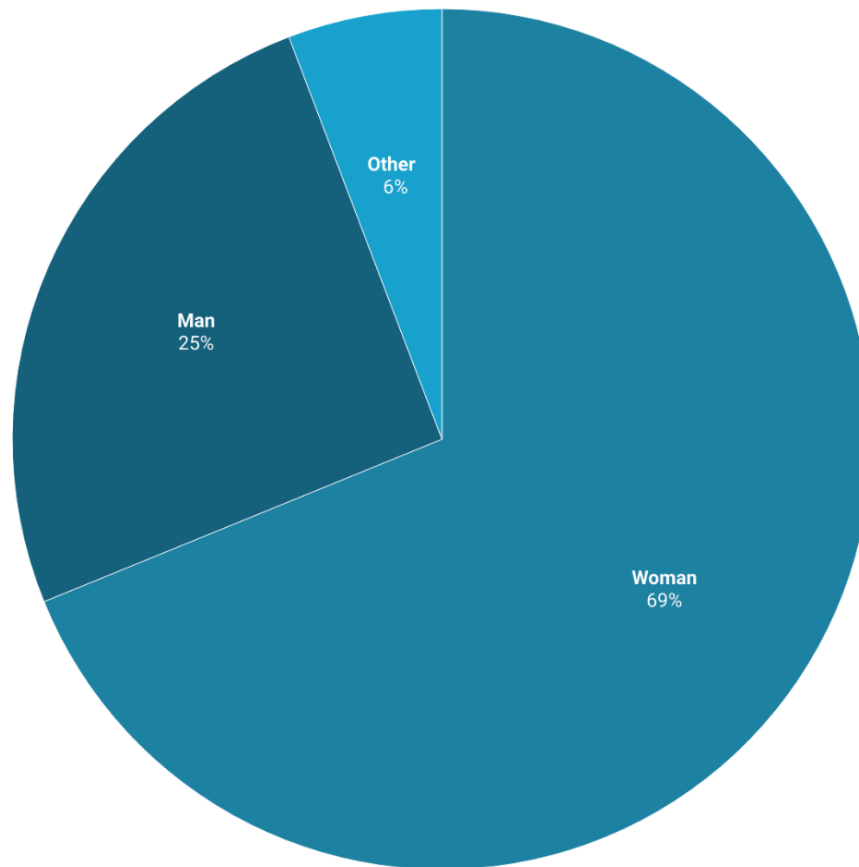
Respondent's Age Range



Created with Datawrapper

Graph 1: Respondent’s Age Range

Gender Identity



Created with Datawrapper

Graph 2 Respondents' Gender Identity

The vast majority of participants are residents of the United States of America, with all but two living within the country. Most respondents (45%) self-classified the region they lived in as suburban. As shown in Figure 1, the majority, 120, of the respondents were also American nationals with one respondent each a national of The Netherlands, Canada, the United Kingdom, Cuba, Germany, Japan, and Tunisia. Two respondents were nationals of Italy, three of Mexico, and seven of Ireland.

Respondent's Nationalities

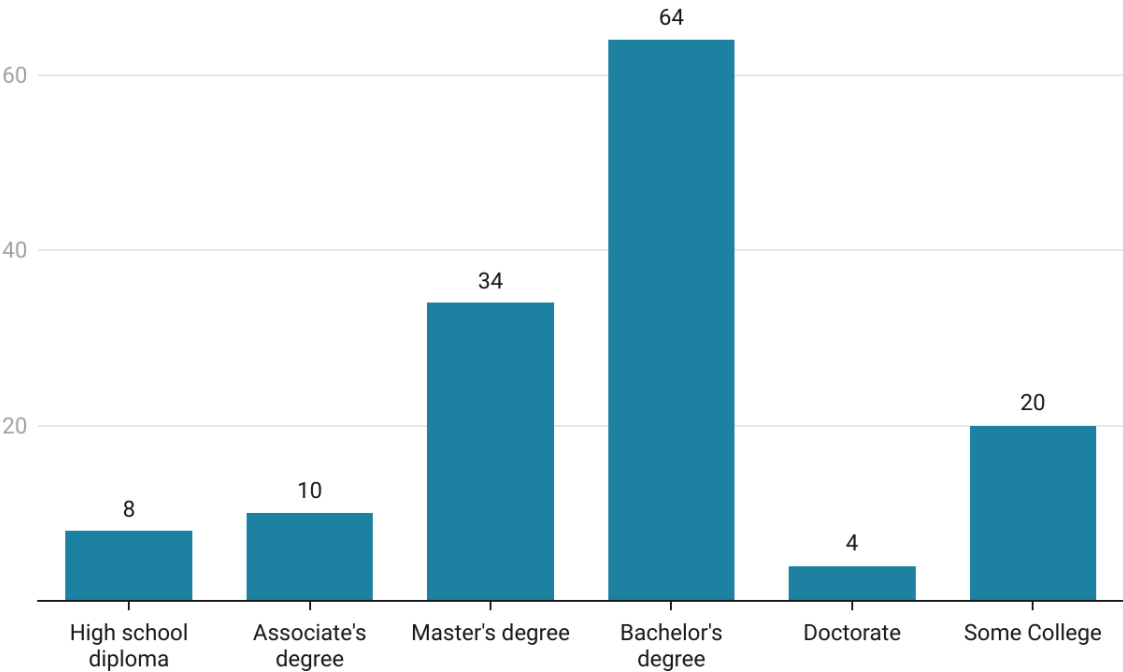


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Figure 1: Nationality of Survey Respondents

Survey respondents' most common education level was a bachelor's degree with 64 answers. The second most common was a master's degree with 34 responses, as represented in Graph 3.

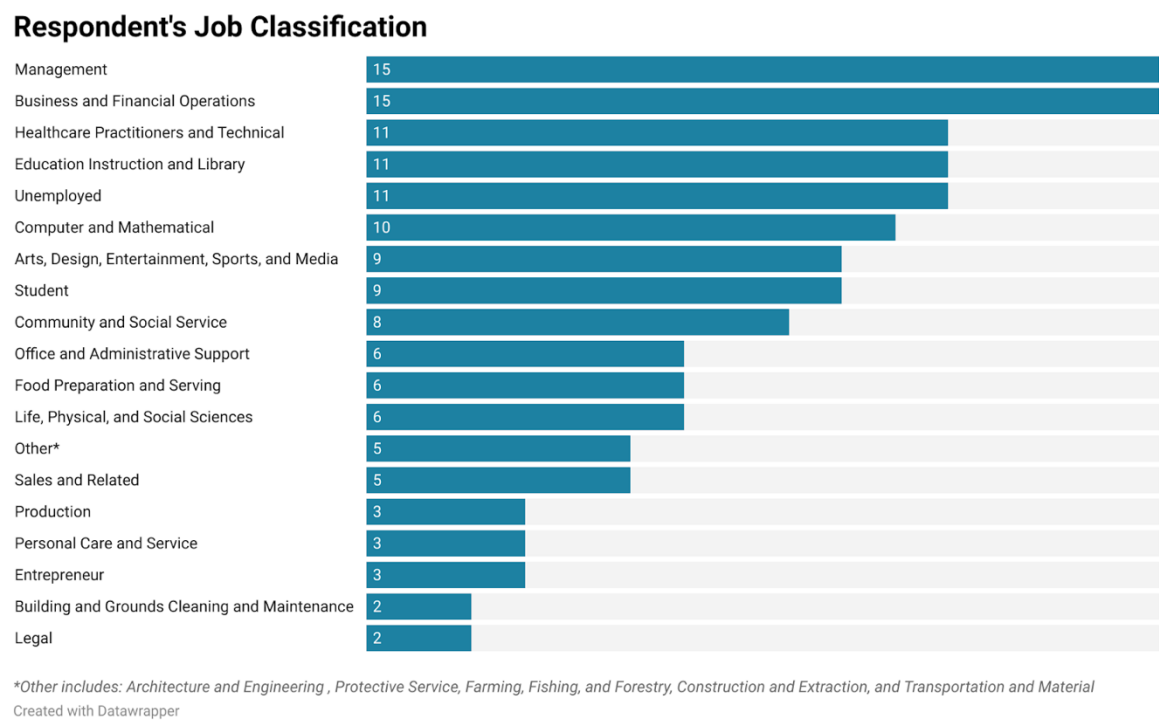
Respondent's Education Levels



Created with Datawrapper

Graph 3: Respondent's Education Levels

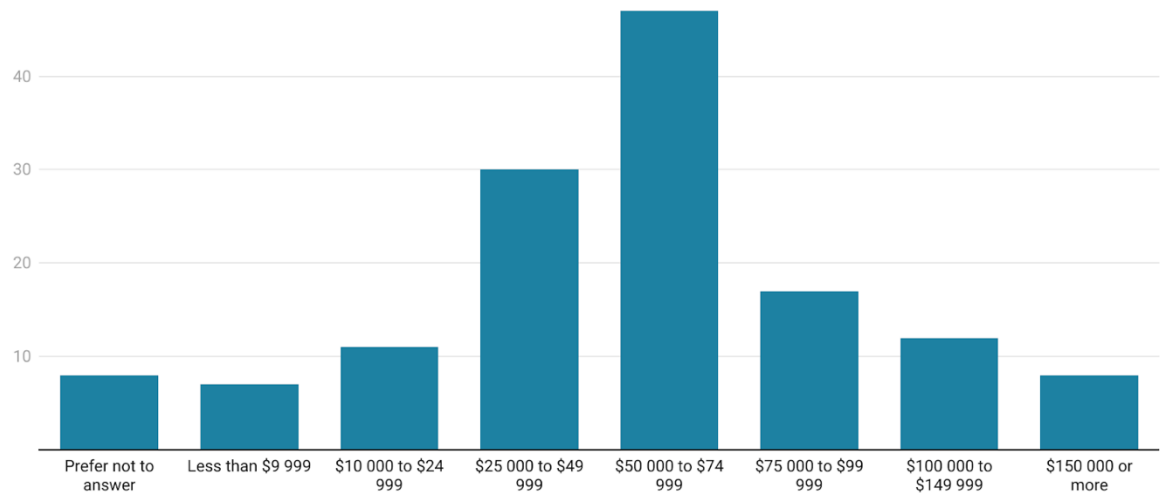
Respondents were asked to state their job titles in an open question, and then jobs were classified by the researcher according to the occupation profile classifications of the United States of America’s Bureau of Labor Statistics (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019), which are listed in Graph 4. In allowing respondents to list their job titles, the survey avoided any confusion surrounding classifications.



Graph 4: Job Classification

As shown in Graph 5, the average yearly salary of participants fell in line with wage statistics for the United States. About 33.57% of respondents reported wages between 50,000 and 74,999 USD – which matches the average in 2022 of 63,795 USD (Social Security Administration, 2022).

Yearly Income



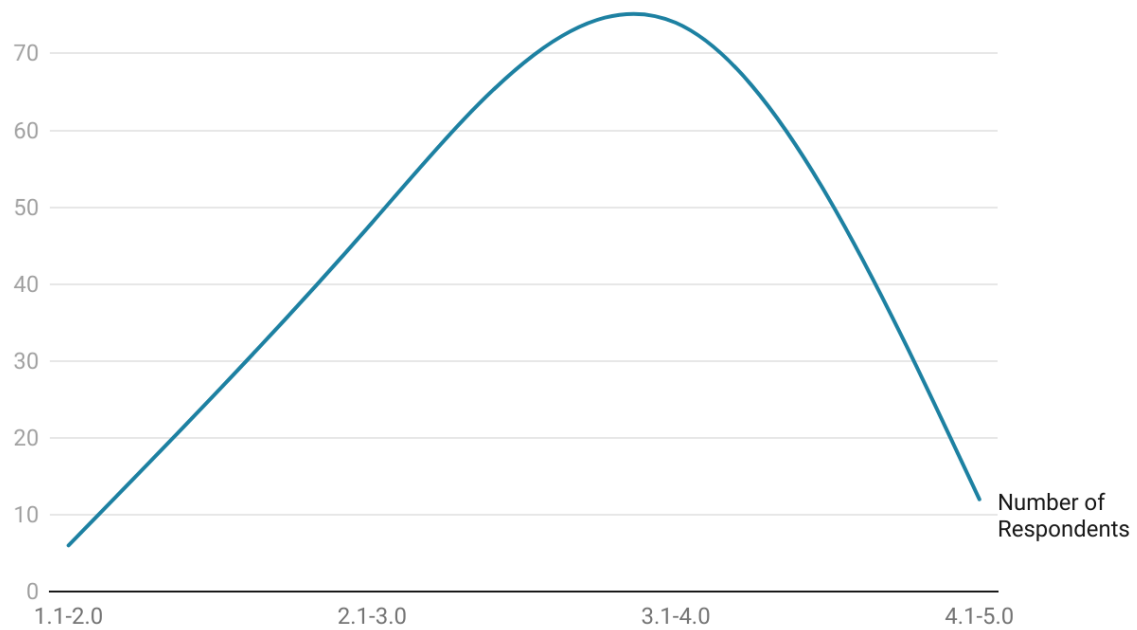
Created with Datawrapper

Graph 5 Yearly Income

5.2.2 Measuring Parasocial Relationships

The average of all answers to the 14 questions in the adjusted parasocial relationship scale described in Table 6 was calculated and used to categorize people based on their parasocial relationships. Because answers were given on a five-point scale, a score of 1 represents a near non-existent parasocial relationship and a five represents the strongest parasocial relationship. As seen in Graph 6, the average parasocial relationship score was 3.26, with a minimum of 1.57 and a maximum of five. For the sake of analysis, participants were placed into four groups reflecting their parasocial relationship scores. Those groups contained those who scored: between 1.1 and 2.0, 2.1 and 3.0, 3.1 and 4.0, and 4.1 and 5.0.

Parasocial Relationship Score



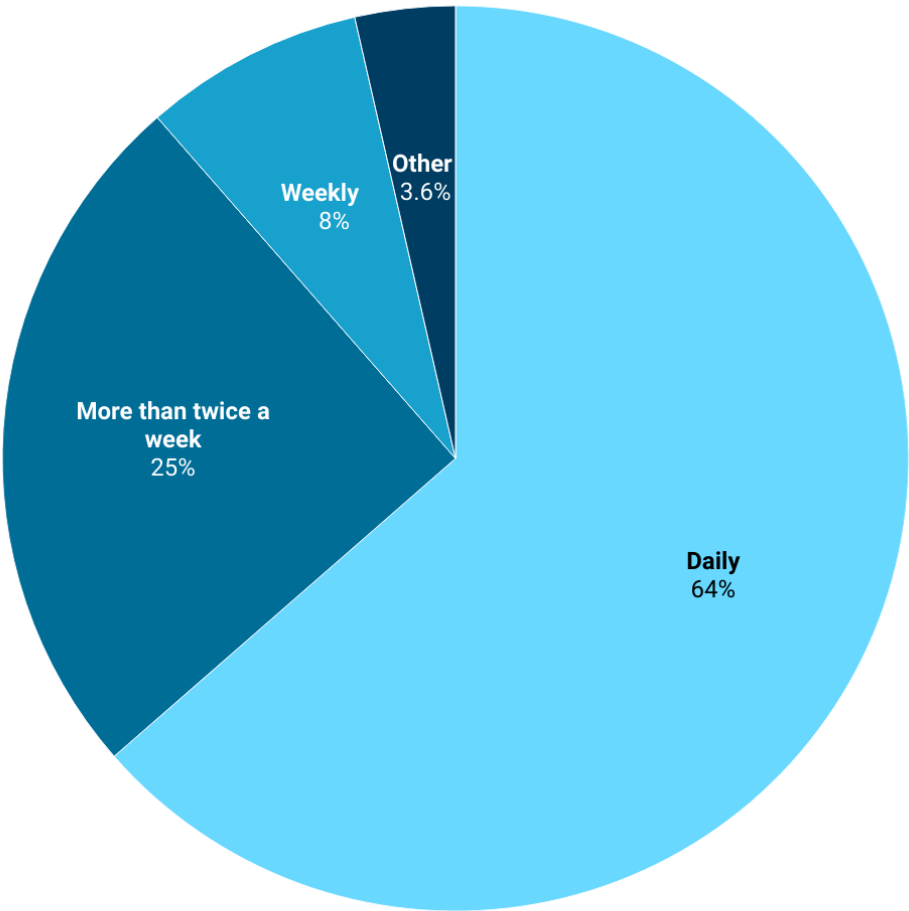
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Graph 6 Parasocial Relationship Scores

5.2.3 Listening Habits

As can be seen in Graph 7, most survey respondents listened to podcasts every day, with only five people reporting that they listened less often than once a week.

Frequency of Listening



Other includes: More than once a month, monthly, and less than once a month

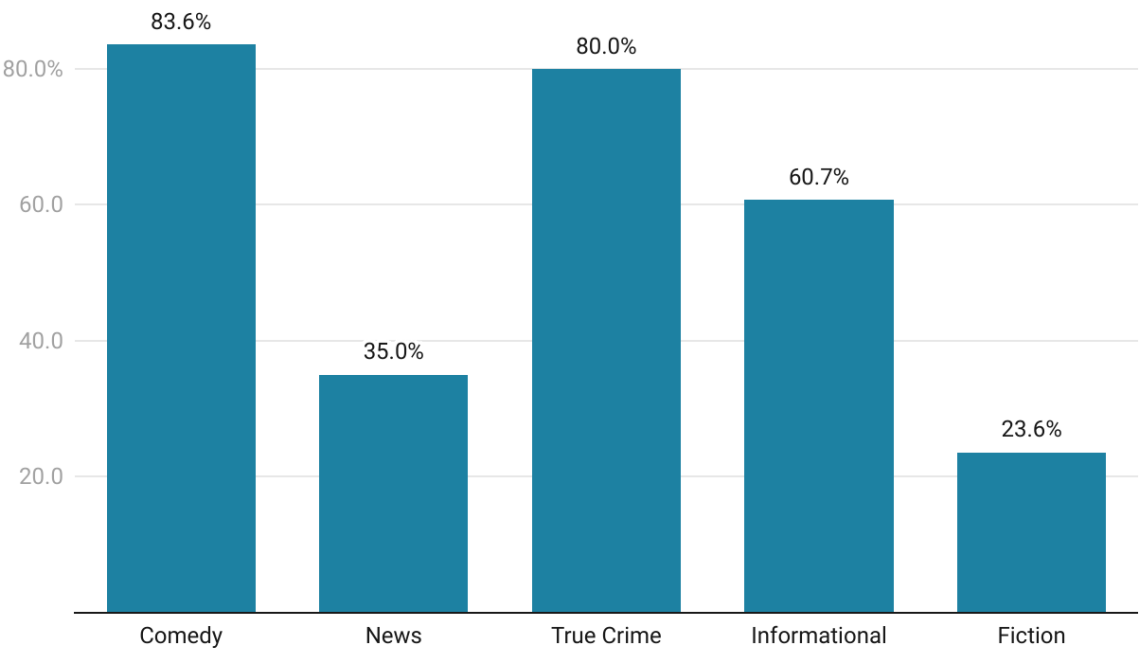
Created with Datawrapper

Graph 7: Frequency of listening

The most common genres that respondents reported listening to were comedy and true crime with the least popular being news and fiction, as displayed in Graph 8. When examining how, if at all, preferred genres vary across parasocial relationship scores, it can be observed in Graph 9 that those with scores between 3.1 and 5.0 are more likely to report listening to news podcasts than those with lower scores. Further, there is a slight increase in comedy podcast listenership as scores get higher, and a decrease in true crime

listenership.

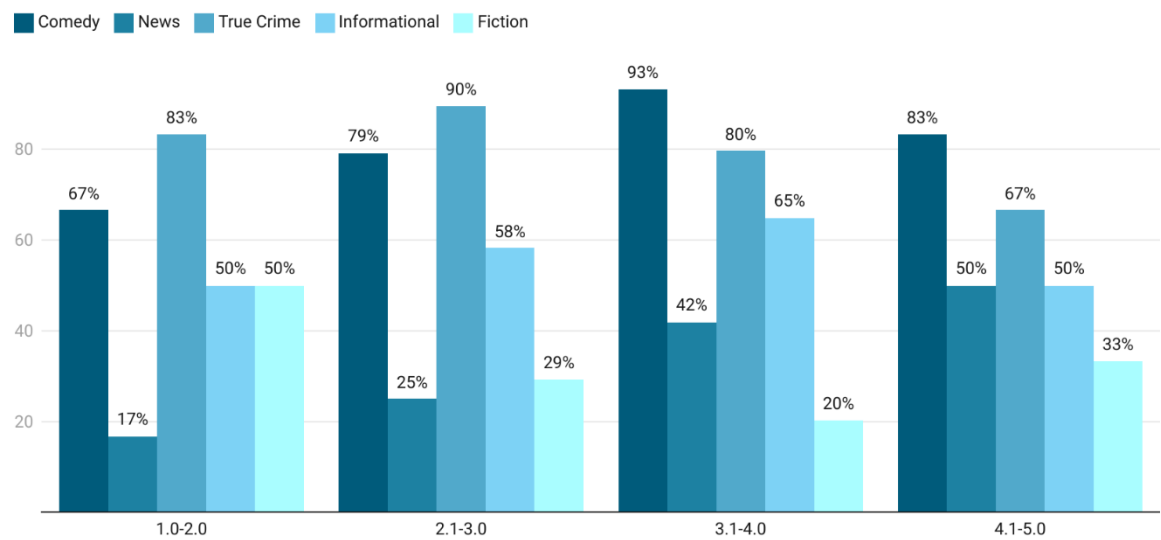
Preferred Genres



Created with Datawrapper

Graph 8 Preferred podcast genres

Preferred Genres by Parasocial Relationship Score

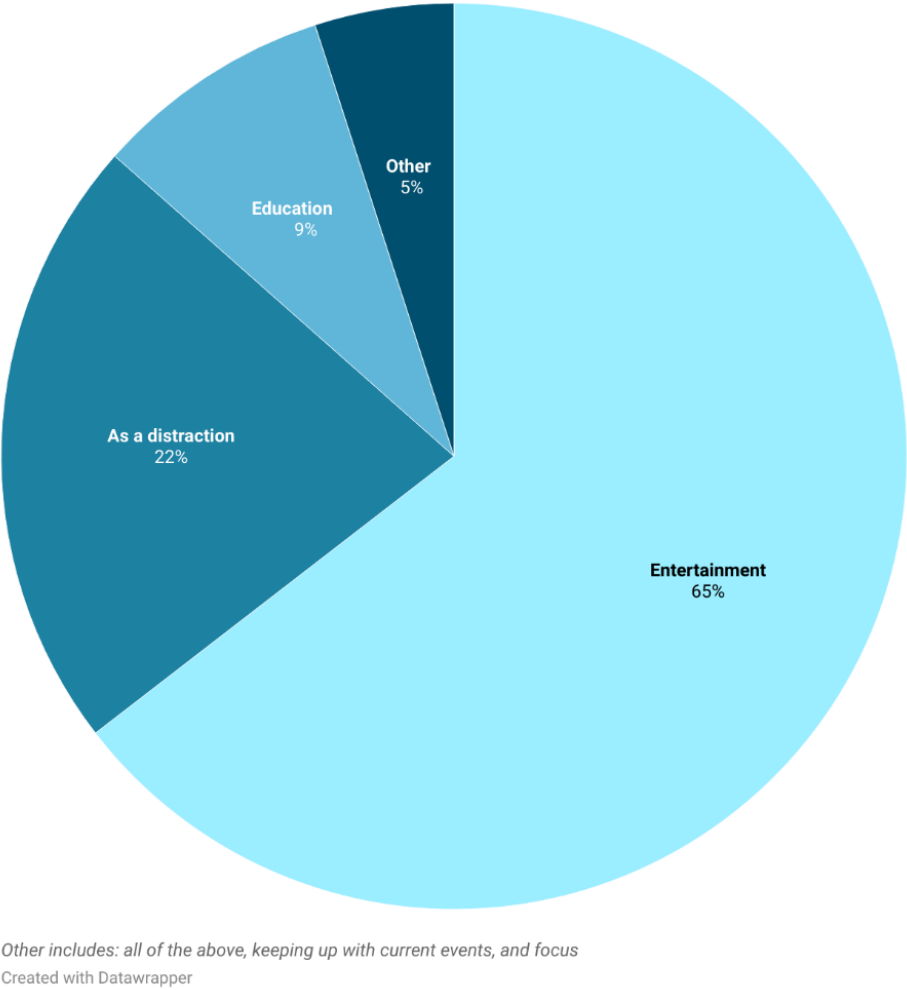


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Graph 9: Preferred Genres by Parasocial Relationship Scores

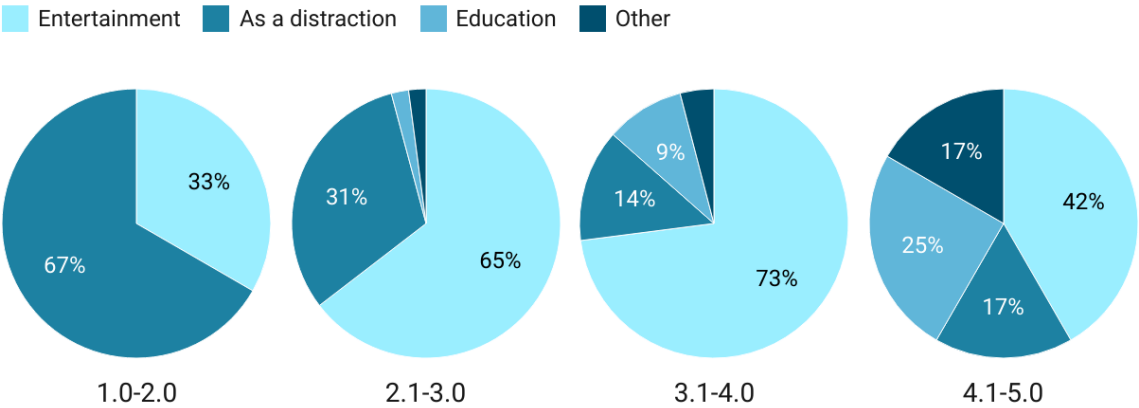
As shown in Graph 10, respondents overwhelmingly listened to their favorite podcasts for entertainment, with this answer being chosen by 66%. Those with lower scores on the parasocial relationship scale tend to report listening “as a distraction” more often than those with higher scores, as represented in Graph 11.

Why people listen



Graph 10: Reasons for listening to podcasts

Reasons for listening based on parasocial relationship score

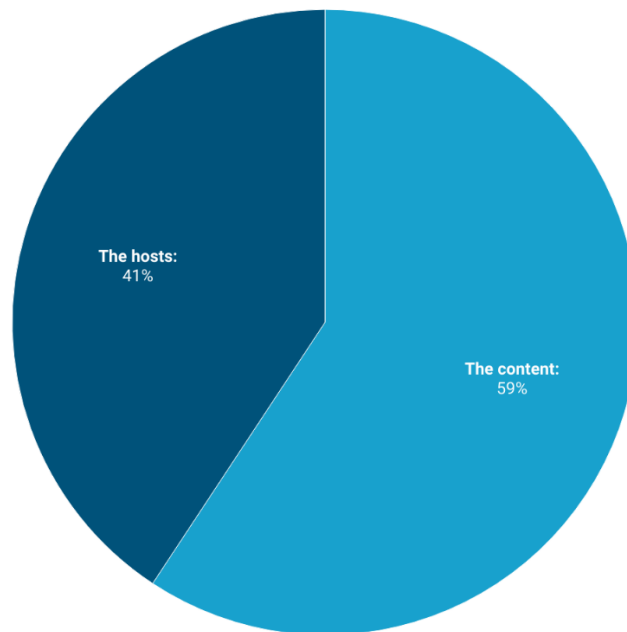


Other includes: all of the above, keeping up with current events, and focus
Created with Datawrapper

Graph 11: Reasons for listening to podcasts based on parasocial relationship scores

In answering whether people prefer the hosts or the content of their favorite podcasts, a small majority of respondents stated that they listened more for the content than the hosts, as represented in Graph 12. However, as seen in Graph 13, those with higher parasocial relationship scores are more likely to state that they listen for the hosts – with the group of people with a score of between 4.1 and five being the only ground with a higher percentage of choosing the hosts over the content.

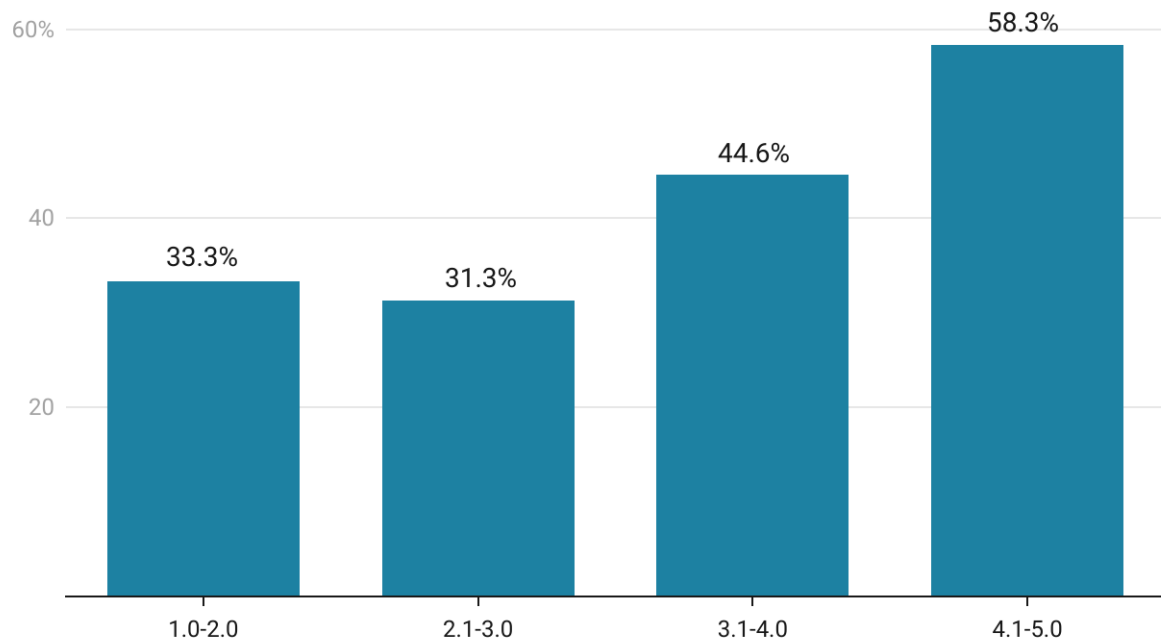
Reasoning for Listening: The Hosts or Content



Created with Datawrapper

Graph 12: Participant's Preference for the Host or the Content of Their Favorite Podcasts

Percentage who chose host by parasocial relationship scale score



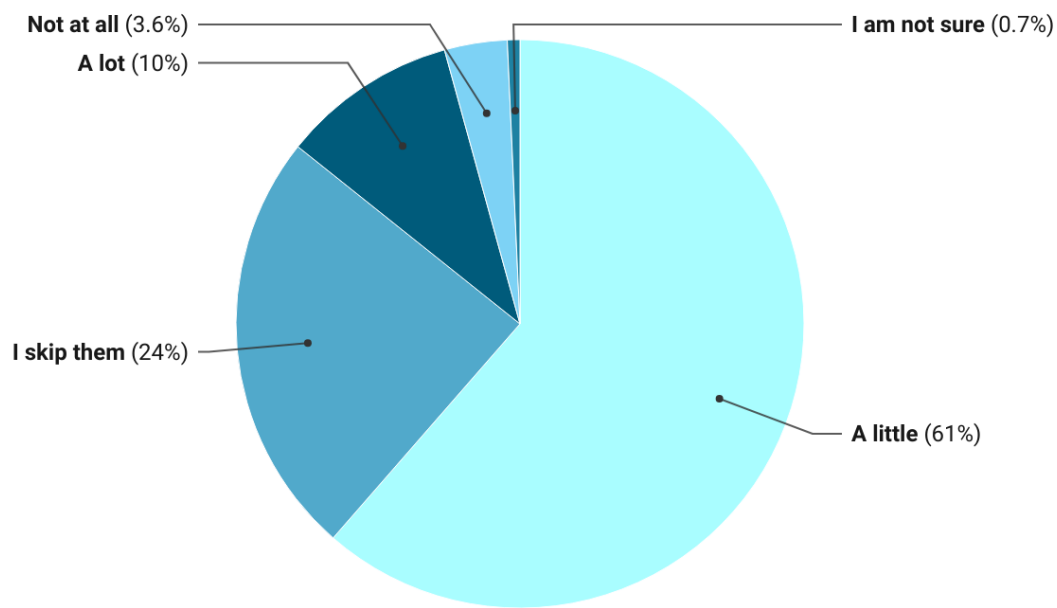
Created with Datawrapper

Graph 13: Percentage of Respondents Who Listen for the Host Over Content by Parasocial Relationship Score

5.2.4 Podcast Advertisement

Respondents primarily self-reported paying “a little” attention to podcast advertisements, according to Graph 14. However, as seen in Graph 15, those who scored between 3.1 and 5.0, or those who exhibited more signs of a stronger parasocial relationship were more likely to report paying “a lot of attention” to them, with 14% of those who scored 3.1 to 4.0 and 17% of those who scored 4.1 and 5.0. That is in comparison to none of those who scored 1.0 to 2.0, and 4% of those who scored between 2.1 and 3.0.

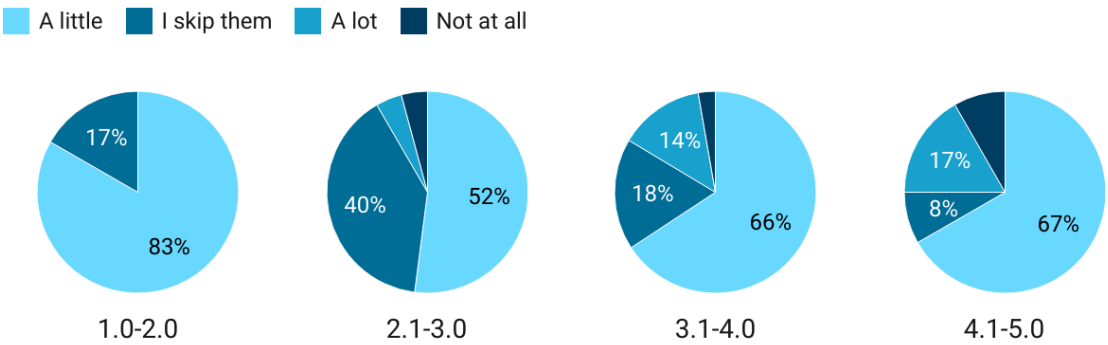
Attention paid to podcast ads



Created with Datawrapper

Graph 14 Attention Paid to Podcast Advertisements

Attention paid to podcast ads by parasocial relationship scale score

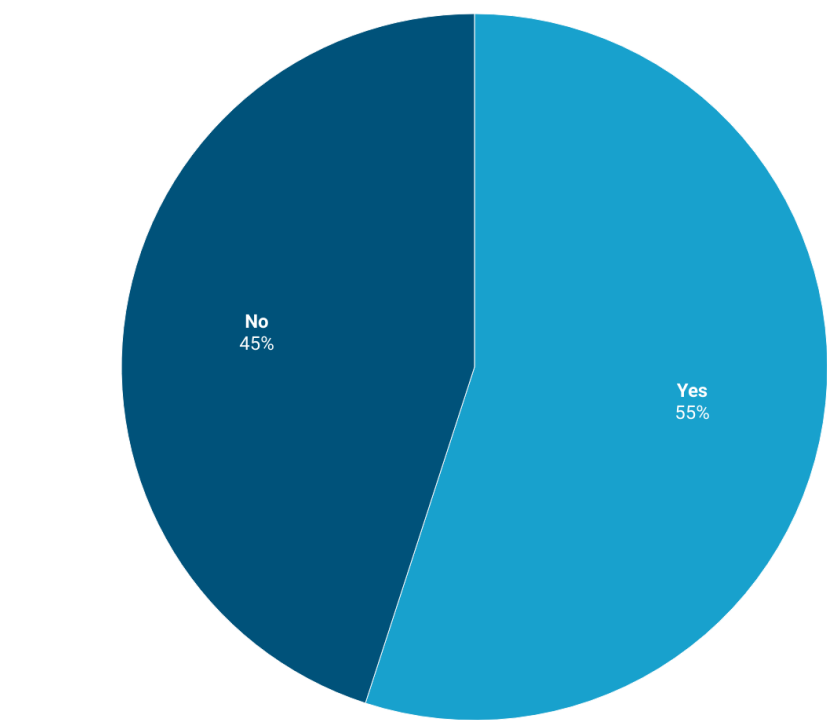


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Graph 15 Attention Paid to Podcast Advertisements by Parasocial Relationship Scale Score

A slight majority of respondents stated that they bought something from a podcast advertisement besides BetterHelp, as represented in Graph 16. Those with the highest parasocial relationship scale score, 4.1-5.0, overwhelmingly reported buying something from a podcast advertisement other than BetterHelp.

Have you bought something from a podcast ad besides BetterHelp?

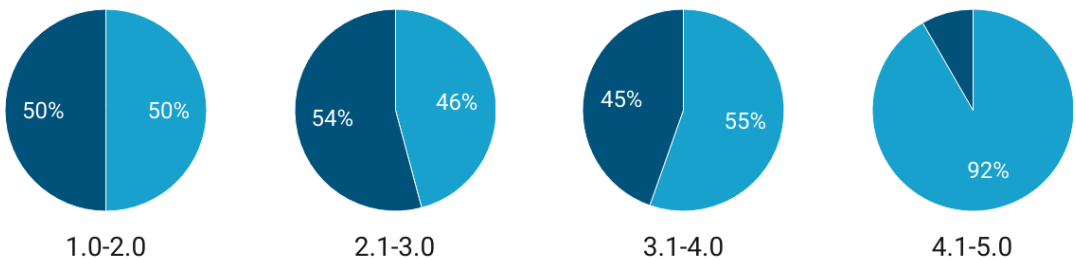


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Graph 16 Whether respondents bought something advertised on a podcast besides BetterHelp

Prior purchases from a podcast ad other than BetterHelp by parasocial relationship score

■ Yes ■ No



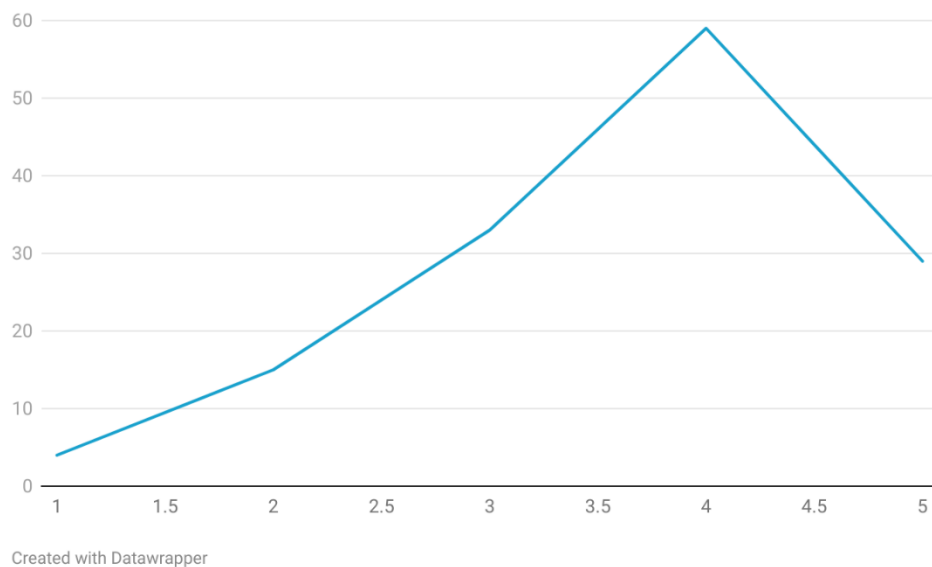
Created with Datawrapper

Graph 17 Whether respondents bought something advertised on a podcast besides BetterHelp by parasocial relationship score

5.2.5 BetterHelp Advertisement

Overall, survey respondents seemed to be heavily influenced by the podcast advertisement in their decision to try BetterHelp, with most (62.86%) rating the influence as a four or five, as shown in Graph 18.

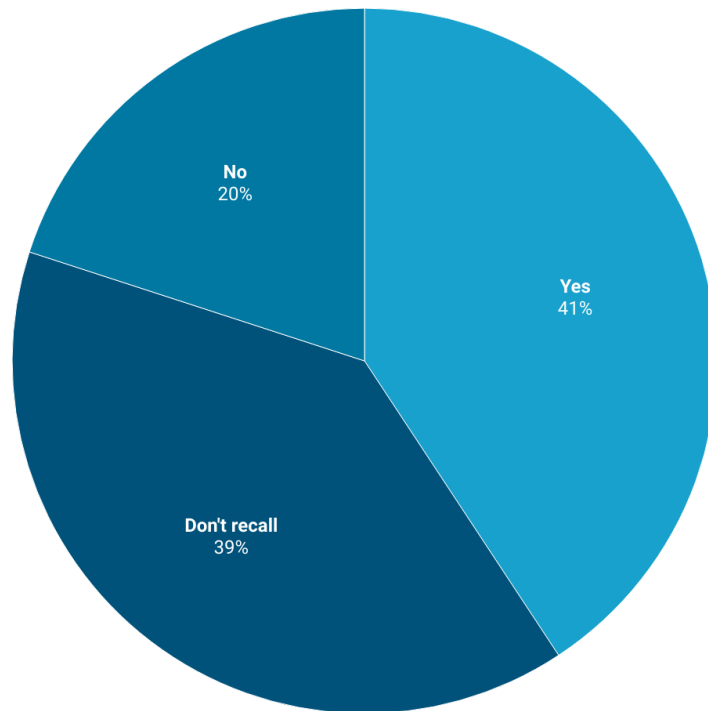
How much the advertisement played into the decision to use BetterHelp (scale of 1 to 5)



Graph 18 Advertisement influence on the decision to use BetterHelp

When asked whether the podcaster used their testimony of therapy as part of their BetterHelp advertisement, a small majority (41%) said they did, while 39% said they could not recall, as represented in Graph 19. The highest number of respondents did not remember whether their host used BetterHelp or a different type of therapy, as seen in Graph 20. Those who could remember recalled their host using BetterHelp.

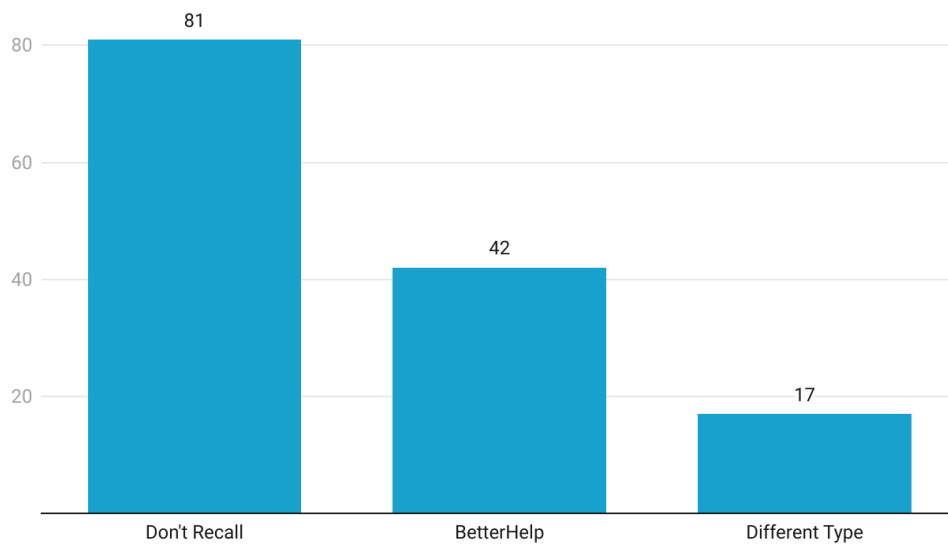
Host's personal experience with therapy in BetterHelp ads



Created with Datawrapper

Graph 19 Whether a host used their own testimonial of therapy in a BetterHelp ad

If the host testimony was in reference to BetterHelp or a different type of therapy

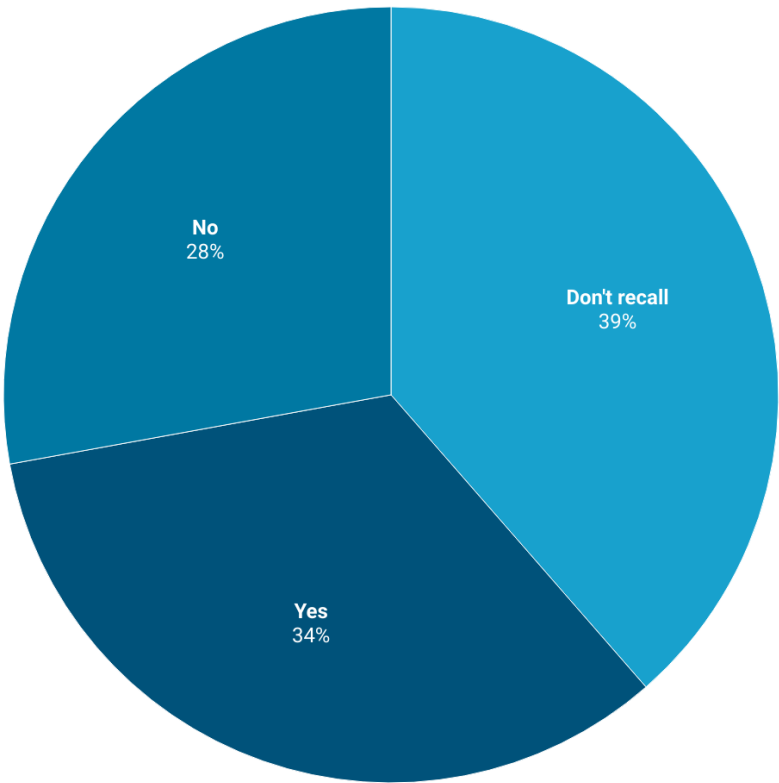


Created with Datawrapper

Graph 20 Whether the host’s testimony was in reference to BetterHelp or a different type of therapy

While most could not remember whether that testimony impacted their decision to try the company, a majority of those who could remember (34%) said that it did, while 28% said it did not, as seen in Graph 21. As shown in Graph 22, those who recalled the podcast host using BetterHelp as opposed to another type of therapy reported being more likely to have been impacted in their decision to use BetterHelp than those who heard testimony about another type of therapy. In total 76% of those whose podcast host used BetterHelp said that testimony impacted their decision to try BetterHelp, while only 18% said the testimony regarding different types of therapy impacted their decision.

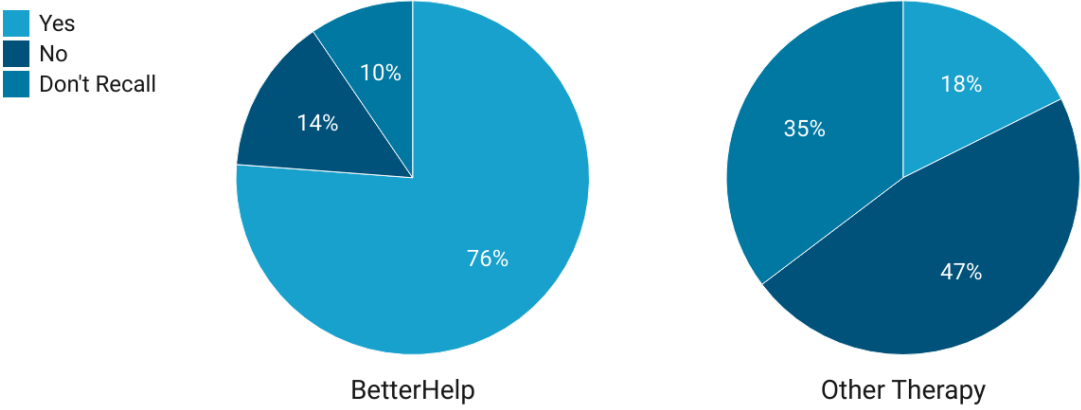
Impact of host testimony on using BetterHelp



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Graph 21 If the host’s testimony of therapy influenced a person’s decision to use BetterHelp

The impact of the host's testimony based on whether they used BetterHelp or another type of therapy.

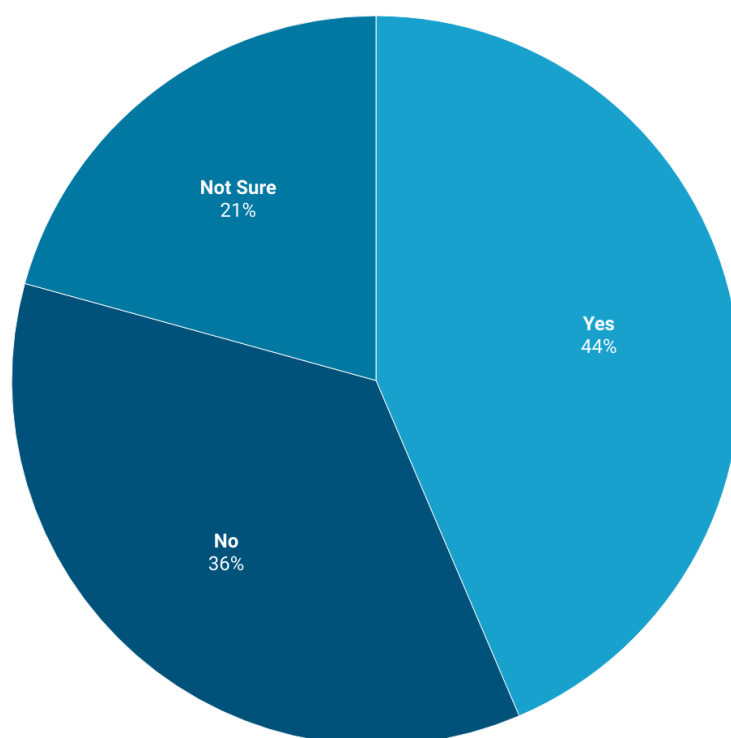


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Graph 22 Impact of host testimony based on whether or not they used BetterHelp

As seen in Graph 23, a majority of the respondents did feel that BetterHelp was advertised fairly on the podcasts they listened to with 44%. The remaining 56% were either not sure (21%) or did not believe the advertising methods were fair (36%).

Whether or not participant's believe BetterHelp was fairly advertised to them



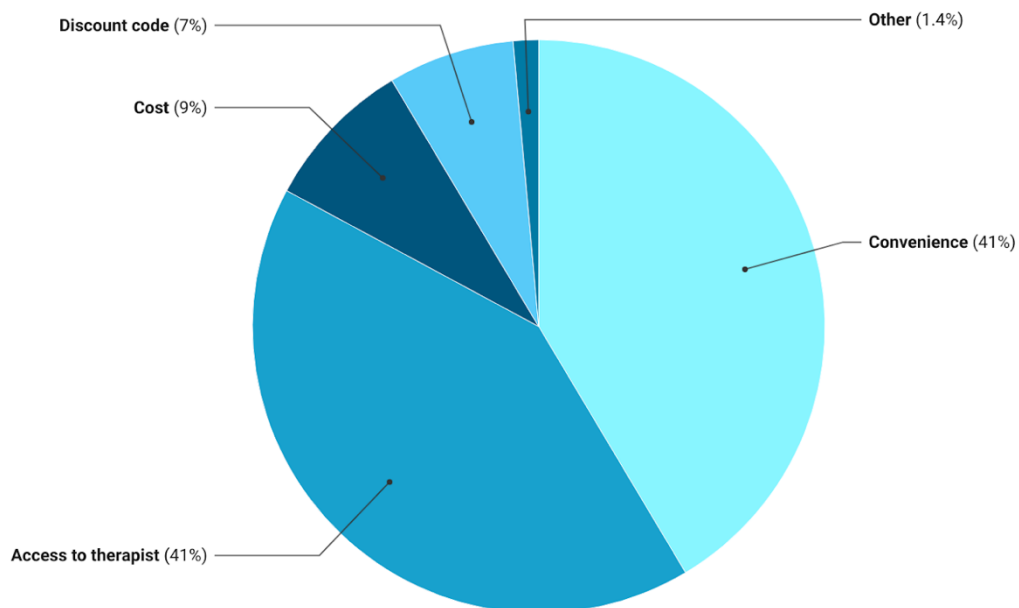
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Graph 23 Perceptions of the fairness of BetterHelp's advertising methods.

5.2.6 Experience with BetterHelp

As shown in Graph 24, respondents were evenly split (41% each) between using BetterHelp due to convenience or access to therapists. The least common reason for using the company was having a discount code from the podcast (7%).

Reasons for trying BetterHelp

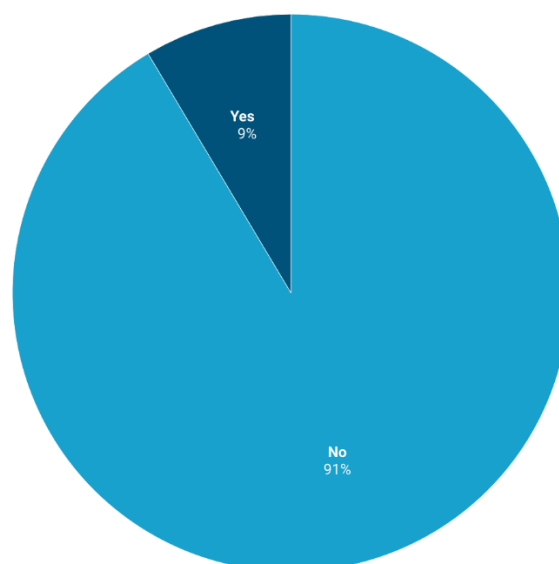


Other includes: purely from podcast advertisements and the ability to switch therapists easily
Created with Datawrapper

Graph 24: Reasons for trying BetterHelp

A majority (91%) of respondents were not currently using BetterHelp, as represented in Graph 25. As seen in Graph 26 most people used the company for less than three months.

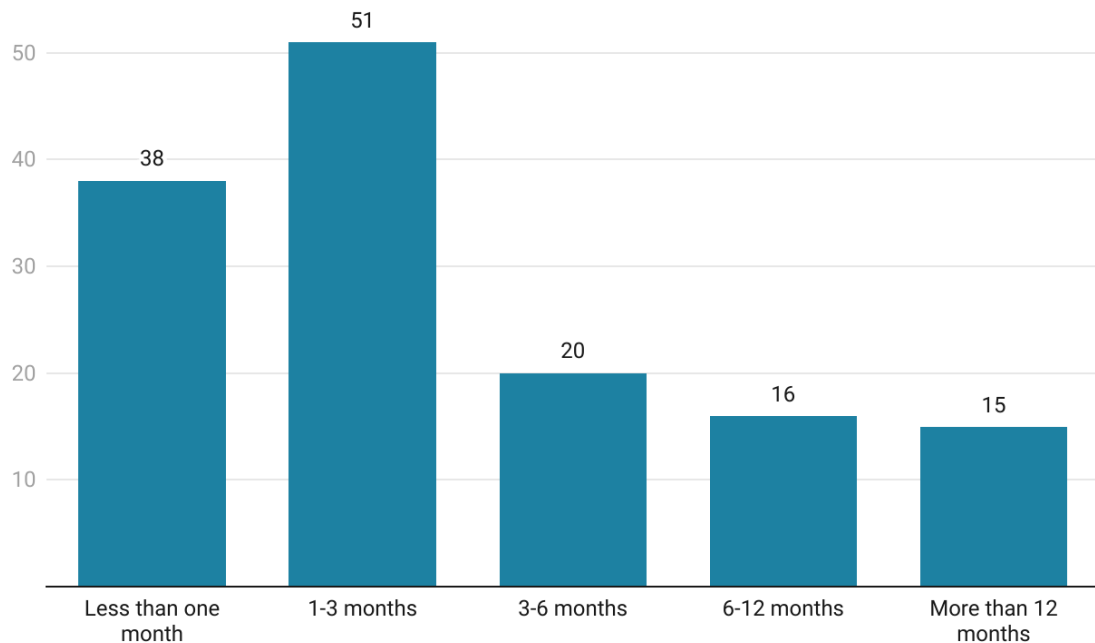
Current BetterHelp usage



Created with Datawrapper

Graph 25: If a respondent is still using BetterHelp

Length of BetterHelp usage

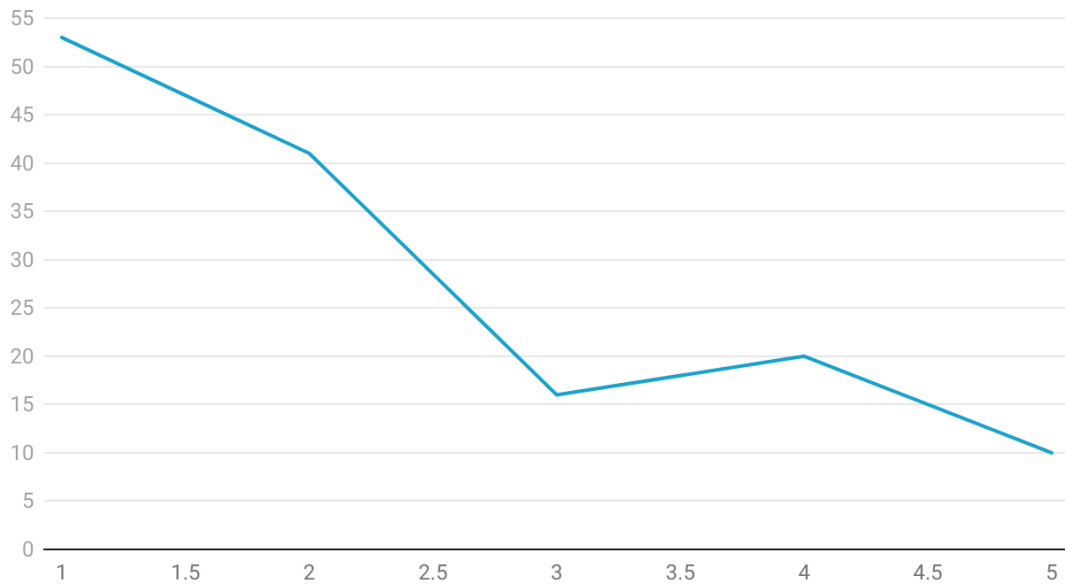


Created with Datawrapper

Graph 26: How long respondents used BetterHelp for

Graph 27 shows that when rating their time with BetterHelp on a scale of one to five (with one being the lowest), the most common answer was one with 53 respondents (37.9%), followed by two with 41 respondents (21.3%). The score with the least number of respondents was five with only 10 individuals (14%).

Experience with BetterHelp on a Scale of 1 to 5



Created with Datawrapper

Graph 27: Experience with BetterHelp

5.3 Open-Answer Question Results

In total, 67 survey respondents left comments that focused on BetterHelp specifically at the end of the survey in response to a “Is there anything else you’d like to add?” question. Those responses were categorized based on whether the person had a positive experience with BetterHelp, a negative experience, or a neutral experience or did not mention the experience, instead commenting on the advertising methods. After sorting the comments into the categories above, nine were classified as positive, 33 as negative, 19 as neutral, and six commented solely on the advertising.

5.3.1 Positive Experiences

Those who had positive experiences praised the company’s convenience, and ability to use it as an entry point into therapy, or their therapist.

1.) Convenience

Half of the positive reviews mentioned the convenience of using BetterHelp, and one individual noted that the company's ease of use helped them feel comfortable using therapy and avoid stigma.

“At the time of trying it, I had been considering therapy for years but the stigma of it made me ashamed and embarrassed. A big reason I tried it after learning about it from a podcast is the convenience of using BetterHelp in my own time without anyone knowing I was going to therapy” (Appendix E: Response 12)

Another response indicated the flexibility of using the company as a major positive, as their schedule demands moving between different American states.

“I love the schedule flexibility with BetterHelp. I have taken sessions in parking lots when I get stuck in traffic. With horse shows, I have to bounce between Ohio and Florida for two months of the year and Kentucky for the summer. I never miss a week because sessions are done remotely” (Appendix E: Response 56).

2.) Entry point to therapy

A few respondents said that BetterHelp was a helpful starting point in their journey to better mental health. One person said that the experience with BetterHelp was positive, but they were now more interested in moving to in-person.

I had a good first-time experience with (BetterHelp) and it has been my only therapist to date. However, after around two years of doing therapy online, I am looking to move to a new therapist in person. But hearing podcast hosts talk about their personal experiences with therapy motivated me to sign up for it after thinking about it for many months and I thought (BetterHelp) was a great entry to it” (Appendix E: Response 5).

3.) Good Therapists

A bit over half of the positive statements referred to working with a good therapist. One individual, in particular, noted how much her therapist had helped her with moving forward with her mental health.

“I really liked my therapist, she helped me through a really hard time and helped me to go to my doctor and get the antidepressants I clearly needed. I live in a rural area and I did BetterHelp during COVID when you couldn’t go in person anyway, but I still can’t find any therapists anywhere near me that are in my network” (Appendix E: Response 30).

Further, one individual stated that when recommending BetterHelp, he makes sure to mention the importance of finding the right therapist. For him, that was a therapist who offered Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). “When I suggest BetterHelp I’m specific about finding the right therapist. Mine was great after saying no to a few. He practiced CBT and that’s what I was looking for” (Appendix E: Response 67).

5.3.2 Neutral Experiences

Those whose experiences were neither positive nor negative stated they either experienced variance in their treatment or had a simply neutral experience.

1.) Treatment Variance

A few responses recalled a change in their experience with BetterHelp. One individual said, “BetterHelp was working at first but started to (be) very impersonal and too businesslike for my comfort” (Appendix E: Response 57).

Another individual expressed satisfaction with their therapist when they had sessions but mentioned that sessions were regularly not taking place.

“The therapy was wonderful when it happened, but my therapist canceled many sessions due to various issues: being sick, emergency surgery, issues with the BetterHelp platform not working and her being on vacation) It's too bad as I would like to talk to somebody, and I fight against continual thoughts that people don't hear me and/or ignore me. I am more depressed than when I started therapy, and this has reaffirmed my isolationist thinking” (Appendix E: Response 3).

2.) Neutral Experience

A few respondents felt they had a truly middle-ground experience with BetterHelp. One respondent said “I had a truly neutral experience with BetterHelp. I moved to a new city and thought it would be easier than finding a therapist in person. I found it to be much less helpful than in-person therapy” (Appendix E: Response 38).

5.3.3 Negative Experiences

Respondents whose experiences were strictly negative primarily fit into three categories: those who had a poor experience with their therapist(s), those who had a bad encounter or opinion of the company, or those who thought it was too expensive

1.) Bad Therapy

One individual, in explaining her time at BetterHelp said “My therapist was inattentive, rushed me, and dismissed a lot of my concerns. I contribute some of this to a bad therapist and some of this to the platform she was on” (Appendix E: Response 15).

Another respondent commented on her fear that, after her poor experience with BetterHelp, the company had the potential to do more harm than good.

“I paid for 6 months in advance and after my third awful therapist, I gave up after a few weeks. I wasn’t expecting best-in-class but the incompetence was astounding and I have to imagine this company has harmed many people who needed help and wound up with unskilled therapists who do little more than share easily Googleable info” (Appendix E: Response 54).

The above quotation was not the only individual who feared that BetterHelp would negatively impact its users.

“I’ve always been a huge proponent of therapy as suicide runs in my family, when I first heard about better help I was excited because I had just lost my health insurance and couldn’t afford my regular therapist. It was such a horrible experience.... I worried about people who this was their first experience with therapy. I knew how help(ful) good therapy is and just kept thinking if this is what people think all therapy is a lot of folks who need help won’t get it” (Appendix E: Response 26).

2.) Negative Opinion of the Company

Several respondents simply stated that they did not approve of BetterHelp’s existence or practices, such as one who wrote “BetterHelp is terrible and should not exist. This is my professional opinion as a therapist” (open response 16). Others said the company was “an awful organization” or “a weird predatory company” (Appendix E: Responses 32 and 17).

3.) Expensive

A few negative comments focused solely on the cost of BetterHelp. One individual commented, "I sought out BetterHelp because I thought it would be an affordable option for someone without insurance, but it turned out to be way out of my budget” (Appendix E: Response 65). Another noted that the care wasn’t up to par, and the service was too expensive, commenting “The cost is way too high. Therapists seem to treat it like a side gig rather than a real job helping people who actually need the help” (Appendix E: Response 31).

5.3.4 Advertisements

A total of 27 of the answers commented on the podcast advertising of BetterHelp. Of those that mentioned advertisements, eight were negative experiences, four were positive, nine were neutral, and six did not mention their opinions of BetterHelp’s services. Responses regarding BetterHelp’s advertising typically fit into the following categories:

repetition/awareness, an understanding that advertisements are not endorsements, questioning the validity of the advertisements, host testimony, or the use of a discount code.

1.) Repetition/awareness

One individual highlighted her opinion that the advertisements only helped in the decision to use BetterHelp due to putting it on her radar, stating “I’d say the podcast ads were key to my AWARENESS of the existence of BetterHelp but not hugely influential in my choice to try it beyond that” (Appendix E: Response 66).

Another person stated the repetition itself also played a role in the decision to use the company “The testimony of the podcaster didn’t influence me to join. It more pushed me to look into it myself after hearing it in advertisements multiple times” (Appendix E: Response 8).

The above take was repeated by a respondent who commented that life circumstances along with the repeated advertisements is what made her try BetterHelp, saying

“I think the fact that the ad was on so many of the podcasts I listened to is what led me to eventually give it a try when I was struggling to find a therapist with openings. Not any personal podcaster testimony” (Appendix E: Response 19).

2.) Comments on advertisements not being endorsements

In line with the understanding of the nature of advertisements, one respondent who discussed a poor experience with BetterHelp said that he doesn’t blame the podcast *Race Chaser* for the experience.

“I don’t blame the Race Chaser podcast that (it) introduced me to Betterhelp and gave me a discount code. I continue to listen to them. I have (listened to) numerous podcasts daily for over 6 years and have probably only bought 5 or 6 things because of the ads. I realize it is just an advertisement and it is (a) way for them to make money” (Appendix E: Response 3).

Another respondent mentioned the use of humor in advertisements as a way to emphasize the fact that advertisements are not necessarily personal endorsements by hosts.

“I think important context is that the podcasts I listed are often “breaking the fourth wall” by speaking openly about having to record the ads and being outrageous/sarcastic in the ad recordings. I’m not saying this applies to BetterHelp, but it applies to how listeners or viewers may perceive the validity of their promotions, in general” (Appendix E: Response 13).

3.) Questioning advertisement validity

A few survey respondents reflected a sense of mistrust towards BetterHelp advertisements, with one individual stating “I feel like the podcasts saying they use (BetterHelp) lie” (Appendix E: Response 59).

Another respondent commented specifically on the survey question asking whether the testimony by a podcast host was regarding BetterHelp or a different type of therapy, stating “Re: did the host use BetterHelp? It’s written to sound as if they did. But then you hear the exact same script from different podcasters so, clearly, it’s not their actual testimonial” (Appendix E: Response 18).

4.) Host testimonials

A small number of comments mentioned the host’s testimony as the reason they tried the company, with one saying "Hearing podcast hosts talk about their personal experiences with therapy definitely motivated me to sign up for it after thinking about it for many months" (Appendix E: Response 5) and another stating “I felt comfortable using better help the first time, in part, because of testimony from hosts I like” (Appendix E: Response 55).

5.) Referral code

The referral codes offered to listeners were a major player in some respondents’ decision to use BetterHelp. One stated, “The coupon code is what led me to finally use BetterHelp instead of finding a local therapist” (open response 49). Another person highlighted both the convenience of the company and the ability to receive a discount on therapy as the major factors, saying “I only used BetterHelp because I needed remote therapy, and it was an easy option with a podcast discount code” (Appendix E: Response 53).

6. Discussion

Two research questions drove this study: 1.) In what ways do parasocial relationships influence a person’s decision to use BetterHelp? (RQ1). And 2.) What are the ethical implications of using parasocial relationships between podcast hosts and listeners to motivate listeners to try BetterHelp? (RQ2). To answer the research questions, this study

employed a mixed-methods research design using semi-structured interviews, a wider-reaching survey of 140 respondents, and content analysis of answers to an open-ended question at the end of the survey. This chapter will relate the findings of the study to the literature review presented at the beginning of this paper.

Parasocial relationships between audience members and podcast hosts were demonstrated in this study. As seen in Graph 6, the average parasocial relationship score for survey respondents was 3.26 – showing that most respondents had at least a few characteristics indicative of a parasocial relationship. According to Scherer et al. (2021), parasocial relationships are consciously formed like forming actual relationships, such as spending time with the content. This effort was reflected in the study through Interview Subject Five, who stated podcasts formed a near-constant presence in her life.¹³ Further, Graph 7 shows that most respondents listened to podcasts at least daily.

Interview subjects expressed a preference for podcasts that employ conversational tones. Interview Subject Five, for example, noted that she prefers podcasts focusing on conversations.¹⁴ Interview Subject Ten even said that the conversational aspect of podcasts increases her sense of trust and connection with the host.¹⁵ Conversational tones are an especially apt way to form parasocial relationships and are widely used in podcasting (Shah et al., 2023; Adler Berg, 2023). Soto-Vásquez et al. (2022) back up that claim, saying that listeners view hosts as conversational partners instead of random entertainers.

The perceived authenticity of podcasters was extremely pertinent in this study. This authenticity leads to long-term, committed, trusting relationships between audiences and influencers (Nichols & Shapiro, 2023). Half the interview participants mentioned this

¹³ “But I listen all the time. I’ll listen when I’m getting ready in the morning. I’ll listen when I’m driving. I’ll listen when I’m cleaning. Pretty much any time I have free time, I’m listening to a podcast over music” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Five).

¹⁴ “I really can’t do a podcast that is like, just one person talking. I lose (focus)...And then yeah, I like humor. I like funny. I like the conversation, but I mean, I also obviously find all the topics very interesting as well” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Five).

¹⁵ “The in-depth, conversational feel of podcasts allows for more detailed explanations and personal anecdotes, which helped me feel a stronger sense of trust and connection with the hosts” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Ten).

perception, describing their favorite podcasters as “real”¹⁶ or “down-to-earth.”¹⁷ Authenticity comes with self-disclosure by influencers, which can further support the development of parasocial relationships (Kim & Song, 2016). Podcasting is especially apt for this disclosure due to the feeling of anonymity and the casual nature of the medium (Adler Berg, 2023; Clarke & Bjork, 2023). Interview Subject Two exemplified this idea, noting how she could relate to the hosts of the podcast *Beach too Sandy, Water too Wet*, and their self-disclosure of anxiety.¹⁸

Survey respondents were likelier to listen to podcasts for the content than the hosts, as seen in Graph 12. However, when examining the results further, those with higher parasocial relationship scores are likelier to listen due to the hosts of their favorite podcasts over the content, according to Graph 13. This backs up the claim made by Soto-Vásquez et al. (2022) that some podcast listeners care more for the hosts than the content.

It is also pertinent that those with higher parasocial relationship scores were likelier to pay “a lot” of attention to podcast advertisements, as seen in Graph 15, and had a significantly higher rate of purchasing items from podcasts besides BetterHelp, according to Graph 17. These two findings relate to Wang & Chan-Olmsted’s (2023) conclusion that the personality of the host could matter more than the content of the show when it comes to selling advertisements, and findings by Moe (2021) that there is a connection between parasocial relationships and a desire to purchase advertised products.

According to answers to both the survey and interview questions, host testimony was extremely beneficial in persuading audiences to try BetterHelp. A slight majority of survey respondents stated that their podcast host mentioned their own experience with therapy in an advertisement for BetterHelp, as shown in Graph 19. And Graph 20 shows that 30% said

¹⁶ “I trusted the hosts because they seemed real and down to earth” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Seven)

¹⁷ “She seems really humble and real. It seems like she cares about other people” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Eight)

¹⁸ “I definitely relate to Christine and Alex when they talk about their struggles with like, you know, kind of taking everything personally and just generalized anxiety, some of the things they say I’m like, ‘Oh my gosh, that’s, yeah, that’s exactly how I am’” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Two).

that their host mentioned using BetterHelp. Those who recalled a podcaster testifying about using BetterHelp were significantly more likely to have been impacted by the testimony than those who heard testimony recalling a different type of therapy, according to Graph 22. These findings reflect those of Olivia Simone Reed (2023) who analyzed the impact of influencers' statements about therapy on viewers and found that those who viewed a post about a positive experience were more likely to believe that they would also benefit from it. This impact can also be seen in Interview Subject Eight's recollection of trusting BetterHelp due to her trust in a podcast host,¹⁹ and two comments left at the end of the survey describing the importance of the testimony in their decisions.²⁰ The benefits of these testimonies also back up Bersch's (2021) claim that host-read advertisements are extremely successful due to the trust between hosts and listeners.

Despite the success of the testimonies, a few interview subjects and survey respondents questioned whether podcast hosts used BetterHelp, such as Interview Subject Five who noted that she believed the hosts go to therapy but may not use BetterHelp.²¹ Another respondent simply stated that the podcast hosts advertising BetterHelp are lying about using the company.²²

The influence that testimonies had over the research participants can be explained by the persuasion knowledge model and the schema theory (Brinson et al., 2023; Hoofnagle and Meleshinsky, 2015). The persuasion knowledge model refers to a person's ability to become accustomed to advertising methods and thus be able to differentiate between advertisements and genuine content, while the schema theory when applied to advertisements theorizes that individuals develop "schemas" to recognize when they are being advertised to (Brinson et al., 2023; Hoofnagle and Meleshinsky, 2015). For example, some respondents questioned or did not believe in the authenticity of podcast advertisements due to having heard multiple

¹⁹ She described exactly what it was and how it worked for her. Because I trusted her, I believed what she said, and I trusted the product" (Appendix D: Interview Subject Eight).

²⁰ "Hearing podcast hosts talk about their personal experiences with therapy definitely motivated me to sign up for it after thinking about it for many months" (Appendix E: Response 5) and another stated "I felt comfortable using better help the first time, in part, because of testimony from hosts I like" (Appendix E: Response 55).

²¹ "I do truly wonder if any of them actually use it. I mean, I think every podcast host that I listened to probably goes to therapy, but do I think that they're using BetterHelp? I don't know" (Appendix D: Interview Subject Five).

²² "I feel like the podcasts saying they use (BetterHelp) lie" (Appendix E: Response 59).

BetterHelp advertisements. Interview Subject Five,²³ noted that she believed the advertisements were scripted based on hearing advertisements for BetterHelp from different shows. Further, Response 18 questioned the legitimacy of the testimonies because they had heard the same testimony from multiple shows.²⁴ According to the Schema Theory, those who have heard multiple advertisements for BetterHelp across different shows are likelier to develop schemas to recognize the advertisements than those who are not familiar with BetterHelp advertisements (Hoofnagle and Meleshinsky, 2015).

One respondent mentioned the fact that some podcasters are extremely obvious when recording advertisements, whether by being “outrageous” or “sarcastic” in the advertisements.²⁵ This, according to the respondent could affect how valid advertisements seem to listeners. It is also representative of the impact of insult advertising. Insult advertising involves mocking or making fun of advertised products during an ad read (Snyder & Cistulli, 2023). Insult advertising can increase trust between listeners and hosts but does not change podcaster credibility or brand perception. These types of advertisements do, however, decrease purchase intention (Snyder & Cistulli, 2023).

Although the repetition of advertisements could make testimony less effective, it appeared to have been a motivating factor in a few people’s decision to use BetterHelp. Both Interview Subjects Four²⁶ and Five²⁷ denied being moved to try BetterHelp due to their parasocial relationships, rather they acknowledged the possible impact of hearing about the company consistently influencing their decision to try it. Additionally, three respondents echoed that

²³ I mean, I obviously they're ads, and they're scripted and you can tell that they are especially when each of your podcasts say pretty much the exact same thing. When I first started listening, I was excited because (it) felt like (the hosts) truly promoted brands and companies and things like that. I don't feel that way anymore. I feel like they're promoting McDonald's and crap” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Five).

²⁴ “Re: did the host use BetterHelp? It’s written to sound as if they did. But then you hear the exact same script from different podcasters so, clearly, it’s not their actual testimonial” (Appendix E: Response 18).

²⁵ “I think important context is that the podcasts I listed are often “breaking the fourth wall” by speaking openly about having to record the ads and being outrageous/sarcastic in the ad recordings” (Appendix E: Response 13).

²⁶ “I think (advertisements) definitely put (BetterHelp) on my radar at the very least. But you know, nine times out of 10 I fast forward through the advertisements, but you still kind of hear those well ‘BetterHelp, BetterHelp’ and so I think it did definitely, at least somewhat, influenced me to start using that program” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Four).

²⁷ “I do feel like the fact that all of my podcasts promoted BetterHelp definitely made me more inclined to try it” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Five).

sentiment.²⁸ Hearing about the company from multiple shows makes sense because BetterHelp has been the biggest podcast advertiser for years (Magellan AI, 2023).

The results of this study echo previous findings about what draws people to use BetterHelp. As seen in Graph 24, most survey respondents chose BetterHelp due to the convenience and the ability to access a therapist. This reflects the difficulty of finding a therapist within the United States, where there are a reported 350 individuals for every qualified therapist, and most Americans live in areas suffering from a shortage of mental health providers (Reinert et al., 2022; Modi et al., 2022). The ability to conveniently access a therapist was reflected by Interview Subjects Five²⁹ and Nine,³⁰ and several survey respondents, including Respondent 56.³¹

Experiences with BetterHelp were overwhelmingly negative, according to survey respondents. Graph 27, which shows how respondents rated their experiences with the company on a scale of one to five, shows that the most common answer was a one, followed by a two. Further, Graph 25 shows that a significant majority were no longer using BetterHelp. Individuals involved in the study were unlikely to use BetterHelp for more than six months, with survey respondents using the company for zero to three months, as seen in Graph 26, and interview respondents using it for one to six months.

Interviews further reflected on having a negative experience with the company, such as Interview Subject One³² who felt like her therapist was only providing her with “homework” and making her more stressed. This experience is reflected in Fischer

²⁸1.) “I’d say the podcast ads were key to my AWARENESS of the existence of BetterHelp but not hugely influential in my choice to try it beyond that,” (Appendix E: Response 66). 2.) “The testimony of the podcaster didn’t influence me to join. It more pushed me to look into it myself after hearing it in advertisements multiple times” (Appendix E: Response 8). 3.) “I think the fact that the ad was on so many of the podcasts I listened to is what led me to eventually give it a try when I was struggling to find a therapist with openings. Not any personal podcaster testimony” (Appendix E: Response 19).

²⁹ “A therapist is a therapist you can find one in person or online, but I think for me it was the easiness and being able to easily schedule it and you know jump on the computer real quick and do a video call versus having to go to an office” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Five).

³⁰ “And then I’ve done some things virtually just because I have a pretty complicated schedule. So, I still primarily see her over FaceTime. But I’ve seen her in person, in the past year I want to say like, four or five times” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Nine).

³¹ “I love the schedule flexibility with BetterHelp. I have taken sessions in parking lots when I get stuck in traffic.... I never miss a week because sessions are done remotely” (Appendix E: Response 56).

³² “It felt like a waste of money... It felt like he was providing pamphlets for anything and everything I had to say which like just led for me to do homework and read those pages” (Appendix D: Interview Subject One).

(2021) explaining the use of “copy-and-paste” responses to client questions. A significant number of interviews described a more neutral experience with the company, primarily due to an inability to find a good fit, such as Interview Subject Seven.³³ The reasoning for this could be influenced by how fast BetterHelp grew and the inability to keep up with “various regulatory and ethical considerations” (Joe et al, 2023, p. 1). Those with a positive view of BetterHelp stuck with the program for longer, with two spending multiple years with the same person. For example, Interview Subject Six³⁴ said that she liked her therapist so much she did not want to know about the scandal when the company was exposed for selling patient data.

Although the experience with BetterHelp was overwhelmingly negative, most respondents feel that the company was fairly advertised to them, as seen in Graph 23. This perceived fairness is echoed in both open-ended responses and interviews, with one respondent stating that he had no issue with the podcast for advertising BetterHelp, as he knew it was just a way for the show to make money.³⁵ Interview subjects expressed differing levels of fairness in their assessment. For example, Interview Subject Three stated that the company was as easy to use as advertised, but the quality of the service was not up to par.³⁶

A few survey respondents expressed concern about the company's continued existence, with one individual fearful that those who need mental health support would be less likely to try therapy again after using BetterHelp.³⁷ Another respondent echoed this

³³ “I think it’s hard to find like a therapist that is good. I tried a few different ones and never quite like clicked with them” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Seven).

³⁴ “I kind of didn't want to know, because I really enjoy (BetterHelp) and I was going to keep using (BetterHelp). It was something along the lines of like sharing data with other advertisers or something, something they should not have been doing. Not anything that to me means enough for me to let go of this counselor that I really liked so much” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Six).

³⁵ “I don't blame the Race Chaser podcast that (it) introduced me to Betterhelp and gave me a discount code. I continue to listen to them. I have (listened to) numerous podcasts daily for over 6 years and have probably only bought 5 or 6 things because of the ads. I realize it is just an advertisement and it is (a) way for them to make money” (Appendix E: Response 3).

³⁶ “I guess yes and no... The ease of it. I think yes. It is very easy, things like that. I think all the help that it gives is inaccurate.... It's not as good as it's cracked up to be, and (after) hearing other people's real testimony, people who have been through (BetterHelp). I know that's not true now. And it wasn't like this platform that it wanted to be” (Appendix D: Interview Subject Three).

³⁷ “I worried about people who this was their first experience with therapy. I knew how help(ful) good therapy is and just kept thinking if this is what people think all therapy is a lot of folks who need help won't get it” (Appendix E: Response 26).

idea and assumed that there were people harmed by BetterHelp who needed good mental health support.³⁸

It is possible to address the two research questions using the above information. For RQ1, this study found that parasocial relationships between podcast hosts and listeners are cultivated through conversational tones, perceived authenticity, and listeners consistently engaging with the content. These relationships contributed to listeners trusting podcast hosts and their recommendations/advertisements of BetterHelp, especially when hosts directly testified about their own experience with the company.

In answering RQ2, the clearest ethical implication is the confusion between content and advertisement. Principle Three of the Institute for Advertising Ethics states that “advertisers should clearly distinguish advertising, public relations, and corporate communications from news and editorial content and entertainment” (IAE, 2022, p. 1). Several study participants seemed to view the BetterHelp advertisements as recommendations instead of paid ads. This issue directly relates to the schema theory, where some listeners lack the schemas to differentiate content from ads, as podcast advertising is relatively new (Hoofnagle and Meleshinsky, 2015). Given this confusion, the overwhelmingly negative opinions of BetterHelp are concerning, because individuals may be unfairly led to try an unhelpful company by someone they trust.

As with any study, this one has its limitations. First, the study would have benefited from a larger sample survey sample size. Unfortunately, a larger sample size was not attained due to a lack of financing for any additional responses and a need to close the survey in the interest of time. Secondly, longer and more in-depth interviews could have taken place to form a better basis for the survey. Interviews were seriously complicated by the time difference between Portugal, where the researcher resided at the time of conducting the interviews, and the United States, where most interviewees lived.

³⁸ “I have to imagine this company has harmed many people who needed help and wound up with unskilled therapists who do little more than share easily Googleable info” (Appendix E: Response 54).

Many interviews took place before the survey was created and the interview responses were used in building it; However, it would have been beneficial to conduct the interview analysis before building the survey. By completing the analysis of the interviews before the survey, a more comprehensive, well-rounded, and clear survey could have taken place.

Despite these limitations, this study contributed valuable information to the field of podcast advertising. In particular, understanding how parasocial relationships between hosts and listeners impact podcast advertisements. Further, this study explored the ethical implications of leveraging these advertisements to sell cybertherapy platforms to their listeners.

Future studies should focus on how podcasters can ensure their listeners can differentiate between advertisements and content. And further, address the responsibilities of podcasters when recording advertisements. This could be by ensuring the products or services they endorse are credible, well-regulated, and ethical. A code of ethics for podcasters who advertise and endorse products would also be beneficial.

Conclusion

This study investigated the ethical implications of podcast advertisements for cybertherapy applications. The research aimed to understand these implications using a mixed-methods approach employing semi-structured interviews, a survey, and content analysis of open-response questions. In particular, this study focused on the role that parasocial relationships between podcasters and audience members play in advertisements for BetterHelp, and the ethical effects of leveraging those relationships for advertisements.

The research found a clear connection between stronger parasocial relationships and the decision to use BetterHelp. It echoed previous findings by Moe (2021) that parasocial relationships increase interest in advertised products. Listeners displayed a sense of trust towards podcasters, viewing their advertisements as a sort of recommendation. This sense of trust is influenced by the perceived authenticity of podcasters. That is, listeners see podcasters as being real and authentic, as explained by Nichols & Shapiro (2023).

Authenticity is reflected in advertisements in that listeners believe podcasters are authentic in approving of the products they advertise.

The clearest explanation for the phenomenon of listeners viewing podcast advertisements as genuine endorsements is the schema theory. This theory posits that individuals develop schemas to differentiate advertisements from content (Hoofnagle and Meleshinsky, 2015). As people become accustomed to new forms of advertising, they begin to adapt and can identify when they are being advertised. An inability to distinguish between advertisements and content raises ethical issues, as listeners may be blindly following what they believe are recommendations (IAE, 2022). This inability is especially concerning when advertising companies that deal with serious matters, such as cybertherapy platforms. A significant majority of survey respondents in this study had a negative experience with BetterHelp, bringing possible ethical issues to these advertisements.

Despite the important information gleaned from this study, there are limitations. In particular, this study would benefit from additional survey recipients and by analyzing the interviews before curating the survey. These limitations, however, do not diminish the fact that this study brings valuable knowledge to the understanding of how podcast advertising benefits from parasocial relationships. And further, it opens up the conversation about using these relationships to advertise cybertherapy platforms, such as BetterHelp. Future studies should explore this deeper and move to understand how podcasters can bring a more ethical approach to advertising and, what is the role of ethical and legal considerations in regulatory frameworks.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Interview Script

Concept	Author(s)	Questions
Podcasts	Berry, 2006 Berry, 2015 Rime et al., 2022 Balanuta, 2021 Lin & Huang, 2023	1. What are your podcast listening habits (approximately how many shows, how often)? 2. How do you consume podcasts (commuting, audio, video, etc)? 3. Which show was the one that piqued your interest in BetterHelp? 4. What draws you to this show?
Parasocial Relationships	Lin & Huang, 2023 Horton & Wohl 1956 Hartmann et al., 2008 Moe, 2021	Thinking about the hosts of your favorite show, could you please answer the following 14 questions on a five-point scale with one being nonapplicable and five being very applicable? 1. I think my favorite podcast host(s) is like an old friend 2. My favorite podcast host makes me feel as comfortable as when I am with friends. 3. I miss my favorite podcast host(s) if they do not release an episode for a long time. 4. I think about my favorite podcast host(s) even when I am not listening to him/her/them. 5. I feel that I know my favorite podcast host(s) very well. 6. I try to imagine what my favorite podcast host(s) thinks about an episode (or certain topic) 7. Podcast episodes/interviews show me what my favorite podcast host(s) is like 8. I find my favorite podcast host(s) to be likable. 9. I mostly agree with the actions/opinions of my favorite podcast host(s). 10. If there were a story about my favorite podcast host in a newspaper/online article/ on TV, I would read or watch it.

		11. I would like to meet my favorite podcast host(s) in person. 12. I admire my favorite podcast host(s) for his/her/their achievements. 13. I look forward to the next episode released by my favorite podcaster(s). 14. I trust the products my favorite podcaster(s) recommends.
BetterHelp	Darnell et al., 2022	1. How long did you use BetterHelp (and are you still using it now?) 2. What type of therapy did you use? (talk, text, both, etc) 3. What motivated you to try it? 4. Could you describe your experience using BetterHelp? 5. Was the podcast host(s) testimony of BetterHelp a factor in your decision to use the company? 6. Do you feel that the company was fairly advertised to you? Why, or why not?

Appendix B: Survey Structure

Section	Question	Answer type
Part 1: screening (if no on any of these, survey does not continue)		
	Are you a resident or national of the United States?	Yes/No
	Are you over the age of 18?	Yes/No
	Have you tried BetterHelp?	Yes/No
	Were you motivated to try BetterHelp because of an advertisement on a podcast?	Yes/No
Part 2: demographics		
	How old are you?	a. 18-24; b. 25-29; c. 30-34; d. 35-39; e. 40-44; f. 45+
	What is your gender identity?	a. man; b. women; c. nonbinary; d other
	What is your occupation?	open answer
	What is your education level?	a. High school diploma; b. Some College; c. Associate's Degree; d.

		Bachelor's Degree; e. Master's Degree; f. Doctorate
	What is your income level?	a. Less than \$10,000 per year; b. \$10 000 to \$24 999; c. \$25 000 to 49 999; d. \$50 000 to 74 999; e. \$75 000 to 99 999; f. \$100 000 to 149 999; e. Greater than \$150 000; f. Prefer not to answer
	What country do you currently reside in?	Drop-down menu
	How would you classify the area in which you live?	a. Suburban; b. Urban; c. Rural; d. I don't know
	What is your nationality?	Drop-down menu
	What is your race/ethnicity?	a. Hispanic or Latino; b. white; c. Black; d. Indigenous; e. Asian or Pacific Islander; f. Other
Part 3: Podcasts		
	How often do you listen to podcasts?	a. daily; b. more than twice a week; c. weekly; d. more than once a month; e. monthly; f. less than once a month
	What genres of podcasts do you listen to? (answer all that apply)	a. comedy; b. news; c. true crime; d. informational; e. fiction; f. other (please specify)
	What are your favorite podcasts? List up to three	open answer
	What do you like most about those shows	a. the content; b. the hosts; c. other (please specify)
	Do you consume audio or visual podcasts?	a. audio; b. visual; c. both
	Why do you listen to podcasts? (select the most applicable answer)	a. entertainment; b. education; c. to keep up with current events; d. as a distraction; e. other
	In what situations do you listen to podcasts? (select all that apply)	a. while working; b. while commuting; c. while doing household chores; d.

		while relaxing; e. while exercising; f. other (please specify)
Part 4: Podcast Advertisements		
	In your opinion, how much attention do you pay to podcast advertisements?	a. a lot; b. a little; c. not at all; d. I skip them; e. I don't know
	Have you ever bought something from podcast advertisements? (besides BetterHelp)	Yes/No
	If so, how many times have you bought a product after hearing it on a podcast ad?	a. once or twice; b. less than five times; c. more than five times
Part 5: Parasocial Relationships		
	Thinking about the hosts of your favorite show(s), please answer the following 14 questions on a five-point scale with one being nonapplicable and five being very applicable.	
	I think my favorite podcast host(s) is like an old friend	1-5
	My favorite podcast host makes me feel as comfortable as when I am with friends.	1-5
	I miss my favorite podcast host(s) if they do not release an episode for a long time.	1-5
	I think about my favorite podcast host(s) even when I am not listening to him/her/them.	1-5
	I feel that I know my favorite podcast host(s) very well.	1-5
	I try to imagine what my favorite podcast host(s) thinks about a certain topic	1-5

	Podcast episodes/interviews show me what my favorite podcast host(s) is like	1-5
	I find my favorite podcast host(s) to be likable.	1-5
	I mostly agree with the actions/opinions of my favorite podcast host(s).	1-5
	If there were a story about my favorite podcast host in a newspaper/online article/ on TV, I would read or watch it.	1-5
	I would like to meet my favorite podcast host(s) in person.	1-5
	I admire my favorite podcast host(s) for his/her/their achievements.	1-5
	I look forward to the next episode released by my favorite podcaster(s).	1-5
	I trust the products my favorite podcaster(s) recommends.	1-5
Part 6: BetterHelp		
	How long did you try BetterHelp?	a. less than one month; b. 1-3 months; c. 3-6 months; d. 6 months to one year; e. more than one year
	Are you still using it now?	yes/no
	If no, why did you stop?	a. poor quality; b. cost; c. found a different option; d. did not need therapy anymore; e. other (please specify)
	What motivated you to seek therapy with BetterHelp?	a. convenience; b. cost; c. access to therapists; d. discount code; e. other (please specify)
	Would you recommend BetterHelp to a friend?	Yes/no
	On a scale of 1 to 5 with one being extremely bad and five being very good,	1-5

	how would you rate your experience with BetterHelp?	
	Did you try more than one therapist on BetterHelp?	yes/no
	Did the host of a podcast share their own testimony with therapy as part of their BetterHelp ad?	yes/no/don't recall
	Did the host of that podcast use BetterHelp or a different type of therapy	yes/no/don't recall
	If so, did that testimony influence your decision to use BetterHelp?	yes/no/don't recall
	On a scale of 1 to 5 with one being very applicable and five being not applicable, how much do you think the podcast advertisement played in your decision to use BetterHelp?	1-5
	Do you feel that the company was fairly advertised to you?	yes/no/not sure
	Is there anything else you want me to know?	open answer

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent

TITLE OF STUDY

PARASOCIAL BONDS WITH PODCAST HOSTS AND THE DECISION TO USE THERAPY

APPLICATIONS

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

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PURPOSE OF STUDY

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.

The purpose of this study is to better understand the connection between parasocial relationships between podcast listeners and hosts, and how those relationships factor into the decisions to use products advertised on their shows. This study will investigate how these relationships play into the decision for consumers to try the therapy platform BetterHelp due to learning about it from a podcast advertisement.

STUDY PROCEDURES

1. In-depth interviews of approximately 30 minutes to help provide a deeper understanding, as well as to help guide the survey process. Interviews will be conducted virtually, audio recorded, and transcribed.
2. Wider-reaching survey.

RISKS

Your answers will be kept confidential, and precautions will be taken to safeguard any personal data. However, there is always a small risk of data breaches or leaks of your data when communicating over the internet. You may decline to answer any or all questions and you may terminate your involvement at any time if you choose.

BENEFITS

Your participation in this research provides essential information for this study, as well as for communications and advertising research. This study will help provide a deeper understanding of the relationships formed between fans and podcast hosts, and how those relationships impact advertising. Furthermore, it will provide a clearer picture of the potential implications of using hosts to advertise online therapy platforms.

Page 1 of 2

Participant's Initials: _____

Informed Consent

CONFIDENTIALITY

For this research study, your identity will be kept anonymous, but your comments may be used. Every effort will be made by the researcher to preserve your confidentiality including the following:

- Assigning code names/numbers for participants that will be used on all research notes and documents.
- Keeping notes, interview transcriptions, and any other identifying participant information in the personal possession of the researcher.

Participant data will be kept confidential except in cases where the researcher is legally obligated to report specific incidents. These incidents include, but may not be limited to, incidents of abuse and suicide risk.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have questions at any time about this study, you may contact the researcher whose contact information is provided on the first page.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary. It is up to you to decide whether to take part in this study. If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to sign a consent form. After you sign the consent form, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. Withdrawing from this study will not affect the relationship you have, if any, with the researcher. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

CONSENT

I have read, and I understand the provided information and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and without cost. I understand that I will be given a copy of this consent form. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

Participant's signature _____ Date _____

Investigator's signature _____ Date _____

Page 2 of 2

Participant's Initials: _____

Appendix D: Interview Text

Interview Subject 1

Subject Age: 26

Subject Gender: Woman

Education Level: Bachelor's

Occupation: Health and Food Access Program Coordinator

Nationality: Iranian

Country of Residence: United States of America

Parasocial Relationship Scores:

Virtual Friendship: 3.14

Respectful Interest: 3.42

Trust: 4

Researcher:

First of all, what are your podcast listening habits? Like how many shows, how often?

Subject 1:

I probably listen to about one or two shows per week.

Researcher:

Um and how do you consume podcasts?

Subject 1:

Um, so yeah, I primarily, like, use the Spotify app whenever I'm listening to podcasts. It's just kind of become my go-to, you know? Like, I find myself, um, putting on a podcast when I'm doing something like cleaning my room or even just tidying up. It makes the whole process way more enjoyable. And then, if I'm driving, especially if it's a longer drive like over an hour or so I definitely find myself reaching for the podcast section on Spotify instead of just flipping on the radio. I guess it's just more engaging, you know? It's like, you can really get into a good conversation or story, and it makes the time fly by.

Researcher:

And could you tell me which show was the one that piqued your interest in BetterHelp?

Subject 1:

Um I believe it was called *Oddvice* by two young adults like talking about their experiences with life, adulthood, dating all that um stuff.

Researcher:

And could you tell me what draws you to this show?

Subject 1:

So, like, I really enjoy this podcast because it kinda feels like I'm, um, sitting down with my big sisters, you know" I like this podcast because it feels like my big sisters are giving me advice or just talking through things. Growing up I didn't have sisters or siblings to give advice or hear me out, therefore even though this is just a podcast, that part of me feels a bit

more comfortable with this So even though, yeah, this is just a podcast, it still feels like it fills that space for me. It makes that part of me, um, feel a bit more comfortable and less alone, you know?

Researcher:

Okay, now I have a few questions about um BetterHelp. So, how long did you use it, and are you using it now?

Subject 1:

Um I used BetterHelp for two months like during the pandemic in 2021. And, no I am not using it anymore.

Researcher:

Okay. For sure. Um what type of therapy did you use? Like talk, text, video, or whatever.

Subject 1:

I mostly used like text even though I preferred talk or video calls. Um I was not aware how to switch or change the methods at the time.

Researcher:

Do you think you could describe your experience using BetterHelp in a bit more like um detail?

Subject 1:

I personally um did not enjoy my experience. Looking back on it, I thought it was a waste of my money especially like during a time that I was laid off work, so it was not wise of me to spend five hundred dollars of my savings just to text someone for eight weeks. Um the conversations were short and felt very automated like especially since this vulnerability was shared with text messaging. It didn't make too much sense to me. It felt like he was um providing pamphlets for anything and everything I had to say which like just led for me to do homework and read those pages. I wish um discussions were held rather than for me to do it all at a time where I was already feeling overwhelmed. It was hard for me to put my like mental health first because I was overwhelmed with like the amount of packets and articles and files I read to try to make sense out of it. Um while on the other hand very underwhelming and frustrating of not receiving anything to help me feel heard. Being in a pandemic did not help either because I was not able to go out and I didn't have people around me to talk to much either, um so the only source felt like it was failing me

Researcher:

Um thank you so much for that. Do you think that the podcast host testimony of BetterHelp was like a factor in your decision to try it?

Subject 1:

Yes um and I wish they had like a trial week or something before paying straight up for all the sessions. Because it did sound like an amazing platform, um I just wish I was able to do a better job finding the resources for how to utilize the platform or if the platform really was underwhelming and not beneficial as I experienced. It was hard to tell since I um was hearing like commercials and even seeing advertisements for this on social media platforms.

Researcher:

Ok and with all that, do you think the company was like advertised fairly to you?

Subject 1:

I really do not. Um it's hard for me to tell if it's a good platform and my experience was like negative, or if everything I saw and heard was like pampered and fabricated. Or it makes me wonder like how I could have gone about it differently to have received a better experience like I've seen in the commercials and or heard. I don't think it's something I will try again as all I remember is negative experiences.

Researcher:

Ok, that's all the questions I have. But do you have any questions for me?

Subject 1:

No, um that's all.

Interview Subject 2

Age: 43

Gender Identity: Woman

Education Level: Master's

Nationality: American

Country of Residence: United States of America

Occupation: Jr. High English Teacher

Parasocial Relationship Scores

Virtual Friendship: 3.57

Respectful Interest: 4.71

Trust: 5

Researcher:

So. Okay, so first, I'm going to ask you a few questions about, podcasts and everything like that. What are your listening habits like how many shows? how often?

Subject 2:

Um, honestly, I really only listen to, like, two shows regularly. One of them is *Beach Too Sandy*—it's hilarious, and I just love it—and the other one is *Red Handed*, which is more on the true crime side, and I'm totally hooked on it. I find myself tuning in probably around four times a week, maybe even more, depending on how much I'm driving. It's become kind of a routine for me to listen on my way to work and then again on my way home. You know, it's like my little escape during the commute. It makes the drive go by so much faster, and I actually look forward to it.

Researcher:

Okay, so how do you consume podcasts? Commuting, audio?

Subject 2:

Just in the car.

Researcher:

Yeah, um, and which show was the one that piqued your interest in BetterHelp?

Subject 2:

It was *Red Handed*.

Researcher:

And what draws you to this show?

Subject 2:

Ah, um, well, I've been involved with researching missing and unidentified people since I was in high school. My dad was a police officer and I've always enjoyed the whole true crime thing. Not to be like that person that like I did it way before everyone else. But they do true crime, but they're also just fun to listen to. They don't. It's kind of a mix of scripted and non scripted which is what I prefer in podcasts. So they have these lovely British accents and they curse just the right amount to make them relatable, but not so much like oh gosh, the one that's super popular. They're like, they're cursing constantly and it's distracting. So yeah, I just I just kind of relate to them. I guess that that comes into the whole parasocial thing. I just feel like I could hang out with them.

Researcher:

Okay, perfect. How long did you use BetterHelp? And are you still using it now?

Subject 2:

I used it for about six months. No, I'm not still using it.

Researcher:

Okay. And what type of therapy did you use talk text or both?

Subject 2:

Both.

Researcher:

Okay, video or talk? Sorry.

Subject 2:

Um, I did both. I ended up preferring the phone and I didn't expect that because I don't mind video chatting but yeah, I preferred the phone. With the phone, it's just so much easier. You can take the calls like in the car, or on a walk, or whatever.

Researcher:

No, it makes sense. Um, so could you describe your experience using BetterHelp?

Subject 2:

Yes, um, I was using it when my now ex-husband and I were separated and um just trying to sort some things out trying to decide you know, if we wanted to get back together, or split up. So it was difficult for me to find someone who was helpfully neutral if that makes sense. One lady I had was basically like, 'he's garbage you should leave him' and she was not wrong. However, I didn't feel like she was unbiased at all. It was basically just like talking to a friend and being like, 'Girl, he's he's awful,' you know?. So it. It wasn't particularly helpful there. Then I had other ones who were so kind of blase about the whole thing that I didn't feel like I was getting very helpful feedback. So I tried like three different ones and I was like, this is not working.

Researcher:

Um, so could you explain a little bit more about the specific therapists that you found on the app? Or were those the three?

Subject 2:

So I started with a man I, I did therapy for.. I had health anxiety really badly as Gosh, from the time I was nine until I was about 25. And I went to the same guy, three different times. So I was like, Okay, well, I had a really good rapport with them. Obviously, it was in person at that time. So I, when they matched me with a male therapist, I was like, Cool. That's, you know, that'll work. It did not. I only spoke with him once. It was kind of an intake sort of thing, and I did not, um, I didn't connect with him. So I'm like, that's fine. Like, maybe a woman would be better. Um, both of the other ladies that I had, this is two years ago. More than two years ago. They were, I would say in their late 50s, early 60s. And they were very kind. I think both of them were licensed clinical social workers. And they were both very kind, but they just were not what I was looking for in therapy. Not that I knew really what I was looking for.

Researcher:

Did that contribute to your decision to stop using it?

Subject 2:

Yes.

Researcher:

Did you find anyone after?

Subject 2:

In person I did. I the whole reason I started it is because my ex husband and I had a lady that we spoke to and he got in there first. When we split up, we were doing couples therapy with her and then when we split up, he started going to her and she's like, well, I don't feel comfortable counseling you guys separately. So I was like, Okay, I guess can find somebody else. So that was the situation but I did find someone else in person.

Researcher:

Okay. Um, do you think that your podcast host's testimony of BetterHelp? Do you think that was a factor in your decision to use the company?

Subject 2:

Yes, definitely.

Researcher:

Do you think you could expand on that just a little bit?

Subject 2:

Sure. Um, well, both, I would say both. *Red Handed* and the Schiefers. I definitely relate to Christine and Alex when they talk about their their struggles with like, you know, kind of taking everything personally and just generalized anxiety, like some of the things they say I'm like, 'Oh my gosh, that's, yeah, that's exactly how I am.' So I figured and they're very open about especially Alex is very open about talking about going to therapy. So yeah, I felt like hey, I can relate to these two on kind of a psychology level so why not try that? Also with *Red Handed* they're both pretty down to earth, but they also speak on women's issues and things that I can relate to so because they're so down to earth, I felt like if they're using if they're using this service, and getting something out of it, I'm kind of neurotic I could definitely benefit from this.

Researcher:

Okay, um, so my last question, do you feel like the company was fairly advertised to you?

Subject 2:

Yeah, I think so. Yeah, I don't think they make any promises. Any of the podcasts, either in the podcast, I should say, make any promises that BetterHelp couldn't deliver on. It just wasn't right for me at that time.

Researcher:

Okay. Do you think that there's anything else that I might have missed, or you want to add?

Subject 2:

No, I you know, I think I wish that they would have been a little bit more I guess one of them I can't remember which one was like, you know, it didn't work out with the first one so I could easily switch to someone else. Oh, I think *Red Handed* mentioned that but I don't think no that's not it. *Beach too Sandy* mentioned that you could switch therapists *Red Handed* did not so I felt a little embarrassed I guess about being like this isn't working. This isn't working. So I didn't want to I didn't know if I was gonna get the reputation of like doctor shopping but online. So that was part of my decision to to quit. So maybe if you know if they have experience where they said, You know, I thought at first it wasn't working for me, but I just needed to connect with the right therapist.

Researcher:

Okay, thank you.

Interview Subject 3

Age: 25

Gender Identity: Female

Education Level: Master's

Occupation: Teacher

Nationality: American

Country of Residence: United States of America

Parasocial Relationship Scores:

Virtual Friendship: 3.57

Respectful Interest: 4.57

Trust: 5

Researcher:

Um so the first question is what are your podcast listening habits like how often and how many shows do you listen to?

Subject 3:

I listen to *Office Ladies* for sure. And that one comes out once a week. And then occasionally, I basically only listen to podcasts with the office so I feel like sometimes listens to other other podcasts related to the office. But it's like, it's just like randomly when I'm like done

listening to all the Office Ladies ones so I feel like maybe like two or three podcasts like once a week.

Researcher:

Okay. And how do you consume them like audio, or video?

Subject 3:

Yeah, it's all audio.

Researcher:

Um, which show was the one that piqued your interest in BetterHelp?

Subject 3:

I'm pretty sure it was *Office Ladies*.

Researcher:

And what draws you to that show?

Subject 3:

Cause I'm obsessed with *The Office*.

Researcher:

Okay, beautiful. Okay, then I have five questions about BetterHelp um, how long did you use it for? And are you still using it now?

Subject 3:

I use it for I want to say like six to eight weeks. I know it wasn't super long. But I think I had like six to eight sessions.

Researcher:

That's fine. And what type of therapy did you do talk video or both?

Subject 3:

It was like a video. Yeah.

Researcher:

Can you describe your experience using it?

Subject 3:

I feel like it was very interesting. I feel like that when we started sessions, I felt, and the main reason I think I started it was because I was having a really hard time like with like ending, not ending it, but with my relationship with like (an ex) and stuff and, so whenever when I

started therapy, like I was in a really weird space and she, the therapist, was just really not having good practices because she'd be like, well, if (the ex) were a man, how would you feel about this? And I was, and I was like, okay, like maybe that's a normal question. Then I was telling people about what happened and they're like, that's really fucking weird. And I was like, oh, okay, that's weird. And she would kind of be like, well, and maybe it's because you're gay and maybe it's because this and she would kind of bring up issues. And I'm like, those aren't my issues. I don't have a problem with that. No one in my life has a problem with that. I'm sure she wouldn't focus on the actual, I think, things I've tried to talk about. And one thing that she said where I think that was, I was like, no, this is my last session because that's really fucking weird. Is she was like, well, you know, love is about how much you can kind of take from the other person. And if you can, if you, it's like, you just have to kind of choose when when enough is enough and, but if you want to continue and grow with that person, then you could take it, you should continue to do that. And I was like, no, I feel like that is terrible fucking advice you.... Absolutely not. And I remember questioning her and being like, why? Like, why I kind of asked like, why would you say that? What good does that do? And she was kind of like, well, what do you mean? Love is a sacrifice and it's sometimes pain and it's this and that and people make mistakes and you're young and I'm like, okay, pause. Absolutely not. Like that's, I feel like that was just like really weird. And so after that, I stopped having sessions, and BetterHelp reached out and they're like, oh, we can give you more free sessions because it was a free trial for a month and a half or something. Like, oh, we'll give you free ones. Like, you can come back you can switch therapists and I was like, no, I'm good. This is really strange, and when I looked up the therapist, she had this book on... I want to say (she was someone) someone who does like men and women relationships, but like men in their relationships, and like women, though, she's very like, hetero normative. And I was like, interesting. So I feel like that showed her lack of understanding, but her thing was like, no, she specializes in LGBTQ, ally, dadadada, but it was not true at all. And I feel like she was very heteronormative very, old fashioned mindset and like, not willing to shift that. Like for the client, patient, whatever. So it was a very interesting I felt very like maybe it was... it was just really weird.

Researcher:

Um, can you tell me like what interested you about BetterHelp in the first place?

Subject 3:

I feel like because it, I didn't need to go through my insurance and I feel, I was like, that process is long and, even now I see that I'm probably, I'm trying to do it right now. I've got like, three or four different people because schedules don't line up, whatever, but this one seems so much easier. And I knew it was lower costs, it wasn't super expensive, and I got to try it for free for a few weeks. And they kept giving me these free trials. When I'd be like, oh, hey, I can only pay this much. (They'd be like) oh, don't worry, we'll give you another couple of weeks for free. But you do have to start paying by this date. I think because I was a student they were trying to be relaxed about it. So I feel like that's what drew me to them

and just all the ads I feel like, I heard on the podcast and like I would see on Instagram and was always popping up so that. But yeah, so I think that's why.

Researcher:

Do you think that the podcast hosts testimony of BetterHelp was a factor in your decision?

Subject 3

Yeah.

Researcher:

Okay, cool. Do you feel like the company was fairly advertised to you?

Subject 3:

I feel like no, I feel, I mean, I guess yes and no, like the ease of it. The ease of it. I think yes. It is very easy, things like that. I think all the help that it gives is inaccurate and because they still have the ads in their podcasts and I cringe every time I have to hear the ad because I'm like, oh my god, it's false advertising and like it's not as good as it's cracked up to be and hearing other people's real testimony to people who have been through and I know, I know that, that's not true now. And it wasn't like this platform that it wanted to be.

Researcher:

Do you think that you have anything else that you need to share?

Subject 3:

No.

Interview Subject 4

Age: 27

Gender Identity: Woman

Education Level: Bachelor's

Nationality: American

Country of Residence: United States of America

Occupation: Legal Assistant

Parasocial Relationship Scores

Virtual Friendship: 3

Respectful Interest: 3.86

Trust: 3

Researcher:

So, I have a few questions about podcasts. And then we'll move into parasocial relationships and then specifically about BetterHelp. So, can you describe your podcast listening habits like how many shows how often?

Subject 4:

Pretty frequently. I listen to podcasts every day for sure on my commute to work, and I pretty consistently listen to about three or four shows. Whether I'm re-listening or listening to new episodes. Yeah, kind of have a few there in the rotation.

Researcher

And do you mostly do like audio or do you consume video at all?

Subject 4

Primarily audio every once in a while I'll watch video but I just kind of prefer audio.

Researcher

For sure. Um, so which show was the one that piqued your interest in BetterHelp?

Subject 4

Um, you know, I think there were three that really stood out obviously the three that I kind of consistently listen to but um yeah, *Beach too Sandy* and then *And That's Why We Drink* and also *My Dad Wrote A Porno* they all three kind of their ads were very persuasive I guess not that you need persuading to go to therapy, but yeah, for sure, I guess. Yeah.

Researcher

Um, so I guess then, like, you can answer these questions in the broad combination of all three of these shows. What draws you to them?

Subject 4

Um, you know, I like listening to podcasts generally just because it's kind of nice to listen to somebody talking but that's not my own voice in my head. I guess if that makes sense. And then also, especially *Beach too Sandy*, *My Dad Wrote A Porno*, very funny podcasts, and then *And That's Why We Drink*. I've been listening since the beginning. So I feel like they're my friends. So it's just nice to like, catch up with them every week is almost what it feels like.

Researcher:

So okay, and then we have the BetterHelp questions. How long did you use BetterHelp? And are you still using them?

Subject 4:

I used it for about three months and I'm not using them anymore.

Researcher:

And so what type of therapy did you do talk text video, or?

Subject 4:

Yeah, all of the above.

Researcher:

Okay. What motivated you to try it?

Subject 4:

Um, I had sort of a traumatic incident occur and so I was primarily seeking assistance just kind of working through that. And I was living in a small town on the Oregon coast at the time, that there were not a lot of resources for mental health. And so I decided to kind of outsource

Researcher:

Can you describe like, as in depth as you can your experience using it?

Subject 4:

I really enjoyed it. I found, I tried one therapist that didn't quite work out and so it was nice to have the option to just kind of try a new person and not have to do you know all the research and searching for them. The person I ended up working with for the three months was really really helpful. I enjoyed her a lot. If I lived in Oregon still I would definitely still be seeing her. I liked the sort of ability to like text her anytime. And like the scheduling and it all was just very like cohesive and I appreciated that.

Researcher:

Do you think that the podcast hosts testimony of using BetterHelp was a factor in your decision?

Subject 4:

I think it definitely put it on my radar at the very least. But you know, nine times out of 10 I fast forward through the advertisements, but you still kind of hear those well BetterHelp BetterHelp and so I think it did definitely at least somewhat influenced me to start using that program.

Researcher:

And do you feel like they were fairly advertised to you?

Subject 4:

Yeah

Researcher:

Yeah. Why or why not?

Subject 4:

Yeah, I feel like all of the advertisements were like, pretty, I don't know. Not pushy, but just like, hey, if you need this, you know, I keep thinking back to one that My Dad Wrote A Porno. Did especially where they're, like, joking about how they might need therapy after, you know, reading their dad's porno, which obviously, yes. But, you know, it was just like, we all need to think about our mental health. Here's kind of a casual approach to it. Which felt nice because I think sometimes therapy can seem like such a daunting thing and this was like a very approachable, non-aggressive type of therapy or at least it feels that way.

Researcher:

I know you have to go soon, but do you think you have anything else that is important to share?

Subject 4:

I don't think so. I still get emails from BetterHelp even though I'm not using them, which is nice. They're just like, hey, hope you're doing good. If you need us, we're here. So that's nice, I guess. And it's not frequent enough that it bothers me but yeah.

Interview Subject 5

Age: 31

Gender Identity: Female

Education Level: Bachelor's

Nationality: American

Country of Residence: United States of America

Occupation: Marine Biologist

Parasocial Relationship Score

Virtual Friendship: 2.57

Respectful Interest: 4.43

Trust: 3

Researcher:

So my first question is, what are your podcast listening habits like how many shows how often?

Subject 5:

Um all the time. I have probably like, six different shows that I listen to very, like religiously. Maybe, maybe a few more. But I listen all the time. I'll listen when I'm getting ready in the

morning. I'll listen when I'm driving. I'll listen when I'm cleaning. Pretty much any time I have, like free time, I'm listening to a podcast over music.

Researcher:

Yeah, Do you prefer audio or do you consume video podcasts at all?

Subject 5:

Mainly audio. I really don't. I don't, I don't watch any of them. Not video-wise. It's all mainly audio.

Researcher:

So, what was the main show that piqued your interest in BetterHelp?

Subject 5:

I don't know for sure. I don't know exactly which podcast it was. But, I mean, they all, literally every single one, promotes it now. If I have. I mean, if I had to guess it would have probably been mm. It probably would have been *Office Ladies*. I think that is if I had to guess. It was that one that or *Morbid*. Those are like a couple of my main ones and because I tried it. I had heard about it. Like when they first started promoting it. And I didn't end up using it until later. But those ones were podcasts that I was listening to like, very regularly then so I'm gonna guess it was one of those two, but I don't know exactly which one it was.

Researcher:

You can also just talk about this in kind of a more expansive way if there are multiple ones. What is it that draws you to these shows?

Subject 5:

Um, okay. I so I love *The Office*. It's like my favorite show. So that was a very easy one. I, *Office Ladies* is something that, like I I love all the extra information and details about the episodes, all the behind-the-scenes things. Um and actually *Beach too Sandy*, my brother listened to *Beach too Sandy*, and he's the one who told me about it. And once he was like, yeah, it's this really funny podcasts where it's like a brother and sister and they read reviews and I was like, ah cool. I'll give it a shot. And I mean, I love it. I absolutely love the hosts like I just really enjoy the silliness and the banter. But then I listen to a lot of true crime um as well. So I really like *Morbid*. *Last Podcast on the Left* is another one that I really like. And I like I like the funniness like the conversation the back and forth. I really can't do a podcast that is like, like just one person talking it. I lose. Like I like get distracted easily, easier. And then yeah, I like I like humor. I like funny. I like the conversation, but I mean, he also obviously find all the topics very interesting as well.

Researcher:

OK perfect, and then I have questions more about BetterHelp. So about how long did you use it? And are you still using it now?

Subject 5:

Okay, I used it for few months. Maybe three months. And I am not using it now. No.

Researcher:

Okay. And then what type of therapy did you use? Like talk, text, video, or everything?

Subject 5:

Video.

Researcher:

What motivated you to try it?

Subject 5:

Um, I was going through a pretty tough relationship situation. And I just couldn't navigate it well enough on my own. So, I know, I knew I needed outside help. And I figured BetterHelp would be a good option. Just because it was easy and online and like and I mean, all the, you know, every single podcast that I listen to recommend it. And I think that, and I don't say that that made me want to try it. I think it was more so the convenience of it, because like a therapist is a therapist like you can find one in person or online. But I think for me it was the easiness and being able to easily schedule it and like, you know, jump on the computer real quick and do a video call versus having to like go to an office, um, because I have a pretty crazy schedule. So I was excited about that.

Researcher:

Yeah, um, I guess in like a broader or detailed way can you describe your experience using it?

Subject 5:

Yeah. Um, I mean, it was fine. I don't. So I you know, I got matched with a therapist pretty much right away, which was great. And she, weirdly enough was local to me. Like, an hour from where I live. And she was nice. I mean, I think I did not explore it fully. Like I didn't switch therapists I kind of wish I would have because she was good and she definitely like understood me to an extent, but I don't think she was quite like what I needed. And I liked having you know, the flexibility of like being able to change an appointment at the last ish minute. I mean, it wasn't always like it was like within 24 hours or something, but it that was really nice. But it was expensive. And it was weekly, which was too much I didn't need a weekly thing. And the only other option was like once a month, I think it was like pretty much the same exact price as the weekly thing. So I was like, Well, I'm gonna do the weekly thing and get my money's worth, but yeah, it I don't know. It was good. Like, I do think that

she helped and they had a lot of resources, which was really nice. They had a lot of like webinars, and you know, all these different things online that you could watch in classes and things so it was more than just like going to a therapist like it was they had a lot of extra I never used any of them. So, I don't know how great they were but I did like that I had the option to you know.

Researcher:

Yeah, anything else on that?

Subject 5:

No, I don't think so.

Researcher:

So I feel like we've already touched on this, but I'm gonna ask it anyway. Do you think that um, like the testimonies of podcast hosts were a factor in your decision to use the company?

Interviewee

Um, I mean, no. So, cause I mean, I obviously they're ads, and they're scripted and you can tell that they are especially when each of your podcasts say pretty much the exact same thing. But I mean, at first, you know, I do feel like I feel like the majority of the podcasts that I listen to, at least the smaller the smaller ones that are so like, like, *Office Ladies*. I when I first started listening, listening I was excited because they felt like they truly promoted brands and companies and things that that they like, like I don't feel that way anymore. I feel like like they're promoting McDonald's and crap. You know, it's like, all the big names that don't need it. Um, but I feel and I mean, but I do feel like the fact that all of my podcasts promoted BetterHelp it definitely like made me more inclined to try it. But I wouldn't say that like what they were saying about it. Is what did it it was more so just the fact that all of them were advertising it I think is what did it because I didn't really feel like because I I do truly wonder if any of them actually use it. I mean, I think every podcast host that I listened to probably goes to therapy, but do I think that they're using BetterHelp I don't know. You know, I believe that they've probably all actually tried it because they probably have to but I don't know if I think that like they're you know, testimony to it or whatever is what made me want to try it. I think it was more so like I did like that everyone promoted it. That that was definitely part of it. But I don't know if it was what like they actually said about it that did it for me.

Researcher:

Yeah, that makes sense. Yeah, no, that makes sense completely. Um, so I guess like my last question is Do you feel like they were fairly advertised to you on these podcasts?

Subject 5:

Yeah, yeah, I do. I mean, I think that like I do, you know, you can obviously ads are scripted like they obviously are. And I listen to enough podcasts and I hear enough ads. Where it's

the same one pretty much every single time. A couple of my podcast hosts definitely do, like put a little spin on to their, like, ads. But um, yeah, I mean, I still I feel like it was advertised for what it is. I think that it was they did a good job.

Researcher:

No, that's fine. Um, do you think you have anything else that I should know or should be in here?

Subject 5:

I don't think so. I don't know.

Researcher:

Do you have any questions for me?

Subject 5:

No, I don't think so.

Interview Subject 6

Age: 42

Gender Identity:

Education Level: Bachelor's

Nationality: American

Country of Residence: United States of America

Occupation: Editor

Parasocial Relationship Scores:

Virtual Friendship: 4

Respectful Interest: 5

Trust: 4

Researcher:

Okay, then. So, I have a few questions about podcasts. Then we'll talk about parasocial relationships. And then we'll go more into BetterHelp Um, can you tell me about your podcast listening habits like how often and how many shows?

Subject 6:

Honestly, I'm pretty much always listening to a podcast. If I am doing laundry or dishes or getting ready in the morning, you know anytime I'm not working or if I'm driving you know, anytime I'm not working or like watching a show or a movie, I pretty much have a podcast on in the background. I want to say I probably follow maybe around 10 right now.

Researcher:

And well, the second question was, how do you consume them? So I think we have an understanding of when and how, but um, do you consume solely audio or do you consume video podcasts as well?

Subject 6:

Mainly audio, I do have one podcast that I am a Patreon member of and sometimes they'll release a bonus episode that has video and I'll watch it, but it's like 99.9% audio.

Researcher:

Okay. And then. So which show is the one that piqued your interest in BetterHelp?

Subject 6:

It's a podcast called *The Mental Illness Happy Hour*.

Researcher:

Interesting: It sounds good.

Subject 6:

It's a comedian. It's a comedian who got into you know, therapy and support groups and stuff and now, it's really fantastic. He interviews people who have mental illnesses, he interviews writers, he interviews doctors and it's very raw and like also just very off-the-cuff and humorous.

Researcher:

And then so what draws you to this show? I guess in like a more in-depth way.

Subject 6:

You know, I have lived with mental conditions for most of my life, and I'm really interested in learning about it and learning what other people's experiences about it are like, I'm really passionate about like, removing the stigma and you know, letting people know they're not the only ones and they can get through it. And I just like the fact that this one is so honest, they don't hide anything. But it also has like a really good sense of humor to it too. Like a dark sense of humor. So, it's just really like, open and honest and approachable.

Researcher

Okay, that's good. And then we'll talk more about better help. So how long did you use BetterHelp?

Subject 6:

I've used them. I mean, I used them for a couple of years and then took a break and have started using them again. So probably total like four or five years in total.

Researcher:

Okay, cool. And do you still use them now?

Subject 6:

Yes.

Researcher:

So um, what type of therapy do you use? Like talk, text, or video?

Subject 6:

Yeah, it's mainly video every once in a while we'll do a text but it's like 99% um video.

Researcher:

And um, I guess like can you explain why you prefer video over like the other options?

Subject 6:

It's you know, I've done texts when you know, I need to like I can't get to a good place for video but there's a real big delay so I feel like we can't get through nearly as much as we would if we were just talking. And you know with the video too, you can kind of see, you can see that they're listening. You can get like the emotional cues and it just feels like you're having more of a conversation.

Researcher:

Okay, perfect. I get that. Um, then what first motivated you to try BetterHelp?

Subject 6:

I, when I first tried it, I had moved to a different city and I was looking for a new counselor because mine was too far away. And I just wasn't loving what I was finding and I liked the idea that with BetterHelp, you could try so many different counselors without having to like make an appointment here and go to this office and then cancel it seemed a lot easier.

Researcher:

And yeah, so that makes sense. And can you describe I guess your experiences like how many counselors did you try?

Subject 6:

I think I've probably tried maybe four total. The one I have now I've been with for like the past two years.

Researcher:

How was your first experience if you want to just go through like the whole timeline of everything and then kind of how it went throughout?

Subject 6:

So I really like, there was a really thorough intake procedure where they asked you know, everything from what are you looking for? What do you want to talk about? What are you dealing with? And then like, what kind of counselor do you prefer? Would you want someone who's older or younger? Male or female? Or you know, has experience in these particular topic areas? And then I believe and I might be misquoting because I did try Talkspace recently too I believe what they do then is give you like a handful, maybe three or so counselors you can choose from to see which one's description best fits you. I know Talkspace did that recently when I looked at them, it may be that BetterHelp just you know, connected me with someone but I'm pretty sure I had a choice too, and then basically you just do you know an intake with them. You talk about what your history is. Talk about what you want to talk about, see if there's any sort of connection. And what's really nice is if you decide that you want to try someone else, you don't have to even talk to that counselor and say here's why blah, blah, blah, you can just tell BetterHelp like it's not a great fit can I find somebody else and they'll match it to somebody else.

Researcher:

And then if you don't mind, what do you like about your current counselor?

Subject 6:

Yeah, um, honestly, she's my favorite counselor that I've had so far. It seems like we really understand each other like I could see us being friends outside of this. Like, we just we have a similar sense of humor and she gets what I'm saying and she picks up really well on like, what I'm not saying. She also is able to frame things in a way that's helpful to me. Like I've had counselors that just, they just listen and they're like, oh, that's too bad. Or you know, like, I like someone who can be like, okay, here are the thought patterns I'm recognizing that you keep falling into and here's what you can do actively to like try to counteract that or here's a book I think you could read or here's, you know, just she gives me tools that I can use and like recognizes when I'm doing certain things I've done before and I find that a lot more helpful than like just listening like she lets me vent too but then she like gives me things I can use the rest of the week to try to like, you know, handle my stuff a little bit better.

Researcher:

Definitely. Um, do you think that the like the testimony of the podcast host that recommended BetterHelp or advertised better help was a factor in your decision to use the company?

Subject 6:

Yes. 100%. Not only do I trust this particular podcast host to recommend things that he finds valuable, but because the whole podcast is about mental health. I was like if he's going to recommend something, and he like he has used them for years, or he had used them for years

at that point. So I was like, okay, like, if I'm gonna listen to any podcast host about this particular thing, then I think he's probably the one who knows what he's talking about.

Researcher:

Yeah, definitely. Um, so I guess the last question, I think I already have your answer for this. Do you feel that the company was fairly advertised to you?

Subject 6:

I do. I know. I don't know if you've heard this or not, I don't know the details, but this particular podcast actually has stopped advertising BetterHelp and I guess it's really cut a chunk into his revenue each month because they were a big advertiser. And I don't remember the details. I kind of didn't want to know, because I really enjoy them, and I was going to keep using them. It was something along the lines of like sharing data with with other advertisers or something, something they should not have been doing. Not anything that to me means enough for me to let go of this counselor that I really liked so much. So yeah, I think but overall, though, I think he definitely did advertise it correctly. You know, everything I've experienced in terms of how easy the process is and how well they match you and the quality of the counselors like I haven't had any complaints about the service itself.

Researcher:

That's great. That's all I have question wise unless you think that there's anything that I might have missed that you think should be included in here.

Subject 6:

No, not really. I mean, not that I can think of I just I just want to mention that thing with him not using them anymore just because and he actually released like, a whole mini-episode that was like, here's why I'm not using them and it really was a hard decision and blah, blah, blah. But you know, I, like I said, I've enjoyed it so much that to me, it was just like, I get why you're doing what you're doing. But this is a wonderful service for me and like I'm gonna keep using it. So yeah, no, that's I I've only bought a few things because podcast hosts recommended them and advertisements and like, I'm glad that this was one of them. So yeah.

Interview Subject 7:

Age: 27

Gender Identity: Female

Education Level: Bachelor's

Occupation: Editor

Nationality: American and Italian

Country of Residence: United States of America

Parasocial Relationship Scores:

Virtual Friendship: 3.43

Respectful Interest: 2.86

Trust: 3

Researcher:

Um I need to ask you a few questions now about like your podcast listening habits. First, uh what are your podcast listening habits?

Subject 7:

Um, I'd say I listen to podcasts on average, like, maybe once or twice a week, probably? It kinda depends on what I've got going on that week, you know? Some weeks, I'm super busy and might not get around to it as much, but other weeks, if I have more free time or I'm just in the mood to listen to something, I might tune in a bit more. But yeah, I'd say once or twice a week is pretty typical for me. It's not, like, a daily habit or anything, but I definitely enjoy it when I do find the time to listen.

Researcher:

OK cool, and do you primarily listen to audio or do you consume video podcasts? And how do you typically consume them?

Subject 7:

Yeah only audio. Um I listen usually while I am commuting or like cleaning. That's kind of it. I mean, like, I'm not a very avid listener so those are really like the only times I listen.

Researcher:

OK cool. What podcast introduced you to BetterHelp?

Subject 7:

Oh uh it was Not Another Dungeons and Dragons Podcast

Researcher:

OK. And, what is it that you like about this show?

Subject 7:

Well, it's, um, pretty obvious that I'm into *Dungeons and Dragons*, I mean, I'm a total nerd, so that's probably not a surprise, right? But, honestly, it's not just about the game itself. It's also really like entertaining, you know? I love how it can just pull you into this whole other world. Plus, I can listen to it while I'm driving or even just walking around, which is super convenient. Like, I don't always have time to sit down and play, but being able to listen to campaigns or discussions about it while I'm on the go is, uh, cool. It keeps me connected to the game and the community, even when I'm busy doing um other things.

Researcher:

Great. Amazing. First, could you tell me how long you used BetterHelp for, and are you using it now?

Subject 7:

Uh I used it for like three months I think. And no I am not using it anymore.

Researcher:

OK, cool. Um can you tell me why you were interested in it?

Subject 7:

Yeah, so, um, I actually first heard about it on the podcast, and it really caught my attention. I was, like, already looking for therapy at the time, but it was so complicated, you know? Like, with the whole insurance thing, and then there's the cost to think about, which can be pretty overwhelming. And on top of that, finding the right location was a whole other challenge. It was especially tough because this was all during the pandemic, so in-person sessions weren't really an option, which made it even more stressful. I mean, I knew I needed help, but everything just felt so difficult to navigate, and I was getting pretty frustrated with the whole process.

Researcher:

And could you tell me about your like experience using it?

Subject 7:

Yeah um I mean. It was nice in a way, because I definitely appreciated the like ease of the platform. But like it was. The cost added up, and I was just never super satisfied with the therapists I spoke with.

Researcher:

Do you think the uh podcast testimony was a factor in your decision to use BetterHelp?

Subject 7:

Yes.

Researcher:

Can you explain more about that?

Subject 7:

Yeah, definitely. Um, I think what really made me trust the hosts was that they just seemed so real and, like, really down to earth, you know? They weren't trying to sell anything or push an agenda; it just felt like they were being genuine. So, when they talked about it, I figured, you know, if it worked for them, then maybe it could work for me too. I mean, they seemed like people I could relate to, and that made me feel a lot more confident in giving it a try. It was kinda like getting a recommendation from a friend, which made it easier to take that first step

Researcher:

OK thank you. Do you feel that the company was fairly advertised to you?

Subject 7:

Yes, but also no. Um it was advertised as like a low-cost option and easy to use. It was definitely easy to use, but I don't think low-cost, considering like the costs ad up. Uh also I think it's hard to find like a therapist that is good. I tried a few different ones and never quite like clicked with them.

Researcher:

Do you have anything else you want to share with me?

Subject 7:

Uh no I don't think so.

Interview Subject 8

Age: 55

Gender: Woman

Occupation: Lawyer

Education Level: Doctorate

Nationality: American

Country of Residence: United States of America

Parasocial Relationship Score

Virtual Friendship: 4.14

Respectful Interest: 4.4

Trust:4

Researcher:

Could you please start off by letting me know your podcast listening habits?

Subject 8:

Yes, sure. I usually listen to around three different shows pretty regularly, and I actually end up listening to them everyday when I'm driving. It's kind of like um a routine now.

Researcher:

OK, cool. Could you tell me which show piqued your interest in BetterHelp?

Subject 8:

It was a um true crime show called Murder, Mystery, and Makeup.

Researcher:

And what about this show do you like?

Subject 8:

Yeah um the host seems really like humble and real. It seems like she cares about other people, and I like the way she tells stories. She's like quirky and has a sense of humor. I really appreciate a host that seems real, you know? Um it's like, a lot easier and enjoyable to listen to.

Researcher:

I've never heard of that show. It sounds cool. Um and, to the best of your ability, how much do you think you're impacted by podcast advertisements? Like have you like bought things before?

Subject 8:

Yeah um. When podcasters do talk about a product, I find myself very interested in the like product. Like, I'll seriously, I consider buying it or joining whatever it is that they recommend. However, I don't um, even though I do think about it a lot, I usually don't end up following like through with it by actually um getting the product or signing up for whatever it is, like, on a regular basis or anything.

Researcher:

For sure, um, I have a few questions about BetterHelp I want to run by you now. Can you tell me how long you used it for, and are you still using it now?

Subject 8:

I used it probably for several months, although I'm not sure exactly how many. Um I am not using it now, but am considering using it again. It was nice um. I had a very nice therapist who was like very helpful and kind. I would like to um go back to it once I can afford it again.

Researcher:

OK, and what type of therapy did you use with BetterHelp? Like, was it text or video or like voice calls?

Subject 8:

Yeah um I used video and text messaging with my therapist.

Researcher:

For sure. Could you tell me what motivated you to try BetterHelp in the first place?

Subject 8:

For me, I think it was super helpful that the host of the podcast I listened to described it in a way that was convenient and, like, affordable. I mean, like, she broke it down in such a way that it just seemed like something that would really fit into my busy schedule without too much effort, you know?

Researcher:

So, her specific testimony was a significant factor in your decision to use it?

Subject 8:

Absolutely yes. She described like exactly what it was and how it worked for her. Um because I trusted her, I believed what she said and um I trusted the product.

Researcher:

OK um so last question. Could you tell me whether or not like you felt the company was fairly advertised to you?

Subject 8:

Yes, I do.

Researcher:

And um why is that?

Subject 8:

The company was exactly like she described it. It was like easy to use and relatively affordable, and I believe I even got a discount by referring to the podcast. Um so that's why I think it was fair.

Researcher:

OK, and is there anything else you'd like to ad?

Subject 8

No. No. I think that's all.

Researcher:

OK. Thank you.

Interview Subject 9:

Age: 37

Gender: Woman

Occupation: Registered Nurse

Education Level: Bachelor's

Nationality: American

Country of Residence: United States of America

Parasocial Relationship Score

Virtual Friendship: 3.43

Respectful Interest: 4.86

Trust: 3

Researcher:

So, can you tell me a bit about yourself, your job?

Subject 9:

Yeah. So I work at Yeah, I work in paranesthesia. So I like I'm waking everybody up from surgery. I'm stabilizing people before they go to, whether they go to med surg or they go to the ICU or they go home or they go back to the women's hospitals. So it's pretty cool because I see a lot of different stuff whether it's like a brain burr hole craniotomy or a hysterectomy or a gallbladder removal, so I really enjoy it. But yeah, you definitely have to be on your toes because you're, you know, managing cardiac drips and giving fentanyl and dilaudid and nausea medications, but I really, really enjoy it.

Researcher:

That's really good. I think a lot of people that are nurses, you know, some people don't enjoy it.

Subject 9:

Yeah. And I mean, what led me into paranesthesia kind of going into BetterHelp was because so I was on what's called the progressive care unit or ICU step down. And I did that during COVID. And I was a lead charge. I.. when our first case of COVID came in the door, you know, I was there and then that first case turned into 10 cases turned into 15 cases. And I was, we were so desperate, I was wearing, we were so short on gowns that we were hanging our disposable gowns, like outside the door and initialing them. And then I had friends who were kind enough to make me cloth masks to wear to work, so I didn't have a bandana. And I had new grads who just got out of school and were like, what the heck am I doing? And so then I was trying to guide them and teach them like post-mortem care. And it was, a it was pretty typical that we would at least, it was pretty typical that we would have at least one patient die a shift. There were plenty of it as I was working the night shift for this job, there were plenty of nights where I was scrambling around the hospital because we were out of body bags.

Subject 9:

And my parents, my parents are snowbirds so to say they split their time between Wisconsin and Florida. And my parents were in Florida and because they, they go down to Florida in November so they went down to Florida November 2020. And then because of everything that happened, they stayed in Florida and then my twin sister was pregnant, and I am then I was showing up to work and watching people die and trying to be a lead on this floor and having no supplies and no resources and I was really desperate, and I was so isolated. And I was, you know, I I was coming you know I I was coming home and I couldn't fall asleep and I also trying to get food was an issue in itself. So I had too many nights where or I should say when I came home in the morning because I was working night shift too many mornings where I was having bourbon and cookies for like for dinner, breakfast and then going to bed. And just the it's really I certainly don't want to you know, say people can't put themselves in other shoes, but I think it's an experience a lot of people don't understand.

Researcher:

Yeah, no, I mean, I don't think that I would ever imagine that. I would understand that.

Subject 9:

And it was especially hard to because there was such a huge wave of misinformation and disinformation. And people like telling themselves or telling me that I signed up for this and that it you know, you signed up for this you're in health care you need to deal with this and it was really bad. So the things that I loved the most were my podcasts and resources were also pretty were my podcasts and I knew that things were really fucking bad. I also have type two bipolar disorder. I have been, I have wonderfully supportive parents. I have a good group of friends and I have a great psychiatrist and I have been on medication for 13 years and being able to get psychotherapy during like in 2020 was yeah, good luck. Yeah, with especially, you know, you get these therapists that have you know, like the woman on Reddit said we have years long waiting lists and yeah, you know, and I would never do BetterHelp.

And it's like, well, maybe having useful long waiting lists was the problem. So, you know, I was being treated medication wise, but the problem was so much bigger, and like trying to like I called because things got really bad. I had obsessive thoughts about killing myself. I never like had a plan and like I knew I could never do that to my twin sister. I could never do that to my family. But I couldn't stop thinking about it. And because I had been I've been at my hospital for almost 10 years, and I used to park on the roof because I love to watch the sun come up after my shifts. And I had to stop parking on the roof because I thought about jumping off it too often. And I was like I need help and I, because my hospital had an employee assistance program but they're like well, we you know can only, because I had called them and was like I really need help. And this and they said well, we can you know basically they were like we can have you talk to counselors for like, I don't know what it was like three sessions and then we'll find you help in the community and then they didn't really they couldn't help in the community.

I heard BetterHelp advertised on several of the podcasts I listened to and I was like why the hell not. So I went on BetterHelp and they had like a questionnaire, what sort of issues are you looking for help with and, you know, at the time I just like clicked like bipolar disorder, like suicide, like substance abuse, and then they asked, would you prefer like, somebody who's local. And so I clicked yes, because I thought well, if this really works out, yeah, I would prefer somebody local. And then that's and then I had my first appointment with (Therapist's name). And we did that over video. Like with cameras on FaceTime. And I really liked her and I really felt like I got a lot out of it. And one of the things I really liked because I have been in I've been in therapy on and off for a very long time. My parents took me with just a like a child psychologist when my twin sister and I were fighting when we were under five and then over the years when I've had I've just had a lot of it between, you know, coping with bipolar disorder. But then I was like, I was a victim of a kidnapping when I was in fifth grade. And so that kept me in therapy. And then when I was 25, I was hit by a drunk driver on a walk and it was a hit-and-run case and I had a very long recovery from that lucky to be alive, sued the hell out of the bastard who hit me. And so I've always and my parents have always been so supportive. So I've always had therapists and stuff like that. And then you know when I was and then when I started working night shift, I didn't really have that accessibility. And you know, I been on meds and had my psychiatrist and didn't really, I didn't really have a need and then COVID happened and it was like, Oh my God, I don't know how I'm gonna get through the day. So I had a very good first meeting with (Therapist's name). And one of the things I really liked was that she had like, made like a summary of our, of our session. Like, just like things like we focused on like, you know, one, you know, it was like, go on a walk, even if every step feels like a million pounds, you know, to like, get some nutritious food, you know, don't drink, you know, don't have bourbon and cookies for dinner. And I loved that. And so I started seeing her in um, it would have been January of 2021. And I still see her and I also she also still does the summary for all of our sessions. And even with like meeting her in person now and then also like with the BetterHelp app she has said message me every any like whenever you need me like I'm

available, and I also never had that from a therapist. And my dad died April 25. And I wasn't able to get into her because my dad passed in Florida, and then we had to fly as body, I live in Wisconsin and so that we had to fly his body back up to Wisconsin. And so my availability was limited for like a FaceTime. And so she said just message me whenever, you know, just message me. And so then I was messaging her back and forth and then luckily I was able to like fit in a video session when somewhere in between, like, you know, all of that so yeah. So anyways, I know that was a mouthful and I know you have to direct things in what you're looking for. But

Researcher:

No, that's okay. I think a lot of my like, you know, structured questions have been answered. Um, I wanted to say that I'm sorry about your father. That's really hard. But I'm glad that you have help. Um, but another question, I guess. Because you said you see your therapist in person, are you I don't know if this is okay to ask but are you paying for both?

Subject 9:

Um, I so like with BetterHelp, it does like the, it was like two sessions a month or is it two or three sessions a month was \$200. And I just was like, I just was paying it and never applied my insurance. But now that I see her in person, and my insurance covers it now I just have like a \$50 copay. So like when I see her so now it's kind of like so. So now it's like went from like, \$200 to like \$100 Because I see her because I have the sessions with her twice a month. And then I've done some things virtual just because I have like a pretty complicated schedule. So I still primarily see her over FaceTime. But I've seen her in person, in the past year I want to say like, four or five times. So I kind of like made that conversion. But you know, it's like, I never really like ran my insurance or anything like that through BetterHelp because it was like, I kind of don't care but also, I had you know, I had the disposable income because like, I'm single and have no kids and financially okay. So were you know, when I talked about, you know, how much BetterHelp helped me with my fraternal twin sister. She said, Well, I have a kid and a mortgage and I can't you know, I can't do anything unless it's through like my insurance and she had to kind of go out of her way to find like couples counseling, through her insurance. So you know, price just really kind of wasn't that big of a priority for me and was like, well, \$200 a month for like, whatever it is two, three sessions. Just yeah. You know, Oscar Wilde said the, a cynic is a person who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. That's how I've just felt about it the whole time.

Researcher:

Yeah definitely. If it's okay with you, I have a few questions that I want to ask just like I guess primarily really about? No no most of the preliminary questions we've already covered so it's not a big deal, but mainly just about like your podcast consumption. Can you tell me like how many shows do you listen to and like, what's your general listening schedule?

Subject 9:

Yeah, so. So I would say there are because you know, you have shows that are like a story. And like, you know, episode one through episode 10. The story is tied in a bow. That's it. And then you have those like podcasts that are, you know, weekly. So, I would say at any given time, I'm listening to eight to 10 podcasts. Um, let's see here

So, out of that, eight to 10 Four of them that I listened to are like weekly. The first one and the one I've been listening to the longest is the *Bravo Docket*. Okay, that's a podcast that's hosted by two lawyers, who are huge Bravo fans, and they go over all of the court cases that different cast members are going through. So like, for example, Jen Shah, who was on *Real Housewives of Salt Lake City*, she went to prison for fraud. And so they did several parts on her case, and because they got all the discovery and the docket and they have really good sense of humor, but then also they kind of they go over every single thing like they talked about her defense lawyers closing arguments were the Jekyll and Hyde defense like this is a good woman who made a horrible mistake. So I really enjoy that. Because, because, well, I'm a big trash TV fan. But also, they're funny and I find the, just the, the cases really interesting. And like, you know, oh my gosh, not only are these people ridiculous on TV, but they get themselves into the most ridiculous legal trouble. And then, yeah, and then the other one I follow is *Pretend Pod* and that's about con artists and they, and for the *Pretend Pod* I got into it because he did a multi-part episodes or it was like, I want to say eight episodes on how Frank Abagnale Jr from the movie *Catch Me If You Can*, is like a con artist and none of his story is true. And that like his biggest con is his story. And like, it was an it was just so like well done. And so anyways, he covers like, all different cons and his episode and his show is weekly. So the *Bravo Docket* I listen to weekly, *Pretend Pod* I listen to weekly, and it's just all these different con people. The third one I listen to weekly is *90 Day Cray Cray*. And because I also like *90 Day Fiance* i really like my trash TV. Yeah, and they just go over how ridiculous like every episode is and I just laugh because I don't. I mean, I was single like during COVID and now I'm engaged.

Researcher:

Congratulations.

Subject 9:

Thank you. So but I don't I won't make my fiance like watch it with me. Because you know it's my trash. Yes. Like listening to *90 Day Cray Cray* it because it feels like an outlet to laugh about the show. Like I don't think I would like necessarily like consider them friends. But it's like, it's really fun to listen to another person who listens to it. And when they make the same like observations that I do, I'm like, Oh my god, yes like I'm not the only person who thought that you know whatever. Manuel was being manipulative in that scene. So and then the other ones I listened to our stories I like that I like sometimes just things that are like tied in a bow. Like I really enjoyed *Sweet Bobby*, which was a podcast about a woman who was catfished for years and I and that I really actually really like for my story podcast. I really like con artists, because I find the psychology of it very interesting. With *Sweet*

Bobby, it was, you know, beginning to end and I liked that because because like I tend to gravitate towards the story ones because I find them thought provoking. But also they're not like a huge commitment. I would and the most I listen to podcasts I do listen to them every day because I walked to work. My work is a mile, my hospital is a mile and a half from my home. And so I love waking up my brain listening to a podcast and walking and getting that fresh exercise in. So I listen to a podcast on my way to work, and then I listened to one on my way home. So I listen to like a podcast about an hour a day. But when I'm really into a podcast. I'll listen to it over my lunch and I get a 30 minute lunch break. So I'll just click on the episode and eat. And then I also listen to podcasts when I'm doing chores. So when I'm doing laundry and I'm cleaning and I'm any chores I'm doing around the house. I love to listen to them.

Researcher:

Yeah, definitely. Um, do you know which, like, obviously, there's a lot of shows and there's probably a lot of them that were advertising with BetterHelp but do you know like, which one in particular were the ones that kind of piqued your interest?

Subject 9:

Yeah, so um, *Something Was Wrong*, the Reddit, they advertised it. Um, and then let's see here. So *Something Was Wrong*. And then I listened to picking and choosing *The Showcase File*, they were advertising BetterHelp and then I was listening to I think they have advertised it on *Bravo Docket* but I would say like 80% of the podcasts I listened to advertised BetterHelp. Like, yeah, I would say probably like eight out of the 10 advertised it. And when I was listening to podcasts and so isolated, that was the one, the one place I thought that was the one outlet where I heard about it and was like, Well, this is the only thing I know so I'm gonna give it a shot.

Researcher:

Do you think that the like the testimony of the like the podcast hosts or whatever was a factor in your decision or do you think it was more like just circumstantial?

Subject 9:

Circumstantial. I've never heard um like, I'm never I have I know for sure. I've never heard anyone on the podcasts I've said, have said that. They've used it themselves. They just said it's helped, you know, millions of people. Like, I know with like *Something Was Wrong*, and I know it's like the *Bravo Docket* and I also think I listened to a podcast called *No One Should Believe Me*, which is about Munchausen by proxy. And on that one, all of them have phrased it as you know, like, for *No One Should Believe Me*, *Something Was Wrong*, those ones that deal with like, like abuse, trauma, scamming, they'll say, you know, people were in a, you know, people face hardship, people, you know, things don't go well. The pandemic is such a tough time. Listeners know, from the content of this podcast that people can really struggle

with things and BetterHelp can help. So it's never been like a personal testimony of her no one's like, I've used this before. It's just more they advertise it and like, tie it into their content.

Researcher:

Okay, yeah, that's that works. I know that it's also always different. So it's good. Um, I think that all the like all the structured questions are taken care of. I'm double checking, because I think that a lot of that was covered in the first place. But I guess before we run out of time, since zoom will kick us off in 10 minutes. Is there anything else that you want to like add to the to the interview?

Subject 9:

Oh, yeah. Um, I know one of the questions you asked was do you like see the people as like friends? And I wouldn't say I like you know, with the Bravo Docket and 90 Day Cray. I don't see them as friends, but I see them as people where it's like, I crave hearing from them.

Researcher:

Yeah, interesting. Okay.

Subject 9:

You know, like, you know, I crave hearing from them. And like, if I like for example, I would love to go to BravoCon and me, like the two lawyers from Bravo Docket, but I wouldn't say be like, Oh, we should go to lunch and you feel like friends that would I probably if I approach them say, I love your podcast, and I love your legal. I love your legal knowledge that you apply to this and it's just great. Yeah. So it's more of like a craving and even with 90 Day Cray. I don't really know any like buddy else that like enjoys it as much as I do. So I like I love tuning into it and like hearing what they have to say. And the 90 Day Cray, one of the hosts is from Wisconsin, so I get really amused when he likes us something about Wisconsin.

Researcher:

Yeah, definitely. Uh do you feel like you have anything else to add?

Subject 9:

No no. I think that's all.

Subject 10

Subject Age: 26

Subject Gender: Woman

Education Level: Bachelor's

Occupation: Student and social media specialist

Nationality: Dutch

Country of Residence: United States of America

Parasocial Relationship Scores:

Virtual Friendship: 2.43
Respectful Interest: 3.43
Trust: 5

Researcher:

Do you think we could start off with you just explaining your relationships to podcasts? Like how often do you um listen, etc?

Subject 10:

Yeah sure. At the moment, a lot less. I used to listen to podcasts on a weekly basis, like when I was commuting to work, while on walks, in particular, um during COVID, in the car, and stuff like that. Um I um since I work from home now I do not listen to podcasts as often anymore. I would usually stick to one or two podcasts I really enjoyed for a while, before trying out new ones. Um yeah. I would usually stick to one show at a time, until I finished or until I got bored with it. And yeah.

Researcher:

For sure, and how do you usually find yourself consuming podcasts? Like, is it strictly audio, what do you do while you're listening?

Subject 10:

Um yeah I definitely only listen to audio. I don't think I've ever tried to watch a podcast. I mostly listen while doing something else, like I mentioned walking, commuting, stuff like that. I would never just listen to a podcast. Um I would always either be going somewhere, be cleaning, be going to and from um work, and stuff.

Researcher:

Yeah, that's all fair. Um do you know what show um piqued your interest in BetterHelp in particular?

Subject 10:

Um, honestly, like no I do not. I believe it had to be something from Wondery (podcast network), because I was listening to those a lot at the time. Yeah. Sorry. I really don't um remember.

Researcher:

No no worries. Could you tell me what it is about Wondery that interests you in their shows um like in particular?

Subject 10:

Yeah, um I don't know. I think it's just because they're really like well-produced and high-quality. Um and they tend to find really interesting stories, I think.

Researcher:

Yeah, no, definitely. I get that. I wanted to ask, um, like to the best of your knowledge, how much do you think you're impacted by podcast ads? Like, have you purchased a lot of things from them?

Subject 10:

Yeah, um I was thinking about this. I would say that um I am not easily impacted, since other than BetterHelp, I've never tried um anything. Like that a podcast host has recommended or talked about. I guess, maybe subconsciously I have, but like I don't remember it vividly at all.

Researcher:

Yeah, absolutely. Um so I have a few questions about BetterHelp to run by you. Um, first, how long did you use it? And like are you still using it now?

Subject 10:

I am not really sure the exact time period, but I would say probably I used it for a time period of, if I remember correctly, 1.5 to 2.5 months. Yeah. And no, um I am not using it now.

Researcher:

Okay, yeah. Um what type of therapy did you use BetterHelp with? Like text, talk, video?

Subject 10:

Um I think I only used video and text. Yeah.

Researcher:

For sure, yeah. What about BetterHelp motivated you to try it in particular?

Subject 10:

Can you repeat that?

Researcher:

Yeah, sorry, um like what interested you in BetterHelp?

Subject 10:

Oh, yeah, I believe I first heard about BetterHelp from a YouTuber, but like it really caught my attention when I heard about it again through a podcast. For me, the endorsement by the podcast host of a more serious, reputable show lent a sense of seriousness and trustworthiness to BetterHelp that I didn't get from like a vlogger on YouTube. Also, the podcast host's discussion made the service seem more credible and reliable, which

persuaded me to give it a try. Additionally, I um was living abroad at the time, so like the idea of online therapy seemed like an ideal solution for accessing mental health support without the complications of finding local therapists in a foreign country. Yeah. I think that this combination of factors ultimately led me to explore and use BetterHelp's services.

Researcher:

OK, yeah that's good. Um and I guess you already answered this a bit, but do you think that the testimony of a podcast host was part of your decision to use the company?

Subject 10:

Yeah, um, if I remember correctly, I found my podcast hosts to be well-informed, smart, and educated. Like, their demeanor and the way they presented information made me feel more comfortable and confident about trying something they recommended, especially when it came to like BetterHelp. The hosts' thoughtful discussions and insights gave me the impression that they had thoroughly reviewed the services of Betterhelp, which like, was making their recommendations feel more reliable. This was different than all the BetterHelp advertisements on social media. They're like all over social media, but like those ads never really piqued my interest in the same way. Social media endorsements often feel more superficial and less trustworthy to me, maybe because the platform itself is more casual and used for promoting literally anything you can think of. For some reason, um, podcasts always seemed more trustworthy and credible. The in-depth, conversational feel of podcasts allows for more detailed explanations and personal anecdotes, which helped me feel a stronger sense of trust and connection with the hosts. And I think that that feeling definitely um influenced my decision to give BetterHelp a try.

Researcher:

Um just a few more questions. Um could you talk a bit more about your experience with BetterHelp?

Subject 10:

Yeah, I don't know. I think my experience was fine but I think really disappointing. Nothing horrible happened, but, the therapists I tried were usually like unresponsive, and came across kind of like amateurs.

Researcher:

OK, for sure, with all that in mind, do you think that BetterHelp was fairly advertised to you on these podcasts?

Subject 10:

You know, not particularly. Um I think it was advertised like, a lot more affordable than it actually turned out to be. There was a big payment plan which pulled the entire fee at the start, which is not how it was advertised to me at all. Um It also sounded like you would

get the service of a ‘regular’ therapist, who is knowledgeable and involved, but like I said the therapists were just not really up to par. Um it was advertised to me as the better alternative to in person therapy, but I was definitely very disappointed with their services.

Researcher:

Of course. Yeah. Um, those are all the questions I have for you, do you have any for me?

Subject 10:

No no, it’s good. Thank you.

Researcher:

Thank you.

Appendix E: Open-Answer Question Responses

Number	Response
1	Better Help was a great motivator for me to seek an in person therapist. The two therapists I saw at BH we’re awful
2	Went thru 3 therapists during my time with betterhelp. The third therapist was exactly what I needed and helped me achieve a lot of my mental health goals. The first two were more aligned with the standard criticisms of better help therapists: inappropriate or not there.
3	The therapy was wonderful when it happened but my therapist canceled many sessions due to a various issues: being sick, emergency surgery, issues with Betterhelp platform not working and her being on vacation.) She hasn't responded to my 3 emails in last 2 weeks asking for an individual therapy session (her calendar is unavailable to me) but I can group therapy session. I not sure what the issue is as my account is still active. It's too bad as I would like to talk to some body and I fight against continual thoughts that people don't hear me and/or ignore me. I am more depressed than when I started therapy and this has reaffirmed my isolationist thinking. I don't blame the Race Chaser podcast that I introduced me to Betterhelp and gave me a discount code. I continue to listen to them. I have listed numerous podcasts daily for over 6 years and have probably only bought 5 or 6 things because of the ads. I realize it is just an advertisement and it is way for them to make money. The ads don't really influence my purchases but I do sometimes think that the ads reflect "what the kids are doing/like." (I am 54.) Hope this helps.
4	On my last session, my “therapist” went through a checklist of things we had talked about. If we had not covered something, she quickly went through it and asked “so we covered that right?” It was very rude and impersonal as i was struggling with grief at the time. Session ended with her asking me to fill out a survey.
5	Although I don't currently listen to it as often, the podcast discount code that motivated me to join betterhelp was Office Ladies. I had a good first

	time experience with BH and it has been my only therapist to date. However, after around 2 years doing therapy online, I am looking to move to a new therapist in person. But hearing podcast hosts talk about their personal experiences with therapy definitely motivated me to sign up for it after thinking about it for many months and I thought BH was a great entry to it.
6	Pretty sure most of the “licensed therapists” are just random people who have very little educational background in regards to administrating therapy and counseling. Also all the ones I had very little to say and offer in conversation had pretty much sat there zoned out for most sessions. All in all the service feels more oriented at giving people an outlet where they can pay to talk and complain at a person without push back.
7	Better help did not work for me I’m not sure if it was because of me or because of better help
8	The testimony of the podcaster didn’t influence me to join. It more pushed me to look into it myself after hearing it in advertisements multiple times.
9	The cost was too high to continue. I gravitated towards better help because I was unsure of where to seek help. The ad pointed me In the right direction.
10	I picked a non religious therapist as a preference and the therapist I was assigned to talked heavily about religion
11	Better help is the definition of a snake oil scam
12	At the time of trying it, I had been considering therapy for years but the stigma of it made me ashamed and embarrassed. A big reason I tried it after learning about it from a podcast is the convenience of using better help in my own time without anyone knowing I was going to therapy.
13	I think important context is that the podcasts I listed are often “breaking the fourth wall” by speaking openly about having to record the ads and being outrageous/sarcastic in the ad recordings. I’m not saying this applies to BetterHelp, but it applies to how listeners or viewers may perceive the validity of their promotions, in general.
14	Betterhelp is not an adequate service. The therapists do not listen and aren't qualified to actually be treating people. It feels like a complete scam after trying 4 different incompetent "therpists."
15	This was my personal experience but my therapist was inattentive, rushed me, and dismissed a lot of my concerns. I contribute some of this to a bad therapist and some of this to the platform she was on.
16	BetterHelp is terrible and should not exist. This is my professional opinion as a therapist
17	I think it's a weird predatory company
18	Re: did the host use betterhelp? It's written to sound as if they did. But then you hear the exact same script from different podcasters so clearly it's not their actual testimonial.

19	I think the fact that the ad was on so many of the podcasts I listened to is what led me to eventually give it a try when I was struggling to find a therapist with openings. Not any personal podcasters testimony. The flexible service fit my schedule, and I stuck with it a long time because it was convenient. But ultimately it was quite expensive and while I enjoyed chatting with my therapist, I could tell she was not remembering much about me from one session to the next so it was often more a friendly chat than a productive session and I honestly should have stopped seeing her a lot sooner, especially given that it's not covered by insurance so the price really adds up.
20	i had tried better help before the influx of podcast advertising. i ended up not continuing with it because it didn't actually seem like a good deal compared to traditional therapy when i evaluated the costs
21	I was ghosted by my counselor at better help and then they randomly assigned a man to me. I had trauma related to men and that was clearly in my file....
22	I enjoyed my experience with better help and would use it again if I needed it
23	better help was awful they told me my problems weren't too bad when i was struggling with severe depression and their advice was to try making friends
24	Better help felt so solution focused ,there was no rapport building or connection. A refrigerator would be it was like the drive through option of therapy ill take a CBT with a side of fries see you at the next counter.
25	I found BetterHelp years before I found my favorite podcasts. A podcast I listened to at the time recommended it and offered a coupon code, this was at a time where I was on a months-long waiting list to see a local therapist in person, so I figured I would try it and no harm done. The therapist I was assigned was 6 time zones away, and was inflexible with her scheduling. She spent the majority of our appointments talking about her job as a counselor for teenagers at a day program, and once when I had to cancel an appointment due to illness she told me that it wasn't fair because she wouldn't get paid. She then told me I wasn't "cut out" for therapy and told me I had a victim complex (which I was aware of and was the entire reason I was seeking therapy in the first place), and called me inconsiderate towards her income. I contacted BetterHelp customer service and included screenshots, they told me that therapists do still get paid in the case of cancellation and that she was not being truthful. They offered to set me up with a new therapist but I felt that a company with an already waning public opinion, and who does not properly vet their therapists' skills would not be worth the money spent on trying a new therapist. BetterHelp was not covered by my insurance and was more expensive than it would be to pay a copay and see an in person therapist.
26	I've always been a huge proponent of therapy as suicide runs in my family, when I first heard about better help I was excited because I had just lost my health insurance and couldn't afford my regular therapist. It was such a

	horrible experience (I had one therapist cancel on me multiple times, it took them almost two weeks to find me another therapist and then that one was awful, over all I paid for three months and only had 3-30 minute sessions. Which they also don't tell you until your first session that they are 30 minute rather than the standard 55) I worried about people who this was their first experience with therapy. I knew how help good therapy is and just kept thinking if this is what people think all therapy is a lot of folks who need help won't get it.
27	Better help was more expensive than in person therapy.
28	My therapist was not very helpful. She would often divert attention away from me and my problems and make the sessions about her and her life and experiences. The advice she had to offer was also not helpful and I often felt as if she wasn't actually listening to what I was saying.
29	The quality of the therapist I expected based on the ad (professional psychologist doing telemedicine bc they cared about affordable care for struggling patients), and the quality I got were very different (someone who didn't fit my preferences, and multitasked while talking with me {ie they were cooking food and not paying attention, didn't remember things I had talked about in depth multiple times, etc}, mentioned they were on the fence about quitting the profession when better help became an option and started doing it out of convenience)
30	I didn't know about the problems with betterhelp when I used it, and I still think it would be a great service if they weren't shady. When I was having trouble paying for it, they lowered the price for me and the customer service was super helpful. I really liked my therapist, she helped me through a really hard time and helped me to go to my doctor and get the antidepressants I clearly needed . I live in a rural area and I did BetterHelp during COVID when you couldn't go in person anyway, but I still can't find any therapists anywhere near me that are in my network. Podcast hosts giving testimony was at the most a very shallow description of the service that made me think they don't even use it. But I wouldn't know about betterhelp if I hadn't heard it on a podcast ad.
31	The cost is way too high. Therapists seem to treat it like a side gig rather than a real job helping people who actually need the help. Podcast hosts (most podcasts I listen to advertise(d) for the company) recommend it as if it actually is a viable option for therapy, but in my opinion it isn't. You wouldn't use teledocs as your main doctor, and this is the same issue with therapy.
32	BetterHelp is an awful organization.
33	I was looking for a therapist when the podcast advertisement made me aware of Better Help's existence. 0/10, do not recommend.
34	Fuck those people fr
35	It was not a helpful service
36	Both of my better help therapists were very unprofessional and unreliable

37	I just personally didn't like either of the therapists I talked too. Both weren't familiar with my culture and It made it hard to talk about my life
38	I had a truly neutral experience with better help. I moved to a new city and thought it would be easier than finding a therapist in person. I found it to be much less helpful than in person therapy. But I definitely learned about better help from podcasts. I hope all goes well with the dissertation! I'm writing mine right now! :)
39	The ad influenced me to try Better Help mostly because of the cost. I was looking for a therapist in 2020, when there was very little access and I really needed a cheap option. I quit pretty quickly after being very unimpressed with the therapists I tried.
40	I've been with my therapist through better help for nearly 3 years, yes it is costly but I've gained so much and grown so much from it and I'm genuinely grateful I've found my therapist
41	In an emergency, sure, BetterHelp is fine. But I felt like I was texting into the void, and paying a lot of money for it.
42	I've tried BetterHelp twice - the first time it was the podcast discount code that motivated me and I determined my match was not a good fit, discontinuing after 3 months. The second time it was a friend who referred me to her therapist and that therapist was /still is awesome.
43	I knew I needed therapy but I was overwhelmed trying to book one through my insurance. Repeatedly hearing about Better Help (through a podcast I no longer listen to due to not liking how they go about things) is what pushed me to see if that would be an easier option than trying to go through the roundabout of the doctors office.
44	Better help is a scam 💔
45	My therapist was nice but the one thing that gave me pause was that she was licensed as an LCSW (licensed clinical social worker) as opposed to traditional psychology.
46	While I've heard the horror stories and am somewhat aware of privacy issues with the company, I actually had a good experience with the app. I found 2 great therapists that helped me a lot during a time of transition, and the ease of using the app made it much easier to get started in my high anxiety state than connecting with a traditional therapist.
47	Better help was advertised as affordable but it wasn't at all. I tried to use it during covid when I was very depressed and isolated but once I was able to do a little bit of local research I found a therapist for under \$100.i didn't feel comfortable giving my credit card info to better help in the way they had it set up
48	The discount code offered through podcast ads was a factor
49	The coupon code is what led me to finally use BetterHelp instead of finding a local therapist
50	In my area there was no local therapist so I had a therapist that was on a different time zone so it was impossible to get into contact with them. The

	second therapist I got had religious affiliations wich I specifically stated I did not want. When I tryed to cancle the service they tried to get me to stay by giving me more discounts and did not care when I mentioned the above to costumer service. I feel like it is weird that Podcast do advertise this service when it does seem that most people have bad experiences with the app. It is understandable as to why the service is so shotty but it does make it hard for people to get quality help and it could also make people not want to try therapy in the future.
51	I think BetterHelp is predatory in their practices and doesn't vet their "therapists" well, if at all.
52	I kept asking the therapists if they had any experience working with trans people, every single one of the SIX I matched with told me to find someone else. It was a horrible experience.
53	I only used betterhelp because I needed remote therapy and it was an easy option with a podcast discount code.
54	I paid for 6 months in advance and after my third awful therapist I gave up after a few weeks. I wasn't expecting best-in-class but the incompetence was astounding and I have to imagine this company has harmed many people who needed help and wound up with an unskilled therapists who do little more than share easily googleable info
55	I felt comfortable using better help the first time, in part, because of testimony from hosts I like. It was an awful experience. The customer service is atrocious and they can't seem to hold onto good therapists. I would absolutely nor recommend using it.
56	I love the schedule flexibility with BetterHelp. I have taken sessions in parking lots when I get stuck in traffic. With horse shows I have to bounce between ohio and florida 2 months of the year and Kentucky for the summer. I never miss a week because sessions are done remotely. My therapist is very engaged and encourages me to message her in between sessions when I'm struggling or she knows I have a stressful situation happening between sessions. I am very open about my mental health and recommend better help to everyone.
57	Betterhelp was working at first but started to very impersonal and too businesslike for my comfort
58	I chose to utilize Betterhelp following a major traumatic event (death of my son). Because this coincided with lockdowns/COVID, I opted for a remote therapy option, Betterhelp, because I had heard about it from ads on several podcasts. I stopped utilizing Betterhelp because I felt I had processed the trauma and developed appropriate coping mechanisms to thrive on my own. I would consider returning to Betterhelp therapy if I felt my life situation would benefit from it.
59	Joke, rip off - I feel the podcasts saying they use them lie.
60	I have also used a similar service called Lyra which I have had a better experience with. The counselor telemet with me whereas the betterhelp counselor didnt do that

61	I used better help after my miscarriage with the idea to help work through the grief and trauma as I started fertility treatment. I chose it because I could schedule an appointment quickly and had the podcast discount. It was not set up to help with my specific situation and cost the same as other therapist in my area once the discount was done. I transitioned to a local therapist that specialized in my needs.
62	The therapist I got was terrible. Hardly let me speak and was dismissive when I tried to talk
63	I am in therapy again, but this time not with BetterHelp. My employer's insurance provided a different virtual therapy option.
64	I would not recommend Better Help. Received worksheets instead of talk therapy.
65	I sought out BetterHelp because I thought it would be an affordable option for someone without insurance, but it turned out to be way out of my budget.
66	I'd say the podcast ads were key to my AWARENESS of the existence of BetterHelp but not hugely influential in my choice to try it beyond that
67	When I suggest better help I'm specific about finding the right therapist. Mine was great after saying no to a few. He practiced CBT and that's what I was looking for.

Index of Tables

Table 1: Parasocial relationship stages adapted from Tukachinsky and Stever, 2019, p. 297-308

Stage	Definition
1. Initiation	The point at which a person finds a media figure attractive physically or psychologically and starts to pay more attention to them.
2. Experimentation	When an individual starts to put more effort into learning more about the person through the internet, or by engaging in more of the person's content to see if the figure shares the person's beliefs.
3. Intensification	A person becomes more interested in the media figure to the point of thinking about them outside of interacting with their content.

4.Integration/Bonding	The parasocial relationship becomes a part of the person's identity, and they want to be socially recognized for this relationship.
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Table 2: The four parameters of podcast intimacy adapted from Adler Berg, 2023 p. 4-10

Parameter	Action
Listening circumstances (when & how)	- Releasing episodes on specific days: Reliable scheduling makes listening to a podcast a part of a person's routine, whether as a part of their weekend or week. - Listeners using headphones: With headphones, sound is delivered directly into the listener's ear. This is even more pertinent with noise-canceling headphones as background noise is blocked out and the focus is on the podcast.
What is said	Sharing more intimate details and discussing taboo topics: The more the host shares about themselves, the more intimate the listening experience.
How it is said	Speaking informally: Podcasts feel more real than traditional radio because podcasters are not trained to speak a certain way and instead bring an authentic voice. Hosts and guests also express themselves through their voices with laughs, sighs, and vocal changes.
Cross-media interactions	Building closeness: Intimacy is fostered between interactions between podcasters and their fans on social media, and between fans who build a community surrounding a specific podcast.

Table 3: The six frameworks of the cybertherapeutic theory. Adapted from Suler, 2008 p. 103-110.

Synchronous/Asynchronous	Synchronous psychotherapy involves the counselor and patient interacting at the same time through text, internet calls, or video calls. Asynchronous communication revolves around disconnected time frames. There is a delayed viewing of the text, audio, or video messages.
Text/Sensory	With text-based approaches to psychotherapy, there is little opportunity for sensory experiences, but it exists within video or internet call options. There is also the ability to create sensory experiences through text with emojis, capital letters, and punctuation to convey more emotions.
Imaginary/Realistic	Fantasy worlds and virtual reality can help professionals conduct therapy, whether by encouraging role-playing, creating a relaxing environment, or exploring dreams, fantasies, and childhood memories.
Automated/Interpersonal	Computers can help automate interventions or assessments, are unbiased in their analysis, and have better memories than people. But the human reaction and intimacy are lost. A computer also can't catch body language.
Invisible/Present	Some clients may open more when they are not aware there is a therapist there, this can involve a therapist "listening in" to another colleague interacting with their patient, listening to a group session, or reading over an email list. Clients can be invisible by listening to, but not participating, in group sessions. In these cases, it is essential to have informed consent from everyone involved.
Individual/Group Work	This aspect of cybertherapy reflects traditional therapy. Group work allows patients with similar issues to discuss their

	experiences together. Online group sessions are beneficial for people with rare issues who cannot find anyone to relate to in their day-to-day lives.
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Table 4: Results from Joe et. al, 2023, p. 7

Professionalism	• Most users saw their therapists as acting professionally. • Others reported unprofessional activities from their therapists, such as: performing sessions from a car, not showing up to the appointment, not replying within the guaranteed response time, and repeatedly canceling an appointment.
Continuity of Care	• Many users faced glitches, therapist unavailability, or “abrupt” termination. • One BetterHelp user stated that they had emergency financial problems and were distressed that they couldn’t say goodbye to their therapist after being locked out of the app.
Affordability of Access	• Platforms can be more affordable than traditional face-to-face therapy. • One user left a review saying they got a discount due to financial hardship.
Cost Fairness	• Users did see the apps as being fair in their pricing. • Subscription models mean clients will pay even if there are no appointments.
Cost Transparency	• Users stated they did not feel that the pricing was transparent, as it requires the user to fill out a full questionnaire before being told the price.

Access to Care	• Users stated they were happy to be able to connect with a therapist when they couldn't find one near them, such as in small towns. • They were happy to be able to continue therapy during the COVID-19 pandemic. • Some users stated they were scared to go to therapy because of social anxiety, and the apps helped.
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Table 5 The original parasocial relationship scale developed by Hartmann et. Al, 2008, p. 28

Item	Category
I think my favorite racing driver is like an old friend	Virtual Friendship
My favorite racing driver makes me feel as comfortable as when I am with friends	Virtual Friendship
I think about my favorite racing driver even when they are not on TV	Virtual Friendship
I miss my favorite racing driver if I do not see him on TV for a long time.	Virtual Friendship
I feel that I know my favorite racing driver very well	Virtual Friendship
I try to imagine what my favorite racing driver thinks about a race.	Virtual Friendship
The TV coverage shows me what my favorite racing driver is like.	Respectful Interest
I find my favorite racing driver to be likeable.	Respectful Interest
I mostly agree with the actions of my favorite racing driver.	Respectful Interest
If there were a story about my favorite racing driver in a newspaper or on TV, I would read or watch it.	Respectful Interest

I would like to meet my favorite racing driver in person.	Respectful Interest
I admire my favorite racing driver for his	Respectful Interest
I look forward to watching my favorite racing driver in the next race.	Respectful Interest and Virtual Friendship

Table 6 Adjusted parasocial relationship scale based on Hartmann et. Al, 2008, p. 28

Item	Category
I think my favorite podcast host(s) is like an old friend	Virtual Friendship
My favorite podcast host makes me feel as comfortable as when I am with friends.	Virtual Friendship
I miss my favorite podcast host(s) if they do not release an episode for a long time.	Virtual Friendship
I think about my favorite podcast host(s) even when I am not listening to him/her/them	Virtual Friendship
I feel that I know my favorite podcast host(s) very well	Virtual Friendship
I try to imagine what my favorite podcast host(s) thinks about an episode (or certain topic)	Virtual Friendship
Podcast episodes/interviews show me what my favorite podcast host(s) is like	Respectful Interest
I find my favorite podcast host(s) to be likeable.	Respectful Interest
I mostly agree with the actions/opinions of my favorite podcast host(s)	Respectful Interest
If there were a story about my favorite podcast host in a newspaper/online article/ on TV, I would read or watch it.	Respectful Interest
I would like to meet my favorite podcast host(s) in person.	Respectful Interest

I admire my favorite podcast host(s) for his/her/their achievements.	Respectful Interest
I look forward to the next episode released by my favorite podcaster(s).	Respectful Interest and Virtual Friendship
I trust the products my favorite podcaster(s) recommends.	Trust

Table 7: Interview subject traits

Interview Subject	Age	Nationality	Professional Sector	Education
Interviewee 1	26	Iranian	Health	Bachelor's
Interviewee 2	43	American	Education	Master's
Interviewee 3	25	American	Education	Master's
Interviewee 4	27	American	Judiciary	Bachelor's
Interviewee 5	31	American	Natural Science	Bachelor's
Interviewee 6	42	American	Media	Bachelor's
Interviewee 7	27	Italian/American	Media	Bachelor's
Interviewee 8	55	American	Judiciary	Doctorate
Interviewee 9	37	American	Medical	Bachelor's
Interviewee 10	26	Dutch	Student	Bachelor's

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Figure 1: Nationality of Survey Respondents
Respondent's Nationalities

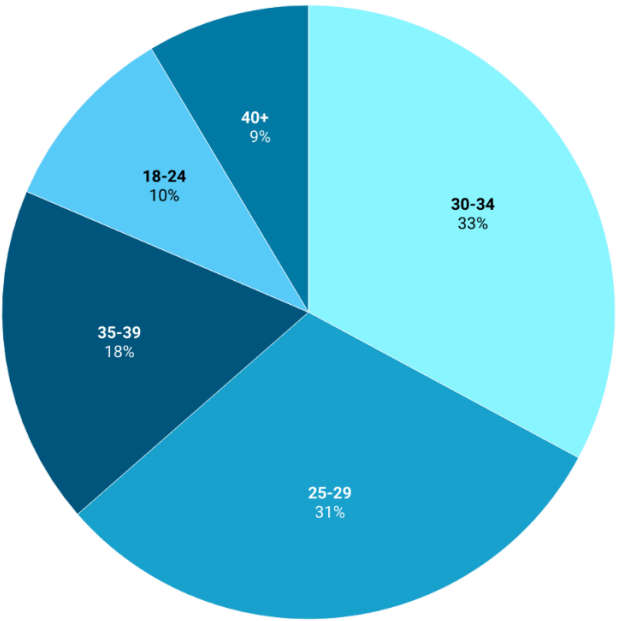


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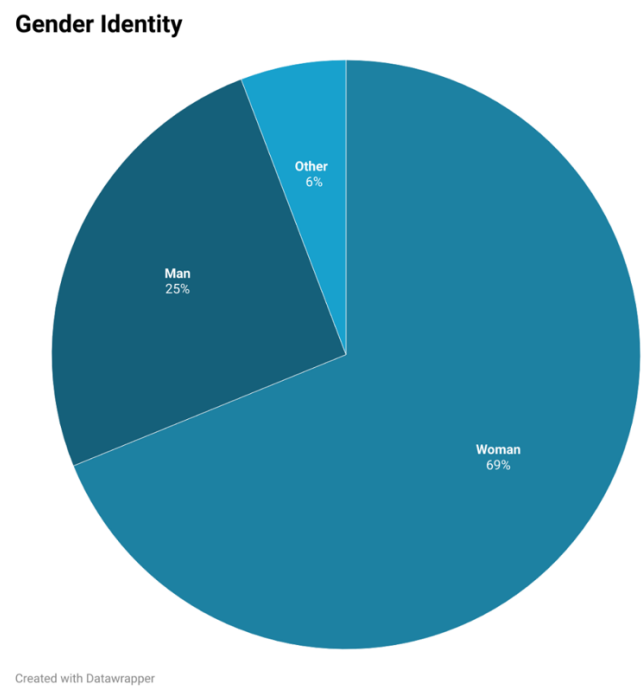
Graph 1: Respondent's age range

Respondent's Age Range



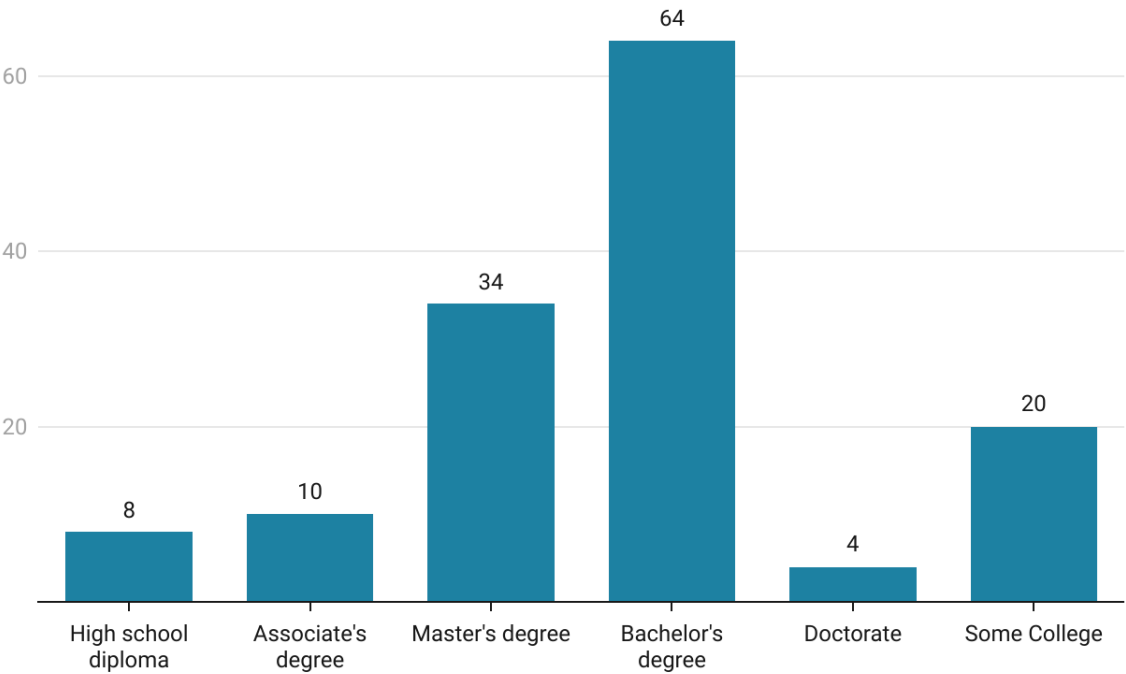
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Graph 2: Respondent's gender identity



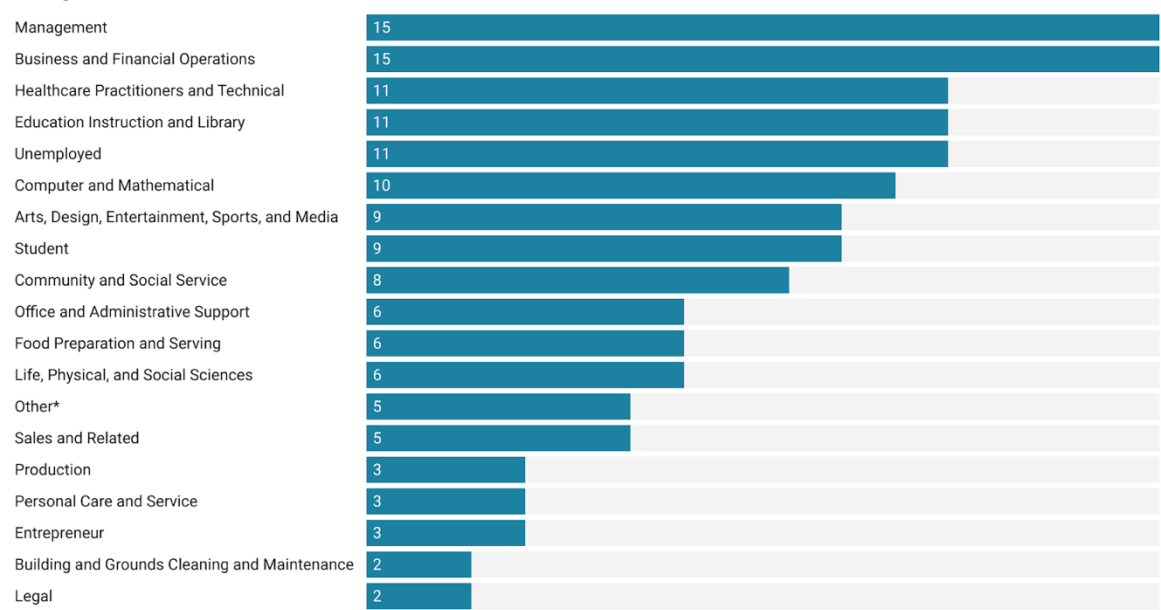
Graph 3: Respondent's education levels

Respondent's Education Levels



Graph 4: Job classification

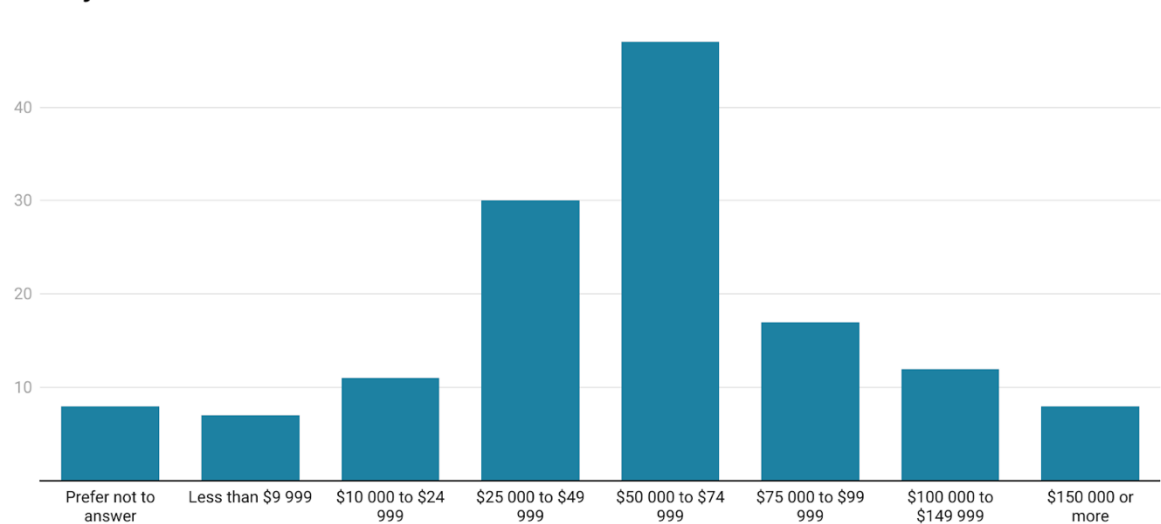
Respondent's Job Classification



*Other includes: Architecture and Engineering , Protective Service, Farming, Fishing, and Forestry, Construction and Extraction, and Transportation and Material
Created with Datawrapper

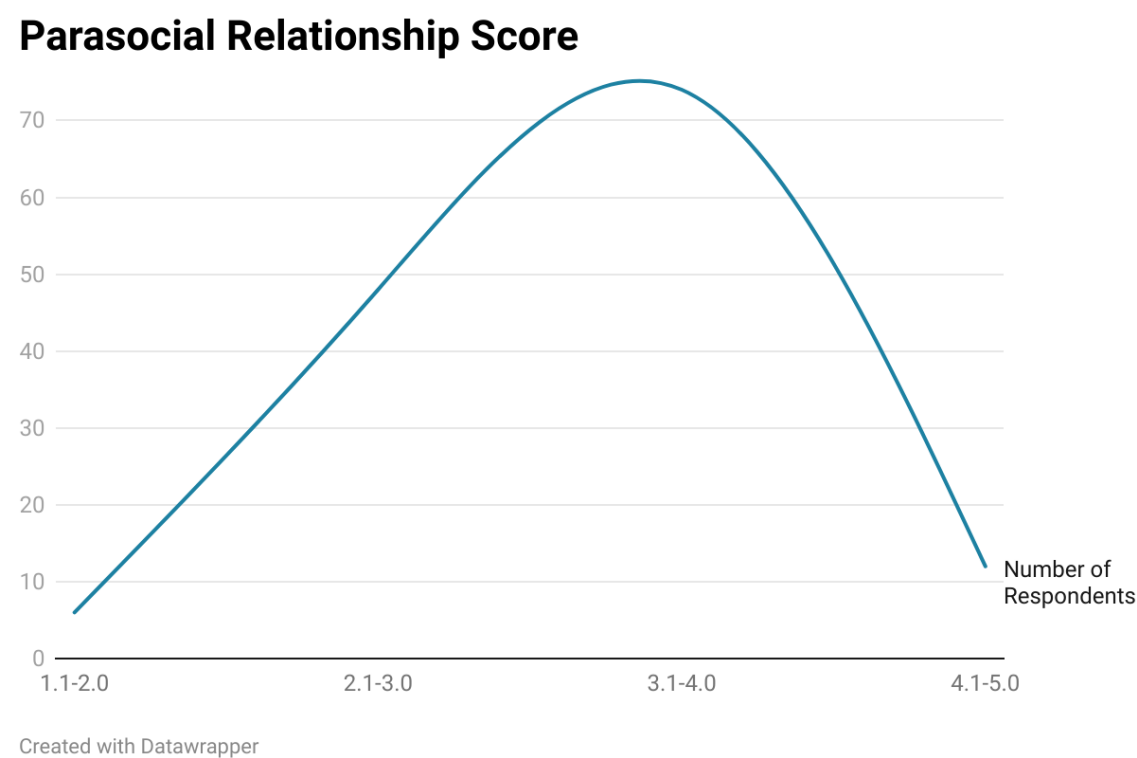
Graph 5: Yearly income

Yearly Income



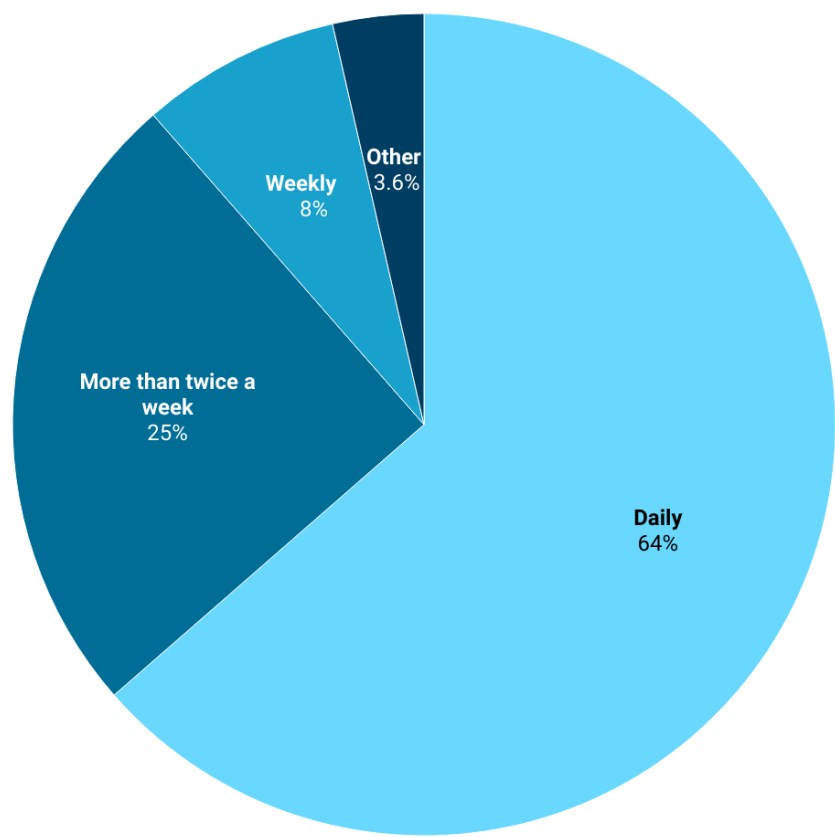
Created with Datawrapper

Graph 6: Parasocial relationship score



Graph 7: Frequency of listening

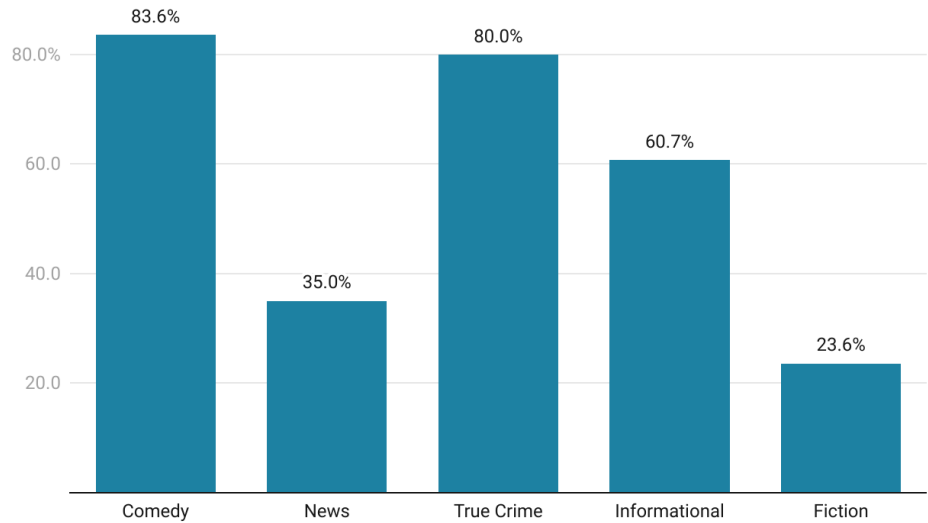
Frequency of Listening



Other includes: More than once a month, monthly, and less than once a month
Created with Datawrapper

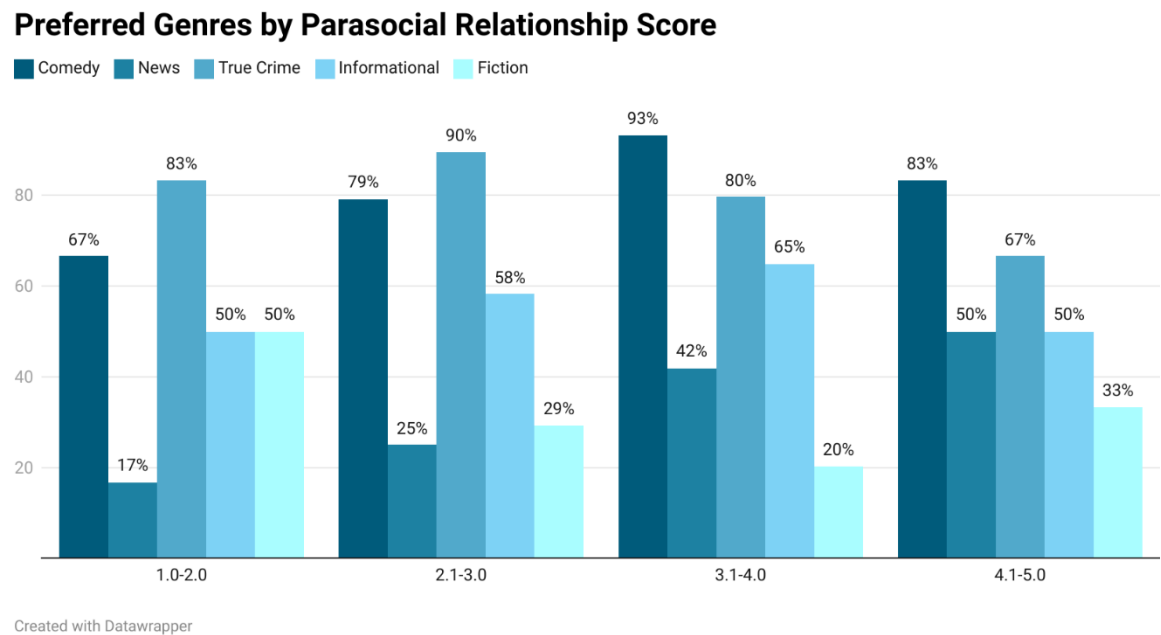
Graph 7: Preferred podcast genres

Preferred Genres



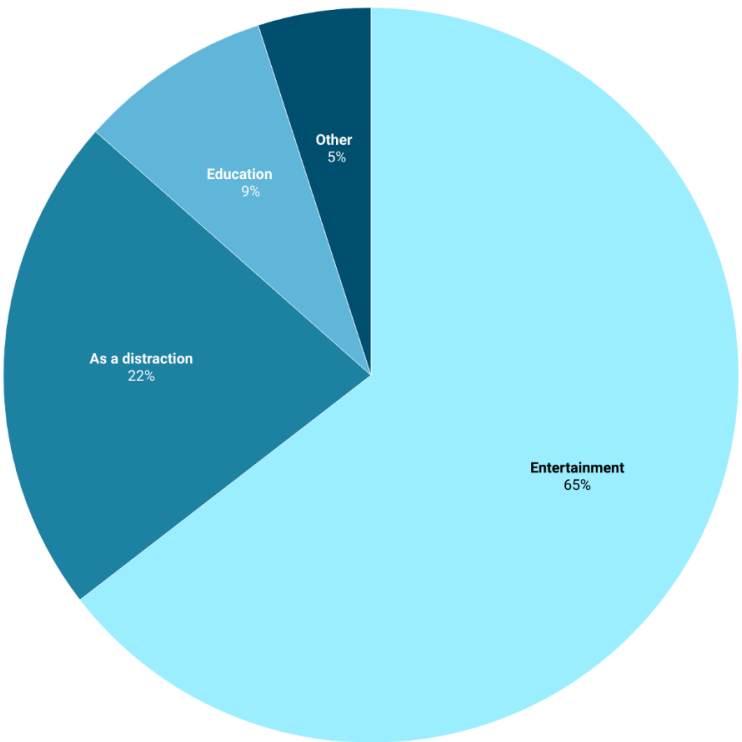
Created with Datawrapper

Graph 9: Preferred podcast genres by parasocial relationship score



Graph 10: Reasons for listening to podcasts

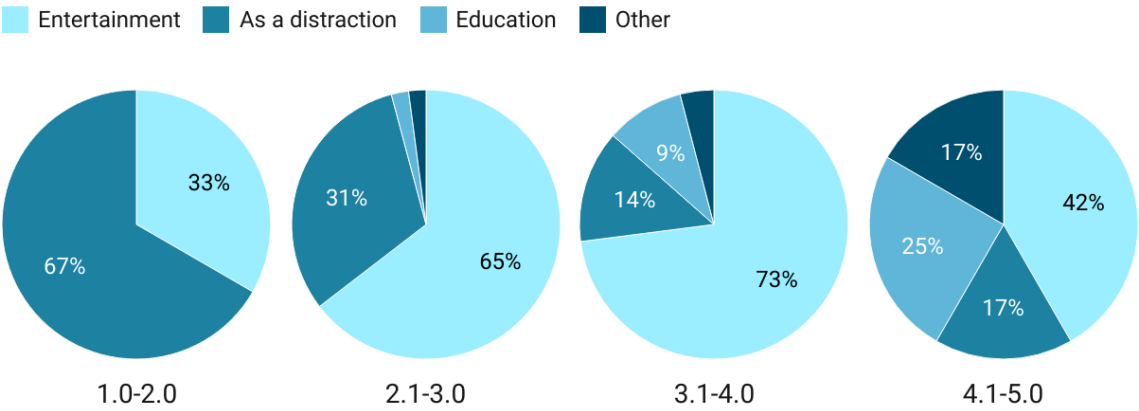
Why people listen



Other includes: all of the above, keeping up with current events, and focus
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Graph 11: Reasons for listening to podcasts based on parasocial relationship score

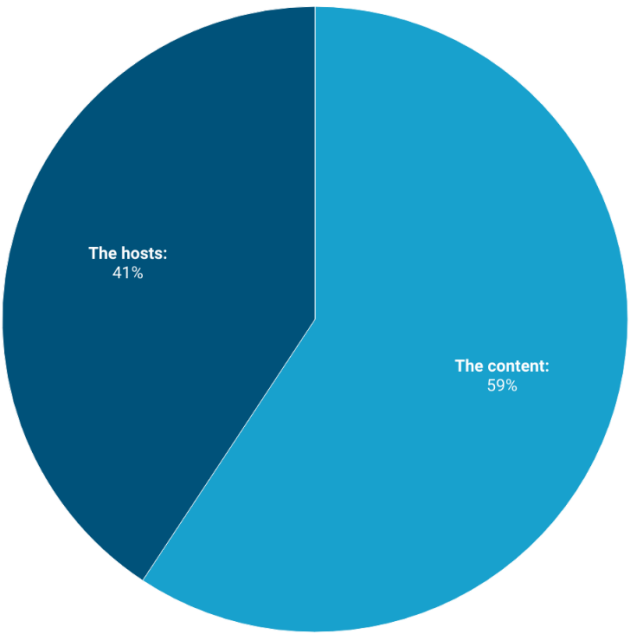
Reasons for listening based on parasocial relationship score



Other includes: all of the above, keeping up with current events, and focus
Created with Datawrapper

Graph 12: Participant’s preference for the host or the content of their favorite podcasts

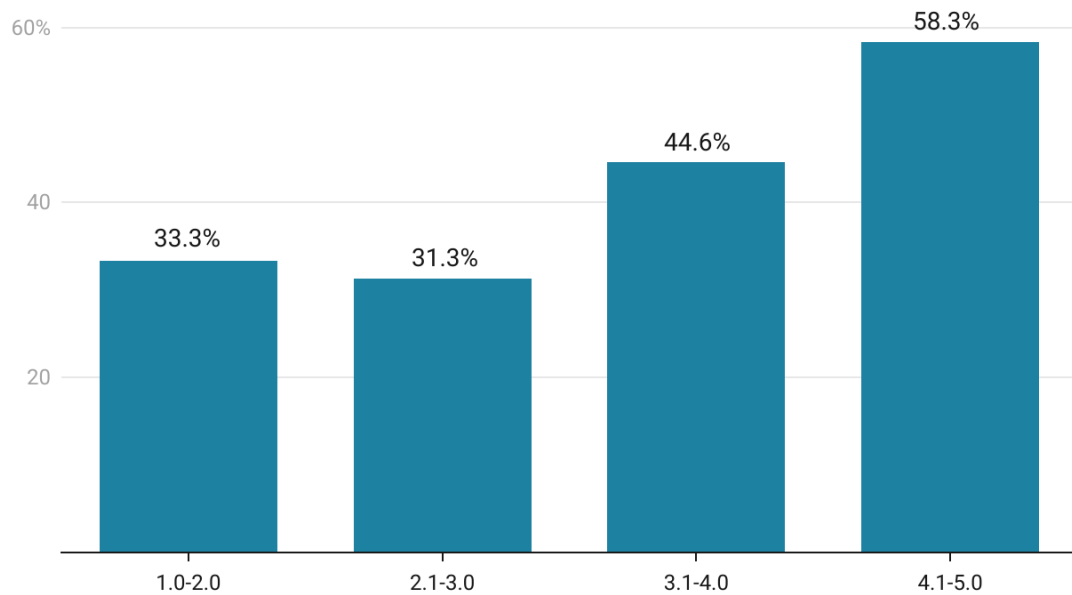
Reasoning for Listening: The Hosts or Content



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Graph 13: Percentage of respondents who listen for the host over content by parasocial relationship score

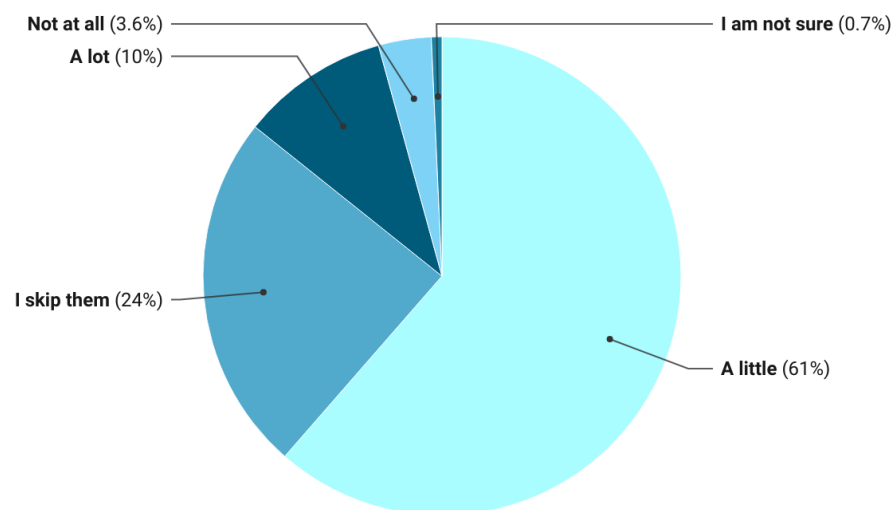
Percentage who chose host by parasocial relationship scale score



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Graph 14: Attention paid to podcast advertisements

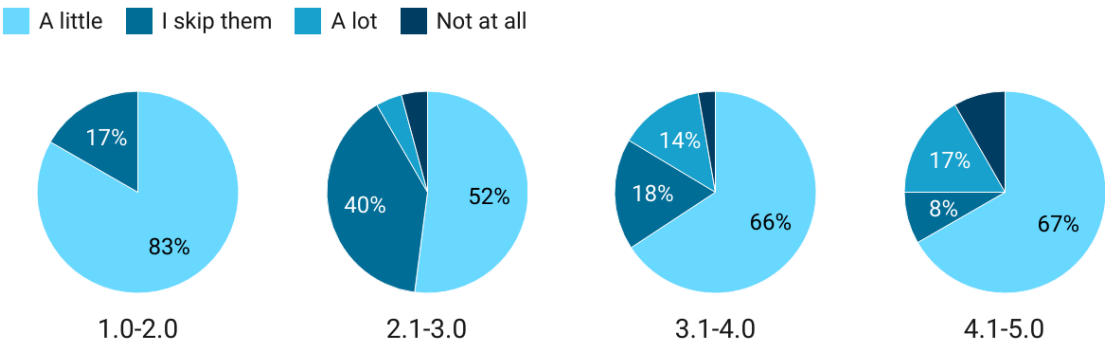
Attention paid to podcast ads



Created with Datawrapper

Graph 15: Attention paid to podcast advertisements by parasocial relationship scale score

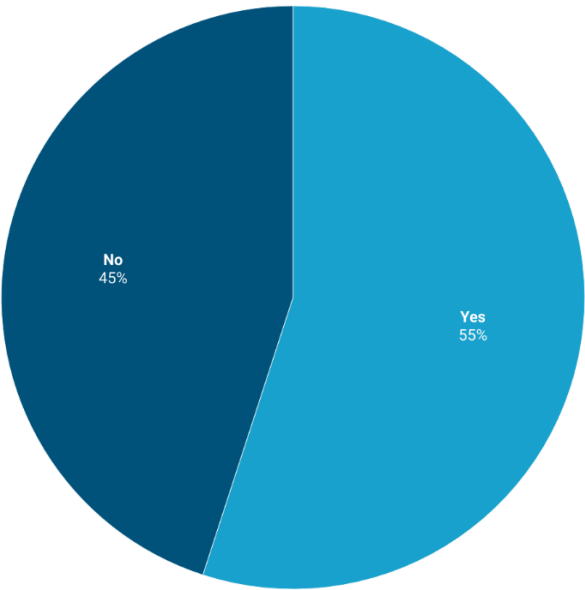
Attention paid to podcast ads by parasocial relationship scale score



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Graph 16: Whether respondents bought something advertised on a podcast besides BetterHelp

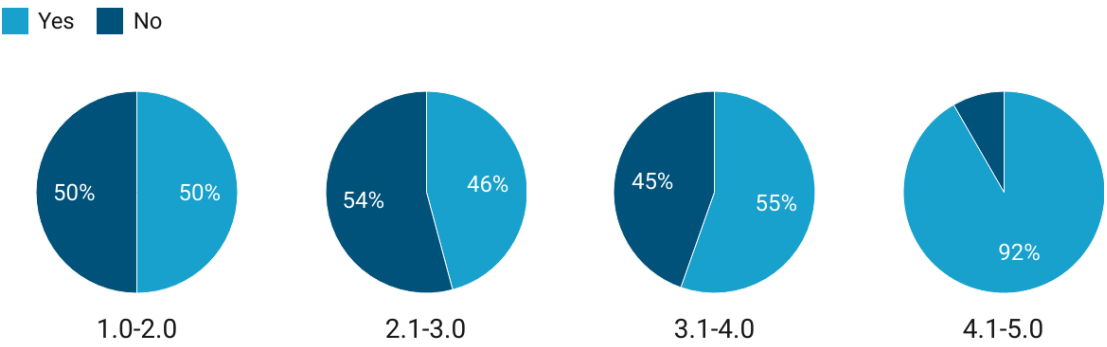
Have you bought something from a podcast ad besides BetterHelp?



Created with Datawrapper

Graph 17: Whether Respondents bought something advertised on a podcast besides BetterHelp by parasocial relationship score

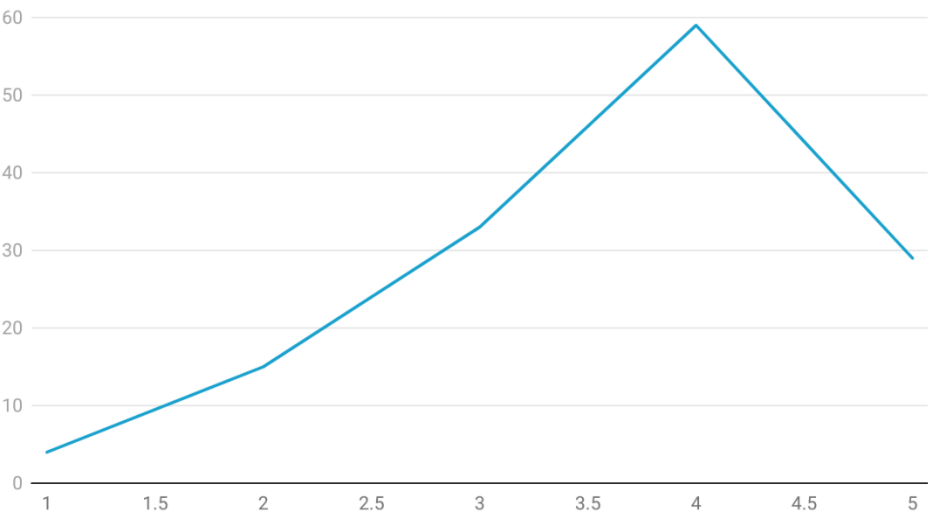
Prior purchases from a podcast ad other than BetterHelp by parasocial relationship score



Created with Datawrapper

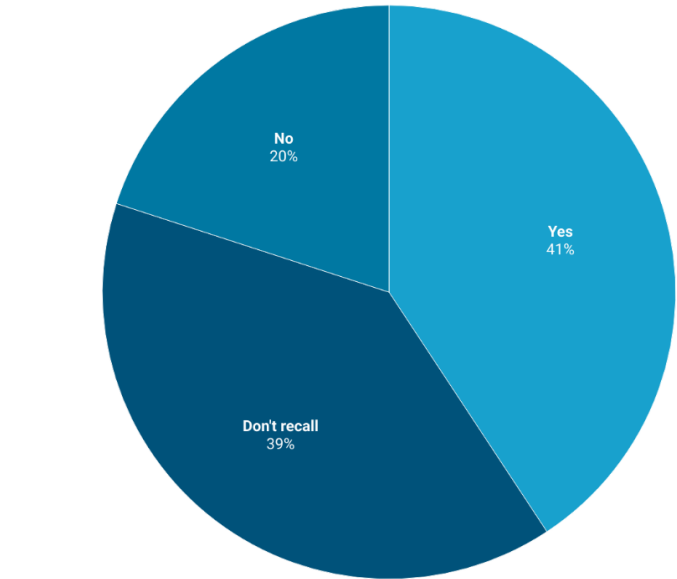
Graph 18: Advertisement influence on the decision to use BetterHelp

How much the advertisement played into the decision to use BetterHelp (scale of 1 to 5)



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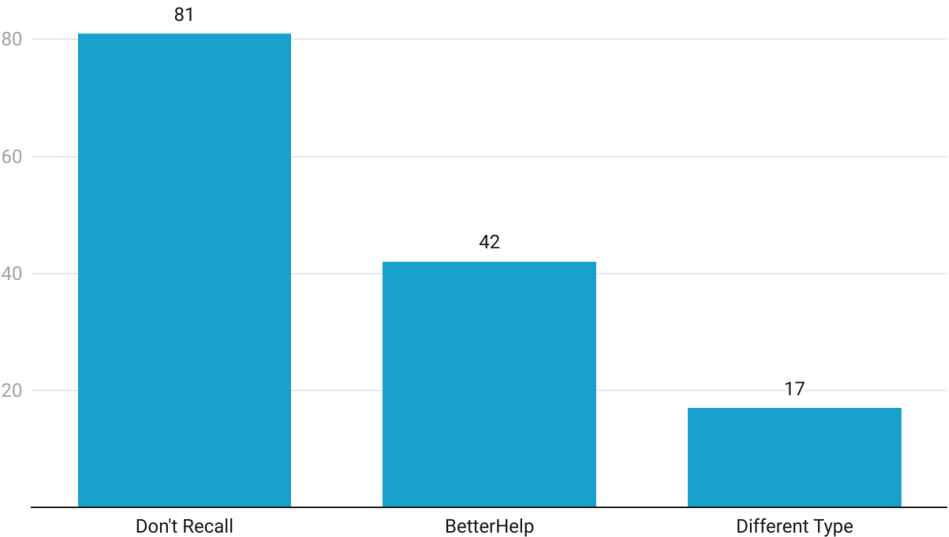
Graph 19: Whether a host used their own testimonial of therapy in a BetterHelp ad
Host's personal experience with therapy in BetterHelp ads



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Graph 20: Whether the host's testimony was in reference to BetterHelp or a different form of therapy

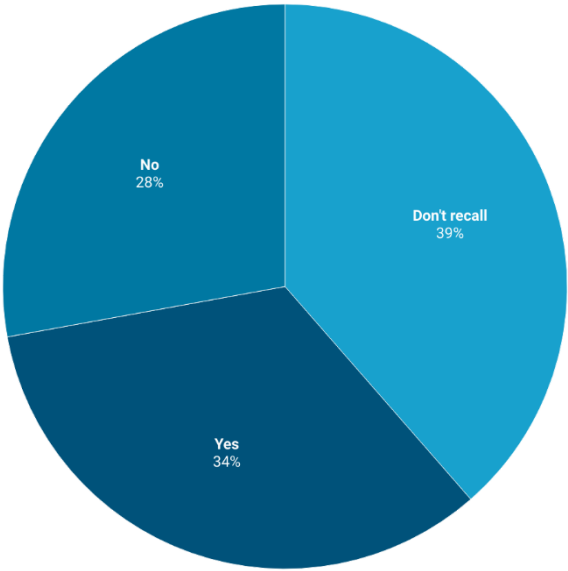
If the host testimony was in reference to BetterHelp or a different type of therapy



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Graph 21: If the Host’s Testimony of Therapy Influenced A Person’s Decision to Use BetterHelp

Impact of host testimony on using BetterHelp

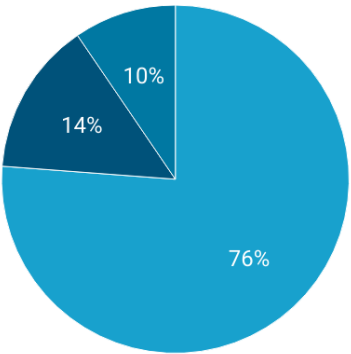


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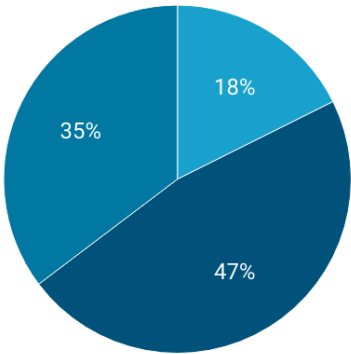
Graph 22: Impact of Host Testimony Based on Whether or Not They Used BetterHelp

The impact of the host's testimony based on whether they used BetterHelp or another type of therapy.

Yes
No
Don't Recall



BetterHelp

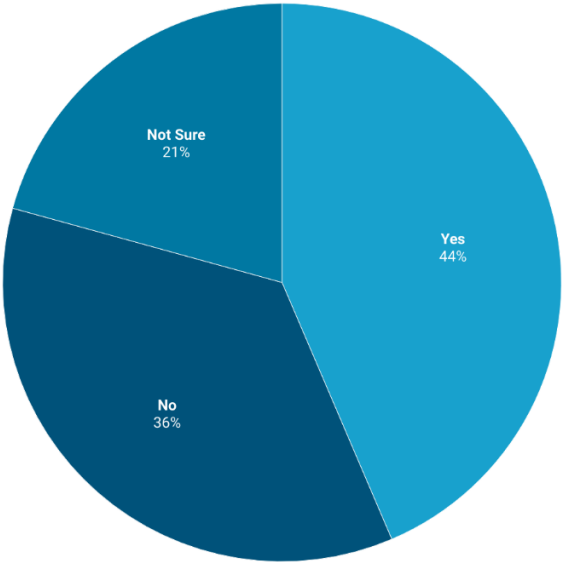


Other Therapy

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Graph 23: Perceptions of the fairness of BetterHelp’s advertising methods

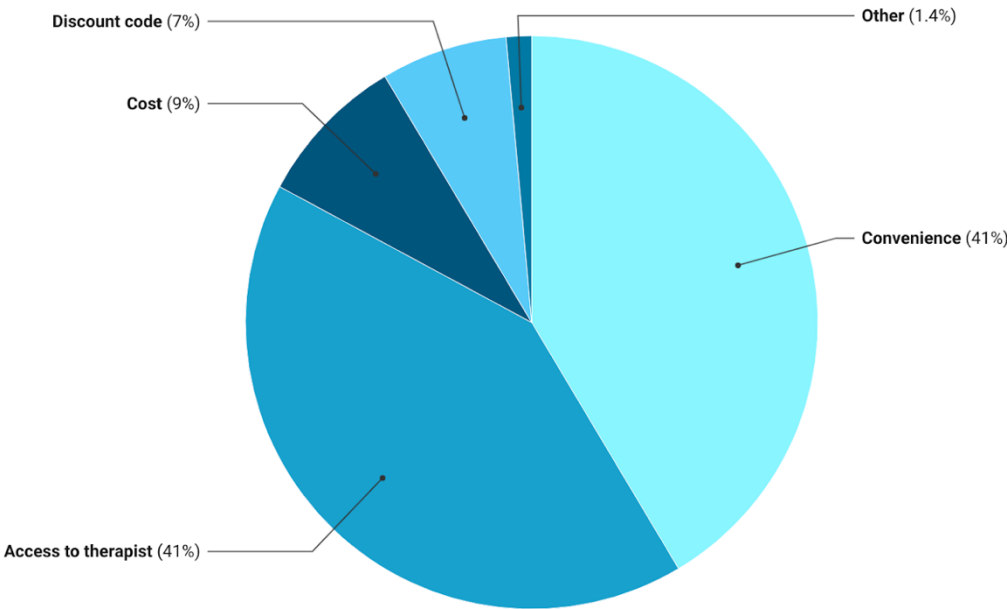
Whether or not participant's believe BetterHelp was fairly advertised to them



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Graph 24: Reasons for trying BetterHelp

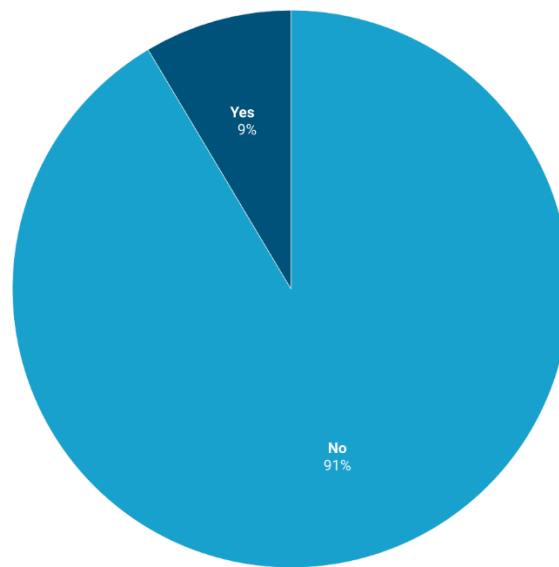
Reasons for trying BetterHelp



Other includes: purely from podcast advertisements and the ability to switch therapists easily
Created with Datawrapper

Graph 25: If a respondent is still using BetterHelp

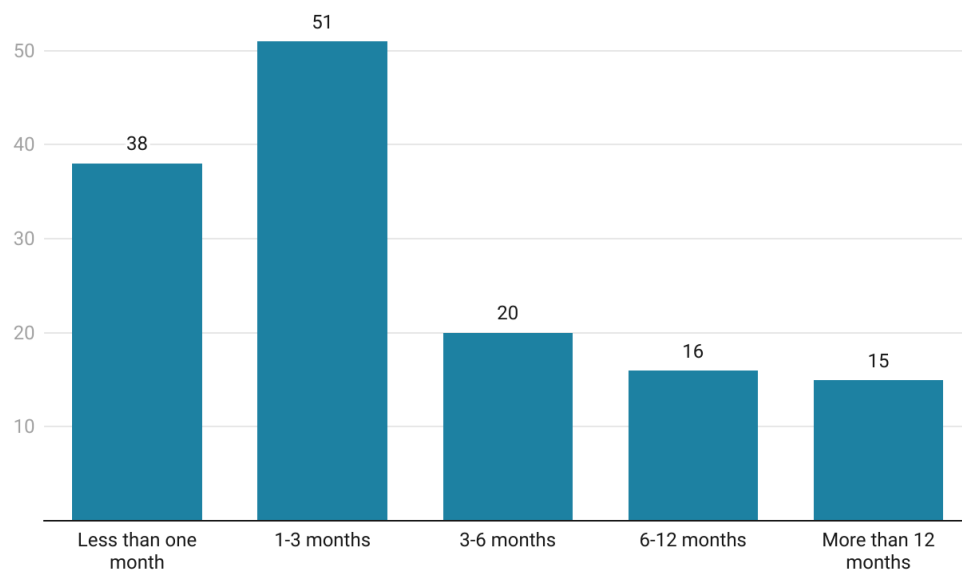
Current BetterHelp usage



Created with Datawrapper

Graph 26: How long respondents used BetterHelp for

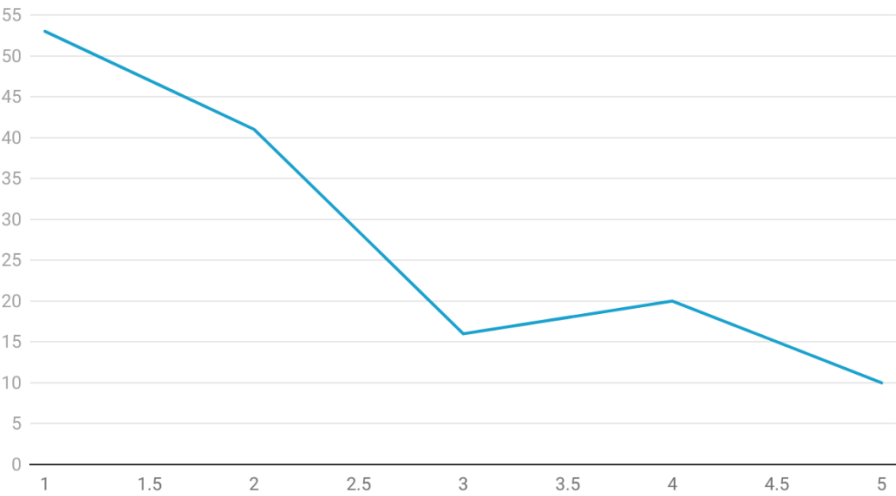
Length of BetterHelp usage



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Graph 27: Experience with BetterHelp

Experience with BetterHelp on a Scale of 1 to 5



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