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The value of authenticity and intimacy: A case study of the Danish independent podcast *Fries before Guys’* utilization of Instagram

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Abstract

The article addresses podcasting as a social media activity, considering independent podcasters’ – an emerging but understudied category of Pro-Ams – utilization of social media. This was done by conducting qualitative interviews (Brinkmann and Kvale 2001) with the Danish podcast phenomenon, *Fries before Guys*, and their main sponsor. To study the online interaction between listeners and podcasters, an inductive open coding of the podcast’s Instagram account was carried out, focusing on the ten most-liked Instagram posts and the user comments written underneath. Since Instagram is the podcasters’ primary means of communication in engaging socially with their mainly young female listeners, the aim was to explore how the digital infrastructure between Instagram and the podcast medium unfolds. The study shows that social media activity, besides providing emotional support through posts, comments and direct messages, is essential to independent podcasters to make revenue.

Keywords

independent podcasters
podcasting
social media marketing
authenticity
intimacy
podcast studies
Introduction

The popularity of the podcast medium is growing explosively around the world, including Denmark. The number of Danish podcasts available on Apple Podcasts has doubled in four years, from approximately 1250 in 2016 to approximately 2500 in 2020 (Podcast Stats 2020). This is mainly due to the rise of independent podcasting: More than half of the podcasts available in the Apple Podcasts category ‘Popular podcasts’ are independent podcasts (personal counting, 14 June 2019). As radio has historically been produced by public service radio institutions (Cwynar 2019), independent podcasting challenges the established Danish talk radio market. At the same time, two new nationwide public service talk radio stations have emerged within half a year: first Radio4 in November 2019, followed by Radio LOUD in April 2020. Entering the 2020s, Denmark is a rapidly changing empirical field for investigating aural media.

The podcast medium as a global phenomenon is changing as well; from a ‘do-it-yourself, amateur niche medium into a commercial mass medium’ (Bonini 2015: 27), where the majority of the most downloaded podcasts is now funded by sponsorships, advertisements and listeners’ donations (Bonini 2015: 27). Thus, independent podcasters are pulled towards the lure of commodification, and an undetected landscape of researching the ‘second age of podcasting’ (Bonini 2015: 27) lies ahead.

Studies of podcast genres (e.g. Bottomley 2015; Heise 2014; Lindgren 2016; McHugh 2016), podcast listeners (e.g. McClung and Johnson 2010) and podcasting in education (e.g. Campbell 2005) have been undertaken. But, despite this large body of podcast research – and the new commercialized reality that independent podcasters now face – research on independent podcasters remains scarce (Markman 2012: 550; Markman and Sawyer 2014: 21). Podcast production culture is generally an overlooked aspect of podcast studies (Heeremans 2018), and an inquiry of podcasting as a cross-media activity has not yet been completed.

This article explores how independent podcasters use social media in the commercialized digital era, and it does so through a case study of the Danish independent podcast phenomenon Fries before Guys (in the following FBG). FBG is successful in terms of listener numbers, but the podcast is selected for this case study because of its immense popularity on the social media platform Instagram. The first post on the Instagram account @friesb4guyspodcast, posted in April 2016, received fourteen likes; a post from September 2018 received 2400 likes overnight. The
account has +20,000 followers (August 2019) on Instagram, only surpassed by one Danish independent podcast (the true crime podcast *Mørkeland*).

Focusing specifically on authenticity and intimacy as inherent features of podcasting as well as social media activity, this article uses podcast research (Bonini 2015; Berry 2016; Heise 2014; Markman 2012; Markman and Sawyer 2014; Murray 2019), social media research (Duffy and Hund 2015; Jerslev and Mortensen 2016; Marwick 2015; Marwick and boyd 2011), qualitative interviews (Brinkmann and Kvale 2009) and inductive social media analysis (Liebhart and Bernhardt 2017; Marwick 2015) to investigate the question: How does the Danish independent podcast *Fries before Guys* utilize Instagram, and how is the notions of authenticity and intimacy put to work in the social media activity of the podcast?

**Key notions of independent podcasting: Authenticity and intimacy**

Before embarking on a presentation of research design, methods and results, the ever-evolving concept of ‘independent podcaster’ needs to be elaborated upon and situated in the era of social and commercialized digital media. The independent podcaster of interest here are Pro-Ams, which are defined as innovative, committed and networked amateurs working to professional standards, producing UGC (user-generated content) unaffiliated with legacy media (Leadbeater and Miller 2004). The production of independent podcasts is different to institutional podcasts (e.g. produced by private or public media institutions) and branded podcasts as it is characterized by the highest degree of autonomy. This entails no gatekeeping mechanisms and no obligation to please a large, mainstream audience (Sullivan 2018: 39), no restrictions of form and content regarding language, framing, topics, duration and, in some cases, episode frequency.

As a consequence, independent podcaster maintain a powerful ethos of authenticity within the specific context of their listener community. Cultivating identity, self-expression and being immodest, indiscrete and explicitly passionate about their podcast projects are defining features of independent podcaster (Markman 2012; Spinelli and Dann 2019). As Christopher Cwynar (2019: 323) notes, ‘the emphasis on intimate oral communication, and the absence of the visual, provide the basis for the cultivation of perceived transparency and self-reflexivity’. Radio has the ability to circumvent the brain and ‘touch the heart’ (Allison 2010: 184) and urge the listener to create unique images in their mind, which makes it inherently personal and intimate (e.g. Rodero 2012). Radio
presenters have historically addressed listeners in a personal, intimate manner (Crisell 1994). However, as listeners are actively selecting which podcasts to listen to through headphones at a time and place of their choosing, the podcast medium is capable of offering a deeper level of intimacy (Berry 2016). This is intensified by podcasters using first-person narration, reflexive self-disclosure, authenticity of language and an intimate type of communication involving proximity to the microphone, whispering, breathing and understated sound effects (Murray 2019: 310; Cwynar 2019; Lindgren 2016; Spinelli and Dann 2019). Podcast researchers Martin Spinelli and Lance Dann (2019) might provide the most specific notion of podcast intimacy that they describe as ‘efforts to create and reveal emotional experiences and personal connections in a comfortable space between interviewers and interview subjects, between the producers themselves, and between listeners, producers and subjects’ (2019: 112).

While autonomy is a strong motivation to start podcasting (Markman 2012; Spinelli and Dann 2019), being an independent podcaster on the rise entails two significant challenges that should be mentioned here. First, as measurements of podcast streams and downloads are still highly uncertain (Quirk 2015; Spinelli and Dann 2019), companies are reluctant to sponsor or advertise in podcasts. Second, podcasts are distributed across platforms and through apps in which they are ranked by algorithms according to their popularity and actuality. This can cause a self-amplifying effect on the download numbers. Podcasts with many listeners will reach even more, while the many niche podcasts remain hidden (Berry 2018). Therefore, visibility is necessary on other platforms, and as independent podcasters often do not earn the income for promotion and marketing expenses, this means social media.

The significance of social media in the second age of podcasting

When facing the challenge of visibility, promotion and activity across digital platforms are necessary. Independent podcasters need to generate and cultivate listeners to maintain and expand the podcast community, which brings us back to the possibilities of social media platforms. Previous studies (Markman 2012; Markman and Sawyer 2014; Millette 2011; Spinelli and Dann 2019; Wrather 2016) indicate that independent podcasters are strongly connected with blogging and social network sites. In her article about motivation and podcasting, Kris Markman (2012: 555) found that 60% of independent podcasters had a Twitter or Facebook account, and 75% maintained
a podcast blog on which they could get feedback from listeners. Through various podcast case studies, Spinelli and Dann (2019) unfold some of the connections between podcasts and social media, and they argue that social media’s ‘heightened capacity to enhance engagement with, and activate, an audience’ (2019: 24) accommodates the podcast medium’s challenges in establishing synchronous communities. Thus, it is highly significant for independent podcasters to interact on social media – and create a sense of immediacy (Duffy and Hund 2015: 8) – with their ‘interactive solitude’ (Hilmes 2013: 30) practising and headphone-wearing audiences.

Investigating the infrastructure between FGB and Instagram, it is interesting to note that the podcast medium and social media share the same governing logics of authenticity and intimacy. Social media platforms such as Instagram are recognized for increasing the intimacy between (micro)celebrities, influencers and fans (Marwick and boyd 2011; Jerslev and Mortensen 2016). The norm of revealing intimate knowledge on social media is perceived as a marker of authenticity (Marwick 2015; Jerslev and Mortensen 2016), which evidently is valuable in a digital attention economy. Brooke Duffy and Emily Hund (2015: 7) argue that female fashion bloggers share elements of their personal lives on their blogs and ‘offer representations of life that would not appear in the pages of a fashion magazine’ in endeavouring to depict themselves as authentic and relatable. Unedited photos, throwback photos, selfies and behind-the-scene shots provide visual insights into homes, bodies and everyday life, thereby potentially amplifying a sense of authenticity, intimacy and immediacy (Jerslev and Mortensen 2016: 252). Utilizing social media platforms is thus a necessity to create, maintain and expand a fan community to cultivate relatability and stay in touch with the audience (Duffy and Hund 2015; Jerslev and Mortensen 2016).

Research design and methods: Qualitative interviews and inductive analysis of Instagram

FGB’s conversational form and unravelling of the personal and intimate topics (see the section ‘The success of FGB’ below) resemble hundreds of other podcasts. However, as pointed out in the introduction, its Instagram success is exceptional, and it is one of very few, if not the only, commercially successful independent podcasts in Denmark within its genre. This is why FGB is chosen for this case study.
Researching the production of cross-media content involves studying how producers create mediated experiences and attempt to control how and where the content should be consumed (Sandvik 2018: 83). Therefore, the research design consists of two separated parts: semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann and Kvale 2009) with FBG and their main sponsor, Organic Basics, and an inductive open coding of FBG’s Instagram account.

In August 2019, a two-hour semi-structured interview with FBG’s hosts and producers, Nanna Hovgaard and Josephine Kuhn, was conducted. The following three main topics were addressed: the podcasters’ motivations for podcasting, use of social media in relation to the podcast (Instagram in particular) and revenue streams. The informants were approached via e-mail in which interview questions and the aim and scope of the research project were presented. Close listening of approximately twenty FBG episodes provided background research and informed the analysis.

Prior to the interview with the podcasters, in June 2019, an approximately 45-minute interview with the founder and CEO of Organic Basics, Mads Fibiger Rasmussen, was conducted. Here, the following topics were addressed: how the company perceives podcast metrics (downloads, subscriptions and streams), profits from sponsoring podcasts and the decision to sponsor FBG.

The exploratory analysis of FBG’s social media activity was carried out on their public Instagram account (instagram.com/friesb4guyspodcast). As text-based platforms such as Twitter have dominated social media research (Highfield and Leaver 2015; Marwick and boyd 2011), an established methodological approach to analysing visual content on Instagram does not yet exist. However, recent Instagram studies have utilized image type analysis (Jerslev and Mortensen 2016; Liebhart and Bernhardt 2017), and inductive coding of user accounts has also been performed (Duffy and Hund 2015; Marwick 2015). Following these studies, all FBG’s Instagram posts (369 posts between 27 April 2016 and 25 June 2019) were categorized to determine if certain types of posts attracted more attention (likes) than others. Each Instagram post was viewed as a unit of analysis, including all visual and textual elements such as video clips, captions, hashtags and emojis. A preliminary review of the Instagram account guided the coding categories that were adjusted inductively. Five distinct categories emerged plus one miscellaneous category consisting of posts that did not fit into one of the five distinct categories. These categories provided a basis of an in-depth analysis of the ten most-liked posts, which constitutes the second part of the analysis.

To elucidate the online interaction between FBG and their followers (the term ‘followers’ is used in the following analysis as it investigates Instagram followers, but of course most, if not all, of these
followers are also listeners), comments – ranging from 31 to 151 – were included in the analysis. To examine how the podcasters interacted with listeners through the Instagram story affordance, screen dumps of FBG’s Instagram stories relevant to the analysis were collected.

The success of FBG

FBG represents the widespread genre of ‘conversational podcasts’ or ‘chumcasts’ (Markman and Sawyer 2014: 27; McHugh 2016: 12), which can be defined as two (or more) hosts engaging in a conversation about a topic of interest. Scripts and editing are sparsely used for time and flow (McHugh 2016: 12). First published in January 2016, FBG is produced and hosted by Nanna Hovgaard and Josephine Kuhn, two Danish women in their twenties, unknown to the public when they started podcasting. Approximately 30,000 individual listeners – a significant number in a Danish context – download their podcast each week; in addition, their popularity on Instagram is spectacular. Instagram is populated mainly by female users under the age of 35 (Jerslev and Mortensen 2016: 256), which is FBG’s target audience. But, as this article will argue, its popularity is primarily attributable to a high degree of intimacy and authenticity across platforms. The following Instagram post sums up this point:

We started FBG because we wanted to explore and share our intimate conversations. […] We believe it has become much easier to be human now that we have a close-knit community in which we are always met exactly as we are. […] We believe that our conversations are absolutely crucial for us to feel good. Strength lies in the words, in everything that brings us closer to ourselves and to each other.

(@friesb4guyspodcast, 31 October 2018)

Hovgaard and Kuhn seek to establish intimacy through what Sarah Murray (2019: 310) labels self-disclosure, honesty and the reveal of affective processes of personal change. The podcasters state that they display their privacy through their work and ‘ascribe great value to shared experiences’ (@friesb4guyspodcast, 20 September 2019), describing the podcast as a ‘therapeutic free space’ and ‘one hour of opening up every week’ (e.g. in the podcast episode ‘Tough on the Outside, Soft on the Inside’, 10 May 2019). FBG revolves around the podcasters’ relationships, physical and mental well-being (or lack thereof), vulnerability, feminism, the female body, body positivity, love, sex or whatever is going on in their lives at the time of recording. Rather than through the use of music, sounds and proximity effects (Copeland 2018; Spinelli and Dann 2019), Hovgaard and Kuhn create
an intimate listening experience through their words and unmanipulated voices. As this article will argue, the psychical intimacy of their Instagram account effectively supplements the podcast content.

In the United States and Spanish-speaking countries, celebrities and former radio personalities monetize their podcasts through crowdfunding and sponsorships (Bonini 2015: 25; Fernández 2014; Fernández and Gallego (2015), which are supplemented with merchandise sales and live events (Spinelli and Dann 2019: 71). But, as emphasized by Hovgaard and Kuhn (2019) themselves, getting funding for independent podcasts is difficult in a small language area with a correspondingly small podcast audience, especially when starting out as amateurs with no existing listeners or social media community. FBG has outstandingly overcome this major hurdle. They have succeeded in combining several revenue streams (sponsorships, revenues from live shows, selling merchandise and writing a book) to earn a full-time salary. Their most viable revenue stream, though, is sponsorships, such as their collaboration with Organic Basics (Hovgaard and Kuhn 2019).

The ontology of Instagram: What is posted, and what is liked

The interview with Hovgaard and Kuhn is centred around their use of Instagram, but it quickly became clear, though, that they do not follow an explicit social media strategy:

> We never sat down and agreed on what to do and what not to do. We just have a strong gut feeling. It’s fluffy. Often it is like, fuck, we need to take a picture [for an Instagram post] to tell people that ‘hey, a new episode is coming up’, and no one ever bothers to take a good picture of us.

(Kuhn 2019)

According to Hovgaard and Kuhn, they usually post on Instagram shortly before releasing a new episode to promote the podcast. This is confirmed by the fact that nearly every second post (44.7 per cent) belongs to the category ‘News about upcoming episodes’ (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage of all posts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>News about upcoming episodes</td>
<td>44.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal events happening to the podcasters</td>
<td>17.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sponsorships, merchandise and commercial collaborations</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listener Q&amp;As and contests</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Considering that news about upcoming episodes is the most frequent post category, it is notable that posts concerning *something other* than podcast episodes attract the most likes (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Ten most-liked posts dispersed into the overall post categories.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number of posts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal events happening to the podcasters</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sponsorships, merchandise and commercial collaborations</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal reflections expressed by the podcasters</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News about upcoming episodes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although different categories are present among the ten most-liked posts, news about personal events happening to the podcasters is the dominant topic. In fact, the nine most-liked posts all depict personal revelations about Hovgaard and Kuhn, as explained in the following: The most-liked post shows Hovgaard and Kuhn announcing that they have signed a book contract with a publishing firm; the second most-liked post reveals the front page of this book; the third and sixth most-liked posts depict the podcasters’ book-writing process in a Swedish forest cottage; the fourth and fifth most-liked posts are about their collaboration with their main sponsor, Organic Basics; the seventh and eighth most-liked posts are pictures of Hovgaard and Kuhn receiving or being nominated for awards; the ninth most-liked post is a selfie of Kuhn, explaining that she has cried all day and feels too exhausted to record a new podcast episode. Though not emphasized explicitly in the interview, it is presumed that the personal support motivates *FBG* to continue with what *Duffy and Hund (2015)* labels social sharing both in the podcast and on Instagram. Consequently, producing the podcast has had a positive, liberating impact on the podcasters’ use of Instagram:

> When people have listened to our most intimate stories […] then they already know that we are not that perfect, so we don’t need to pretend that we are. If all of our Instagram photos depicted two super glam people with full makeup taken in a photo studio, it wouldn’t represent what we want to accomplish with the podcast. I’ve been thinking a lot about appearing in an Instagram post just the way I feel that particular day [the photo is taken]. And I never would have done that previous to starting the podcast.

*(Hovgaard 2019)*
This quote shows that coherence between the podcast and the Instagram posts is profoundly important to the podcaster. It also shows that they have decided not to edit the photos they post as a sort of counter-argument or reaction to the conventionally good-looking, disciplined and glamorous self-presentation of fashion bloggers, Instagrammers and celebrities (Duffy and Hund 2015; Jerslev and Mortensen 2016; Marwick 2015). Though the podcaster do not have an explicit social media strategy, they are deliberately performing a practice of self-disclosure, authenticity and intimacy, thereby adopting the governing logics of social media (Jerslev and Mortensen 2016).

Supportive interactions 1: Commenting

Kuhn and Hovgaard express their gratitude for followers’ support of the FBG community in several Instagram posts, e.g., the following in January 2018:

Since we released the episode yesterday, I (Nanna Hovgaard) have received so many overwhelming, loving messages. You do not understand how much this means to me and I have read them all several times. It is incredible to have a huge network of listeners who wish the absolute best for us and you can feel the love flowing. I am overly grateful to have your support. THANKS.

(@friesb4guyspodcast, 27 January 2018)

Followers’ comments on these Instagram posts are similarly affectionate. The more than 130 comments on each of the two most-liked posts include lots of emojis: hearts, smileys with heart eyes, crying smileys, clapping hands, unicorns, confetti, and stars, accompanied by affective responses like ‘oh my God’, ‘wuhuuu’, ‘yaaaaaas’, ‘congratulations’, ‘I love you’, ‘You are so gorgeous / cool / fantastic’, ‘can’t wait’ and ‘looking forward’. Followers thus position themselves as faithful and adoring fans. In the same two posts, more than 50 followers have tagged friends to call attention to the book, suggesting that they read it together – and the friends react with confirmation. In comparison, the posts about the podcaster’s writing process in a cottage (the third and sixth most-liked posts) received noticeably fewer but similar affective comments (respectively 48 and 29 comments): heart emojis, verbal cheering like ‘sending you creativity and inspiration’ and tagging friends while asking if they should also go on a ‘friendship trip’ to a small cottage or someplace similar – the friends, again, reply with confirmation.

The first advertisement post for Organic Basics (the fourth most-liked post; see Figure 5) received over a hundred comments such as ‘you look gorgeous’, ‘you have amazing bodies’, ‘damn!’, ‘wow, babes’ and other statements addressing Kuhn and Hovgaard’s visual appearances.
The second Organic Basics post (the fifth most-liked post) is framed as a ‘giveaway’ contest in which followers can tag a friend who they think deserves Organic Basics underwear, much in line with the overall topic of the podcast, i.e., friendship. This post has the highest number of comments (298) that consist of followers tagging a friend and writing more or less comprehensive explanations of why the friend deserves to win the contest. According to Hovgaard, these comments prove that the advertisement post was ‘spot on’:

> We have thought a great deal about how to engage our listeners in these advertisements. […] And I feel that our listeners are also gaining something from this. Actually, since we started making sponsored content in January 2018, we haven’t received one single negative reaction.

(Hovgaard 2019)

In the seventh and eighth most-liked posts about FBG receiving or being nominated for awards, Kuhn and Hovgaard ask followers to vote for them. Followers comment that they have voted and that Kuhn and Hovgaard are the best of all the nominees and deserve to win. The comments on the selfie of Kuhn (the ninth most-liked post) consist of supporting statements like ‘I support you’, ‘sending you love’, ‘sending you hugs’ and ‘you are brave’ followed by lots of heart emojis. As a common photographic genre on social media that calls for intimacy and emotional engagement (Mortensen and Jerslev 2016), it is not surprising that 68 of the 369 posts are selfies. The comments on Hovgaard and Kuhn in swimwear promoting a new episode (the tenth most-liked post) contain numerous complimentary statements about the podcasters’ visual appearances, similar to the comments on the Organic Basics posts. These Instagram posts reveal a comfortable space between the podcasters and their audience (Spinelli and Dann 2019: 112), which depends upon a psychical intimacy instead of the verbal intimacy expressed through the podcast content.

Figure 2: Screen dump of the tenth most-liked post on the Instagram account @friesb4guyspodcast and the user comments exclaiming ‘you are gorgeous!’ , ‘I love these two women’ and tagging friends who should listen along.

Supportive interactions 2: Posting/reposting

Posting and reposting is, like commenting, content that is generated by multiple followers and received by multiple followers. This type of interaction has a commercial value, because followers often post about attending live shows or purchasing tangible commodities such as Hovgaard and Kuhn’s book and merchandise, all of which visually communicate that the owner is a fan; they are
‘material signifiers of the wish to be identified and recognized as the follower of a media text’, as phrased by Spinelli and Dann (2019: 71). The followers display the book on the bookshelf, attend the live shows, wear the FBG T-shirt or carry the FBG-duffle bag. The idea of producing merchandise was in fact suggested by a follower who mentioned the idea of recognizing a fellow FBG fan in public. Just like buying tangible commodities, social media interactions also prove as visible signs of identity (Spinelli and Dann 2019: 224). Followers post Instagram stories about reading the book and Hovgaard and Kuhn are notified via the tagging affordance on Instagram. Hovgaard and Kuhn then repost the story on the FBG Instagram story, which will then appear on followers’ Instagram accounts. The chance that some of the +20,000 followers will be influenced to buy the book, a T-shirt or a live show ticket – and afterwards post a story about their new purchase, thereby influencing even more people – is considerable. Followers distribute the podcast through their Instagram activities, thereby ‘becoming a component of the marketing strategy’ (Spinelli and Dann 2019: 222) of FBG.

Figure 3: Screen dumps of stories from the FBG Instagram account (May 2019) depicting followers reading the book, buying the merchandise and attending live shows.

Supportive interactions 3: Direct messaging

Direct messaging is facilitated by the affordance of Instagram Direct, which allows for private one-to-one (or one-to-few) communication, unlike the public many-to-many communication of commenting and posting. Hovgaard (2019) points out: ‘Wednesday night, when you are feeling very introverted, emotional and incapable of anything, then an insanely sweet message ticks in, saying “thank you” and assuring you that what you do is okay’. Followers themselves share their most intimate and private stories. Kuhn (2019) explains: ‘People have been thinking some of the same thoughts as us. It’s the synergy that we all share with each other. That’s what makes me dare to share’. Hovgaard (2019) reflects: ‘I think our online community is of great value because it seems like we’re skipping a lot of steps here. In the inboxes, on Instagram, on Facebook, in our mail, people just open up their hearts’.
Direct messaging is a vital motivation for Hovgaard and Kuhn to keep podcasting. In the private space of direct messaging, the podcasters’ public performance of authenticity and intimacy is supplemented with followers’ own self-disclosure. In comparison with commenting and posting, direct messaging allows for a deeper level of intimacy between podcasters and followers, which further consolidates Spinelli and Dann’s (2019: 112) notion of podcast intimacy as the sharing of personal experiences between listeners and podcasters.

One final point regarding FBG’s interaction with followers must be stated here. As much as the podcasters use Instagram for reasons of enjoyment and emotional support, they use social media for practical and financial reasons. Practically, Instagram affordances are utilized to ask followers for topics to discuss in the podcast. This seems emblematic of conversational podcasts, which to a high degree incorporates listeners’ questions, discussions and personal stories. Financially, the time-consuming activity of creating, maintaining and expanding an engaged community through social media platforms is necessary when aspiring to become a full-time independent podcaster. Therefore, social media activity is a double bind. Kuhn (2019) concludes: ‘I don’t think it’s so much fun to do social media marketing. The podcast is the primary and most important thing and it will always stay that way’.

The advertisement posts

As the above analysis concludes, commerce is increasingly becoming a part of independent podcasting. This final section will delve further into how Instagram has played an important role in establishing FBG’s sponsorship with the Danish underwear brand Organic Basics in February 2018.

When asking Organic Basics founder and CEO Mads Fibiger Rasmussen why the company chose to sponsor FBG, he explains that ‘their feminism and body positivity is a perfect match to our brand. It suits our values very well’ (Rasmussen 2019). Once again this suggests that the advertisement posts are in line with the overall topic of the podcast – the female body – as well as with other Instagram posts depicting Hovgaard and Kuhn in only a little clothing. When asked if FBG’s Instagram account played a role in deciding to sponsor the podcast, Rasmussen confirms and
explains that FBG ‘has access to a unique following’ (Rasmussen 2019) — which, implied, matches Organic Basics’ target audience. Thus, social media activity, including numbers of followers, interaction with followers and followers’ engagement with the content, is a significant factor in attracting sponsors. Put more directly, FBG’s Instagram activities are the most vital part of their sponsorship collaborations.

Figure 5: Screen dump of the fourth most-liked post at the Instagram account @friesb4guyspodcast (photo credit: Benjamin Lund). The beginning of the caption writes: ‘Advertisement! 🍟[…]
FANTASTIC LOVELY NEWS! After two years and no less than 73 episodes of FBG, it finally happened! We got the organic and sustainable brand @organicbasics as a sponsor on the podcast 😍AND our mutual dream of having taken underwear pictures together came true’. Kuhn and Hovgaard further announce that now they can finally make a living out of podcasting.

Figure 6: Screen dumps from FBG’s Instagram account. The first post is posted few months after they started podcasting, the second almost three years after. Other examples of Hovgaard and Kuhn depicted in underwear, similar to the Organic Basics advertisement posts, are posted on 21 April 2017, 28 May 2018 and 23 April 2019.

The fact that advertisements are among the most-liked posts indicates that FBG’s followers engage with the podcasters as they were friends; they want Kuhn and Hovgaard to be successful and they are aware that making revenue as independent podcasters is difficult. Still it seems striking and highly unusual that advertisement posts are among the most-liked posts on any Instagram account, as media fans are generally critical towards being exploited for commercial gain (Spinelli and Dann 2019: 99). Mads Fibiger Rasmussen reflects on this:

> FBG talks about body positivity and being unsure of yourself, so it is courageous of them to go out and pose in underwear. I believe this is part of why listeners were so supportive when they announced that they got a sponsor.

(Rasmussen 2019)

According to the podcasters themselves, relatability is the primary reason why the advertisement posts received so many likes and positive comments: ‘I think that the norm [on Instagram] is to look at people with very small body sizes. Many of our followers could relate to our underwear pictures’ (Hovgaard 2019). The advertisement posts are in line with the overall topic of the podcast – the
female body – and reproduce the images of several Instagram posts depicting Hovgaard and Kuhn in only a little clothing. Furthermore, the podcasters attempt to safeguard their authenticity by carefully cherry-picking what to advertise for on their Instagram account: ‘We only advertise for products that we can vouch for ourselves. We don’t want to create a consumption smear’ (Kuhn 2019). Once again, Hovgaard and Kuhn attempt to ‘stay very close to ourselves in everything we do’ (Kuhn 2019), both when podcasting and when posting on Instagram. In line with previous research on creative labour in a digital-attention economy (e.g. Murray 2019), authenticity and intimacy are FBG’s primary products.

Conclusion

Through a case study of the Danish independent podcast success, FBG, this article has aimed to understand podcasting as a social media activity and how social media provides notions of authenticity and intimacy with emotional and financial benefit for podcasters. Previous research has shown a strong interaction between independent podcasters – defined as Pro-Ams producing UGC (Leadbeater and Miller 2004) distributed across platforms – and listeners through feedback, Q&As and listener requests (Markman 2012; Markman and Sawyer 2014; Millette 2011; Wrather 2016). Furthermore, authenticity and intimacy have been emphasized as inherent features of both podcasting and social media activity (Berry 2016; Cwynar 2019; Lindgren 2016; Murray 2019; Duffy and Hund 2015; Jerslev and Mortensen 2016; Marwick 2015; Spinelli and Dann 2019). Following this theoretical framework, an inductive open coding of FBG’s popular Instagram account was conducted and the podcasters were interviewed. To further investigate the commercial possibilities of Instagram, the podcasters’ main sponsor was interviewed too.

The coding of all Instagram posts (369 in total) showed that the topic of nearly every second post was news about upcoming episodes, but the most-liked posts concerned personal issues or events happening to the podcasters, such as publishing a book, being awarded for their podcast or establishing a commercial collaboration. FBG’s followers engage with the Instagram content in a friendly and supporting way, and they are not wary of being exposed to advertisement posts, because, it is suggested, these visually and textually communicate authenticity.

As noted by John L. Sullivan (2018), the chance to generate revenue by independent podcasting is slim because, among other factors, podcast metrics such as download numbers,
streams and subscriptions are uncertain measurements to sponsors and advertisers (Sullivan 2018), and it is even slimmer in a small language area like Denmark. With no traditional broadcasting platform or the money required to pay for marketing elsewhere, social media platforms serve as useful to gain visibility for independent podcasters. Additionally, it is argued that social media accounts are crucial in attracting sponsors with a ‘value match’. Social media activity is a reasonable and significant business strategy when aspiring to become a full-time independent podcaster. In this podcast economy, followers’ comments and posts are important contributions.

This article intends to provide a close examination of how Instagram is utilized by one specific podcast, which is a deviant case in terms of social media popularity and commercial success. Still, findings are consistent with previous research showing that independent podcasters are emotionally supported by listeners through social media platforms (Markman 2012; Markman and Sawyer 2014; Millette 2011). Likewise, FBG is motivated to keep podcasting through comments, posts and, in particular, private direct messages, in which followers reveal their own, intimate stories. These findings may be extrapolated to future studies. How do other cases of independent podcasters – and bloggers, influencers and Instagrammers alike – share, reveal and confess personal stories to create authenticity and intimacy? What are the long-term implications of digital ‘emotional labour’ that is mostly performed by women (Duffy and Hund 2015: 9)? Gendered work in digital media is an important field of research that should be further investigated.

Though providing opportunities for independent podcasters, as mentioned above, social media platforms also alter the auditory nature of podcasting and sound work (Hilmes 2013) by adding visual components. Audio media’s unique ability to create intimate images in the head of the listener is thus challenged when producers are using social media for promotion and listeners are seeking photographic proof of what they are listening to. The faces of the ‘talking heads’ are no longer concealed. What are the implications? How does visual content affect listeners’ emotions and relatability towards the voices they listen to? How do radio and podcast producers all over the world address the extended visual capabilities and the time and energy that social media activities require? Further research on transmedia storytelling in the field of podcasting may help to expand our understanding of how social media platforms influence the ways in which audio content is visually rendered.

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