Podcast fandom in Europe: Audio audiences' participation in a digital context

Miguel Mañas-Pellejero; **Elisa Paz**

Miguel Mañas-Pellejero ✉
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4283-3038

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
Facultat de Ciències de la Comunicació
Carrer de la Vinya, s/n
08193 Bellaterra (Barcelona), Spain
miguel.manas@autonoma.cat

Elisa Paz
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7477-0858

University of Derby, EU Business School
Avinguda Diagonal, 648B
Barcelona, España
elisa.epz@gmail.com

Abstract

Podcasts are an increasingly popular form of sound media that generate active listeners and fandom around them. These programmes present an opportunity for scholars to analyse not only new forms of consumption around convergent and on-demand media, but also the particular phenomenon of fandom related to audio productions in the current digital context. Scholars have mainly focused on studying how fandoms use podcasts to create content rather than on podcast fandoms. This paper analyses podcast fandoms in Europe, what distinguishes them from other active audiences, and how they engage with this digital media through online tools. To explore this, a method of triangulation is used, relying on content and netnography analysis, and both top-down and bottom-up strategies are considered across the biggest European markets. Results show that around a third of the podcasts in the sample have an active fandom that engages with these programmes through social media, primarily on *Instagram*, through the creation of content. This content usually highlights the brand identity of the podcasts through the creation of fan art and fan accounts, and that there are more consistencies across European fandoms than exist across European audiences. This suggests that social media sites, and particularly *Instagram*, are used by fandoms across Europe in an equivalent way to extend their textual productivity and that this is still what distinguishes audiences from fans. These findings have important implications for scholars and producers alike, both to build upon the knowledge of reception and fan studies and to understand how to encourage fandom engagement on social media sites.

Keywords

1. Introduction

Since the early forms of broadcast, the study of audiences and how they engage with different forms of media has been of academic interest. As new media forms and technology have evolved, new patterns of consumption and possibilities of media engagement have appeared.

Audio productions are one of the media productions that have greatly benefited from this digital evolution: from radio programmes to online radio and, ultimately, to podcasts. This has allowed for the proliferation not only of the number of audio programmes but also of genres, the extension of audiences and forms of engagement.

Undeniably, the current digital context influences an already sophisticated (and overwhelmed) consumer. Audiences are active and engaged and seek to build communities, sharing interests across borders without space or timing restrictions.

To this complexity, it is pertinent to add the ramifications of reception studies and the multiple possibilities of considering media publics, such as regarding them as audiences, citizens, customers or even prosumers.

When focusing solely on their role as media audiences, and more precisely on those consuming audio formats, there is a particular phenomenon evolving across platforms besides on-demand and holistic consumption: that of fandom. For an audience member to be classified as part of a fandom, there is an extra motivation or implication that needs to be demonstrated, and that gains relevance in a context in which this member could choose between multiple options and forms of consumption.

This paper aims to understand how this phenomenon articulates in the particular environment of audio productions and, more particularly, when it comes to podcasts and social media, both being increasingly popular among audiences.

2. Literature review

This literature review aims to provide an understanding of how podcast fandom is constructed, combining radio and podcast studies, fan studies and social media studies. Firstly, the consolidation of podcasts and their success as a medium in Europe is covered to provide the necessary context. Then, the development of fan studies in the digital era and their relation to social media activity and active audiences are considered, with a focus on how these elements of transmedia convergence relate to podcasting.

Lastly, it assesses podcasts as an engagement medium, which leads to the consideration of podcasts as fan objects and the existence of podcast fandom. The goal is to also point out the detected gaps in the literature that justify the relevance of this research.

2.1. Podcasts and European audiences

The last ten years have seen the growth and consolidation of podcasting. The number of podcasts has increased hand in hand with the number of listeners, and the medium has professionalised, with several podcasts even becoming a cultural phenomenon (**Berry**, 2016; **Spinelli**; **Dann**, 2019). This is the "second age of podcasting" (**Bonini**, 2015), where podcasts have become a mass consumption medium with a sustainable market that stands as an alternative to radio and not merely an extension.

When it comes to podcasting, private multinational streaming platforms such as *Spotify* are dominating the European market (**Bossetta**, 2020). Even if in its inception podcasting was born in a decentralised system, it is being increasingly shaped by platformization by commercial players entering the business (**Sullivan**, 2019). The integration of podcasting into music streaming platforms has contributed to the maturity and consolidation of the medium. Worldwide, 18% of streaming users listened to podcasts in 2018 (**Mulligan**, 2019). In Q2 of 2021, *Spotify* remained the world's leading podcast streaming provider with a market share of 31% of total subscribers (*MIDiA Research*, 2021). The platform has shown a strong commitment to podcasting by spending over 600 million U.S. dollars between 2019 and 2020 on podcast company acquisitions such as *Anchor FM*, *Gimlet Media* and *Parcast* (**Stassen**, 2020).

It is also important to understand the evolution of radio audiences to online radio and, ultimately, to podcasts. The main shift from linear broadcast to digital consumption has to do with on-demand media, with podcast listeners becoming "self-scheduling consumers" (**Murray**, 2009).

The profile of podcast listeners has been linked to that of the early adopters of new technologies (**Rogers**, 2003). Demographic research into podcast listeners showed that they are mostly male, young, highly educated and with a higher income than the general population (**Chadha**; **Avila**; **Gil de Zúñiga**, 2012; **Samuel-Azran**; **Laor**; **Tal**, 2019). However, these results are geographically limited and might not apply to other areas and consumer segments. Consumption of podcasts has become dynamic, with multiple profiles of users seeking different goals in different settings and access scenarios (**Chan-Olmsted**; **Wang**, 2022).

Concerning podcast-listening intensity, two European markets stand out: Spain, with 32% of occasional podcast listeners (10 hours or less of consumption per week) and 3% of frequent ones (11 hours or more of consumption per week), and the United Kingdom, with 29% of occasional podcast listeners and 4% of frequent ones. Table 1 shows the details for the biggest European markets.

Table 1. Podcasts listening intensity (*Statista*, 2021)

	France	United Kingdom	Germany	Spain	Italy
Frequent listeners	2%	4%	3%	3%	2%
Occasional listeners	19%	29%	24%	32%	21%
Non-user / no answer	79%	67%	73%	65%	77%

Regarding the distribution of podcast audiences in the biggest European markets, there seems to be a majority of listeners that are still not users, although it is a consumption trend that has been consistently and significantly increas-

ing throughout these past years (**Brentnall**, 2021) In the United Kingdom, the estimated number of podcast listeners in 2017 was 8.9 million. Now in 2022, the estimate claims 21.2 million listeners, with a projected 28.1 million by 2026 (*Statista*, 2022).

> " Audiences are active and engaged and seek to build communities, sharing interests across borders without space or timing restrictions "

2.2. Digital fandom and audience productivity

Early research proposed fans as productive consumers, who "poached" source texts from pop culture and reworked them to fit their own needs and desires (**Jenkins**, 1992). **Fiske** (1992) considered three types of audience productivity: Semiotic productivity, enunciative productivity, and textual productivity. The last one is physical and appears when fans manifest their compromise by reworking popular texts, materialising in fan-created and fan-distributed content. Examples include writing fan fiction, creating fan art or cosplaying.

These concepts were proposed at a time when most fandoms developed face-to-face and when the opportunities for creating and circulating content were limited. Textual productivity served as a way to identify fans since it implied a prominent level of investment. It was possible to establish a continuum between regular viewers and highly organised petty producers (**Abercrombie**; **Longhurst**, 1998). Nowadays, the possibilities allowed by digital media have turned a wider proportion of the population into "produsers" (**Bruns**, 2008). Under this new environment, and considering that fans had always used any technologies available at the time to pursue their interests (**Booth**, 2017; **Pearson**, 2010), digital fandom has become more visible and has reached the mainstream (**Grandío**, 2016). Now that the barriers to textual production are lower, in digital spaces, it becomes unclear if social media content constitutes enunciative or textual productivity, and, accordingly, what separates a fan from a casual commenter. Regardless, most of the work on fandom still focuses on the textual productivity of fans extending its study to digital and social media outlets (**Hills**, 2013).

Media convergence has fostered and co-opted fan cultures, with some media companies choosing a top-down (from producers to audiences) collaborationist approach to offering materials and designing spaces for audience engagement and their contribution to transmedia narratives (**Jenkins**, 2008). **Askwith** (2007, p. 3) conceptualised television viewer engagement as "the range of opportunities and activities that become possible when drawing upon an expanded, multiplatform conception".

This multiplatform conception is also present in podcasts and social media. The engagement of active audience members is a clear goal of platforms to turn participation into user-generated content, which is crucial to the circulation and promotion of a "spreadable" text in various outlets (**Jenkins**; **Ford**; **Green**, 2013). **Barger**, **Peltier** and **Schultz** (2016) focus on consumer engagement in the levels of reacting to content, commenting on content, sharing content with others and posting user-generated content. This last category aligns with the realm of bottom-up (from audiences to producers) fan textual productivity under the convergence model.

Fan studies have reached a phase of counter-hegemonic negotiation in which older paradigms about fandom and audience productivity have been revised, introducing new theoretical and epistemological approaches to account for the ethnic and racial perspectives, fan activism and these new relationships between fans and producers (**Prego-Nieto**, 2020). Under the new "Convergence Culture Industry" (**Scott**, 2019), fan productivity has been commoditized by media companies who seek profit from audience interactions. This production has been regarded as work (**Stanfill**; **Condis**, 2014), and in the context of digital spaces, it falls under the realm of unpaid "free labour" (**De-Kosnik**, 2012; 2013; **Terranova**, 2013). The fact that companies gain profit from unpaid content generated by fans has raised concerns about the possible exploitation of fandom (**Establés-Heras**, 2020; **Stanfill**, 2019), and the possibility of fostering certain interactions or others depending on the gender or race of the fans, who are assumed to be white (**Pande**, 2018; **Scott**, 2008; 2019).

It is under these digital convergence contexts where podcasting has grown and developed, turning to social media as a means to build connections with audiences (**Bonini**, 2014).

Besides social media promotion, ancillary productions that accompany the podcast, such as books, merchandise, and live events, can function as para-texts, which become entry points to the podcasts for new audiences (**Gray**, 2010) and are central when it comes to transmedia strategies (**Scolari**, 2013). The interactions gathered in social media have commercial value since follower and like counts are measurable markers of success and can be a guarantee when looking for sponsorships (**Adler-Berg**, 2021).

Podcasts have also integrated user-generated content into their structure. In many podcasts, audiences and fans participate when their comments, questions and interventions are included in the content of the episodes themselves. This interaction has existed in radio before, but the engagement between podcasters and fans is enhanced. The interaction is present in the podcasts, in the spaces of fan interaction and the fan-made texts present in them.

> " Podcasts have become a mass consumption medium with a sustainable market that stands as an alternative to radio and not merely an extension "

Producers can create their own spaces to foster fan communities, but now most of them rely on social media platforms to reach wider audiences (**Wrather**, 2016). Social media discussion groups also allow followers of specific programs to share their opinions, and to expand and speculate about plot development, tying loose ends, or searching for clues. This is how collective fan cultures around a podcast are developed (**López**; **Monteiro-Homssi**, 2021). Since most podcast listening applications don't incorporate the possibility of adding comments at the moment of listening, a multiplatform approach is necessary (**García-Marín**, 2020).

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2.3. Podcast engagement and fandom

In this process of seeking collaboration from listeners, podcasts turn into an engagement medium. **García-Marín** (2020) detects the factors that influence the engagement of podcast audiences, which has multiple dimensions. It is related to three elements: the characteristics of the medium itself, the consumption habits of the users and the media literacy of the creators. Podcasting creates more of a horizontal relationship between transmitters and receivers than what is present in traditional media. This can lead listeners to view the podcaster as one of them, a member of their community (**Sellas**, 2011). Although a completely horizontal interaction between hosts and their public is not present (**García-Marín**; **Aparici**, 2020), followers still engage with podcasters as if they were friends who want them to be successful. This is caused by a perceived authenticity and intimacy from podcasters who share personal stories on the program and on social media and who stay in touch with their audience (**Adler-Berg**, 2021; **Meserko**, 2014).

This closer relationship of podcast audiences with their hosts has been studied under the lens of Para-social relations (PSR) and Para-social interactions (PSI) (**Giles**, 2002; **Hartmann**; **Goldhoorn**, 2011), where fans feel like they know the presenters personally and could even be their friends. The seriality of podcasts encourages repeated listens, and since listeners adopt an active role to select content on-demand, they are already more engaged (**Schlütz**; **Hedder**, 2021). Although these relations are essentially one-sided, the direct interaction of podcasts hosts with their fans on social media makes them more intense and increases identification (**Pavelko**; **Myrick**, 2020)

The engagement of podcast listeners and their motivations have also been studied within the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) frame. U&G centres on the assumption that audiences are active, they can satisfy their wants and needs by selecting media based on their goals and objectives (**Rubin**, 2002; **Williams**; **Rice**; **Rogers**, 1988). This bodes well with podcasting since podcast audiences are already active in selecting the episodes they want to listen to. When analysing the main motivations of true crime podcast listeners, they listed entertainment, convenience, and boredom. Many listeners declared to participate in podcast-specific communities, and some of them even binge-listen to podcasts they enjoy (**Boling**; **Hull**, 2018).

Podcast studies have addressed the active audiences of podcasting, and the factors that play a role in creating audience engagement. Most of the contributions that consider their productive practices come from the field of fan studies. **Hills** (2009) exposed the need to bridge the gaps between fan studies and radio studies, noting a lack of research from both fields into radio fandom.

Since then, the act of hosting and sharing a podcast online has been compared to productive fandom (**Salvati**, 2015), which consists of multiple activities based on popular media (**Lamerichs**, 2018). Podcasting about a field of interest can be a form of the aforementioned textual production (**Fiske**, 1992). As media convergence shifted how audiences access and consume media, with users selecting audio content through multiple platforms, understanding their "fan-like" behaviours seems crucial to binding them to specific programs, anchors or brands (**Hills**, 2009).

When considering the means of production present in independent podcasting, the activity has also been compared to fan labour (**De-Kosnik**, 2012; 2013; **Turk**, 2013). This has been the case with episodic television podcasts, which are dedicated to examining an individual television series episode-by-episode and are hosted by self-declared fans of such series (**Savit**, 2020). Since the chosen series tend to have an already well-established fan community, these podcasts act as a hub where fans can connect and new communities can be created (**Cameron**, 2017). The format of podcasting offers a space that's resistant to external intrusion from people outside their group because listening to the contents of a podcast requires more commitment than reading text-based content from a social media feed, so this deters potential harassers (**Florini**, 2019).

Hitherto these contributions focus mostly on media fans that create podcasts and not so much on fans of podcasts. Although **Savit** (2020) considers how the hosts gain notoriety within the general fandom as these projects grow, generating an active fandom around themselves as well as the programme, how these fandoms are articulated is yet to be widely explored. In

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this line of research, the *Welcome to Night Vale* fandom seems to be the exception as it has sparked the interest of scholars (**Spinelli**; **Dann**, 2019; **Weinstock**, 2018; **Włodarczyk**; **Tyminska**, 2015). The show built a fan base early on, and included crowdfunding, merchandising and live events as sources of income as their audience grew. Since *Welcome to Night Vale* is a fiction podcast with elements of horror and science-fiction, its contents align with cult texts (**Gwenllian-Jones**; **Pearson**, 2004) that have been studied in media fandom, although fan studies have tended to privilege television and film over audio media (**Hills**, 2009). Audio elements instead, like the anchor's voice, seem to be what made the podcast

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attractive to the audience (**Włodarczyk**; **Tyminska**, 2015), which points out the increasing interest in this type of programme from a fandom studies perspective.

The productive fandom of *Welcome to Night Vale* fits into what has been usually studied in terms of transformative fan works (**Jenkins**; **Ford**; **Green**, 2013), but it is also important to consider not only the most evident instances of fandom. In the field of social media contributions, we can value more casual forms of participation and hybrid forms of semiotic-enunciative-textual contributions and user-generated content (**Barger**; **Peltier**; **Schultz**, 2016; **Hills**, 2013).

Also, many studies focus on one single podcast or a single social media platform. Since each online space where fans interact has its design, the practices built on one might be different from the ones that can be found in another. While specific platforms might disappear, fans tend to migrate to different spaces (**Fiesler**; **Dym**, 2020) Studying the content found on multiple platforms then allows for a wider understanding of fan phenomena (**Alberto**, 2020).

Lastly, although cultural differences in podcast fans have been addressed (**Włodarczyk**; **Tyminska**, 2015), a wider view across multiple countries is still needed. This research aims to cover the aforementioned gaps, analysing the most popular European podcasts, assessing which ones have an active fandom and what distinguishes fans from casual audiences, and examining how fandoms engage with these programmes online.

3. Methodology

Considering this context of media evolution from sound to sound-media and digital fandom, it is important to understand how audiences interact with new audio or sound formats, and how fandom articulates across platforms in Europe.

The objective of this paper is to analyse the behaviour of podcast fandoms in Europe. Considering the digital dimension of the media production itself, as well as the solid use that fandoms make of online tools, this paper analyses the online behaviour of the fandoms of these programmes.

More specific objectives of this paper include the goals of

(1) explaining the elements that set podcast audiences and podcast fandom apart, considering both top-down and bottom-up strategies (**Jenkins**, 2008);

(2) understanding how European fandoms engage with these programmes; and

(3) assessing differences and similarities in the analysed European markets.

To achieve these objectives, this paper answered the following research questions, which reflect on the gaps found after reviewing the existing literature. This is, rather than focusing on podcasts as fan labour or as examples of fan productions and productivity, we focused on analysing the fandom of the podcast programmes themselves. We also considered a variety of multiple programmes and diverse cultures. The inquiries that this paper answered are:

RQ1: What and where are the main podcast fandoms in the main European markets?

RQ2: How do European fandoms behave on social media platforms concerning podcast programmes that they follow?

RQ3: How do European markets compare in terms of fandom activity?

To answer these research questions, this paper followed a triangulation of methods, relying on qualitative methodology, which is the most frequent and adequate method to analyse, understand and explain fandom activity and fandom behaviour.

More particularly, a combination of content analysis and netnography was used, following an exploratory mixed-method approach, which is useful for analysing both the media environment and the social interactions (**Seelig** *et al.*, 2019).

3.1. Content analysis of podcast programmes

Content analysis enables researchers to study media texts in a way that is empirically grounded and exploratory in the process (**Krippendorff**, 1980). Although its origins are mainly quantitative, and maintaining this dimension in a

mixed-method approach allows for more solid research, combining quantitative categories with qualitative content analysis allows for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative material (**Schreier**, 2012).

To identify the main fandoms of European podcasts, this research has firstly identified and analysed the top podcasts on *Spotify* of the five biggest European markets, namely France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom. *Spotify* was selected as the main platform due to its high popularity as a podcast platform within the European market (**Bossetta**, 2020).

To obtain a sample of programmes that is representative of what audiences listen to (and which is more susceptible to enabling a noticeable fandom) the most popular podcasts were considered for analysis. Rather than focusing on podcasts that discuss a specific theme or that meet certain production characteristics (e.g.: interview-based), focusing on the most popular ones allows for identifying what audiences are more drawn to, and exploring whether certain genres or types of podcasts are more susceptible to generating fandom around them.

To identify what these programmes were, the website *Podcast charts by Spotify* was used, which publishes official information gathered and generated by the platform itself (*Spotify*, 2022). A purposeful sample of five hundred podcasts was extracted from this source, which included the top one hundred most popular podcasts in each one of the countries that were part of the sample. The selection of podcasts took place in February 2022. Hence, the characteristics that enable the sample would be the fact that the programme is available on *Spotify* and that it is officially classified by the platform as one of the most popular ones.

After compiling the final list of the most popular podcasts, a preliminary content analysis was conducted to understand the podcasts, as well as finding the programmes with an active fandom. This resulted in a framework of comparison focusing on two units of analysis: the programme's (1) main characteristics and (2) use of digital tools and social media to engage with potential fandom.

3.1.1. Coding sheet

The preliminary analysis was conducted to understand the defining characteristics of the most popular programmes, with the purpose of data scrubbing and conducting further nethnographic qualitative analysis of programmes that showed evidence of bottom-up or top-down strategies. In this phase of analysis, categories included country, name of the programme, host or hosts of the podcast, and the description they have on *Spotify*, along with the keywords that stand out in these descriptions.

Another element of analysis was the topic of the podcast, which refers to the subject discussed and the category of the programme. For this classification, we adapted the "category podcaster" observed indicators suggested by **Tsagkias** *et al.* (2008) and considered the authors' claim that podcasts are highly topical and narrow-targeted. Considering this classification, the official classification of the programmes on *Spotify* and the description of the podcast, a list of values was created in a deductive manner.

It is worthy of mention that a specific distinction is made between "Comedy" (content mainly relying on humour) and "Entertainment" (the content can be humorous, but the main goal is to amuse, different emotions can be identified in the episodes). Hence, the deductive taxonomy of podcasts includes seventeen distinct values: Business, Children, Comedy, Culture and society, Current affairs, Documentary, Entertainment, Fiction, Lifestyle, Personal, Philosophy, Politics, Psychology, Science, Sexuality, Sports, and True Crime.

The seventh category analysed was the digital platforms, for which two specific social networks were selected: *Instagram* and *Twitter*. Both sites allow for social interaction and potential social experience, which enhance a sense of community; and are preferred by fandoms to enable their activities and share their experience (**Blight**; **Ruppel**; **Schoenbauer**, 2017; **Radmann**; **Hedenborg**, 2022). These platforms also comply with the requirements of netnography analysis identified by **Kozinets** (2015), stating that sites must be, among other factors, relevant, interactive, heterogeneous, rich in data, and experiential. Podcasts may have a presence on *Instagram*, *Twitter*, both sites or none.

Related to this, the analysis was performed also considering online communities around *ad hoc* hashtags (**Bruns**; **Burgess**, 2011). Data was collected from *Instagram* and *Twitter* using different methods explained below, in six months, from January to June 2022, both months included. Although this time frame does not allow to describe the evolution of fandom, it accounts for a significant part of the podcast season.

To collect data from *Instagram*, the digital scraper *Apify* was used; in particular, its tool *Fast Instagram Hashtag Scraper*, which extracts data from the available *Instagram* posts for a given list of hashtags. Five runs were conducted with the scrapper, each of them with the list of hashtags pertaining to the podcasts of each one of the countries analysed. A total of 7,161 *Instagram* posts were retrieved with this method (263 in France, 1,712 in Germany, 397 in Italy, 1,430 in Spain, and 3,359 in the United Kingdom).

Original tweets were collected using *Python* and the open-source *Python* package *Tweepy*, which grants access to the *Twitter* API. The same list of hashtags was used, with a limitation of five hundred tweets per request. In total, 8,033 tweets containing the pertinent query were collected (903 in France, 1,874 in Germany, 478 in Italy, 1,874 in Spain, and

2,904 in the United Kingdom). This translates into a total of 18,002 posts on both platforms combined.

Finally, fandom activity was filtered for conducting further analysis, and this consisted of two elements: fan-created content and fan touchpoints. In this first phase of analysis, the main purpose was to find whether this fandom activity existed or not, simply marking each element as positive or negative. Besides the examination of hashtags, two other techniques were used to find active fandom: a search query with the name of the podcast on each platform, with the intention of finding fan accounts, and an exploration of tagged *Instagram* posts in the last six months (from January to June 2022), which is a strategy used by fans to reach out to their programme of interest. These tagged posts were manually counted from the podcasts' *Instagram* accounts, finding 2,808 posts in total (153 in France, 445 in Germany, 205 in Italy, 423 in Spain, and 1,582 in the United Kingdom).

> The chosen methods are content and netnographic analysis of the fandom activity in some of the most popular podcast programmes in the European markets

Fan-created content was marked positive when explored *Instagram* posts and tweets included elements of productive fandom such as fan-created accounts or fan art. Enunciative comments about the podcasts were not considered fan content. Although any interaction with a program could be considered a way of engagement, this exclusion allowed to distinguish casual social media users from active fans. Fan touchpoints were detected when posts and tweets included content about users having physical interaction with the podcasts or their hosts, via merchandising or attendance to live events.

This allowed us to clearly identify fandoms and focus on online communities that are (1) suitable for the research questions and topic), (2) demonstrated higher engagement, and (3) generated descriptively rich data, which are elements that imply an important adaptation to the online context and guarantee the proper application of the next step of examination: netnography analysis (**Kozinets**, 2002).

3.2. Netnographic analysis of fandom activity

Netnography analysis examines how social reality is constructed online, allowing researchers to study the interaction between users, different narratives and practices, and even how people manifest creativity online (**Kozinets**, 2015). This approach allows for applying observational and textual analysis when studying fandom (**Hernández-Santaolalla**; **Rubio-Hernández**, 2017).

After the first filtering, programmes that showed an active fandom by having (1) fan-created content, and/or (2) fan touchpoints were selected. A total of 36,5% of podcasts generated fan-created content, whereas 33,1% of the analysed podcasts had fan touchpoints. This translates into a final selection of forty programmes that showed to have an active fandom by having either both or one of the elements mentioned above.

The Table 2 includes the fandom activity for six months, from January to June 2022, both months included. A final qualitative content analysis was performed on this sample, with a total of 18,093 data points, analysing the activity of the fandom. Out of the possible forms of consumer engagement that have been discussed in the literature (**Barger**; **Peltier**; **Schultz**, 2016), for this research, the analysis focuses on fandom that posts user-generated content, as it shows a higher level of engagement with the podcast programmes.

Considering this, two aspects of fandom production were analysed: fandom type, referring to the nature of the post (fan account, fan art, fan memes, fan events, fan pictures) and fandom content, referring to the textual matter of the posts (merchandising, a recap of an episode, parody, fake clips, segments of the programme, brand identity, or host(s) praise).

3.3. Limitations

Although the methodology described has been proved valid and reliable when studying fandom and online communities, there are certain limitations drawn from the choice of methods that are worthy of acknowledgement.

On the one hand, the limitations of netnography revolve around the focus on online communities, which makes it difficult to generalise the findings to an offline environment where fandom may be present too (**Kozinets**, 2002). On the other hand, the final sample is not too extensive, and future projects studying this topic would benefit from selecting a longitudinal time frame to broaden the sample and potentially assess the evolution of the programmes and their fandoms throughout full seasons. This paper aims to contribute to the field of podcasting fandom, which has not been largely analysed, but it is important to acknowledge that this contribution is exploratory and including a wider sample and longitudinal across time would improve the generalizability of results.

Finally, a key challenge of netnography is that researchers face datasets that are constantly changing. Considering that the sample represents fandom activity for six months, results describe European podcast fandom in this specific period, but the datasets (both the most popular European podcasts and the ones with an active fandom) are sensitive to shifts in a relatively brief period of time.

> The programmes that are the most celebrated in terms of fandom in Europe fall into two categories: entertainment, and culture and society

Table 2. List of selected podcasts with an active fandom

Podcast	Country	Posts (IG)	Tweets	Fan accounts	Tagged posts	Total
Le précepteur	France	36	11	0	13	60
FloodCast	France	31	487	1	0	519
Le coeur sur la table	France	1	5	0	65	71
Les couilles sur la table	France	88	4	0	59	151
Hondelatte raconte	France	107	396	0	16	519
Gemischtes Hack	Germany	449	241	32	9	731
Hobbylos	Germany	13	1	2	1	17
Fest & Flauschig	Germany	367	491	7	0	865
Offline + Ehrlich	Germany	3	1	1	0	5
Geschichten aus der Geschichte	Germany	43	6	0	21	70
Mordlust	Germany	392	371	9	68	840
Baywatch Berlin	Germany	280	495	16	62	853
Kaulitz Hills - Senf aus Hollywood	Germany	80	248	1	250	579
Mord auf ex	Germany	85	20	7	34	146
Muschio selvaggio	Italy	164	239	0	118	521
Il podcast di Alessandro Barbero: Lezioni e conferenze di storia	Italy	8	137	0	30	175
*Non Aprite quella podcast**	Italy	21	17	0	0	38
Demoni urbani	Italy	82	11	1	0	94
Cachemire podcast	Italy	112	68	1	57	238
Dee Giallo	Italy	10	6	0	0	16
Estirando el chicle	Spain	303	324	3	279	909
Nadie sabe nada	Spain	373	498	3	33	907
Entiende tu mente	Spain	364	499	0	99	962
La pija y la quinqui	Spain	4	33	1	7	45
Acabar	Spain	0	2	0	5	7
Deforme semanal ideal total	Spain	41	26	0	0	67
Bilateral con Calle y Poché	Spain	345	492	0	0	837
The Joe Rogan experience	United Kingdom	816	457	2	1.070	2.345
The diary of a CEO with Steven Bartlett	United Kingdom	664	333	0	0	997
The always sunny podcast	United Kingdom	68	84	0	40	192
Rob Beckett and Josh Widdicombe's parenting hell	United Kingdom	185	136	1	22	344
JaackMaate's happy hour	United Kingdom	0	494	0	0	494
Off menu with Ed Gamble and James Acaster	United Kingdom	188	19	1	70	278
Call her daddy	United Kingdom	84	486	1	311	882
Sh**ged married annoyed	United Kingdom	479	494	1	0	974
The fellas	United Kingdom	18	8	0	3	29
ShxtsNGigs	United Kingdom	17	19	0	23	59
The girls bathroom	United Kingdom	76	3	0	40	119
Huberman lab	United Kingdom	757	137	0	0	894
Fozcast - The Ben Foster podcast	United Kingdom	7	234	0	3	244
Total		7.161	8.033	91	2.808	18.093

*This programme has been included because, despite not having tagged posts, the official account of the programme highlights fan reactions and merchandising on their *Instagram* account.

4. Results

It is pertinent to mention that although the first purposeful sample is balanced in terms of quantity and shows certain homogeneity among countries (selecting the 20 most popular programmes out of the list of the 100 most popular podcasts), there is a certain disparity in terms of the categories that form the sample and not all countries are part of the final sample in the same proportion. Hence, out of the forty programmes, 5 (13%) are from France, 9 (23%) are from Germany, 6 (15%) are from Italy, 7 (18%) are from Spain, and 13 (33%) are from the United Kingdom.

Moving on to the more specific results, to explain the elements that set podcast audiences apart from fandom, as aforementioned in the literature review and the methodology, both top-down and bottom-up strategies are considered. The selected sample leaves out podcasts that have an active fandom revolving around the host rather than the programmes, to avoid having a contaminated sample. These are programmes that the host promotes through their social media and where no specific fandom-created content or touchpoints related to the podcast could be found. Likewise, in the case of *It's always sunny podcast*, fan posts that were more related to the television show rather than the podcast itself have not been counted.

Out of the sample of one hundred programmes, 36,5% of podcasts generated fan-created content (fan art, fan accounts, etc.), whereas 33,1% of the analysed podcasts had fan touchpoints (either live shows or merchandising).

General results showed that the main categories of the most popular podcasts in Europe are entertainment, culture and society and current affairs, and fandom does revolve around the first two topics, but the third place is occupied by comedy, with no programme dedicated to current affairs showing any active fandom.

This result is particularly interesting to establish a line of research when studying fandom audiences, since determining which categories are the ones motivating fandoms the most, and whether it aligns with the most popular categories or not, allows for a more in-depth study and selection of the sample, and it can be inferred that genre does play a role in audience engagement (**García-Marín**, 2020).

There are categories of programmes that have a significant presence in the general sample that completely disappear in the selected sample with active fandoms, such as programmes that focus on current affairs or politics. This suggests that the nature of the podcast itself may have a strong influence on fandom engagement, but at the same time, it is worthy to mention that these programmes were amongst the ones with not as strong top-bottom strategies.

Notwithstanding, both aspects might be related, as news programmes are not as inclined to the studied top-bottom strategies such as creating merchandising or touring and interacting with audiences in live shows.

As per "where" the main European podcast fandoms are, the majority of these communities are active on both *Twitter* and *Instagram* but there is a preference shown towards *Instagram* for fandom-created content. Fandoms use exclusively *Instagram* 60% of the time,
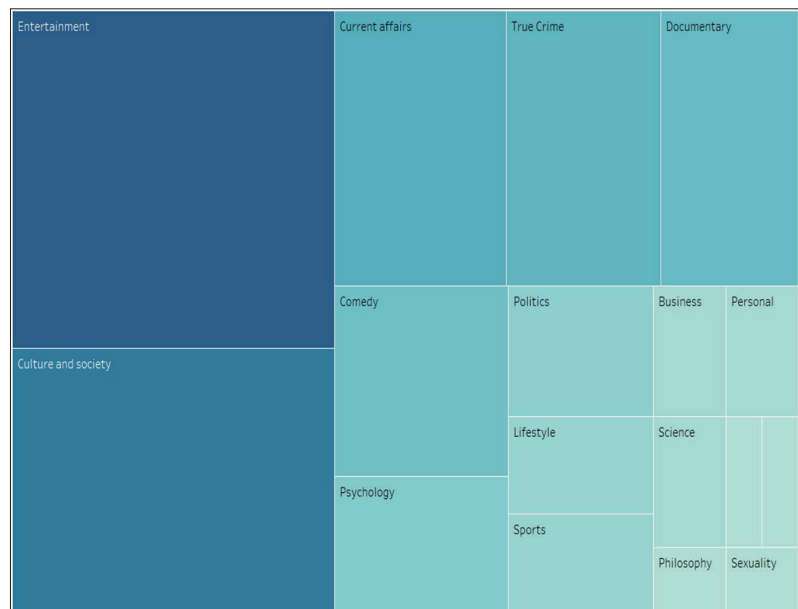

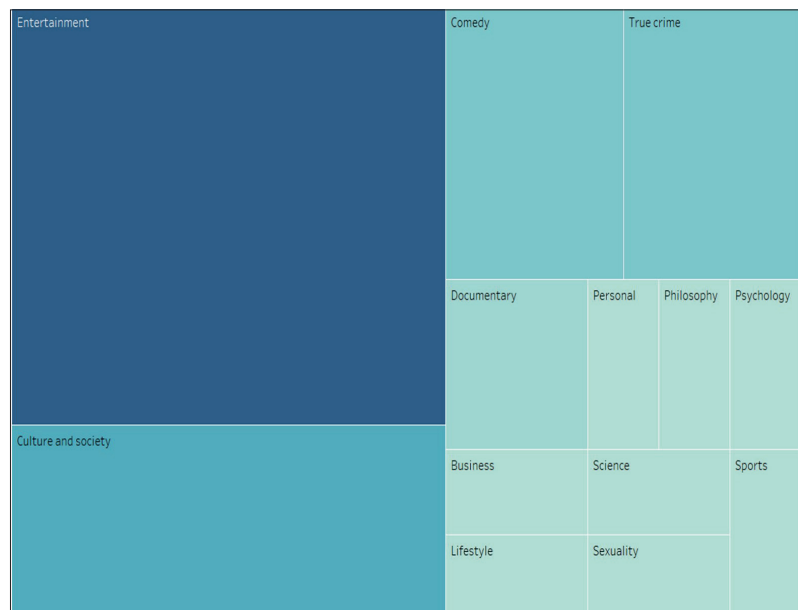Figure 1. Topics of the most popular podcasts in Europe

Figure 2. Topics of European podcasts with an active fandom

37,5% of the time both *Instagram* and *Twitter*, and exclusively *Twitter* only 2,5% of the time. These results show that *Twitter* is not as used in this regard, although fandom seems to gather around the podcasts' names and hashtags to express their admiration and have informal conversations. Podcast hosting platforms such as *Anchor* and *iVoox* are well established on *Twitter*, but they don't have such a strong presence on *Instagram*, which points to inconsistency with fandom activity (**Caballero-Escusol**; **Nicolas-Sans**; **Bustos-Díaz**, 2021).

To understand how European fandom engages with podcasts, within the selected sample three main elements were analysed: (1) the platform (*Instagram*, *Twitter*), (2) the type of fandom activity (fan account, fan art, fan meme, fan event, or fan picture), and (3) the content of the activity (merch, recaps, parody, fake clip, mashups, segment, brand identity, or host praise).

The most common type of fandom activities is mainly fan art and fan pictures. Podcast fandoms create fan art, usually, digital illustrations, which display the brand identity of the podcasts, highlighting their main elements such as the name, the hosts, and quotes that have caught their attention. In some cases, these illustrations are handwritten, and a photograph is uploaded, which still demonstrates a prominent level of fandom involvement.

Fan pictures, on the other hand, are mainly from fandoms that attend the podcasts' live shows, meet the hosts, or upload personal pictures of themselves watching the podcast

Figure 3. Podcasts with an active fandom per country

or, notably, with merchandising. In all of these cases, although the fandom did not create transmedia expansions (**Scolari**, 2013), they are building the podcasts' presence in the digital environment. These are also instances of enunciative fandom (**Fiske**, 1992). Sharing the attendance to shows, or the ownership of merchandising, signals individuals as fans and supporters of the content.

The third most usual form of fan creation, fan accounts, are not as predominant but still have a significant presence. There is a particular phenomenon that seems to be consistent across the fandoms that are part of the sample, which is the creation of accounts "out of context" on *Twitter*. This means that the authors of these accounts take segments of the programme that they find interesting, funny, or catchy and they upload these short clips without a caption (without context). It has an entertaining goal for the rest of the fandom. The recirculation of content under new contexts demonstrates the "spreadability" of podcasts (**Jenkins**; **Ford**; **Green**, 2013). Even if these contributions are based on remixing and repetition, they are transformative expansions of content. Findings about meme-content creation are rather minor, but they are present, and some fan accounts are entirely dedicated to memes about the podcast programme.

As per the content of these creations, the vast majority of fandom activity revolves around the brand identity of the programme or specific aspects of its content, without fake clips, mashups, or fictional writing (e.g.: fan fiction) being among the examined content. It is also worthy of mention that despite the podcasts being programmes designed to be consumed primarily in an audio format, most of the fandom creation is either audio-visual or strictly visual. This is consistent with the fact that most media fandom has traditionally centred around television and film (**Coppa**, 2006), which makes it usual for fandom to produce content using these elements. Furthermore, *Instagram* is the main platform on which audiences share their creations, and this platform is very visual as well.

> The main elements that set audiences apart from fandom are both top-down and bottom-up strategies: fans sharing content from the programmes and creating related content such as "fan art"

When comparing the analysed countries, there is an unbalanced distribution of fandoms among countries, which is particularly interesting to compare with patterns of consumption and the most active audiences in Europe.

It is noticeable that the countries with a higher number of active fandoms are Germany (9 programmes out of 20) and the United Kingdom (13 programmes out of 20). The United Kingdom is the country with the most activity, which is also consistent with results related to the number of data points related to fandom generated by the programmes.
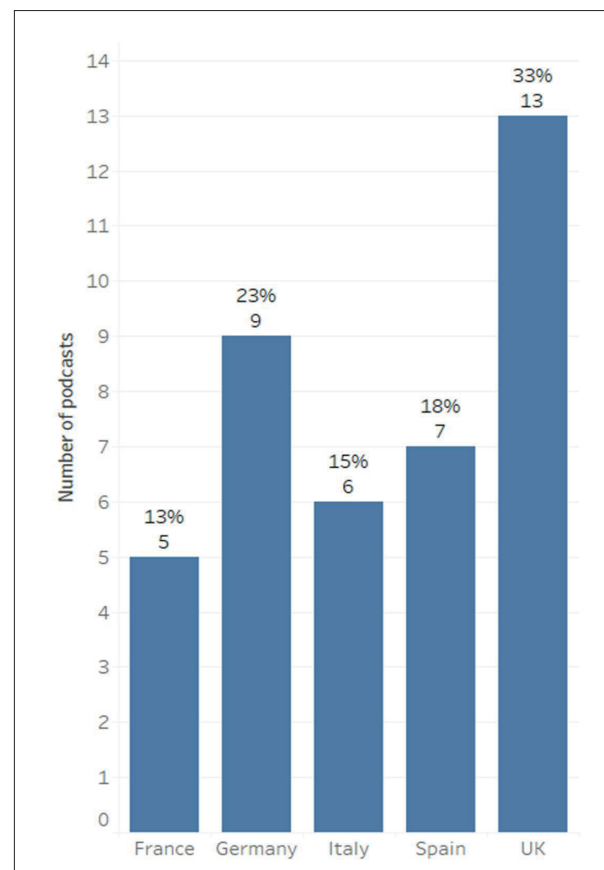
Related to this, in the top-10 programmes with the most fandom-related data points, most programmes are notably from the United Kingdom (5 out of 10 programmes, accounting for 6,092 fandom data points in total, considering hashtags on *Instagram* and *Twitter*, fan accounts and tagged posts), Spain (three programmes with a total of 2,778 fandom-related data points, considering the same units of analysis), and Germany (two programmes, 1,718 fandom data points).

Table 3. Top podcasts with the most fandom-related data points

Podcast (title)	Country	Topic	Fandom data points
The Joe Rogan experience	United Kingdom	Entertainment	2,345
The diary of a CEO with Steven Bartlett	United Kingdom	Business	997
Sh**ged married annoyed	United Kingdom	Entertainment	974
Entiende tu mente	Spain	Psychology	962
Estirando el chicle	Spain	Entertainment	909
Nadie sabe nada	Spain	Entertainment	907
Huberman lab	United Kingdom	Science	894
Call her daddy	United Kingdom	Culture and society	882
Fest & Flauschig	Germany	Comedy	865
Baywatch Berlin	Germany	Entertainment	853

The United Kingdom is the only country that seems to show certain consistency between its reach to podcast listeners and active fandoms. It is the second country with the most active podcast audiences (as seen in the literature review) and the country with more podcast programmes with fandom. Nonetheless, this is the only case with a clear correlation between audiences and fandom. The country with the highest percentage of occasional listeners, Spain, comes in third in terms of active fandom (after the United Kingdom and Germany). This indicates that productive fandom is a small fraction of the audience. Some users may consume a high volume of podcasts and could even claim a fan identity while not participating in online spaces or producing fan objects.

Although fandoms gather around different themes across countries, it is pertinent to mention that there seems to be an agreement on entertainment podcasts being the ones that gather the most active fandoms around the three most prolific countries (the United Kingdom, Germany, and Spain).

Figure 4. Topics of podcasts with an active fandom per country

This demonstrates that podcast fandoms in Europe are diverse, but at the same time, they have several points of convergence that encourage fandom engagement, such as favoured topics to create fandom around, as well as sharing platforms in which to articulate their activities and produced content.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This paper has discussed the relevance of studying podcast audiences and, more particularly, podcast fandoms. The programmes that are the most celebrated in terms of fandom in Europe fall into two categories: entertainment and culture and society. These two themes are also the main ones for listeners (non-fandom) in general, but whereas current events are the third option for general audiences, European fandoms prefer comedy podcasts. Several categories made it into the most popular podcasts that simply do not generate a fandom around them, despite being able to gather active listeners and supporters.
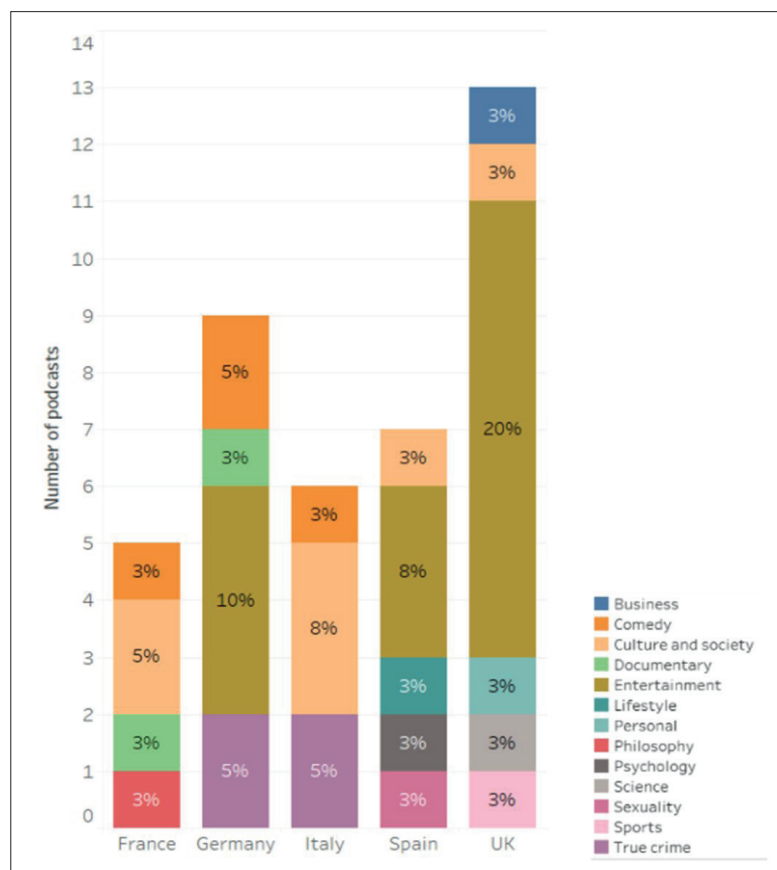
Results show solid reasons for this. When analysing the general scenario of podcast reception, the main elements that set audiences apart from fandom are both top-down and bottom-up strategies. Regarding the former, fandoms reward the efforts that their programmes make by sharing pictures of the podcasts' merchandising or live shows on social media. Furthermore, and showing a higher level of commitment, European fandoms that are part of the analysed sample also reflect on well-iden-

> " The United Kingdom stands out as the country with the highest number of fandoms, and it is also one of the top countries when it comes to active podcast audiences, just behind Spain. Podcast fandoms generate similar topics around all countries "

tified bottom-up strategies, particularly by creating visual (and audio-visual) content in the form of fan art that highlights the brand identity of their preferred audio programmes. These practices resonate with the "affirmational" dimension of fandom where fans' interests align with the contents of the programme (**Jenkins**; **Ford**; **Green**, 2013).

The fact that the fan-created content is visual may have to do with the fact that European fandom mainly uses *Instagram*, a visual-based platform, to share this fan-created content. It might be also related to the fact that most fandom tradition is based on visual media. This contradicts conventional digital strategies of the programmes, which considered *Twitter* the leading site to create a network.

Nonetheless, both platforms gather fandom as an online community around *ad hoc* hashtags, and the content shared on *Instagram* uses this element (the hashtag) to identify their creations with their community. *Twitter*, on the other hand, is mainly used to create "out of context" fan accounts, with the aim of entertaining audiences and creating a rather informal gathering of fans engaging with that content.

In contrast to the activity of fandom of other media productions, European podcast fandoms do not rely as much upon writing fictional texts and stories about programmes or their protagonists. Rather, their textual production is based on entertaining content that features the brand identity of the podcast or focuses on showing admiration for the host or hosts.

Lastly, in terms of comparison among European countries, the United Kingdom stands out as the country with the highest number of fandoms, and it is also one of the top countries when it comes to active podcast audiences, just behind Spain. Similarly, podcast fandoms are also gathered around comparable topics across countries, regardless of the most popular programmes showing more disparity in this sense.

Furthermore, to build upon similarities, fan art and fan pictures are the most common types of fandom creation in all countries, whereas fan memes are the least common type of fandom creation in all countries. These findings are quite significant since they show that there are more consistencies across European fandoms than exist across European audiences.

This paper contributes to the existing knowledge about podcasts and fandom but fills the gap regarding the fandoms of podcast programmes in the biggest European markets. Future research would benefit from expanding the time horizon of the study and addressing a longitudinal analysis, which would help understand the evolution of podcast fandom in Europe and improve the generalizability of results. Considering the increased interest in podcasts and fandom, this is an evolving line of research that would benefit from further contributions.

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