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Memories of Our Youth: The Viral Spread of Radio Station Facebook Posts

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Radio and social media have developed a strong relationship in Ireland since the explosion in popularity of the latter from 2008 onward. Although the convergence of radio with Facebook in Ireland has allowed radio stations to reach wider audiences, some stations have been much more successful than others at achieving this. In this article the author presents a case study of *Beat*, a regional commercial radio station targeting the 'digitally native' (Palfrey and Gasser, 2010) millennial 15–34-year-old market, and one of the Irish Radio Industry's most successful viral media instigators. During the period of study, 2011–2016, *Beat* was found to be very successful at engaging its audience through bespoke material that connected emotionally with the cultural community. The success of this viral reach helped the station grow its online followers to numbers that far outnumbered their actual listenership. In this article the author presents an analysis of the viral posts that feature childhood toys as the subject matter and explore why these pieces 'went viral'. Using the generational theories of Mannheim (1952) and Strauss and Howe (1991) among others to frame the argument, the author posits that users share media texts which connect with them emotionally and by enjoying this material with others are unified as an affective community of individuals. This experience brings the group closer together and closer to the radio station. I also touch on the power of nostalgia as a factor in the viral spread of media texts. This research employed several research methods: in-depth interviews with radio industry professionals, an online survey of radio listeners/online users of *Beat*, textual analysis of *Beat*'s Facebook page, direct observation of radio producers and content analysis of social media growth.

Keywords: Irish radio; viral media; Facebook; nostalgia; millennials; audiences

Introduction

The first two decades of the 21st Century have been a period of immense change for traditional forms of media including radio. With the arrival of Web 2.0, the digitalisation of the mass media and the subsequent ubiquity of digital media devices and social platforms, modern-day audiences have an enormous range of communication possibilities at their fingertips.

By converging with online platforms, radio has expanded its range of content and how it disseminates this content to the audience. Radio has also adopted a host of interactive and on-demand services which provide a multimedia offering that allows users to consume media content where and when they want.

The limited rollout of digital audio broadcasting (DAB) in Ireland aside, radio underwent significant development in the years 2011–2016, while remaining largely unchanged as an analogue broadcast medium. Some feared for radio's survival once the medium became globalised by the internet in the early part of the millennium. Then, less-regulated digital alternatives such as satellite and internet radio, podcasts and music/audio streaming services came into existence, competing for the audience's time and attention (Dubber, 2013: 130). Despite these challenges radio has retained its popularity in Ireland and, with the increasing digitalisation of the mass media, the focus for radio has been for the attention of young audiences. As a result Facebook, and other social network sites (SNSs), have been instrumental in helping stations reach these young 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001; Palfrey and Gasser, 2013). Compounding the above challenges were two external forces: the global economic recession, which severely impacted Ireland and the Irish Radio Industry, and the growth in demand for digital interactive media. A central feature of this period was media convergence which is now commonplace in the Irish, and indeed global, media industries.

This article presents a case study of the Irish youth radio station *Beat 102103*, referred to henceforth as *Beat*, between the years 2011–2016. The station built a large number of Facebook followers and a very dynamic, interactive and engaged audience. Part of this can be attributed to the audience being largely young – the target demographic is 15–34 years of age – and highly active on several social media platforms. The station started out in the nascent stage of Web 2.0, broadcasting since 2003 to five counties across the South East of Ireland. The radio station defines its mission as 'the "go to" multi-platform radio station for entertaining and informing young adults' (Beat, 2018).

This article will focus on the millennial generation, a cohort born roughly in the years from 1982 to 2000 which grew up with social media as an integral part of their lives, central to interpersonal communication and emotional expression. However, much credit for the *Beat* Facebook page's success must go to the production staff who understand their audience well and have devised strategies to engage them emotionally and virally expand the station's reach in the process. This work was done in very difficult economic circumstances when radio station revenues were at an ebb and operating budgets were slashed. The public service broadcaster RTÉ's online presence by contrast was found to be much less in tune with its audiences and thus less effective at building SNS followers.

This article not only shows how important social media is to a youth radio station but also demonstrates how effective well-curated posts can be in building a loyal online audience through affective communication that connects with followers emotionally. Furthermore by engaging existing followers a station can get users to act as brand ambassadors by sharing the material with others in their social network and thus expanding the radio station's online reach outside their franchise area, as has been the case with *Beat*.

This case study focuses on *Beat*'s use of Facebook exclusively, despite the active use of Twitter, Snapchat and Instagram by *Beat* at the time of research. Posting and maintaining content on all of these platforms became part of the radio producer's remit during the years of research thus making the role of the radio station producer ever more demanding. However, the potential to engage the audience is enormous and can have possible economic benefits – a welcome development given the funding challenges that were facing, and continue to face, commercial radio stations in Ireland during this time.

Such is the growing prominence of the millennial cohort as a counterweight to the 'baby boomer' generation that understanding their media consumption habits has become vital to the survival of any media outlet, not just radio stations. Millennials have grown up in the digital era where almost every facet of their lives has been touched by digital media. They live a perpetually connected existence and have many more daily media distractions than previous generations. Therefore employing a communication strategy that involves emotional engagement and tapping into nostalgia can trigger a sense of belonging that leads users to interact with the content and the station through SNSs. Although it is a regional Irish radio station, *Beat* has been able to reach audiences beyond its FM broadcasting boundaries and engage fans and 'followers' from wider geographical areas. The station has achieved this as a result of its successful SNS strategy. With that, the station has centralised transnational groups that are organised around the sense of belonging to a wider community or interest group, in this case the Irish millennial demographic, so that the diaspora are also included in the conversation and attracted to the station (McMahon, 2018).

The study drew data from multiple methods to provide the researcher with a collection of data via a strategy known as triangulation (Webb et al., 1966). The methodology involved two in-depth interviews, one with a senior manager, the other a member of the management team who also serves as producer and presenter of a daily programme on *Beat*. The researcher also engaged in direct observation of a production team as they planned and presented their programme and textual analysis of the station's Facebook page on numerous dates. The methods were designed to gather data on the use of Facebook to engage the public and to increase digital audiences.

This article uses generation theory to support our understanding of millennials' online behaviour and the mediatic phenomenon of online cultural communities. In addition, this article offers an overview of nostalgia and the use of emotions to trigger social media engagement. From the author's perspective, *Beat* was found to have effective social media strategies and acts as an exemplar of how a radio station can best use Facebook to engage and grow an audience nationally and internationally using digital media.

Background and context: Ireland 2011–2016

The economic context in which this research was conducted cannot be ignored due to the far-reaching impact the changes in the economy had on the media industries and the people of Ireland. The Irish economy experienced unprecedented economic growth during what was known as the 'Celtic Tiger' era from the mid-1990s until the global crash of 2008 – a catastrophic event which dragged the country into a near decade long recession. At the depth of the recession in 2012, 14.7 per cent of the population was unemployed and thousands of the country's largely young and educated citizens were emigrating each year for the hope of a better life abroad. There was an inevitable impact on all commercial enterprise – commercial radio stations included – which are reliant on healthy economic activity to survive. Ireland's commercial radio stations depend on advertising and sponsorship revenue as central to their funding model. Ireland public service TV and radio broadcaster, RTÉ, also relies on advertising and sponsorship to support their primary revenue stream – the television licence fee. The drop in radio advertising revenue from a peak of $186 m in 2007, to a trough of $121 m in 2013, a 35 per cent reduction in advertising revenue created a squeeze on Irish radio stations (Statistica, 2018). Data from the advertising industry also shows that advertising spend continued to shift away from radio and print and towards online advertising businesses. Facebook and Google alone took 58 per cent of the advertising spend in Ireland in 2017 – a figure which represents a further increase on the results recorded in 2016 (McGee, 2018). Fuchs has

also noted the prominence of Google and Facebook in the global advertising market with the two tech giants taking 66 per cent of all online advertising revenues (Fuchs, 2018).

The economic situation slowly improved and the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) reported strong growth for the Irish economy in 2014 and 2015 with GNP growth rates of 3.4 per cent and 3.7 per cent respectively and a decrease in unemployment to 9.8 per cent in 2015 (ESRI, 2015). Driven by strong domestic and international demand for goods and services, the economy's return to health continued in 2016 with a 5.2 per cent GDP increase, easily outstripping the rest of the eurozone (Central Statistics Office, 2016).

Given the poor economic conditions during the period of research it is reasonable to expect that a general malaise descended upon the Irish people with the population having little reason for optimism. Having lived in Ireland through this period this author can attest to the low morale and palpable melancholy of the public as the recession wore on and the crisis worsened. During this period of economic hardship, radio continued to be an ever-present companion to the people of Ireland and listenership remained strong at over 80 per cent of adults listening daily – among the highest in Europe (Ipsos MRBI, 2008, 2016).

At the same time the Irish Radio Industry also entered a period of significant change that would alter it forever and bring the medium into the digital age (McMahon, 2019). Along with this progression came increased competition for advertising spend which brought radio up against digital advertising. Radio stations in Ireland, still reliant on selling on-air ad spots and sponsorship packages, struggled as a result. *Beat*, along with the other 35 commercial stations, did not have the resources to invest in Facebook advertisements to promote their own enterprises so instead started to use Facebook and other SNSs as an extension of their brand to gain exposure and build online followings to support their core on-air product.

Millennials and generation theory

At the time of study, 2011–2016, *Beat*'s audience predominantly consisted of the generational cohort known as millennials or Generation Y. The specific years that millennials were born is a matter of some debate. For Howe and Strauss (2000) millennials are the generation born in the twenty years from 1982; however Brosdahl and Carpenter (2011) specify a period between 1982 and 2000, succeeded by the post-millennials, also known as Generation Z or the iGeneration (Rosen, 2010; Fishman, 2015). Millennials are the first generation to reach their teenage years with mobile phones as an integral part of their daily lives and as a result have been labelled 'digital natives', such is their affinity and immersion in digital media (Prensky, 2001). In short, they have grown up in the digital age and this has affected how they interact with one another and with broadcast media.

Others argue that the millennial cohort ought to be broken down to three sub-sections – xennials, millennials and post-millennials. Dan Woodman sees xennials as those born at the end of the 1970s and into the early 1980s and are characterised as having spent their youth in using analogue media and their adult lives in the digital media age (Woodman, cited in Curtis, 2017). Thus their experiences and relationships with digital media are markedly different from those born from the mid-1980s or those who have always known digital media and have used social media from their teenage years for socialisation. Post-millennials, or Generation Z, are born from the beginning of the millennium and are also known as the iGeneration with the 'i' representing 'both the types of mobile technologies being heralded by children and adolescents (iPhone, iPod, Wii, iTunes) plus the fact that these technologies are mostly "individualized" in the way they are used' (Rosen 2010 n.p.). They share with the previous generation the same interest for technology but are more pragmatic and independent. Rosen found 'iGeners' to be the most technologically immersed generation, consuming digital media during every waking hour and multitasking more than other generation (Rosen, 2010).

This makes the cohort – xennials, millennials and post-millennials – a particularly useful subject for this investigation because of the significance of digital media, including Facebook and other SNSs, in their everyday lives and also the strong appeal of visual elements in their online behaviour. Another relevant characteristic of the generation is their ubiquitous connectivity, which even changes the relation of the individuals with time. Message apps change response time expectations; miniaturised browsers and powerful search engines create an expectation of immediate answers to all problems (Bucuta, 2015). For the present study, the combination of these three tech-savvy cohorts – xennials, millennials and post-millennials – will be described simply as millennials, within which those main characteristics are prevalent.

Defining a generational cohort has an intrinsic connection to the main historical events and social influences that helped to shape behavioural patterns. Strauss and Howe (1991), proposed through their generational theory, that a generation represents a period of 20–22 years and that individuals born within this period share a number of commonalities. The generational definition is based on three key criteria. First, members share a location in history, meaning they witnessed important historical events, social experiences and cultural trends. Secondly, based on these experiences during childhood and adolescence, members form certain attitudes, beliefs and opinions. Thirdly, due to an awareness of the experiences, characteristics and traits they share with others from their generation, they have a common perceived membership in that generation (Strauss and Howe, 1991). Bahr and Prendergast (2007) posit that the experiences do not replace or dispute psychological, medical or other theories for understanding individuals and groups, but rather support and complement these frameworks for understanding human development patterns.

What is of interest from a media production perspective is the behavioural patterns of this cohort and how to engage them. After all, the millennial generation represents the future adult radio audience and thus must be secured as loyal listeners and SNS 'followers'. Strauss and Howe (1991) described millennials as the next most influential generation since the Baby Boomers – who were born after the Second World War during the period 1943–1960 – and suggested that the millennials will go on to surpass the influence achieved by their parents.

The affirmation is based on the unique traits that define millennials: 'they consider themselves to be special, they are sheltered, are confident, are team oriented, have conventional hopes and dreams, are pressured, and are achieving' (Howe and Strauss 2000, 4). In addition, favourable economic indicators across most western societies influenced the consumption habits of the generation, resulting in an obsession with possession, 'characterized by materialism, status consumption and the strong influence of reference groups' (Bucuta, 2015: 41). The elevated consumption reinforces a closer relation between millennials and popular culture, from videogames to reality shows, and the familiarity with more complex relations and multiplatform resources (Johnson, 2006).

Technology has changed the ways in which this generation receives and manages information and media with the primary screen in their daily lives being the smartphone. At the same time, the future of media outlets depends on the capability of connecting to this generation and ensuring the recruitment of younger audiences to replace the existing ones who are passing away. Therefore, by focusing efforts on establishing radio, on all available platforms, as a valuable medium in their daily lives, Irish radio might be able to futureproof itself.

This is where social media has come to the fore, particularly for radio which – this author argues – has maintained its relevance in a fast-changing, tech-reliant world by incorporating Facebook and other SNSs into production practices. Media outlets must create touchpoints to connect their outputs with younger generations and generate viral content as much as possible. New strategies are needed to attract an audience that demands immediate satisfaction through novel and emotive content. This requires media producers to have

the ability to be flexible and prepared to expand the producer's role to include content creation and curation.

The emotional connections and the information flows across geographic areas have the effect of connecting users through the idea of unity. Millennials have another specific generational trait according to Nimon, that is that their relationships among group members, even in virtual environments, are stronger than the ones developed by previous generations (Nimon 2007). In this context social media platforms work as catalysts of, and facilitators for, online community formation.

Facebook: The face of radio

Radio has become a much more visual medium since its convergence with Facebook which this author suggests was necessary for it to compete in an increasingly visual digital mediascape. The *Beat* senior manager interviewed stressed the importance of the station 'being where the audience is' which is online on the popular SNSs – 'we have to make sure it's part of what we do'. The senior manager added that it was 'absolutely essential' the station have an online presence 'because we are a youth station and social media is so huge for our audience'. They continued by stating that every presenter and deejay must push everything they do online and in doing so encourage the audience to listen to the on-air programming since this is the only element that can be commodified by *Beat*.

The station's Facebook following and online activity of the audience are more difficult to directly monetise, though *Beat* has had some success indirectly by adding Facebook exposure via posts as part of an advertising package that involves on-air advertising and sponsorship opportunities (McMahon, 2016). Public service and commercial radio stations alike in Ireland use SNSs as an extension of their station and its brand, commercial stations more effectively than RTÉ, the Irish public service broadcaster. Facebook is a cost effective way of promoting the station while building an online quasi-virtual community of listeners/followers around the station (McMahon, 2018). During the period of research radio stations did not have the funds to pay for social media advertisements as a means of expanding their audience and therefore had to grow their online followings organically by posting the right content at the right time to achieve maximum impact.

The *Beat* producer interviewed stated they want their audience to perceive the station and its staff as 'people like us', people who share common tastes and interests with the listeners. Facebook allows *Beat* staff to remain acquainted with the audience's interests by offering a platform for open interaction and engagement. The *Beat* producer monitors what the audience respond well to and uses this to inform the sorts of content to post in the future to gain a similar reaction. Producers post visual content in the form of photographs, videos, gifs, memes and other images throughout the broadcast day and also into the evening when many stations wind down their online activity. However, *Beat* tailors its evening schedule to appeal to a younger audience and therefore the evening presenters are instructed to use SNSs more intensively, particularly those platforms like Snapchat that are more popular with young teenagers. The move to make radio output more visual has been led by a need to attract younger audiences to replenish aging ones. The *Beat* producer explained how important it is for staff to think from the audience's perspective and to source or create memes to engage emotionally with the audience. Another approach is to tap into the national psyche and post memes that relate to Irishness that can be best appreciated by those who understand that culture. Such posts create an imagined community of individuals sharing similar feelings and/or cultural understandings (Anderson, 1991).

Memes became a popular form of visual content for radio producers during the research period. According to Drakett et al., a meme is '… a unit of cultural transmission, which may

represent an aspect of a culture such as language, fashion, songs – things which evolve, change and spread' (Drakett et al., 2018: 112). Memes are relevant to particular cultural sub-sets, meaning only individuals within certain cultures, communities or groups with shared experiences and knowledge will understand and appreciate the humour contained within the message. The key elements of such memes are the image and the text. The image signals a certain connotation which is reinforced or anchored by the text which carries the deno-tation and drives home the message or punchline. Combined, these two elements make a point that is relevant to a group of people at a certain time who share the same underlying feelings/knowledge.

A post that is published on a Friday celebrating the positivity felt as the weekend beckons is a good example of content that carries humour and shared excitement through visual messages. Friday posts prove popular and are designed to tap into the sentiment of joy expe-rienced by the audience that works a traditional 9-to-5 job Monday to Friday and thus feel excited about the approaching weekend. Radio is often referred to as a constant companion, a habitually consumed medium that helps structure the hour, day and week for the listener and therefore timely Facebook posts help reinforce this function.

Emotion and affective communities on SNSs

Facebook leads in popularity among SNS platforms worldwide. A corporate entity with capi-talist motivations at its core, consuming advertisements and providing personal data is the price the user pays for the 'free' service. As with radio and television broadcast services, the notion of 'free' programming is a misnomer – all audiences are commodified (Smythe 1981). Audiences are packaged into demographic cohorts and sold on to advertisers, meaning audi-ences work for media industries and their work is exploited for commercial gain.

Facebook, like all SNSs, is an advertiser first and foremost. The company's aim is to engage with audiences as much as possible to attract them to visit the website regularly. While there Facebook wants users to interact as much as possible and in the process vast amounts of per-sonal data are recorded through these interactions. This data instructs strong algorithms how to advertise to users more accurately and thus better serve Facebook's clients. In this context, both Facebook and radio stations work in tandem. For the user, the Facebook page of the station is another representation of the station itself, not a separate entity. For millennials, this author argues, the Facebook page has more of an influence on the station's image and popularity than the station's offical website or the broadcast content itself.

Nostalgia and retro culture

The term nostalgia comes from two Greek words: *nostos*, which translates as the return to one's native land and *algos*, which refers to pain, suffering, or grief (Daniels, 1985). The pain-ful yearning to return home represents the bittersweet characteristic of an emotion which simultaneously holds both pleasant and unpleasant elements (Holak and Havlena, 1992). According to Huang et al. 'most nostalgic memories include elements of love, pride, and joy' (Huang et al., 2016: 372). However, not all memories recalled by an individual are positive ones, as nostalgia 'may evoke memories of peaceful, pleasant times or of times of tension and turmoil' (Holak and Havlena, 1992: 380).

Holak and Havlena (1992) explored the themes and subjects associated with nostalgia and found that respondents have feelings of nostalgia connected to three broad categories of stimuli: people, objects and events. People that evoke nostalgia are family, friends and close acquaintances from the past; objects associated with nostalgia are often toys, vehicles, books and other media; while events are trips, holidays or other meaningful experiences. For the authors, each of the above categories and elements act as stimuli for each other, so that two

or more categories could evoke one memory. This theory is particularly applicable to the present case study where there is a presence of all three stimuli in the example.

There has been a resurgent interest in nostalgia in recent years, as popular culture has favoured looking back to the past in search of inspiration and escapism. Niemeyer (2014) proposes that media have always been tightly linked to nostalgia and that media put forward several different notions and functions of nostalgia. There are numerous examples of the retro-fitting of cultural artefacts from the past into the present. From the resurgence in popularity of the analogue technological products such as vinyl records, to vintage clothing and the retro media texts *Mad Men* (2007–2015), *Super 8* (2011), *IT* (2017) and *Stranger Things* (2016–), there has been wide cultural appreciation for the past in nearly every aspect of our modern culture. Music too triggers nostalgic feelings associated with memories of the past and particular songs that can be linked to poignant life events which are unique for each of us but can also be shared with others (Garrido and Davidson, 2019).

However, Niemeyer and Wentz posit that 'there is a trend of linking nostalgia to a more or less unrealistic past, adorning its portrayal exclusively with affirmative and positive feelings' (Niemeyer and Wentz, 2014: 129). This rose tinted perspective, Reynolds argues, is preferred as it offers an escape from the present. Reynolds posits that this retro fixation which has been applied to clothing, design, media and culture is in response to the dissatisfaction new generations have with the present and with the horizons of a grim future (Reynolds, 2011). The economic recession from 2008 arguably affected younger generations more than older ones due to the bleak future prospects that came with it. Applying Reynolds' theory, instead of looking to the uncertainties of the future, millennials preferred to look backward for reassurance, where they could be comforted by memories of better times. Childhood is often when strong positive memories of carefree life are formed and therefore for adults, under the pressure of social, political and economic factors, escaping back to a time when life was simpler and happier can trigger upbeat emotions. When these sensations are shared with others who have similar memories, this can build bonding capital between users who have offline relationships with one another, as well as bridging capital and a sense of belonging with other unknown members to a generational community (Ellison et al., 2007; Putnam, 2001).

'Sharing' content instigates conversations with others in a social network while reinforcing identity as a member of a community. In the digital age, this potent phenomenon has created innovative commercial opportunities beyond the scope of traditional marketing. Instead of using affection to directly engage consumers to buy a product, contemporary media outlets such as radio stations use emotion to develop their audiences into commodifiable communities. In this case, audience satisfaction shifts from a sense of consuming to the feeling of belonging (Wakefield et al., 2017). Nostalgia plays a significant role in the scope of emotions and works as a connector among individuals of the same generation. *Beat* capitalises on this opportunity, expanding its regional profile by focusing on the appeal of nostalgia to millennials. *Beat* uses nostalgia, among other strategic content, to gain new 'followers' and extract economic capital from a blooming digital audience (McMahon, 2016).

There are many other examples of radio using the power of nostalgia through music to engage with an audience through programmes and radio stations dedicated to certain decades. Facebook itself has been increasingly associated with nostalgia (Davalos et al., 2015). The social network is used primarily to maintain contact with friends and family, many of whom may be living in different geographical locations, or people whom one may have fallen out of regular contact with. Facebook clearly recognised the strength of nostalgia as a powerful engagement tool and exploited it as a strategy to prolong the engagement of users with its social network. In 2015, the platform introduced a photo album feature that celebrated the anniversary of users joining Facebook and what had happened over that time on users'

Facebook Timeline. In another feature, 'On this Day', Facebook allows users to opt to receive notifications of posts they published on that day in previous years (Gheller, 2015).

Beat's Facebook page

The *Beat* managers interviewed have identified the station's Facebook page as part of the station's promotion efforts and is thus consistent with the brand's website homepage's appearance and content. However, the Facebook page is a far more dynamic and interactive platform (than its website) that is easier to update and can therefore reflect the station's content more fluidly.

Beat's Connection with Millennials

Out of all Irish radio broadcasters, youth-targeted stations boasted the highest numbers of Facebook 'followers'. As a station which has developed a strong social media following in relation to its listenership and broadcast area, *Beat* represents innovative industry practices in using Facebook to connect with the audience and create an emotionally engaging media experience.

Based on the interviews conducted, *Beat* management appreciate that the target audience spends increasing amounts of time online having grown up with digital technology woven through the fabric of modern life, and as a young station itself, *Beat* has grown as a business in the same environment. *Beat* strategically uses social media and nostalgic content to engage technology-savvy millennials. By posting memes or images that go viral, radio stations such as *Beat* are aggressively growing their online presence and trying to develop commercial revenues from their online audiences. Furthermore, based on their Facebook 'follower' numbers of 554,270 in July 2018, the station has successfully managed to attract 'followers' beyond its broadcast region.

It should be noted that not all of the over half a million Facebook followers can be proven to be legitimate profiles of real individuals and therefore the figures should be treated with a certain degree of caution. Facebook revealed that it removed some 2.2 billion fake Facebook accounts in the first quarter of 2019 alone (Segarra, 2019). This is indeed a substantial figure considering the platform boasts some 2.38 billion active accounts; however, Facebook stated that it removes fake accounts almost as quickly as they are created meaning the problem, according to them, is kept relatively under control (Segarra, 2019). Despite this, there is good reason to believe that a certain amount of fake Facebook accounts do exist, a percentage of which make up the 554,270 figure above. The author did observe that the number of followers grew considerably in the days after the *Betty Spaghetty* post (see below) was published and shared widely, suggesting that it did reach and appeal to many individual users who responded by following the station's page and thus organic growth was achieved. Textual analysis revealed that users are very much active and do interact with one another on the radio station Facebook pages studied. Furthermore, regular inspections of a sample of the profiles of those interacting showed them to be legitimate profiles.

Beat's Use of Nostalgia

Two factors should be considered when attempting to understand *Beat*'s approach to nostalgia. First, as outlined above, millennials are commonly attracted to culturally relevant topics. Second, due to the age of *Beat*'s audience, it is possible to assume that childhood will be their main reference point for nostalgia, given that 20 years represents a usual time period when individuals begin to look back to their past (Strauss and Howe, 1991). Therefore, it is understandable that listeners and digital users would find toys from this period an important trigger for outpouring affective reactions. *Beat* used two strategies simultaneously: firstly,

using toys as a trigger for nostalgia; secondly, reminding the users of a common life experience, in this case, the fun had playing with the toy. The third category of stimuli, people, is evident here, when shared with family and friends who were present at the time, in the form of comments made reminiscing with one another. The combination of these three categories of stimuli outlined by Holak and Havlena (1992) increases the chances of the content going viral and thus finding new audiences.

Millennials would have been in their early teenage years or younger when the *Teletubbies* (1997) and *Betty Spaghetty* (1998) toys were released. The two toys were aimed at the 4-to-8-year-old market. One can assume that the individuals of those ages formed the strongest attachment to the objects and would thus be the most emotionally affected by the Facebook posts. Both products were highly desired at the time in Ireland, which lead to a *Teletubbies* toy shortage in 1997 and the *Betty Spaghetty* craze of 1998. Individuals of the millennial cohort have similar shared experiences so the memories make them feel part of an imagined, affective community that has awareness of the shared experiences, providing a common perception of being a member of a generation (Strauss and Howe, 1991). By exploiting this specific situation, *Beat* provoked a cascade effect. The nostalgia and feelings of belonging were reinforced by the affective communication observed between friends and acquaintances who share offline relationships. Some also shared the post with their 'friend' network, some of whom were outside the initial network that followed *Beat.*

A knock-on effect happens because the user feels connected to the radio station as the source of the emotive material. Even if there is no guarantee, there is a considerable likelihood that the user will reward the source by 'liking' and 'following' the Facebook page of the station. As Maecker et al. write, 'Customer engagement … increases the commitment and social identification with the brand as well as the brand community and leads to higher customer retention' (Maecker et al., 2016: 136). If we apply this to *Beat* we can see that by offering material that triggers feelings of nostalgia and exclusively focusing on millennials across all of its communication channels, the youth station speaks the 'generational language' and can find new listeners/audiences outside its geographical broadcast area. The radio station has made itself a credible source of cultural content relevant to the audience which it is targeting.

Viral post example: Betty Spaghetty
An example of a successful post was the *Betty Spaghetty* post. *Betty Spaghetty* was a toy aimed at girls aged four years and older. The bendable rubber figures were highly popular in Ireland's stores after its release in 1998, creating fond memories for young people at the time. The *Betty Spaghetty* post which carried an image of three of the dolls and a simple call out, 'Who Remembers These?', received a significant response from users with 48,431 individuals 'liking' it. At the time, it was the most popular post the radio station had ever put out. There were also 505 'shares' and more than 5,000 comments – a high number of which contained more shares through 'tagging' individuals' names. The content of the comments also included affective communication, that is, communications that express emotions with other users as they recalled fond memories with one another. This has the effect of building bonding capital between individuals and strengthens offline relationships.

More broadly, the enjoyment of the post by an individual makes them part of an affective community. This is a collective of individuals who are moved emotionally in similar ways and in this case have a shared sense of nostalgia and emotional connection with their past. The shared experience gives them a sense of belonging, thus drawing users together. Again, this is largely an imagined community since individuals will not possibly know each of the thousands of users who 'liked' and 'shared' the post but will know they are having similar reactions to the memory because they can see the responses in the comments below the

post. Furthermore as Mannheim (1952) posits, the collective experiences that a generational cohort share from growing up through the same local, national and international events shape and mould that group so they react similarly to stimuli and feel closer to one another.

Beat's viral growth on Facebook

Engagement on social media happens on two levels – active and reactive. Active engagement involves 'liking' (or attributing another emoji) or 'sharing' the content. Active interactions involve only a click and do not represent a high level of effort from the user nor a deep rationale. The reactive level goes beyond the click and involves the engagement that leads the user to write something that reflects their feelings on the subject.

The reactive level of interaction is less common than the active level, however it is more effective in terms of reach. First, comments positively influence the algorithms that are responsible for the hierarchy of the information that will be displayed in each user's timeline. Second, many users 'share' the content by 'tagging' another user and by inputting the friend's name in a comment; the post appears in their timeline even if they are not 'followers' of the Facebook page, and they in turn may similarly 'share' with other users in their social network and so forth. Following Dunbar's (2012) proposal on the metrics of digital relations, the projection is that between active and reactive engagement 'shared' content can reach, on average, 150 friends.

This was found to be the main way the radio station's material goes viral. The content is spread to *Beat* followers who spread it to some or all of the members of their friend network, whose friends then 'share' it with friends in their own networks and so on. The creator of the post, in this case *Beat*, receives credit and exposure to a new and wider audience, even if the post itself does not carry any content directly related to the radio station or its broadcast content, but represents the brand in a broader way. By receiving credit for initiating the post the station receives 'cred' and respect among the new and existing audience members, which Bourdieu refers to as symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1986). By accumulating this symbolic capital, a radio station can raise its reputation and appreciation for its quality in taste.

This process of a post 'going viral' is precisely the strategy that *Beat* management employ in an aim to grow their online presence and credibility and thus cultural capital among their demographic. Considering Dunbar's (2012) theory, the *Betty Spaghetty* post would have reached around 70,000 extra Facebook users in addition to existing *Beat* Facebook page 'followers' which numbered just under 141,000 at the time. The process represents an opportunity for the station to expand its social network presence and as a way of turning listeners/Facebook 'followers' into ambassadors of the *Beat* brand. This is a very important point that should not be overlooked. The *Beat* management stated that they understand and appreciate the value of word-of-mouth endorsements of their brand between friends and, more broadly, members of the millennial cohort. This is a relatively simple and cost-effective way of growing your brand awareness because Facebook is helping the station reach a wider audience using *Beat*'s own visual, nostalgic media that engages audiences and draws them to the station. Furthermore, a viral post may turn a new *Beat* Facebook 'follower' into a radio listener.

An analysis of the comments made by users on the *Betty Spaghetty* post shows that over 90 per cent involved 'tagging' other members of their own social network. The total number of comments on the post, 5,042, represents a high response, especially when one considers the extra thought and effort required to enter a comment rather than simply click 'like' or 'share'. Individuals' memories were clearly jogged by the image of the toys, leading to thoughts of the loved ones with whom the memories were shared, and then reaching out to contact those other users to express an interest in reminiscing about the shared experience.

Just under 50,000 Facebook users, some of whom were existing *Beat* 'followers' some of whom were not, 'liked' the content indicating the users were moved and engaged by the post.

In the nine months from 14 April 2015 to 20 January 2016, *Beat* expanded the number of 'followers' it had on Facebook from 141,947 to 466,638, an increase of 229 per cent – a figure that is greater than the population of the station's broadcast area. These figures suggest that a large number of new users were reached virally, and also interacted with the content. The evidence further suggests that affective posts such as this have a positive impact on a station's growth in popularity when measured in page 'likes'. This supports the argument that such posts have been instrumental in giving *Beat* a wider national and international reach that it may not have achieved otherwise. The *Beat* staff interviewed believe the popularity of their Facebook page can lead to increased listenership by putting the station at the forefront of the audience member's mind making them more likely to recall the station when they are surveyed.

Conclusion

This article has offered an insight into the digitally native millennial generation in Ireland and how a radio station can engage with a cohort that has grown up in a multiscreen, multi-platform and multimedia environment where an audience's attention is difficult to capture. Radio stations targeting young audiences have responded to this by taking advantage of the audience's ubiquitous connectivity, the power of visual imagery, and the viral dissemination and consumption habits of this cohort.

In this context, nostalgia is used by *Beat* as a strategy to engage users emotionally, generating a strong response from millennial audiences through Facebook posts. The nostalgic feelings are evoked and an emotional connection is reformed between old friends and digital acquaintances. At this point, the radio station acts as a bridge and reinforces its affective connections with the listeners and/or 'followers'. There has been growing interest and demand for nostalgia during the period of research with radio stations, and other media, finding audiences keen to enjoy nostalgia via television programmes, films and physical media and use these to celebrate positive memories of days gone by – feelings that offer an escape from the less optimistic present.

The large millennial cohort is vital for stations like *Beat* to replenish the supply of radio audiences and thus ensure the survival of radio stations. However, attracting and maintaining them via SNSs has required the development of new strategies of communication. This research found that the use of emotion is a key ingredient to a successful social media strategy, as triggering active and reactive engagement from the audience has an intrinsic commercial value by endearing the brand to the audience. Social media platforms are now extensions of the radio station's brand and output, and wide penetration into social networks creates opportunities for the commodification of these new audiences. *Beat* found a way to reach their young listeners/followers by using known nostalgic elements as a touchpoint with their target audience and, perhaps just as importantly, creating a sense of belonging between users. The effectiveness of *Beat*'s Facebook strategy in engaging millennials is evidenced in the viral reach and significant gains in Facebook followers. This has helped *Beat* accumulate social, cultural and economic forms of capital, reflecting a brand which understands the challenges and opportunities of engaging audiences in the digital age.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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