Podcast platform opens up dialogue on mental illness, research finds

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A popular comedian's podcast that has fellow comics talking openly about mental illness has redefined the relationship between celebrity and fan.

Vincent Meserko, a University of Kansas doctoral student in communication studies, closely studied comedian Paul Gilmartin's podcast "Mental Illness Happy Hour" and found that the broadcasting technology of podcasts allows the audience to connect to the performer on a more intimate level and makes the audience feel as though the performer was one of them.

Meserko's findings are detailed in the article "Going Mental: Podcasting, Authenticity, and the Artist-Fan Identification on Paul Gilmartin's Mental Illness Happy Hour," which was recently published in the *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*.

A stand-up comedian and television personality, Gilmartin started his podcasts in 2011 and has attracted more than a million listeners since. Relatively easy and cheap to produce, podcasts don't require the commercial backing that traditional radio shows do. They also don't have to follow set timeframes or FCC regulations.

Gilmartin and other comedians began using the medium of podcasts in desperation, Meserko said, after other comedy ventures had seen little success.

"For the first time in their careers, these comedians felt like they could do exactly what they wanted to do and on their own terms," Meserko said.

Gilmartin's podcasts, which are released every Friday, are free to download and range in length. In a typical podcast, Gilmartin reads mental health surveys that have been filled out by his audience, talks about his mental health status, then interviews a guest, who most often is a well-known comedian. The guests open up about their mental health struggles or frustrations.

With many of the topics covered—ranging from incest, alcoholism, depression and suicide—Gilmartin and others would feel uncomfortable discussing them in a forum other than a podcast, Meserko said.

"There is no holding back in any of these podcasts," Meserko said. "The idea is that you are seeing a different side of a performer than you normally would on stage. And, the podcast helps them reveal that side."

Meserko's research closely examined interviews Gilmartin did with three fellow comedians: Greg Behrendt, Marc Maron and Paul Tompkins.

The performers' openness narrows the gap between celebrity and audience, Meserko said. It's a level of intimacy that goes beyond the typical self-help radio show. And, the audience is given the impression that they are getting a more authentic version of the performer.

"The podcast is asking the audience to see themselves on par with the artists. They aren't identifying them as celebrities or performers, but as a mental illness sufferers," Meserko said.

Provided by University of Kansas

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