

OPINION

From assoc.prof. Valentina Valentinova Gueorguieva, PhD

for awarding the degree “Doctor” in 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology, and Cultural Studies. Doctoral Program « Social Anthropology»

Candidate : Bistra Ognianova Dragoykova.

Title of thesis : YOUNG ADULT INFLUENCERS: BIOGRAPHICAL STRATEGIES AND PRACTICES

Thesis supervisor: prof. Dobrinka Parusheva

1. General Presentation of the Procedure and Materials Presented

The following materials were submitted to the jury for evaluation:

1. Dissertation entitled "Young Adult Influencers: Biographical Strategies and Practices", 253 pages of analytical text and another 37 pages of bibliography, an appendix with visual materials (shared folder).
2. Concise version of the thesis (Avtoreferat) of 32 pp.
3. CV of the PhD Candidate
4. Three academic publications in Bulgarian.
5. Table of compliance with minimum national requirements.
6. Other administrative documents required for the procedure.

My opinion is based on a detailed acquaintance with the submitted materials, which I evaluate in accordance with the current Law on Academic Degrees and Academic Positions, The Rules for its implementation and the Current regulations at Plovdiv University.

2. Relevance of the topic

The topic is very relevant. The doctoral student has chosen to examine a form of digital communication that has already been established as leading among youth audiences. The quantitative studies cited in the dissertation clearly show that young people prefer influencers and only through

their channels (“eyes”, opinions, recommendations) do they access information about both consumer products (fashion, makeup, cosmetics) and experiences (travel, food, leisure activities), (pseudo)psychological support, self-care and personal development, cultural consumption (films, reality formats and other cultural content), news, politics and current events.

Compared to older forms of celebrity, influencers are much more dynamic: they create shortform content much more frequently than film or television stars, for example, and they also frequently and inevitably change the subject matter or direction of their channel. In general, their presence and survival in the flood of hyper-information is dependent on the intensity with which they post content and manage to retain their followers. This makes the issue both hyper-relevant and more difficult to capture for research.

2. Knowledge of the problem

The doctoral candidate demonstrates a deep knowledge of the problem. As I have already noted, this form of digital communication is developing extremely dynamically, and accordingly, scientific research publications on the topic are accumulating at an accelerated pace while also quickly becoming outdated. The author demonstrates a profound knowledge of existing research in the field, as shown by the over 500 sources cited in the 37-page bibliography, among which only 11 titles are in Bulgarian. The first two chapters of the dissertation (or a total of approx. 120 pages) represent a systematized and substantiated review of this vast body of literature, through which the reader is guided with great skill. There is no doubt that the author knows the literature and easily navigates the research field.

At the same time, the author herself is immersed in the environment, follows influencers daily and has lived experience in this type of communication both from the user side and as a participant in the team that supports the creation of content (she was part of the moderator team of one of the channels of the studied influencers - Chefo). In talking about this experience, she consciously and reflexively describes her research position in the field (see more in the methodology).

4. Methodology

For data collection and analysis, the author chooses classic anthropological methods such as observation, participant observation, and interviewing. All of these methods – as is well shown in the literature review – have their own characteristics when conducted in an online environment, which characteristics the doctoral student knows and masters. Observation of online communities is the method that provides the most data. The observation methodology includes keeping a field diary, supplementing and verifying the data with in-depth interviews (or whatever may be taken depending on the preferences of the respondents). In addition, the doctoral student also used autoethnography –

a controversial method for many researchers, but in her case there is a clearly reflected position and delineation of the boundaries of this method, as evident from the following quote from the conclusion:

“In the process of my work, I ask myself not only how to achieve objectivity and authenticity in research, but also how to define my role as a researcher in the digital age. I believe that objectivity in anthropology does not mean eliminating subjectivity, but rather its awareness and use as a tool for deeper understanding. The digital environment provides new opportunities for inclusive observation but also requires new approaches to research ethics and methodology. The present study is an attempt to adapt to these challenges and to offer a scientifically sound analysis of influencer culture, combining personal experience, critical thinking, and innovative methods” (p. 243)

5. Characteristic and evaluation of the thesis and its contributions

The presented dissertation consists of 253 pages of main text and 37 pages of bibliography. The appendices are presented in digital format (shared folder in the cloud) and represent excerpts from the field diary and visual materials (screenshots from profiles and posts of the influencers discussed in the dissertation).

The main body of the dissertation can be conditionally divided into two parts – theoretical and fieldwork. The theoretical part covers the first two chapters (approx. 120 pages) and presents an introduction to the field of digital anthropology, a description of the issues, and a detailed and systematic presentation of existing research. Such an extensive theoretical part is necessary to demonstrate that the doctoral student is basing herself on a vast body of literature, is well-versed in it, and manages to fit her research into this dynamically developing field. The fieldwork part covers chapters 3 and 4 (approx. 120 pages), which are dedicated, respectively, to established influencers with a large audience and to novice or younger influencers with more modest experience and a smaller number of followers.

A characteristic skill of anthropologists is to tell stories from the field. Bistra Dragoikova is no less skilled than “real” anthropologists in this regard. Each section dedicated to one of the influencers is a living story. The combination of data collected through different methods in each of these sections is impressive. Some of the methods are innovative, such as walking with a respondent and participating in the creation of content from him, which allows the anthropologist to delve into the “intricacies of the craft”; or observing the online behavior of a given influencer and collaborating in the administration of the group of followers that he creates, which allows for a “close-up” look at the work of building and filtering audiences; or personal acquaintance and spending time (“deep hanging-out”) with some of the younger influencers.

Each anthropological narrative about an individual influencer ends with an analytical derivation of the main biographical strategies and practices of the respective influencer, summarizing the already presented dense description of the terrain.

I will hereby present two reflections of mine, to which I was provoked by reading the empirical part of the dissertation. First, I would recommend that the analytical framework of Cornwell and Katz, which classify influencers according to the number of their followers (see p. 76), be adapted to an environment of content created in Bulgarian language. As the author rightly notes in the conclusion, content in Bulgarian has a limited distribution. In this sense, the numbers proposed by Cornwell and Katz should be adapted to the maximum reach of the Bulgarian-language audience. Here I would ask whether the threshold of 100 thousand followers, which separates micro influencers from macro influencers according to the classification of Cornwell and Katz, is adequate to the scale of the Bulgarian digital sphere. It is clear to me that an influencer who has chosen to create content in Bulgarian will probably not have the opportunity to jump into the realm of megainfluencers with over a million followers due to language limitations. Although there are music videos in Bulgarian with such numbers of views, I am not sure that this is an adequate comparison when looking for comparable numbers for influencers and music stars. Also regarding the threshold between micro and macro influencers: I am not sure what the adequate comparison is – who do we compare them with – in order to find the corresponding numerical value that defines this threshold.

And my second comment is regarding the conceptualization of the audience. Influencers themselves sometimes talk about their followers as a community (instead of an audience). Bistra Dragoikova also outlined a very important problem around the “sense of community”. For me, the transition between a (passive) audience and a (warm, close) community when it comes to digital communication is also a matter of a thin and sometimes elusive boundary. Here I do not want to look for this boundary, but I want to introduce another dimension along the axis of tension between audience and community, and that is the financial dimension. It seems that some influencers expect to find a passive audience for paid content (paid by advertisers). Others would prefer the audience to pay for the content provided to them (but they remain an audience). Still others prefer to limit their audience by introducing a paywall. Does this make the audience more cohesive, i.e. a community? Or vice versa – does free content contribute to building an audience? And perhaps at some point in the influencer's biographical path he moves from audience to community? So where is the sense of community in this transition? It seems that Bistra Dragoikova has asked herself these questions that have no clear answer. Her conclusions are rather in the direction of a dynamic relationship between audience and community or audience and market, a dynamic relationship in which each specific influencer at a given moment in their life trajectory chooses their own strategy. As she writes in the conclusion: “Focus on the audience or market – general strategies are aimed at increasing engagement or reaching new target groups, unrelated to the influencer’s personal narrative, such as participating in mass campaigns or trends; commercial orientation – includes practices such as publishing sponsored content, complying with social media algorithms, or using tools for optimization and increasing visibility” (p. 246). Perhaps one more, eighth conclusion could be added to summarize the

findings of the doctoral student regarding the management of audiences by influencers – both in relation to monetization and their playing with the “sense of community”.

6. Assessment of the publications and personal contribution of the doctoral student

The three attached publications are distinguished by the doctoral student's characteristic engaging writing style. They are confirmation that she has the necessary skills of an anthropologist to collect data using various methods, to analyze and compare, and to tell stories from the field. The quality and number of the attached scientific publications correspond to the requirements for awarding the ONS "doctor".

7. Concise version of the thesis \ Avtoreferat

The avtoreferat has been prepared in accordance with the requirements of the regulatory documents and correctly reflects the content of the dissertation work. The contributions have been correctly stated.

8. Recommendations for future use of the dissertation contributions and results

I recommend that the dissertation be published by the University Press of Plovdiv University. As is clear from the literature review, there is not enough research on the topic in Bulgarian. The published dissertation will be useful both for researchers in the field of digital communications (anthropology, sociology, media studies, digital cultures), and for students in the relevant specialties (cultural studies, sociology, philosophy, journalism, marketing and advertising, etc.). The current topic will arouse wide interest among a non-specialized audience.

CONCLUSION

The dissertation shows that the doctoral student Bistra Ognyanova Dragoikova possesses in-depth theoretical knowledge and professional skills in social anthropology, demonstrating qualities and skills for independent conduct of scientific research.

Due to the above, I confidently give my positive assessment of the conducted research, presented by the above-reviewed dissertation, abstract, achieved results and contributions, and I propose to the esteemed scientific jury to award the educational and scientific degree "doctor" to Bistra Ognyanova Dragoikova in the field of higher education: 3. Social, economic and legal sciences, professional field 3.1 Sociology, anthropology and cultural sciences, doctoral program Social Anthropology.

17.06.2025

Opinion prepared by:

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