REVIEW

by Dr. Siyka Kostadinova Kovacheva,

Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski"

of a dissertation for the award of the educational and scientific degree 'PhD'

by: Area of Higher Education 3. Social, economic and legal sciences

Professional Area 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences

Doctoral programme: Social Anthropology

Author: Bistra Ognyanova Dragoykova

Subject: YOUNG INFLUENCERS: BIOGRAPHIC STRATEGIES AND PRACTICES

Scientific supervisor: Prof. Dobrinka Parusheva, PhD, Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv

1. General description of the materials presented

By Order No P33-22-965 of 28 April 2025 of the Rector of Plovdiv University 'Paisii Hilendarski' (PU), I was appointed a member of the scientific jury to participate in the procedure for the defence of the dissertation on the theme 'Youth Influencers: Biographical Strategies and Practices" for obtaining the educational and scientific degree of Doctor of Science in the field of higher education 3. Social, economic and legal sciences; professional field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences; doctoral programme: Social Anthropology.

The author of the dissertation is Bistra Ognyanova Dragoykova, a full-time doctoral student at the Department of Ethnology at the University of Plovdiv 'Paisii Hilendarski', with scientific advisor Prof. Dr. Dobrinka Parusheva, University of Plovdiv 'Paisii Hilendarski'.

The set of materials presented by Bistra Ognyanova Dragoykova is in accordance with Art. 36 (1) of the Rules for the Development of the Academic Staff of the University of Plovdiv, and includes the following documents:

– a request to the Rector of the PU for the opening of the procedure for the defence of the dissertation;

–   CV in European format;

–   a protocol from the Departmental Council related to the reporting of the readiness to open the procedure and to the preliminary discussion of the dissertation;

–   dissertation;

–   abstract;

–   a list of scientific publications on the topic of the dissertation;

–   copies of scientific publications;

–   a declaration of originality and authenticity of the attached documents;

The doctoral student has provided 3 publications on the topic of the dissertation.

2. Brief biographical information about the doctoral student

Bistra Dragoykova holds a bachelor's degree in philosophy from Sofia University 'St. Kliment Ohridski' and Master's degree in Philosophy and Literature from the University of Plovdiv 'P. Hilendarski'. The work proposed for review is the result of training as a doctoral student in social anthropology at the Department of Ethnology of the University of Plovdiv 'P. Hilendarski'. It's also a good philosophical basis. The doctoral student has enrolled in the Go Styria programme of the University of Graz, Austria, which has made it possible to get access to a wealth of literature about the digital impact of social networks. She has experience as a philosophy teacher at the 'St. Cyril and Methodius' high school in Plovdiv and has worked on international projects. Both her educational and working careers have so far been a suitable basis for understanding the issues of dissertation work.

3. Up-to-date state of the topic and relevance of the goals and objectives set

The dissertation is dedicated to a topical phenomenon – the emergence and consolidation of influencers in social life, who are establishing themselves as a desirable model of behaviour, especially among young people. The work fits into the more general trend in research in Bulgaria, which focuses on the social consequences of the introduction of digital technologies in our society. It should be stressed that Dragoykova's specific goals and objectives focus on little researched aspects of this phenomenon, namely the study of the biographical strategies and practices of influencers – i.e. not on technological innovations in the field of content creators or marketing strategies for advertising and influencing consumer behaviour, but on how the aspirations and actions of influencers relate to their personal projects and, at the same time, impact the 'socio-cultural landscape of society' in which they live. Thus oriented, the problem has also applied relevance - to help teachers, so-

cial and youth workers, employers and politicians to better understand the value orientations and forms of behaviour of the social group they work with.

4. Knowledge of the problem

The dissertation is an in-depth examination of strategies and practices for impacting a wide audience through digital technologies. The PhD student puts emphasis on the long-term plans and concrete means that content creators use in building their life story to gain as many followers as possible. The author demonstrates a systematic knowledge of the emerging field of digital anthropology in the social sciences.

The work is distinguished by the fact that it refers to an extremely large volume of scientific and popular literature devoted to the problem. In the list of bibliographical sources, set out on 37 pages, along with anthropological publications, there are studies of the digital impact from the perspective of various scientific fields (marketing, psychology, medicine, organizational research) while less detailed is the presentation of the contribution of Bulgarian social anthropology, as well as the Bulgarian sociological and journalistic studies of social media. The diverse literature has been rethought creatively by Dragoykova and appropriately illustrates the thesis of the heterogeneity of the phenomenon.

5. Methodology of the study

The doctoral student builds his or her work on the basis of the application of qualitative methods suitable for achieving the stated goal – to explore the 'purely human aspect' of influencers' activities and to reveal the connection between their personal world and the one they construct for their online followers. The chosen methodology for collecting empirical material consists of direct and indirect observation, in-depth interviews, field diary and digital ethnography and is suitable for obtaining a thorough and adequate response to the main tasks formulated in the dissertation. The methodology for the analysis of these data includes ethnographic description, narrative analysis, content analysis and auto-ethnographic analysis (auto-reflection) and is also fruitful. Specific cases of established and novice influencers are presented, the description of which is very rich.

The methodology of the study and the fieldwork itself are not sufficiently clarified and their description is contained only in the Introduction to the work. The methods of social anthropology in general are listed, and it is insufficiently specified how, when and to what extent they are used in this dissertation study. Unspecified, for example, is the volume and frequency of the observation

notes in the fieldwork diary. It is also unclear how long and how many biographical interviews mentioned were conducted and at what stage of the study they were conducted. The Annexes present only excerpts and photographs, without details on the principle of selection or what proportion they represent of the total empirical material.

6. General characteristics and assessment of the dissertation

The dissertation work is well structured and consists of an introduction, four main chapters, a conclusion, a bibliography and annexes. Already in the Introduction the research ambitions of the author are set out and the main concepts underlying the analysis are clarified. Appropriately presented are the research problem and the aims of the study and its methodology. The main thesis of the work is formulated as "the biographical strategies and practices that young influencers develop in a platform digital culture constitute a fundamental mechanism for building a recognizable, authentic and sustainable digital identity". The thesis is successfully defended in the work, which considers the activity of influencers as a socially situated form of cultural activity.

The first chapter of the dissertation contains an overview of academic research in the field of digital culture, social media and influencers. The more general perspective of the work is presented, based on the theories of modernity, postmodernity and globalization according to Sigmund Baumann, Gilles Liotard, Anthony Giddens and Arjun Appadurai. The research of Manuel Castells and Pierre Bourdieu allows the author to present the transformation of social structures in the digital age with an emphasis on network society and the reincarnations of social capital. The field of digital anthropology is outlined with reference to the works of Daniel Miller and Heather Horst, and the social mechanisms for content distribution are outlined. An interesting distinction is made between digital anthropology and digital anthropology. In this part of the dissertation, the concepts of influencer, digital celebrity, digital connectivity, the relationship "digital-real" are developed in depth. Concepts such as digital and influencer culture are not fully developed and elaborated, as a result of which they are used insufficiently systematically and consistently throughout the text. More attention could be paid to such key concepts as 'life strategy', 'biographical construction', and 'identity'. A positive aspect of the analysis is the tracking of the different mechanisms for content creation and hence the social role of major platforms such as Instagram, TickTock and YouTube.

In chapter two, the theoretical analysis presents the dynamics that accompany the affirmation of influencers as influential figures on social platforms and discusses the strategies used for success, the difficulties they face, the necessary skills for online impact and keeping the audience's attention. Special attention is paid to technical skills such as the ability to work with camera, sound, lighting

and editing software. Also presented are ways to monetize influence, increase revenue and promote brands. This chapter de facto moves away from an anthropological perspective and focuses too closely on marketing research and the mechanisms of psychological impact on consumers (in this case, the followers of influencers) and does not contribute significantly to clarifying the social construction of young people's identities in modern societies.

The results of the empirical study are set out in Chapters Three and Four. The third chapter presents five cases of established influencers and their strategies and practices for building a digital image and influence. The focus of the analysis is on the specific content creation strategies with which each of them influences its followers and which are largely determined by the different technological capabilities of the selected digital platforms. The changes in style, themes and formats used by influencers to create content and impact are described in detail. Less attention is paid to the personal biographies of these young people and how their biographical life strategies intertwine and change with success in recruiting followers through digital technologies.

The content of Chapter 4 is shaped around the four cases of novice influencers and an in-depth analysis of their 'breakthrough' strategies in the digital space. The focus is again on the practices and more precisely the "algorithms" (according to the successful term of the author) of the surveyed young people to engage the audience, attract more followers in competition with other content creators in the digital world. Insufficient biographical details for each of the analysed cases again do not allow the complete construction of their individual identities.

The conclusion presents the main conclusions of the study and attempts to summarize the impact of new technologies on the life strategies of young people and their values, and hence on the forms and dynamics of influencer culture in our country. Interesting is the analysis of the similarities and differences between the two groups of youth influencers at different stages of building their online identities. The dynamic interrelationships between 'truth' and 'presentation', biographical and market strategies are skilfully deduced. An achievement of the author is the emphasized self-reflection, both to the research methods used and to the results obtained.

7. Contributions and relevance of development to science and practice

Bistra Dragoykova's dissertation is an original scientific study of youth influencers in Bulgaria. The merits of the work include directing to a topical problem of contemporary Bulgarian society, in-depth knowledge of the scientific literature on the topic, critical author's attitude to bibliographic sources, independent empirical research and systematic analysis of the collected empirical material, readable and at the same time relatively accurate style of exhibition. We should also note the con-

sistent methodical attention to the ethical aspects of the study. Contributions to the work in my opinion are the placing of a new social group in the focus of science in our country, namely youth influencers; the identification of successful and unsuccessful strategies and practices for social impact through digital technologies; and applying an anthropological approach to the use of social media to create content and impact audiences.

8. Assessment of publications on the dissertation

The publications included in the application cover key parts of the dissertation and are the author's own contribution. Two of them are articles in collections of doctoral students' works and the third is included in a scientific collection. They fully meet the regulatory requirements, although it may be recommended that the author should focus on publishing opportunities in reputable and competitive Bulgarian and international journals.

9. Personal involvement of the doctoral student

The dissertation is entirely author's work, the result of independent and purposeful anthropological research and thorough consideration of rich scientific literature. The achieved results and formulated contributions are personal merit of the doctoral student. Of course, it is also important to acknowledge the impact of scientific discussions with the scientific advisor of the doctoral student and the academic staff of the teaching department.

10. Abstract

Bistra Dragoykova's abstract has been drawn up in accordance with the requirements of the scientific field of sociology, anthropology and cultural sciences and truthfully reflects the main results achieved in the dissertation. I do not accept all of the above statements at the end of the abstract as scientific contributions. For example, the systematic and critical presentation of theoretical approaches to the problem in the scientific literature is a necessary prerequisite for any scientific research. Similarly, the distinction made between 'digital anthropology' and 'digital anthropology' is not consistently defended in the overall presentation of the work.

11. Critical remarks and recommendations

In addition to the remarks made on the content of the individual parts of the dissertation, I consider it necessary here to make two more general criticisms of the text presented:

Incomplete theoretical clarification of the basic concepts of work, such as biographical strategies and the formation of one's own identity. The presentation of personal stories on social media with different visual means and emotional load does not exhaust the heuristic charge of the biographical approach in the social sciences. The balance between the analysis of the marketing practices of youth influencers and their life strategies and biographical trajectories is definitely in favour of the former.

In anthropology, and in all social sciences, clarifying the path to truth and truth itself are equally important. I believe that the doctoral student has paid insufficient attention in the overall work to the consistent and systematic presentation of his research methodology and justification of the specifics of the applied specific methods for collecting empirical data.

These remarks do not devalue the many significant achievements of the work in accordance with the author's personal interest and the chosen focus of the dissertation.

12. Recommendations for future use of dissertation contributions and results

I recommend Bistra Dragoykova to continue her work in the field of research of the group of youth influencers in Bulgaria, by highlighting the specifics of their strategies and tactics in comparison with those of young people in other social contexts. Scientifically interesting are the answers to questions such as: how the representatives of this group in our country differ from their peers in other countries; whether there is a meaningful division within the group by education, gender, political orientation or other social indicators; how online self-presentation strategies to attract more followers are changing young people's own identity built in the family, the circle of friends and education. These are, of course, possible guidelines for future work on this subject, and do not represent gaps in the dissertation presented.

CONCLUSION

The dissertation 'Youth influencers: Biographical Strategies and Practices' contains scientific and applied scientific results that represent an original contribution to science and meet the requirements of the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria

(ZRASRB), the Rules for the Implementation of the ZRASRB and the relevant Rules of the Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv.

The dissertation paper shows that the doctoral student Bistra Ognyanova Dragoykova possesses in-depth theoretical knowledge and professional skills in the scientific specialty Social Anthropology, demonstrating the necessary qualities and skills for independent scientific research.

For the above reasons, I give my *positive assessment* of the research carried out, presented in the above dissertation, abstract, scientific publications, achieved results and contributions, and ***I propose to the honorable scientific jury to award the educational and scientific degree of Doctor*** to Bistra Ognyanova Dragoykova in the field of higher education 3. Social, economic and legal sciences; professional field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Sciences; doctoral programme: Social Anthropology.

3 June 2025   Reviewer: ....

(Dr. Siyka Kovacheva)