

EXAMINER'S REPORT

for awarding the educational and scientific degree 'Doctor', in the field of higher education 3. Social, Economic, and Legal Sciences Professional field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Studies, Doctoral Program: Social Anthropology.

Doctoral thesis: YOUNG ADULT INFLUENCERS: BIOGRAPHICAL STRATEGIES AND PRACTICES

Author: Bistra Ognyanova Dragoykova

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Dobrinka Parusheva

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By Order No. RD-22-965 of 28.04.2025 of the Rector of Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski" I have been appointed as a member of the scientific jury for the procedure for the defense of a dissertation on "Young Adults Influencers: biographical strategies and practices" for awarding the educational and scientific degree 'Doctor', in the field of higher education 3. Social, Economic, and Legal Sciences Professional field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Studies, Doctoral Program: Social Anthropology of Bistra Ognyanova Dragoykova with scientific supervisor Prof. Dr. Dobrinka Parusheva

The dissertation presented by Bistra Dragoykova outlines a very interesting and complex interdisciplinary (and) digital field by presenting young adult influencers through their biographical strategies and practices. The PhD student shared her idea, which became the title and research question of her dissertation, during the PhD examination. It struck us that she already had strong observations - offline and online of young adult influencers 'professional transformations, and she had experience of living with the digital platforms. She is one of the most active young colleagues in the Department of Ethnology, who not only developed her

dissertation on time while teaching at the Humanities High School in Plovdiv, but also managed to win a scholarship for specialization at the University of Graz, Austria, to complete correctly and on time all the planned activities of her plan and to become a favorite teacher of our students in the discipline of 'Culture and Digital Environment' and to participate in various scientific events.

I say all this not only because of this report's occasion and genre, but also because all these interests and activities purposefully led Bistra Dragoykova to the creation of this text. Coming from the field of philosophy, with great interest, patience, and I would add research humility, she was able not only to enter the field of anthropology, but also to propose her position, approach, and combination of methods and field organization, as well as data interpretation and analysis, and to develop an ethnography of the digital. The topic of youth adult influencers is undoubtedly significant not only because it reveals one dimension of the social life of almost all youth groups, communities, subcultures, or network groupings through technology, but also as a potential for understanding social mobilizations, creating lifestyle patterns, or value and aesthetic attitudes.

Bistra Dragoykova explores this topic by tracing the biographical strategies and practices of influencers who are defined as youth. She has the opportunity to meet most of them face-to-face, but she also follows them online. The vastness of the topic of digital influencers is in itself a great challenge, which the PhD student successfully tackles. The dissertation is structured in an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion, and a bibliography with 290 pages, of which 253 are main text and 37 are bibliography. The appendices are in an additional electronic package.

The methodology, aims, objectives and theoretical framework are presented in the introduction and in the first two chapters. Still, the rationale for choosing theories relevant to the specific research problems are presented in the full text of the thesis. I find it appropriate to combine the more classical studies of digital culture and aspects of postmodern society and late modern forms of identity such as Daniel Miller, Gilles Lyotard, Anthony Giddens and Sigmund Baumann with Heather Horst's anthropology of the digital and researchers on social networks and their effects such as Tom Boelstorff, Gabriella Coleman and many others. While I am not an expert in the anthropology of the digital and digital anthropology, to the extent that I can familiarize myself with the research directions, I can say that I am impressed by the familiarity with the scholarly literature and the skillful citation of individual authors' arguments and their

adaptation to the research context. The context is, on the one hand, the technological, social, and cultural mechanisms of the functioning of the social platforms in which the young adult influencers develop, and on the other hand, the anthropological specificities of the study of digital communities. To explore the biographical strategies and practices of aptly chosen influencers, which she analyses as case studies, the PhD student uses and builds on Pierre Bourdieu's approach of fields and social capital, combined with gift exchange as a mechanism for legitimizing identity and the positions that influencers can and should occupy, with the constraints of platforms such as specific social spaces offer.

And since the topic also implies “doing” an anthropology of the digital, I would note as another great merit of the author that she “does” a very thorough and dense digital ethnography, which I would also highlight as a contribution of the dissertation. Bistra Dragoykova chooses the approach through case studies of young adult influencers who are already very famous personalities and those who are now entering, defined by her as “wannabes”. I believe that she has succeeded in creating and arguing for two models - of established and emerging influencers- which comprehensively cover the contemporary young generation in practice.

With extreme precision, the author describes not only her research process of entering the field and interacting with the influencers, but also all the ethnographic details, combined with a great deal of autoethnography, which allow the reader not only to follow the reasoning of the conclusions and classifications made, but also to do so through the world of the digital. I commend Bistra Dragoykova for “inventing” this anthropological writing for a field that unfolds linearly in video, photo, or HTML format. Not only can the developed methodology serve as a model for future research, but it also challenges the anthropology and field-making that Chat GTP participates in, which Bistra is experimenting with, but rigorously fits into her overall research and theoretical framework.

It also seems important to note the doctoral student's extreme precision in adhering to the ethical principles of fieldwork and then in analytical summaries and interpretations, taking into account the fact that influencers are celebrities who, while allowing millions of followers through the screen into their private lives, skillfully control this access. Bistra Dragoykova negotiates this apparent boundary of private space very well, with some personal events shown visually in order to fit the personal into a publicly acceptable form of biography and the hidden private aspects of life that must remain private. Here again, the PhD student has found the right

‘measure’ to stay as a researcher at the boundary, allowing her to make the objectifications she has derived as models and conclusions.

Indeed, this work is groundbreaking, but it is constructed with the gravitas of an experienced scholar and a very observant researcher with a writing talent. I hope that the text will soon meet its readers as a monograph, the publication of which I strongly recommend. The abstract accurately articulates the contributions, reflecting the dissertation's content.

Bistra Dragoykova was active in academic conference life, both live and online. She herself was one of those PhD students who started working on their dissertations during the pandemic but became a recognizable face for our department. Scholarly publications suffice and reflect stages of text production. They have been published in open-access academic electronic journals.

I declare no conflict of interest with the PhD student and have not detected plagiarism in the text.

Conclusion. Considering the stated contributions and qualities of the scholarly work, I vote "for" awarding Bistra Ognyanova Dragoykova the educational and research degree "doctor" in Social Anthropology, in the field of education 3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences, 3.1. Sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies.

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Plovdiv

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