REVIEW

Of the dissertation thesis of Bistra Ognyanova Dragoykova for awarding the educational and scientific degree PhD in Professional Field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Culture Studies (Social Anthropology)

Dissertation Theme: ***Young Adult Influencers: Biographical Strategies and Practices***

Field of higher education 3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences

Professional field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Culture Studies

Doctoral Program: Social Anthropology

Supervisor: Prof. Dobrinka Parusheva, PhD

Reviewer: Prof. D.Sc. Milena Iakimova, department of sociology, "St. Kliment Ohridski" University of Sofia, appointed by the Rector of Plovdiv University as a member of the scientific jury, **RD-22-965 / 28.04.2025**

1. The set of materials submitted by Bistra Dragoykova are in compliance with the national and Plovdiv University's Regulations on Academic Staff Development and contains all required documents. The applicant has submitted original dissertation work and three academic publications in the thematic area of the dissertation. They show that the application is legitimate and the National Minimal Requirements for the educational and scientific degree PhD are met.

2. Brief biographical details of the PhD candidate

The applicant's CV together with the text of her dissertation testify to the applicant's enduring interest in the subject of her research: what are the motivations, strategies and practices through which a young person / young adult becomes an influencer, makes himself/herself an influencer, and how does this relate to his/her personal identity and life narrative. This interest seems to be not only a matter of research, but also biographical: Bistra Dragoikova is a high school philosophy teacher, a profession that introduced her to some of her interlocutors and companions in the dissertation research.

3. Relevance of the topic and appropriateness of the aims and objectives

The work is a serious step – the first I know of – in the social scientific study of the Bulgarian influencer scene. The phenomena that constitute the subject of the study are approached in a very meaningful way, without reducing them to "tools for promotion and marketing" (p. 5), but "as [a] social practice" (ibid.). The topic is aptly and productively narrowed and focused on youth influencing as a social practice, which is approached through the notions of biographical strategy and biographical practice. There is already some research on the digital footprint and its uses, also on the political effects of social networks and on digital inequalities, but Bistra Dragoykova's research has no Bulgarian-language analogue yet. A social anthropological perspective on digital identities and identity processes is also a globally increasingly relevant subject and problem area.

4. Acquaintance with the subject matter

The theoretical framework of the dissertation research rests on a very serious preliminary preparation for organizing into a complete corpus a multitude of fragmentary, scattered and heterogeneous ideas and concepts from different fields: anthropology, but also sociology, marketing, economics, psychology and journalism. In short, the PhD student has seriously explored a field that is not yet disciplinarily organized, lacking its own cartography and canon. In addition, the specific subject matter – identity strategies of young adult influencers in Bulgaria – is clearly part of a long-term personal and biographical interest of the PhD candidate.

5. Research methodology

As I mentioned, the research is original and goes far beyond relatively routine marketing research. The methods used follow from the research questions (the 'human and social side' of influencership, the relationship between authenticity and commodification) and are on the spectrum of qualitative social research methods: varieties of observation, semi-structured and unstructured interviewing, digital ethnography, field diary keeping, autoethnography. Data analysis methods are also mainly qualitative. The methods match the research issues.

6. Characteristics and assessment of the dissertation

The dissertation has a length of two hundred and ninety pages, well structured in an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion and an impressive bibliography in Bulgarian and English containing hundreds of titles – all of them relevant and referred to in the main text. To this main corpus are added five appendices: screenshots from videos of the dissertation's protagonists and excerpts from the dissertation research field diary. The appendices adequately illustrate various points from the text and have real added value.

The stakes of the first two chapters are theoretical and methodological, while the actual reflection on the field findings and the main research issues is in the empirical-analytical third and fourth chapters.

Although it does not have a high claim, chapter one has arranged and largely mapped a scattered and fragmented set of terms, notions, and conceptual proposals for making sense of digital-virtual relations with a focus on social media and online platforms, for exploring digital spaces and their dynamics. As a result, the distinction between digital anthropology and anthropology of the digital is pushed, and the dissertation research is grounded in the anthropology of the digital. Other results of this mapping endeavour of the theoretical design of the study are: Outlining the terminological and motivational differences between content creators across platforms; the dynamics between creativity and control, between freedom and algorithmization in them, between profit-seeking and spreading misinformation; clarifying the differences between platforms (Facebook, Discord, Telegram, Threads, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube,) according to audience characteristics, according to the relationship between the platforms' business models and the content creators' culture, according to the content format and the resulting audience engagement strategies; outlining some terminological differences between influencer, opinion leader, micro-celebrity, active user, content creator.

All of this culminates in a definition of the research subject, the influencer, as "a content creator who uses a variety of social platforms to create and maintain an audience, and through certain strategies and practices has the potential to shape societal attitudes and influence their audience in the decision-making process" (p. 80).

Chapter two explores how influencers manage to achieve what they do: how they enter into relationships, how interactivity becomes a resource for popularity, and how popularity is transformed into influence (and monetized). And more: what are the specifics of online interactivity, is there non-reciprocal interaction and what techniques achieve the illusion of

reciprocity in communication between the influencer and his/her followers, what are the techniques of demonstrating authenticity and how authenticity becomes influence and sells, what is the measure between authenticity and commercial success and can authenticity be commodified; etc., etc. The main conclusions based on the systematization of various theoretical sources are 1) the definition of "parasocial interaction" in its ideal-typical difference from social interaction; 2) the derivation and attempt to define "the main ingredients of the success of influencers in achieving strategic outcomes" ("reliability, authenticity and accessibility") (p. 99); 3) clarifying the tension between authenticity, defined as "being oneself" (p. 104), and authenticity as a specific performance, as a strategy, and its corresponding techniques of public representation; 4) summarizing the key skills of and difficulties facing the influencer.

Chapters three and four present the results of the fieldwork conducted and represent both the most interesting and containing the most scientific contributions of the thesis research. The selection of the doctoral candidate's influencer-companions in her research is very apt (I will mention the dominance of the term "influencer" in my notes and comments paragraph). Very appropriate and productive to the guiding research question – how, with what strategies and practices in an ever-changing digital environment, one becomes and remains an influencer – is the subdivision into two groups: established influencers on the one hand, and struggling influencers for recognition on the other, presented as eight separate cases in Chapters Three and Four, respectively. The focus is on the efforts, successes and failures in constructing and transferring elements of personal identity online, in the paradoxical task of strategically maintaining authenticity, a kind of careful planning of spontaneity.

The third chapter presents the peripeteia of the established Choko, Chefo, Azov and the twins Susie and Reni, selected with the idea of accessing different segments of digital culture, differing in their strategies of constructing themselves as authentic, credible and accessible (but also according to their willingness to respond, from which more serious conclusions could be drawn, especially along the lines of self-reflexivity).

The text is engaging and traces the metamorphoses of youth identities and digital coming of age – say, from a gamer-teenager seeing his father as a superhero and himself as a mix between movie character and future movie star, to a musician, to a serious young man searching for himself in the serious, conceived as a new age amalgam of popular science and esoterica (Choko). Or – another metamorphosis – from an actor through a witty commentator on contemporary cultural phenomena and everyday issues to a participant in a reality format to

a commentator on acute social and political issues and processes and a fighter against misinformation, creator of a politically engaged community on Telegram; and back to calmer waters; invariably, however, with a taste for the philosophy of stoicism and cold showers (Chefo)... And so on.

These first two cases show how certain – new age – practices of the self, forms of (as Michel Foucault names them) care of the self, are paired with or even become marketing techniques: techniques of concentration 'in the inner world' (p. 173) and of 'connecting with the self': a public exposure of techniques of sculpting the self. I will venture the suggestion here (and the suggestion to the anthropology of the digital) that a notion of voyeurism would foster the understanding of this duality of techniques of the self and – at the same time – marketing techniques. Here I take the liberty of marking a fundamental lack of the research – the absence of any touches to the portraits of audiences, of their reactions. And if we adhere to the position shared by the PhD candidate that identity is a process, that it is the result of processes of interaction, without the other party – the audience – we cannot fully understand the biographical strategies of the research subjects.

We gain insight into how a community of followers is managed, how influencers make themselves accessible and parasocially simulate intimacy, even with a large audience. But we only gain insight into audience behaviour (as an active force in constructing influencer identity) when the trolls and their attack on Chefo's Telegram community are triggered. Here lies a lot of potential for further work: audience behaviour analysis. And yet another question: why are the trolls triggered? Is it because Stefan is "into politics" (the verb together with the quotation marks is used by Bistra Dragoykova)? What can we conclude from this about the place of the political in the personal strategies of the "young adults"? Are their biographical strategies detached from the political?

Getting back to the presentation of the work, I have to say that at this point, Bistra Dragoykova's dedication to her subject, to fieldwork and to anthropological passion is clearly evident: she becomes the admin in Stefan's group, who is forced to seek such help in order to counteract the coordinated troll attack.

I won't reconstruct the other cases in detail, I'll just mention that they – especially Azov's – are much more sparsely represented in the work (which I don't find to be a weakness; after all, we are talking about anthropological or paraanthropological fieldwork, and the accessibility of the cases is inevitably different). I can't help but mention, however, that I am

missing some more explicit comparisons between strategies of self-stylisation and self-representation (say, Susie and Reni self-stylise through a social **type** – that of 'superpeers', p. 205 – while Choco and Chefo seek identity through **commitment**). The other thing that I would like to see more elaborated, especially in the cases of the mockingbird Azov and the super-peers Susie and Reni, is the question do they have role models. In the long run, their types, like, incidentally, the new age techniques of the self, are global.

The four protagonists of the final chapter are "at the dawn of their careers" (p. 218), at the beginning of the struggle for recognition, and are seeking techniques and effects of intimacy with their audiences through different areas of self-styling and self-representation (motherhood and family comfort; luxury and travel; digital financial tools).

7. Questions, critical remarks, and suggestions for future research

When we say "biography," we say change. The interpretation of change (social growing up and growing older, life cycle change) in this dissertation is limited to the personal and interpersonal level. But the case of Chefo, who in the "early stages of his career [...] used entertainment videos that were subsequently transformed into content focusing on social, political and cultural issues" (p. 190) to then try to create an active political community of followers, but who eventually waves the white flag and retires, so to speak, from the political, this case unequivocally indicates that the changes, the biographical changes, are far from being only age-related and personal, but are equally social and political. And the social and political context and its change is definitely absent from the work. For example, here is what is said about Chefo's turn to politics: "The change in the content of Chefo's channel from entertainment topics to engaged social and political issues is not accidental; it reflects his evolution as a person and as a content creator" (p. 174). This, I suggest, is beyond doubt. As is the fact that a war has begun in Ukraine.

Another crucial question when we talk about biographical change is how does one learn from experience? This is hinted at in the case of the twins, who, by advertising too many (that is, too omnivorously) brands and products, began to lose followers. The method here is trial-and-error and loss minimization, the latter a purely commercial calculative technique. Are there other ways of learning from one's experience?

The protagonists of the doctoral research walk a biographical path marked by their transitions – this is clearly evident (perhaps not about Azov's case): from gaming to esotericism in Choco; from making charts to social engagement in Chefo; the birth of the baby of the former

student Susie. This is, so to speak, social aging. Social aging is a psychosocial process that characterizes both personality and social relationships. What happens to audience relations in this social aging? It seems to me that for Chefo it is a process of mutual adjustment, marked by wandering and a certain dissatisfaction, while Choco abandons one audience along with a past self and searches for and builds another ("That one over there is another personality," as his answer to a Facebook user's question, screenshotted in the relevant appendix, puts it). In general, I miss the image that influencers have of their "parasocial" partners – their audiences.

I will also reiterate that an analysis of the audiences themselves, which would have greatly thickened the interpretation of the identity messages (they are, after all, search for recognition of the identity and personal development claims raised), is missing, and would have thickened the comparative analysis of the tactics of creating a sense of intimacy and the techniques of narrating and representing life.

The protagonists of this dissertation question and critique, and even go so far as to reject, the notion of 'influencer' – for them it is a commercial category, and they contrast self-expression and authenticity to the commercial. Is it the same with, say, Susie and Reni? Beyond that, however, this is the most persistent way in which they are referred to in the text, despite the claim of an empathetic approach to the objects of study (p. 81). Why? Undoubtedly, it is the way in which what the subjects do is recognisable to audiences, including academic audiences. But is this the only reason for the dominance of the appellation 'influencer'?

Again in relation to the empathetic approach: the work – I will readily repeat – very aptly juxtaposes established and struggling influencers yet to be recognised. There is an age difference between the two subgroups. And is there an understanding or sense of what it is to be young among them? Is it a significant predicate for them themselves?

Another – and disparate – reserve for compacting the analysis is the distinction between platforms held in the opening chapters. However, it is rarely used in the empirical sections.

And something – for me – of great importance, the question of normativity: what normative role models do the protagonists of the work endorse (say, what gender roles are associated with their self-stylings, their public images, their personas)? And when they refer to themselves as 'influencers' [*vliyateli*], do they have an idea of such a normativity being asserted non-explicitly, through the selection of traits around which to build a persona?

The conclusion of the dissertation thesis contains some extremely insightful observations, which I would note as contributing points if they were clearly derived from the description and analysis of the field data. At present, they are rather inspiring horizons for further texts. They are about the paradoxes of authenticity and truth: authenticity as both an ethical and an instrumental category; and truth, not as correspondence, nor as coherence, but as a sense of intimacy (p. 244).

Finally, something perhaps petty: if the work is to be published as a book, which I would heartily recommend, it would do well to go through an editor to clean up some minor inaccuracies such as, say, the naïve definition of passion (p. 82), the inaccurate translation of Bourdieu's notion of distinction with a Bulgarian word, and the like.

8. Contributions

Part of the contributions were noted above in the evaluation of the work. Here I recall some of them and add others.

A significant step has been made towards systematizing and organizing a conceptual and analytical apparatus for the study of digital cultures and spaces, an apparatus that was not found readymade but has been diligently plucked from disparate sources; this apparatus can be used by other researchers. This contribution (one of the main emphases of which is the conceptual and epistemological distinction between digital anthropology and anthropology of the digital) to the work is scholarly in its own right, but its potential to be used by other researchers also makes it scientifically applied.

The most significant contributions can be summarized in the main research question and the approaches to answering it: how authenticity is constructed to be commodified and how intimacy is constructed for public access. I consider the very formulation of these inquiries to be highly contributory both to the private field of dissertation research and to a broader critical-social diagnosis of contemporaneity.

The thesis is also a valuable step in the diagnosis of contemporaneity in its consistent demonstration of one particular form of subjectivation: the pairing of certain techniques of the self, of 'expressive individualism', (Taylor) with marketing techniques and the consumer market.

Local aspects and metamorphoses of global phenomena have been highlighted, among which I will particularly emphasize the new age patriotism: local patriotism as a global consumer market phenomenon.

A valuable step has been made towards integrating the strategic use of emotions into the understanding of parasocial interactions.

Overall – in the planning, in the conduct of the research, and in the reflection on and exposition of its findings – the ethical dimensions of the research enterprise are treated with great attention and responsibility (and very far from the common incantatory phrases in the introductions to more than one or two dissertations).

9. Bistra Dragoykova has submitted three publications on the topic of her dissertation: two articles in periodicals and one in a paper collection. One of the articles presents mainly the achievements in the creation of the theoretical apparatus of the research, and the other two – interpretation of the fieldwork findings. The publications are original and independent, as is the dissertation itself.

10. The abstract correctly and concisely presents the work, the assessment of its relevance is accurate, the contributions listed in the reference are valid, although there is much to add.

11. I do not know Bistra Dragoykova and therefore cannot share personal impressions.

Conclusion: the dissertation contains scientific and applied results that represent an original contribution to the scientific field and meet the requirements of the Law for the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (LADAPB), the Regulations for the Implementation of the LADAPB and the relevant Regulations of "Paisiy Hilendarski" University of Plovdiv.

The qualities of the independently conducted scientific research, as well as the scope of the conclusions, along with the number and quality of the publications on the topic of the dissertation demonstrate dedication in mastering the research field and contribution in its development and give me the reason to vote empathically FOR and to recommend to the scientific jury to award Bistra Ognyanova Dragoykova the educational and scientific degree of

PhD in the professional field 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Culture Studies (Social Anthropology).

Sofia   Reviewer:

June 15, 2024   (Milena Iakimova)