

**PLOVDIV UNIVERSITY "PAISH HILENDARSKI"**

**FACULTY OF PHILOSOPHY AND HISTORY**

**DEPARTMENT OF ETHNOLOGY**

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**Bistra Ognyanova Dragoykova**

**YOUNG ADULT INFLUENCERS: BIOGRAPHICAL STRATEGIES AND  
PRACTICES**

**ABSTRACT**

**of a dissertation for awarding the educational and scientific degree "Doctor"**

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The current dissertation "Young Influencers: Biographical Strategies and Practices" has a total volume of 290 pages, of which the main text (introduction, four chapters, conclusion and bibliography) are 253, and 37 are bibliography. Apps are provided via Google Drive.

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## Brief presentation of the dissertation

The dissertation consists of an introduction, four main chapters, a conclusion, a bibliography and appendices. Each chapter is structured with specific research tasks set in the context of the study of influencer culture in Bulgaria.

### Relevance and significance of the topic

The dissertation examines the activities of influencers, which, although gaining more and more popularity in contemporary Bulgarian culture, is still insufficiently analyzed in the humanities and social sciences in our country. The topic of digital influence and online identity building continues to be viewed primarily through the prism of digital marketing, while its cultural and social dimensions remain in the background. In the dissertation, an attempt is made to explore this activity as a socially situated practice related to personal self-expression, publicity and the formation of trajectories of belonging and legitimacy within the platform culture.

The motivation for the study stems from the observation that the activity of influencers in Bulgaria is not just a mechanism for popularization or market realization, but is a complex social and cultural practice in which personal stories, aesthetic choices, biographical strategies and social roles are intertwined. This work aims to show how influencers adapt to the local context, revealing the specific mechanisms through which Bulgarian influencers build their digital image and cultivate connections with their audience.

### Key terms

In the context of the study, the concept of *young adult* is considered not just in a demographic or age sense, but as a socially and culturally constructed stage in the life path. In my dissertation, I use the terms 'youth' and 'young adults' interchangeably, with the intention of designating a group that includes individuals between the ages of 18 and 29, and with two clarifications: first, that even if some of my interlocutors in individual cases were outside that age at the time of completing the study, they were 'youngsters' at the time of my interaction with them; second, It should be borne in mind that the exact boundaries of the concepts may vary depending on the cultural and social context.

The term *influencer* enters the Bulgarian language directly from English (influencer) and refers to individuals who, through their presence in social media and digital platforms, influence the opinions, behaviors and consumer decisions of their audience. In order to avoid the danger of unintentionally giving an evaluative character, this study refrains from placing influencers in a certain category, which does not correspond to their own understanding of their digital identity, except when referring to academic attempts to classify them. The text alternates between the concepts of 'content creators', 'opinion leaders', 'consumers', which, although broad-based, are appropriate in order to avoid unnecessary tautologies.

The concepts of *biographical strategy* and *biographical practice* are central to the analysis – they denote the individual goals and aspirations of the influencers, which are presented and realized in the digital space.) I describe the conscious and long-term plans that content creators develop to build and manage their life narrative, and the second (*biographical practice*) refers to the specific actions and everyday behaviors through which biographical strategies are realized. The two concepts are related but different: their relationship is expressed in the fact that biographical practices serve as means of executing biographical strategies, but strategies are conceptual and future-oriented, while practices are operational and implemented in the present.

### **Field, research question, purpose, tasks and thesis of the research**

The study is built in the field of **The Anthropology of the Digital** – a field in social anthropology that considers digital technologies not just as an instrumental medium, but as cultural and social objects that structure human interactions, identities and strategies of behavior (Horst and Miller, 2021; Knox, 2021).

**The research question** of the dissertation actually repeats its title: What are the biographical strategies and practices used by youth influencers?

**The aim** of the study is to examine, describe, research and interpret the biographical strategies and practices of young influencers that form and influence their identity and public image, from the point of view of social anthropology, of the human, and the work does not aim to "generalize" or "classify" influencers as if they were soulless objects, but to present the aspects that outline their personal life projects and strategies for influence and success. inspired by their own lives. The presentation discusses specific cases that illustrate the diversity of phenomena. The selection of specific cases allows for an in-depth analysis of key elements such as authenticity, engagement and adaptability in the context of digital culture.

In order to achieve its goal, the dissertation sets itself three **tasks**: firstly, to pose the problems related to influencers in the Bulgarian academic environment by reviewing the available academic literature; secondly, to trace how influencers form a certain layer of the socio-cultural landscape of society, which bears its own characteristics, skills, difficulties, etc.; thirdly, by conducting anthropological research; To consider the aspects of inventing, creating and using biographical strategies and practices by "professional" influencers, i.e. those for whom influencer is a "profession" and by novice content creators who are just starting out in the field, trying to explain what needs the content created through the analyzed strategies and practices on social platforms serves.

The main research **thesis** is that the biographical strategies and practices that young influencers develop in the context of a platform digital culture represent a basic mechanism for building a recognizable, authentic and sustainable digital identity.

### **Research methodology**

The methodology chosen for this study includes **methods for collecting** empirical material and **methods for analyzing** information selected to reflect the complexity and dynamics of the digital environment in which influencers operate. Qualitative methods are used to collect information, which allow a detailed entry into the topic under study and provide rich material for interpretation: observation (included and indirect), interview (semi-structured: a total of 7 were conducted, selected in order to save time for the interlocutors who are engaged; and unstructured: a total of more than 20 in number, complemented by many additional oral and written conversations that did not necessarily start as an interview), field diary keeping (over a period of four years: 2021 – 2024), autoethnography and digital ethnography. For analysis, methods such as: coding and categorization of field material, content analysis (content analysis) are used; narrative analysis, autoethnographic analysis (self-reflection) and ethnographic description. The methodological framework outlined in this way both allows adaptation to the characteristics of digital terrains and provides an in-depth understanding of the dynamics between content creators and their audiences, the biographical strategies and practices of influencers and their importance in digital culture.

### **Ethical aspects of the study**

In accordance with the anthropological tradition, the dissertation puts emphasis on the ethical aspects of working with informants. Research ethics is a key aspect, especially when the object of research is related to the personal and professional lives of the participants. This study follows the established principles of informed consent, transparency and voluntariness, guaranteeing influencers that their participation is completely free and can be terminated at any time. My interlocutors are familiar with the objectives of the study and the methods used. I have tried to treat their personal data and experiences with the highest degree of confidentiality, as I believe that this practice is especially important in the context of the study of influencers whose publicity and reputation are part of their professional identity. In this sense, confidentiality is not just a formal element, but a basic ethical principle that preserves the personal space of the interlocutors.

### **Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework of the study is based on concepts that consider digital culture in the context of modernity and globalization. For this purpose, works by authors such as Daniel Miller alone and together with Heather Horst (analysis of the anthropology of the digital), Pierre Bourdieu (capital and social dynamics), Gilles Lyotard (postmodern situation), Anthony Giddens (late modern forms of identity) and others were used. The application of these concepts allows an analysis of the role of digital platforms as social spaces that simultaneously form and reveal aspects of individual and collective identity. Particular attention is paid to anthropological perspectives that emphasize the hybrid nature of the digital – as a space of interaction between reality and virtuality. Manuel Castells' research on networked society and Arjun Appadurai's research on globalization provide key tools for understanding the transformation of social structures in the



digital age. In addition, the research of: Alice Marwick on the "instafamous" phenomenon and how Instagram creates a new type of celebrity through visual culture and the attention economy are used; David Giles and his analysis of the impact of digital culture on traditional celebrities and the rise of new forms of fame such as vloggers and influencers; Teresa Senft, who coined the term "micro-celebrity", viewing celebrities on digital platforms as a different category from traditional ones; Sigmund Bauman, who presents the concept of "liquid modernity" and focuses on the social risks in modern societies associated with excessive freedom and globalization; again Anthony Giddens, who explores late modern forms of identity and the impact of globalization on social and individual structure; José Van Dijk and Thomas Poell, who look at the processes of creating attachment in digital societies, as well as many others. These studies provide valuable perspectives on understanding digital culture, social dynamics, and identity formation in the modern world. The theoretical framework allows this work not only to interpret digital practices as part of the global cultural context, but also to consider how they affect the local cultural scene and contemporary social life in Bulgaria.

## **Chapter I. (Profession) "Influencer" – what is it?**

The first chapter examines the conceptual framework, providing an overview of the main academic sources and research on digital culture, social media, and influencers. The theoretical framework related to modernity, postmodernity and globalization is analyzed, with particular emphasis on social platforms and mechanisms for creating and disseminating content.

The present study is situated in the field of social anthropology and more specifically within the anthropology of the digital. Starting from the need to transcend the instrumental and often techno-optimistic understanding of digital platforms, the dissertation reviews key concepts, theories and approaches that outline the complex relationship between technology, culture, identity and social structure.

The first chapter presents the broad context of digitality in the modern world, emphasizing the **material basis of digital connectivity**, emphasizing that any digital practice is possible thanks to global infrastructures: from submarine cables to local algorithms and sensors (Knox, 2021). This puts digital technologies in a continuous relationship with historical processes such as globalization, media transformation and technological determinism – topics which are also interpreted through classic works such as "The Network Society" by Manuel Castells (2009).

Key authors such as Tom Boellstorff (2021), Gabriella Coleman (2010) and Daniel Miller (2021) emphasize that the distinction between online and offline is theoretically misleading. Digital and physical exist in an intertwined reality in which online practices have real emotional, social and political effects. The study perceives the understanding of digital reality as a matrix in which interactions occur in a continuum of materiality, mediation, and experience (Boellstorff, 2021; Frömming et al., 2017).

Theoretically, the dissertation **distinguishes digital anthropology from the anthropology of the digital**, arguing for the choice of the latter as the guiding framework. While digital anthropology is interested in how people use technology, digital anthropology examines

technologies themselves as cultural artifacts and social environments with normative potential. algorithms, interfaces and material infrastructures for building social worlds.

The presentation traces **the six basic principles of the anthropology of the digital** formulated by Heather Horst and Daniel Miller (2021):

1. the dialectic of universality and locality;
2. the cultural significance of the digital as equivalent to the pre-digital;
3. the holistic perspective on social reality;
4. cultural relativism and rejection of homogenizing discourses;
5. the ambiguity of digital culture between openness and control;
6. the materiality of digital technologies and contexts.

Along with this, **new media** are explored – seen as digitally based environments for social activity, which offer opportunities for personalized content, collective production and parasocial interactions. Through the conceptual framework of Lev Manovich (2001), five main characteristics of new media stand out: digital encoding, modularity, automation, variability and cultural transcoding, which serve as a theoretical background for the analysis of digital media content created by influencers.

The inclusion of virtual reality, gaming cultures and social networks emphasizes the expanded field of possibilities for expressing and building their own digital self-images. This leads to the interpretation of influencers' activities as **part of broader transformations in cultural production, identity and everyday life**, which need ethnographic insight and critical reading, situated simultaneously in the local and global context.

The chapter analyzes the phenomenon of digital celebrity and the shift of the concept of fame from the media elite to the so-called. Instafamous – influencers whose influence stems from their presence on social platforms (Khamis et al., 2016). Attention is paid to the division by age groups in the audience of different platforms and how this also determines the choice of media by influencers (Haenlein et al., 2020). Emphasis is placed on the way in which social networks allow the creation and dissemination of user-generated content (UGC), which is the basis for the establishment of influencer activity as a communication and economic practice (Koivisto and Mattila, 2018; Subramani and Rajagopalan, 2003). The importance of this process in subverting traditional hierarchies in the media landscape is also examined, with users no longer just consumers but active content creators and distributors (Álvarez-Monzoncillo and Santín, 2022).

The platforms Instagram, TikTok and YouTube are examined in detail. **Instagram** is represented through the concept of visual culture and digital aesthetics, where users act as "bricoleurs" (Maschio, 2022), creating their own digital identities through the selection and arrangement of images. The logic of fashion and distinction is also analyzed (Lipovetsky, 1991; Bourdieu, 1977), which structure consumption and affirm the symbolic value of visual content. **According** to Andrew Tolson (2010), YouTube is not just a repository for consumer videos, but a "museum" of electronic media culture, combining television, cinema, music and theater. David Giles (2018) also offers a genre classification of YouTubers, which reveals what type of content is associated with popularity and influence. A critically important contribution to the analysis of

YouTube in the Bulgarian context was made by Petar-Emil Mitev and Siika Kovacheva (2014), who a decade ago noted that the Internet was beginning to replace television as a leading leisure activity for young people in Bulgaria. This development created the conditions for the emergence of "YouTubers" – a new type of public figures, whose authority does not stem from institutions, but from their ability to attract and retain the attention of the audience. **TikTok**, in turn, is analyzed as a cultural phenomenon specifically related to Generation Z – the so-called. "app generation" (Gardner and Davis, 2013), which uses social platforms not only for entertainment but also as a stage for identity formation and expression (Boffone, 2021). The mode of consumption and content creation in TikTok is characteristic, in which short videos based on trends and sound fragments create a new visual culture associated with imitation, dance, covers, and memes (Haenlein et al., 2020). What the two platforms have in common is that in both, algorithms play a central role in which creators get visibility. Of particular importance for success is the adaptation of content to the cultural and technical logic of each platform. This puts creators – including young influencers in Bulgaria – in a situation of constant flexibility and readjustment to algorithms, audiences and format constraints. In this line of thought, attention is also paid to content management algorithms, which play the role of invisible intermediaries in the process of digital selection and distribution. (Gillespie, 2014; Diakopoulos and Koliska, 2016; Esteves, 2022).

Additional focus is placed on the role of platforms as economic and technological entities that manage not only content but also user data. The four main types of data that social media collects – personal, behavioral, engagement data, and user attitudes are listed (Esteves, 2022). The importance of digital methods for social research, incl. social media analysis (SMA), and their potential for empirical research of digital behavior (Stieglitz et al., 2014; Johnson and Sandström, 2022).

From a theoretical point of view, platforms are analyzed through the prism of platformization (Nieborg and Poell, 2018; Van Dijck and Poell, 2013), i.e., the process by which social platforms set structural frameworks for digital content, visibility, and legitimacy.

This chapter of the dissertation examines the complexity of defining the term *influencer* and the need for careful handling of terminology, given the rapid development and multi-layered nature of the field. Leading academic concepts are presented, tracing different approaches to the term within the social sciences and humanities, marketing and media studies. normative body, the dynamic nature of social networks and the blurring between amateur and professional practices. Related terms such as *opinion leader*, *micro-celebrity*, *ambassador*, *content creator* and *vlogger* are discussed, which outline different aspects of influencers' activities. The term *micro-celebrity*, coined by Teresa Senft (2008) and further developed by Alice Marwick (Marwick, 2015) and David Giles (2018), serves to describe figures who gain attention and trust in a digital environment. The so-called. "megaphone effect" (McQuarrie et al., 2013), describing the way in which ordinary users gain popularity through social media. The chapter outlines different types of influencers – from macro to micro – and discusses the value of each of them in a marketing context (De Veirman et al., 2017; Curiel and Ortiz, 2020). The proposed working definition of an influencer is: a content creator who uses a variety of social platforms to build and maintain an audience, influencing public

attitudes and decision-making processes. The importance of identity in this activity is also emphasized – not as a fixed entity, but as a process of continuous construction, adaptation and self-reflection.

## **Chapter II. How to Become Familiar to Strangers: Psychology of Influence**

Chapter two discusses key concepts such as influencer psychology, social and parasocial connections and relationships, success strategies, influencers' practices and skills, difficulties they face, the nature of influencer marketing, and opportunities for monetization and influencer marketing in the context of social media. Particular attention is paid to the adaptation of these phenomena to the Bulgarian context.

At the beginning of the chapter, the mechanisms of influence and engagement in the digital environment are examined through the prism of online creativity and parasocial interactions. The focus is on the social and psychological dynamics that accompany the establishment of influencers as influential figures on social platforms. The study traces how creative activity, when located in online contexts, is structured around positive feedback and audience formation (Kuhlmann, 2019; Michinov and Primois, 2005).

As a starting point for the development of the concept of influence, Robert Cialdini's theory of the six principles of influence (Cialdini, 2009) was used, which was complemented by the research on gift and reciprocity by Marcel Mauss (2001). The theoretical trajectory expands with the analysis of Sevil Yesiloglu (2020), which examines how social mechanisms of influence manifest themselves in the context of digital culture. In the process, influencers' strategies for connecting with audiences – through authenticity, accessibility, and relevance – become cultural capital.

Attention is paid to parasocial relationships (Horton and Wohl, 1956; Lou, 2021), which, although illusory, play an important role in building trust and emotional engagement. They are complemented by a new conceptual framework – of cybersocial interactions, which occupies an intermediate position between social and parasocial relations (Scheibe et al., 2022). The study looks at how social platforms' interfaces and algorithms structure expectations for authenticity, thus forming an influencer's digital ethos. Interactions between influencers and followers are interpreted as multi-layered processes in which trust, homophilia, and a sense of community are combined with marketing strategies focused on engagement and sustainable relationships (Chan-Olmsted and Kim, 2022; Abidin, 2016; De Veirman et al., 2017).

Chapter two comments that trust in influencers, unlike traditional celebrities, is based not only on their experiences and content, but also on simulated proximity, vulnerability, and emotional accessibility, which amplify parasocial impact on audiences – especially among younger generations (Lou et al., 2022; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). In this sense, influencers become mediators of meaningful connections and values in digital publicity that go beyond purely commercial logic and create cultural communities structured around the ideal of shared authenticity and trust. It also examines the key skills needed for success in the field of influencer, with an emphasis on social, technical and communication competences: for example, on-camera

presentation skills, taking into account the triad of abilities formulated by James Bennett (Bennett, 2010), persuasiveness as a central ability related to audience influence and consumer attitudes (Brown and Hayes, 2007; Jin et al., 2019; Lou and Yuan, 2019; Ranga and Sharma, 2014) and others.

Attention is paid to the role of authenticity and "ordinariness" in building trust. Authenticity is seen as a socially constructed strategy of sincerity and vulnerability (Marwick and boyd, 2011), while "ordinariness" is associated with a desire for closeness and identification (Giles, 2018). The objectives, methods and effects of the two strategies are distinguished, highlighting the need for their joint use. The importance of friendliness as a social competence that fosters connection with the audience and stimulates interaction is explored (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Cheung, 2014; Ruiz-Gomez, 2019). Strategic management as a practice involving flexible planning and the use of digital methods to adapt to an ever-changing environment is also considered (Gosling and Mintzberg, 2004; Eriksson et al., 2019). Special attention is paid to technical skills – the ability to work with cameras, sound, lighting and editing software is presented as a critical requirement for professionalism, innovation and efficiency. It is pointed out that technical literacy helps to build trust and long-term adaptation to new technologies. Practical aspects of the activity include digital storytelling, presented through typologies (Robin, 2008; Lambert, 2009) and considered as the main strategy for attracting and retaining the attention of the audience (Nuñez-Janes et al., 2017).

Gamification has been seen as a motivating tool for engagement through game mechanisms (Galletta, 2013; Jia et al., 2016; Sailer et al., 2013). It also analyzes simulation of intimacy and confession as practices for creating closeness and authenticity, as well as the role of self-disclosure, which is evaluated according to the degree of intimacy (Kim and Song, 2016; Lin and Utz, 2017; Chung and Cho, 2017). The importance of live appearances that reinforce the sense of connection between influencer and followers is also pointed out (Haenlein et al., 2020), as well as the role of following trends and creating content that provokes a FOMO effect (Djafarova and Bowes, 2021; Lou et al., 2022).

The chapter concludes by looking at the monetization processes identified through platform and brand revenue (Stock, 2020) and describing the difficulties faced by influencers, from emotional burnout to the risks of cancel culture and inappropriate partnerships (Haenlein et al., 2020; Velasco, 2021).

### **Chapter III. "Born for the Screen"**

The third chapter focuses on the strategies of established influencers – Choko, Cefo, Azov, Suzi and Reni. This is done based on qualitative methods such as long-term observations, content analysis, and interviews. The study highlights how these influencers use biographical practices to build digital image and influence. The chapter provides a detailed analysis of social dynamics across platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok and how these media are shaping new forms of identity and social behavior.

The case of **Stoyan Valkov – Choko** is the first to be examined, tracing his transition from gaming content to esoteric-spiritual orientation and the creation of the INRA platform. Through

an ethnographic and inclusive approach, including a joint experience in a field situation, his biographical strategies related to the construction of a meaningful public identity are analyzed. as well as on social dynamics with the audience – from early YouTube videos to new conceptual formats. Parasocial connections, the ritualization of experiences and the use of symbols and spaces through which Chocó constructs his digital authenticity are examined. The influence of "Cogitality Academy" and Ivomir Dimchev on his aesthetics, rhetoric and philosophy of content is also analyzed.

This case focuses on the audience's ambivalent reaction to the change that has occurred – between identification and alienation – and reveals how influencer activity can become a platform for community experience, self-development and symbolic communication. Through Chocó's case, broader processes of identity, platforming and cultural mediation in the digital age are demonstrated.

Second is the case of **Stefan Popov – Chefo**, one of the recognizable influencers in the modern Bulgarian online environment. The construction of his digital identity is traced through many interrelated aspects – creative experience in theater and television, the creation and development of the YouTube channel Chefo, his social and political engagement, the building of closed online communities, as well as his participation in the TV show Survivor. on the biographical strategies and practices through which Popov constructs and maintains his image in the digital space, and in the course of the analysis concepts from the academic literature are also used (Giles, 2018; Kim and Song, 2016; McMillan and Chavis, 1986; Morawietz et al., 2022).

It traces the transition from entertainment content to socially and politically engaged topics, including initiatives such as "Kremlin Resistance" and the podcast series "1 on 1". The role of the philosophy of Stoicism, Wim Hof's method and solo journeys within his biographical practices and as tools for personal self-knowledge, inspiration and production consistency are examined. Attention is paid to the creation of communities on Telegram and Patreon (the "Lion Club" project), where Popov experiments with new forms of closeness and engagement with the audience. It analyzes how these communities fit into the theoretical model of "sense of community" (McMillan and Chavis, 1986), as well as to what extent paid platforms create opportunities and constraints in building sustainable digital connections. The chapter also describes my own involvement in the Telegram group and subsequently on Patreon, meetings, moderation and communication with Chefo, which gives a personal perspective to the research. The tensions between authenticity and strategic self-presentation are highlighted, as well as the effects of paid models on the accessibility, diversity and spontaneity of digital communities. Chefo's participation in "Survivor" is also in focus, which is seen as a symbolic ritual of transition and personal transformation. The analysis is based on the video he published "I'm Coming Back. I am a new person", which emphasizes topics such as will, self-knowledge, moral values and social engagement. Special attention is paid to emotions, metaphors and biographical narratives, through which he shapes his public image and creates a sense of closeness with the audience.

Cefo's case is seen as an example of contemporary digital self-representation, in which elements of cultural biography, social engagement, and platform logic are intertwined. Popov is

presented as a figure whose identity is formed dynamically – in response to algorithms, cultural expectations and internal searches. His approach to building a personal story on the web and creating a meaningful trajectory through a digital environment coincides with the concepts of life strategy and reflective self-knowledge (Kovacheva, 2020), which makes him valuable for anthropological analysis.

The third case examined is that of **Todor Azov**, one of the established Bulgarian macro-influencers, whose style combines humor, irony and social criticism. The analysis traces the development of his YouTube channel from its inception in 2014 to the present day, with an emphasis on his choice of formats: leaderboards, reactions, comments and podcasts. meta-comments and direct interaction with the audience. The main advantages and challenges of each type of content that the author uses are considered, analyzing the role of humor as a tool for cultural reflection. Attention is paid to his participation in the reality format "The House of Influencers", where Azov plays the role of a critically thinking participant who questions commercialization and dominant cultural models. His practice of self-disclosure and building parasocial relationships is also analyzed, as well as the use of familiar addresses ("Hey, hello nice people") to create emotional closeness.

Attention is paid to the way in which Azov develops closed communities through paid membership and interactive formats, as well as to its strategies for adaptation to the changing digital environment. The study finds that Todor Azov uses his platform not only for entertainment, but also as a space for cultural criticism, building a hybrid image of both a participant and an observer in media culture. His approach is examined through the concept of metacommunication and ethical digital presence, which establishes him as a significant agent of cultural change and a valuable case for research within social anthropology.

Next is the case of twins **Suzi and Reni Georgievi** – one of the recognizable influencers on Bulgarian social networks. By tracing their careers – from animators and dancers to mega-influencers on TikTok and Instagram – the biographical strategies and practices that contribute to building their online identity are explored.

Susie and Rennie use a number of approaches, among which they dominate: sharing personal stories (e.g. challenges related to appearance and self-esteem); demonstration of professional development through participation in television formats and advertising campaigns; creating a variety of visual content with a focus on dance culture, lifestyle and fashion trends; and promoting social responsibility by engaging in charitable initiatives. The analysis shows how they manage to achieve a work-life balance – with examples such as Susie's motherhood and Reni's TV appearances – and how this dynamic becomes a central element of their online presence.

The case illustrates that from a research point of view, Suzi and Reni are especially significant as an object of analysis, because they represent a vivid example of influencers who, through cultural adaptation, emotional engagement and social activity, build a sustainable digital identity. They combine personal narratives with professional strategy, demonstrating how influencer becomes a kind of life practice in which personal experience and media activity are

inextricably linked. Their case illustrates how social networks function not just as media channels, but as a cultural environment for the formation of new models of influence, belonging and identity.

## **Chapter IV. Wannabe Influencers**

Chapter Four presents an analysis of novice influencers and their strategies for "breaking through" in the digital space – Gabi, Martina, Petya and Ziad. Here, their efforts to build communities, develop content creation skills, and adapt to social media algorithms are explored. Using the same methodological approaches as in Chapter Two, the study traces their ways of engaging audiences and building trust, as well as the difficulties associated with competition and visibility in the digital world.

Each of the cases examined presents a different approach to the activities of influencers. In **Gabriela Ivanova's** case, the emphasis is on family and parental roles, which she uses to build emotional closeness and trust with her audience on Instagram, emphasizing the importance of authenticity and visual intimacy. Her partnership with actor Ivo Arakov is also analyzed as a form of social capital, with potential benefits and risks for its independent digital identity. The topic of motherhood is compared with Gabi and Susie.

**Martina Kraeva-Angelova**, on the other hand, relies on a cultural and aesthetic strategy through carefully selected visual content focused on travel, fashion and gastronomy. Her activity is an example of shaping a digital image based on a sense of aesthetics (Maschio, 2022), while her personal life remains discreetly marked in the content. The comparison between Gabriela and Martina illuminates two different models of digital identity – "family" and "aesthetic".

**Petya Turnnikova** demonstrates an approach that combines professional knowledge in the field of digital marketing with the pursuit of authenticity and sustainability. Her content is multi-layered – it includes a healthy lifestyle, personal development and hobbies – and is characterized by strategic planning, selectivity in partnerships and high sensitivity to the correspondence between personal values and commercial goals. Petya is a representative of influencers who are looking for the balance between market value and emotional authenticity, which distinguishes her in the group of the so-called. nano-influencers.

The latest case analyzed is that of **Ziad Jarrar**, a young YouTube content creator focused on trading and cryptocurrencies. Despite initial enthusiasm and technical skills, he faces insurmountable difficulties – from pressure for results and expectations for quick success to experiencing emotional burnout and dropping out of the influencer scene.

In summary, the four cases illustrate how "beginner" influencers build their digital image through a combination of biographical strategies and cultural expectations. They demonstrate flexibility in choosing topics and platforms, striving for personalized and aesthetically pleasing content, as well as efforts to achieve engagement through interactivity with followers.

## **Conclusion**



In conclusion, a summary of the main conclusions of the study is made, focusing on the dynamics of influencer culture and its role in the contemporary Bulgarian reality. The main results of the study on young influencers in the Bulgarian context are summarized, emphasizing the relationship between biographical strategies, platform structures and socio-cultural processes. The main objective of the study – to reveal the ways in which young influencers build and maintain their digital identity (or in other words, their strategies and practices) – is achieved through a combination of theoretical analysis and fieldwork, based on empirical observations and interactions with influencers at different stages of their development.

Based on the cases examined, a two-tier typology is derived that distinguishes between "established" and "beginner" influencers – two ideally-typical models that differ in style, scope, engagement methods and strategic orientations, but also share key characteristics: striving for authenticity, maintaining a connection with the audience and building a consistent public persona. Established influencers handle analytical tools, robust strategies, and professional resources, while beginners rely on intuition, personal enthusiasm, and experimentation. The comparison between the two types shows how digital self-construction is both an individual project and a cultural practice, subordinated to platform logic and social expectations.

The study highlights the importance of authenticity as a social and strategic core of influencer activity. The distinction between "truthfulness" and "representation" is not binary, but dynamic – authenticity turns out to be a rhetorical and emotional resource through which influencers build trust and legitimacy. In this process, the personal narrative (biographical strategy) is often intertwined with market goals and general practices oriented towards engagement, visibility and monetization. The present study offers a theoretical framework that distinguishes between biographical and general strategies and practices, while showing their functional intertwining.

Theoretical conclusions are based on classical and contemporary authors: Daniel Miller and Heather Horst (on the dialectic between technological and social), Anthony Giddens and Zygmunt Bauman (on reflective identity and liquid modernity), Pierre Bourdieu (on the convertibility of capital), Irving Goffman and Alice Marwick (on performativity and authenticity in self-representation). The study shows how young influencers combine cultural, social and so-called. digital capital to navigate the attention economy, using both personalized narratives and technology-driven dissemination and engagement strategies.

One of the significant contributions of the study is the development of the local (Bulgarian) context as a unique field of analysis. In an environment with a limited audience and poorly developed intermediary structures, Bulgarian young influencers demonstrate specific forms of adaptation: they develop multifunctional roles, use hybrid strategies and intertwine global formats with local content. In conclusion, the dissertation reveals young influencers not just as digital entrepreneurs or social media stars, but as cultural mediators whose activities intersect the personal and the public, the authentic and the strategic, the local and the global.

## Main conclusions from the study

This research has led to several key conclusions that highlight the central role of biographical strategies and practices in the activities of young influencers.

**First of all**, biographical strategies and practices are a fundamental element in the process of constructing a digital identity. Young influencers use their personal stories as a tool to build a recognizable and authentic image. These stories create a sense of closeness and trust in the audience, presenting the human side of their digital persona, while at the same time serving to build a long-lasting relationship and sustainability in their digital identity. competitive digital environment.

**The second finding** confirms the claim of the academic literature that trustworthiness, authenticity, and accessibility are fundamental characteristics of the success of biographical strategies, as they help create meaningful connections – one-sided relationships in which followers feel a genuine attachment to influencers. Honesty and emotional openness, demonstrated by sharing personal stories and experiences, strengthen trust, and thus create a positive content creators have an aura of reliability and accessibility. Biographical approaches inspire authenticity, which is critical for establishing influencers as credible figures, distinguishing them from others and maintaining long-term interest in their activities.

Influencers skillfully adapt their biographical strategies to the changes in their own lives on the one hand, and biographical practices to the changing interests of the audience, including new topics, formats and platforms, on the other hand, this flexibility allows them to maintain their relevance in the dynamic online environment.

**The fourth takeaway** focuses on the economic interaction of biographical strategies and practices with monetization. Influencers often integrate biographical elements into their paid partnerships and sponsored content, carefully balancing between commercialization and authenticity. Successfully managing this balance is key to practicing influencer as a primary livelihood and its long-term success.

As a **fifth conclusion**, the audiovisual nature of social networks and the need for aesthetics stand out. High-quality visual aesthetics stand out as an advantage in attracting and retaining an audience, which is in line with the statement of the academic literature that attractiveness can be an additional factor that can influence the biographical strategies for success of influencers. Content creators carefully select color schemes, shooting styles, and composition to create a memorable and professional image that amplifies impact.

**The sixth conclusion** highlights social engagement as an important biographical strategy. Participation in social and cultural causes is an effective way for influencers to increase their influence and show social responsibility.

Finally, a **seventh conclusion** can be drawn in terms of experimentation and niche discovery. For beginner influencers, a key point in development is experimenting with a variety of formats and topics close to themselves, which not only allows them to find their niche, but also to try different approaches to building content that matches their individual interests and personal values.

## Scientific Contributions of the Dissertation

- 1. Study of a new social group emerging in Bulgarian context.** The dissertation presents the first anthropological study of young influencers in Bulgaria, which expands the field of socio-scientific knowledge of digital culture in our country.
- 2. Distinction between established and novice influencers.** An analytical distinction between "professional" and "beginner" influencers is introduced, which allows monitoring both sustainable forms of digital influence and the process of entering the activity.
- 3. Analysis of biographical strategies and practices for social impact.** The study shows how young people use their personal stories, visual aids and emotional engagement to build a digital identity and form a connection with the audience, contributing to the understanding of parasocial interactions in an online environment.
- 4. Conceptual distinction between "anthropology of the digital" and "digital anthropology".** Within the theoretical framework, an attempt is made to analytically distinguish between the two concepts in order to contribute to the theoretical clarity of terminology, arguing the choice of "anthropology of the digital" as a leading perspective.
- 5. Systematization of theoretical approaches to digital in social anthropology through a critical review of the existing literature.** The dissertation offers a critical review and summary of the leading trends in social anthropology and beyond, which enriches the understanding of the evolution of digital phenomena research and lays the foundation for subsequent analyses in the Bulgarian context.
- 7. Justified choice of a specific analytical perspective on the phenomenon of influencer (biographical approach).** This demonstrates how the anthropological view can complement and build on the dominant marketing research in the field. The importance of socio-anthropological analysis in the study of online cultures is emphasized.
- 8. Interdisciplinary research perspective.** The analysis integrates perspectives from anthropology, media studies and digital marketing, which achieves a more comprehensive understanding of influencer activity as a social and cultural phenomenon.
- 9. A local perspective on global discourse.** The study analyzes the activities of influencers through the prism of the Bulgarian cultural and social environment, thus contributing empirical data to the global debate on digital culture and its local manifestations.

**10. Applicability outside the academic field.** The results obtained have the potential to be used in pedagogical practice, youth policies and social work, and could help to better understand the dynamics of identity, belonging and influence in the digital lives of young influencers in Bulgaria.

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### Publications on the topic of the dissertation

1. Dragoykova, B. 2022. Youth Influencers: Biographical Strategies and Practices. The Case of "Choko", in e-magazine *Tereni*, issue 5, Doctoral Seminar "Academic Trajectories" (compiled by K. Yordanova), 62-75: <https://www.ethnologia.bg/broi5>
2. Dragoykova, B. 2024. Being an Influencer: Goals, Difficulties, Emotions, in *Tereni e-magazine*, issue 8, PhD Seminar "Academic Trajectories" (compiled by I. Pachamanova), 86-108: <https://www.ethnologia.bg/%D0%B1%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B9-8>
3. Dragoykova, B. 2024. Together for 1 or how an influencer shares knowledge in the digital space, in Stoilova, E. and M. Kisikova (eds.), *New and Old Terrains of Anthropology. Digital and Pandemic Challenges*, 7-24: [https://logos.uniplovdiv.net/documents/35514/508268/Sbornik\\_Novi+i+stari+tereni+na+etno....pdf/2cc85852-00ef-45f2-a5f2-9f5faefe429b?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAAR1EckdpgEg99w9UJtICVsQAvL3NEDy6xgIcKtJOWx6ansiGKNJ73ULFRc4\\_aem\\_cu8V7OuLIDW7VnkelUQFSw](https://logos.uniplovdiv.net/documents/35514/508268/Sbornik_Novi+i+stari+tereni+na+etno....pdf/2cc85852-00ef-45f2-a5f2-9f5faefe429b?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAAR1EckdpgEg99w9UJtICVsQAvL3NEDy6xgIcKtJOWx6ansiGKNJ73ULFRc4_aem_cu8V7OuLIDW7VnkelUQFSw)