

Research Traineeships 2021 proposal format

1. Title of the project

My very popular online friend: Using photo elicitation interviews to categorize the antecedents of parasocial relationships with influencers

2. Coordinators

Dr. Sara Pabian (TSHD, DCC)

Dr. Mingyi Hou (TSHD, DCU)

Dr. Loes Janssen (TSHD, DCC)

3. Project summary

'Social media influencers' are immensely popular among today's youth¹⁷, and various academic disciplines have begun to explore their impact on young adults' attitudes and behaviors^{1-3, 20, 21}. Influencers share their everyday lives, opinions, and experiences on social media such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram, and engage their audience via the interactive functionalities of these platforms^{1,12,14}. Through their performance of ordinariness, intimacy, and equality, they create strong bonds with their followers^{4,11,15,16}, referred to as 'parasocial relationship' (PSR)⁷. Follower relationships with influencers are parasocial, because followers can perceive influencers as close friends, whereas influencers know little to nothing about their followers⁵.

Empirical evidence from different academic disciplines converges on the idea that PSR is an important predictor of influencers' impact on young adults' attitudes and behaviors^{13,19}. However, it remains unclear how PSR is formed, and which factors contribute to its formation and maintenance. We believe that this knowledge gap is best addressed by an interdisciplinary collaboration, specifically by integrating theoretical perspectives and methodological expertise from culture studies^{6, 8, 9,11, 22} and communication sciences^{10,18-21}. The aim of the current project is to provide evidence-based answers to the following central research question: Which factors contribute to the establishment of PSR between followers and social media influencers?

In the first stage of this project (traineeship 2020), we have performed an extensive literature review, combining empirical evidence and theoretical perspectives from the fields of influencer marketing, online community building, social influence, media psychology, and self-representation and celebrification. This review resulted in (a) a new conceptualization of influencer-follower PSR in a social media context, and (b) a systematic overview of potential antecedents of PSR, organized in four main categories: influencer characteristics and behavior (mainly investigated in diverse subdomains of culture studies) and follower characteristics and behavior (mainly investigated in diverse subdomains of communication sciences).

We are currently performing semi-structured photo-elicitation interviews among 25 young adults (18-25 yrs), who have been following one or multiple Instagram influencers for at least six months. A selection of posts from participants' favorite Instagram influencers are used to trigger conversation, following a topic list derived from our literature review. The study has been approved by the Research Ethics and Data Management Committee of TSHD. The main objectives of the four-month

traineeship 2021 are coding the interview transcripts, analyzing the data, and co-authoring an academic publication, serving as input for a joint funding application with societal partners that could profit from these insights.

4. Project timeline

Activities	Months	Deliverables
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Getting acquainted with theoretical background and refining codebook Transcript coding and thematic analysis Preparing conference abstract 	<p>Sept</p> <p>Sept-Nov</p> <p>Nov</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Abstract submission Etmaal van de Communicatiewetenschap* (annual Dutch and Flemish communication conference). Deadline: November. Conference: February
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Write journal manuscript Preparing conference abstract 	<p>Nov-Dec</p> <p>Dec</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Manuscript submission New Media & Society** Abstract submission IAMCR* (annual meeting of the International Association of Media and Communication Research). Deadline: February. Conference: July. Presentation DCU PhD platform

(*) Both conferences provide a relevant platform for the current project and accommodate scholars from communication studies, culture studies, and related fields relevant to this project, such as celebrity studies and media psychology.

(**) Based on an extended abstract of introduction, theoretical background, and method section written during traineeship 2020.

5. Research trainee profile

General tasks. The research trainee will (1) code the transcripts of 25 photo-elicitation interviews, (2) qualitatively analyze the data, and (3) co-write two conference submissions and co-author an academic journal article (with the coordinators and the trainee from traineeship 2020).

Research Trainee Profile. We are looking for an excellent and enthusiastic student with experience and interest in qualitative research methods and analysis. Bachelor, master, and research master students are eligible to apply when they have at least a 7.5 grade average, obtained at least 120 ECTS, and have excellent communication skills. The trainee should be available for at least 1 day a week between September 2021 and December 2021.

Application information. Applications, including a motivation letter and resume (in English), should be sent to all project coordinators: Dr. Sara Pabian (s.j.r.pabian@tilburguniversity.edu), Dr. Mingyi Hou (m.hou@tilburguniversity.edu), and Dr. Loes Janssen (l.janssen@tilburguniversity.edu). In the motivation letter, clearly indicate your interest in the topic of the traineeship as well as the proposed research method. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions using the above email addresses.

6. References

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