1. Title of the Project

'What we have is so special': Towards an understanding of the parasocial relationship between social media influencers and their followers

2. Coordinators

Dr. Sara Pabian (TSHD, DCC)

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3. Project Summary

Over the last decade, the exponential growth of social media like YouTube and Instagram has fueled the emergence of 'social media influencers'. These popular content creators have built a sizeable network of followers on diverse social media platforms, by successfully branding their personal interests and expertise in niches like fashion, fitness, and gaming[1-4]. Through creating short-form content (e.g., an Instagram post), vlogging (e.g., a YouTube video), or blogging (e.g., a blog post on their personal website), influencers provide insight into their personal everyday lives, their opinions, and their experiences. Influencer content is immensely popular among young adults (18-25 years old), and a significant part of their daily media consumption[5].

A growing body of empirical evidence shows that social media influencers have a significant impact on young adults' attitudes, intentions, and behaviors [1,6-7]. Influencers attract their viewers' attention through the performance of ordinariness, intimacy, and equality [8-9], and their authenticity is reflected in 'a palpable sense of truthful self-expression', 'a connection with and responsiveness to the audience', and 'honest engagement with commodity goods and brands' [10]. It is therefore not surprising that influencers' online word-of-mouth has been widely adopted as a powerful marketing instrument [11]. Not only commercial organizations, but also governments and health-promoting institutions are trying to harness the persuasive power of social media influencers [12]. During the COVID-19 pandemic for example, governments have partnered with influencers to promote social distancing among youth[13].

Despite the growing academic attention for influencer effects, surprisingly little is known about an aspect that seems key to the persuasive success of influencer-audience communication: the parasocial relationship between the influencer and their individual followers[14]. Most influencer-follower relationships are parasocial in nature, which refers to a seemingly personal relationship that one can experience with a (social) media character, as if the person is a friend, whereas the influencer knows little to nothing about the follower[15]. Academic research suggests that the stronger the perceived bond with an influencer, the more likely it is that the follower will take on their advice[14]. However, it is still unclear how this parasocial bond is formed, and which factors contribute to its formation and maintenance. Building on and combining insights from communication studies and culture studies could lead to a deeper understanding of the drivers behind the formation and maintenance of this type of relationship. These new insights may not only benefit communication and culture studies scholars, but also practitioners who partner with influencers in their persuasive campaigns.

Therefore, the proposed project aims to formulate evidence-based answers to the following central research question: *Which factors contribute to the establishment of the parasocial bond that followers may experience between themselves and a social media influencer?*

Our theoretical framework will combine empirical evidence and theoretical perspectives from the fields of both communication science and culture studies, such as influencer marketing[16-18,7,19], online

community building[20-21], social influence[22-23], media psychology[24], and self-representation and celebrification[25-28].

Methodology: Qualitative photo-elicitation interviews

In this project, we aim to identify which characteristics may affect a follower's perception of the parasocial bond between him-or herself and the influencer. The limited number of studies in the domain of communication sciences that have investigated this relationship have mainly focused on follower's perceptions of the characteristics of the influencer, such as similarity[29] and trustworthiness[17]. The proposed project wants to combine these findings with insights from culture studies. Cultural studies of self-representation and celebrification for example identified strategies influencers use to engage and invite followers, such as courting behaviors (responding to comments or publically recognizing comments in new posts) [26-27]. These behaviors seem to play an important role in online relationship formation in online communities[29], however, it is not investigated yet whether these behaviors also contribute to the formation of a parasocial relationship with a social media influencer. Another insight from culture studies is the importance of the dynamic of the follower community[21]. Culture studies argue that the influencer-follower relationship is not a straightforward dyad, involving only a lone follower and an individual influencer. The relationship can become 'multisocial' when followers interact with each other[30]. Research indicates that a positive perception of other 'community members' influences one's commitment to an online community[29,31], which might also be true for parasocial bonding with a social media influencer.

To understand how followers describe their bond with a social media influencer (e.g., which meaning is given to this relationship) and which relationship maintenance behaviors of the influencer and audience perceptions determine this bond, photo-elicitation interviews will be administered among 20 emerging adults (10 males and 10 females) between 18 and 25 years old. Photo-elicitation interviewing is a research method that uses images to elicit discussion in semi-structured interviews[32]. Participants will be asked to open the Instagram account of their favorite influencer and select and discuss posts of the influencer. This will facilitate communication between the interviewer and the participant and trigger rich conversations[33].

In sum, this project brings together different perspectives on parasocial relationship formation, integrating theoretical as well as methodological expertise from culture studies and communication sciences. This interdisciplinary collaboration will result in a joint academic publication, which may serve as input for a joint funding application.

4. Project timeline and deliverables

Activities	Months	Deliverables
● Theory development and ethical screening ● Preparing interview script and contact prospective interviewees ● Data collection and analysis	Sept-Oct Oct-Nov Nov-Jan Feb-Mar	 ● Abstract submission Etmaal van de Communicatiewetenschap* (annual Dutch and Flemish communication conference). Deadline: November. Conference: February ● Diggit Magazine article ● Paper submission IAMCR (annual meeting of the International Association of Media and

		Communication Research)*
● Write journal manuscript	May-Jun	● Manuscript submission New Media & Society ● Presentation Research Traineeships symposium ● Presentation Peers (DCU PhD platform)

(*) Both conferences bring together not only communication scholars, but also scholars from culture studies and other fields that are relevant for the present project such as celebrities studies and social psychology.

5. Research Trainee Profile

General tasks. The research trainee will (1) prepare and test the materials for the interviews, (2) collect and code data, (3) analyze data, and (4) report research results. We want to submerge and involve our research trainee in all steps involved in conducting a scientific study in order to gain as much experience as possible, while being supported by us, senior researchers, who are experienced in the proposed research topic, as well as the proposed methodology.

Research Trainee Profile. We are looking for an excellent and enthusiastic student with experience and/or interest in qualitative research methods. Both bachelor, master, and research master students with at least a 7.5 grade average, and who have obtained at least 120 ECTS are eligible to apply. The trainee should be available for at least 1 day a week between September 2020 and June 2021, while being enrolled at the University, and should have excellent communication skills.

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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