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RATIONALIZING FICTION CUES: PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF DISCLOSING ADS AND THE INACCURACY OF THE HUMAN MIND WHEN BEING IN PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	Parasocial relationships are today established on social media between influencers and their followers. While marketing effects are well-researched, little is known about the meaning of such relationships and the psychological mechanisms behind them. This study, therefore, explores the questions: "How do followers on Instagram interpret explicit fiction cues from influencers?" and "What does this reveal about the meaning of parasocial attachment?"
Background	With a billion-dollar advertising industry and leading in influencing opinion, Instagram is a significant societal and economic player. One factor for the effective influence of consumers is the relationship between influencer and follower. Research shows that disclosing advertisements surprisingly does not harm credibility, and sometimes even leads to greater trustworthiness and, in turn, willingness to purchase. While such reverse dynamics are measurable, the mechanisms behind them remain largely unexplored.
Methodology	The study follows an explorative approach with in-depth interviews, which are analyzed with Mayring's content analysis under a reconstructive paradigm. The findings are discussed through the lens of critical psychology.
Contribution	Firstly, this study contributes to the understanding of the communicative dynamics of influencer-follower communication alongside the reality-fiction-gap model, and, secondly, it contributes empirical insights through the analysis of 22 explorative interviews.
Findings	The findings show (a) how followers rationalize fiction cues and justify compulsive decision-making, (b) how followers are vulnerable to influences, and (c) how parasocial attachment formation overshadows rational logic and agency.

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	The findings are discussed with regard to mechanisms, vulnerabilities, rationalizations and cognitive bias, and the social self, as well as the ethics of influencer marketing and politics.
Recommendations for Practitioners	The paper has relevance for professionals working with children, the youth, and adults, in understanding their relationships and their meaning both on the individual and societal level. Such improve insights and adequate measures in pedagogy, education, health, and therapy. Furthermore, critical perspectives on parasociallity and its mechanisms can contribute to ethical policymaking.
Recommendations for Researchers	The contribution is relevant to relationship research, group dynamics and societal organizing, well-being, identity, and health perspectives, within psychology, sociology, media studies, and pedagogy to management.
Impact on Society	This paper contributes to comprehending nowadays relationships and processes of identification through a systemic lens and develops a critical reflection on current conditions in life.
Future Research	Future research might seek to understand more about (a) quantifiable vulnerabilities, such as attachment styles, dispositions, and demographics, (b) usage patterns and possible factors of prevention, (c) cognitive and emotional mechanisms involved with larger samples, (d) the impact on relationships and well-being, and (e) possible conditions for the potential of parasocial attachment.

Keywords	parasocial relationships, social media, intimate relationships, bonding, social media advertisement, rationalization, human mind, bias, social media communication

INTRODUCTION

This study explores the *parasocial relationship* between influencers and followers of social media accounts, such as Instagram. Parasocial relationships build on the followers feeling that they have a close, personal connection with the influencer even though they have never met the person and on the influencers' interest in a large number of followers. The term parasocial relationships stems from a time when it applied to the relationship between movie stars and their fans. Today parasociallity develops new qualities, with parasocial relationships being established between influencers and followers on social media including new characteristics of the relationship being semi-reciprocal. This study explores the interpretations of followers when confronted with fiction cues, with the aim to understand more about contemporary parasocial relationships and their meaning for subjects. Fiction cues are part of the communication on social media, for instance in cases of advertisement where influencers alter information about their life or themselves, motivated through third parties or secondary interests (e.g. selling products, growing attention).

The theoretical part of this paper first depicts the state of research on Instagram as an economic player. Then, parasociallity as a specific relationship and its communicative characteristics are exemplified by applying the reality-fiction-gap model. Finally, the effects of advertisement disclosure on subjects are summed up, grounding the research question on subjective interpretations of fiction cues and the role of parasocial attachment.

INSTAGRAM AND MARKETING

Instagram is one of the most prominent social media platforms with 1.48 billion users in 2022 and, as such, is still the most significant player in opinion leadership (Casaló et al., 2020; Fakhreddin & Foroudi, 2022; Statista, 2022). Being a billion-dollar industry, it is a serious player in the economy, with 83% of American adults using social media, 48% of whom use it to interact with brands and businesses (Evans et al., 2017; Haenlein et al., 2020).

The platform functions through photo-sharing, story updates in the form of short videos available for 24 hours, and reels, as video frequencies of up to 90 seconds in length, being circulated through an algorithm. Influencers can earn money from their account, depending on the number of followers and the followers' activity and commitment, measured in interactivity. To make money, the influencers have to either sell their own products or place advertisements for other companies. Within the rise of the attention economy, influencer marketing on Instagram is effective and steadily increasing, with an annual advertising revenue of about 17.4 billion USD in 2020, a projection to a total of 40 billion in 2023 (Statista, 2023), and with the most successful influencers establishing multi-million-dollar careers (e.g., Jin & Ryu, 2020)

Influencers and their marketing have persuasive power, more potent than any other type of brand marketing (Freberg et al., 2011; Javed et al., 2021). Central to such effects seems the relationship between influencer and follower and the perceived credibility, which is based on the perception of authenticity, information and entertainment quality, attractiveness, and the follower's positive response (Abidin & Thompson, 2012; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Saima & Khan, 2020).

Followers use social media platforms for leisure and entertainment, but also strategically to gather information for deciding on brands and purchases of products (Casaló et al., 2020). As such, influencers are inquired for advice and information on products but also lifestyle, habits, and values (Casaló et al., 2020; Thakur et al., 2016; Walter & Brüggemann, 2018). Influencer opinion is classified as more trustworthy than information from media advertisements and the news and is often also preferred over advice from family and friends (Degen & Simpson, 2022).

Parasociallity on Instagram

The attachment between influencer and follower is parasocial, which is one-sided and asynchronous. For influencers, the number of followers is essential, securing their existential needs and validating the self. The followers identify with and orient toward the influencer, gather information and advice, and build opinions through the information given (Abidin, 2016).

Such relationships come with an illusion of intimacy, serving the desire for belonging, identification, and striving to be alike to the influencer on the follower's side (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). On the influencers' side, the relationship grounds pragmatically their business success and existential security, furthermore it serves their selves, functioning as external validation (Abidin & Ots, 2016; De Veirman et al., 2017).

The mechanisms, when building and maintaining such relationships as an influencer, include endearment and personal language, e.g., calling followers family, confidants, and best friends (Degen & Simpson, 2022) and supposedly authenticity through behind-the-scenes insights and commonality – e.g., values, lifestyle, interests – with the followers (Abidin & Thompson, 2012; Casaló et al., 2020; Sokolova & Perez, 2021). Content is, consequently, created within a tension between a documented (real and personal) life and management of the relationship, including optimization and orchestration (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021). As such, influencers strategically blend together social interaction, the documentation of their supposedly authentic life, and marketing (Blight et al., 2017; Boerman et al., 2017; Evans et al., 2017; Hoofnagle & Meleshinsky, 2016), aiming to maintain deep and sustainable relationships (Belanche et al., 2021; Tafesse & Wood, 2021; De Veirman et al., 2017; Jin & Ryu, 2020). If well-established, the influencer-follower relationships endure even failures, e.g., when advertising for a later discredited product (e.g., the teeth whitening scandal) with followers siding with the influencers and vice versa (Alaraudanjoki, 2019; Ots & Hartmann, 2015).

The Reality-Fiction-Gap

The communication on Instagram is asynchronous, enabling modification of the content. This exaggerates the described tensions between the authentic and orchestrated – there is a gap, an entire sphere of possibilities, including tools, e.g., in the form of apps, to modify and optimize reality. The

reality-fiction-gap model (Figure 1) can be used to learn more about the conditions and (psychological) mechanisms behind parasocial relations and communicative dynamics. The model is based on the work of Schreier et al. (2001) in the context of media analyses and is further developed and applied to the specific case of Instagram by Degen and Simpson (2022). It integratively depicts the communicative acts, stances, interests, and intentions, including the market and the platform.

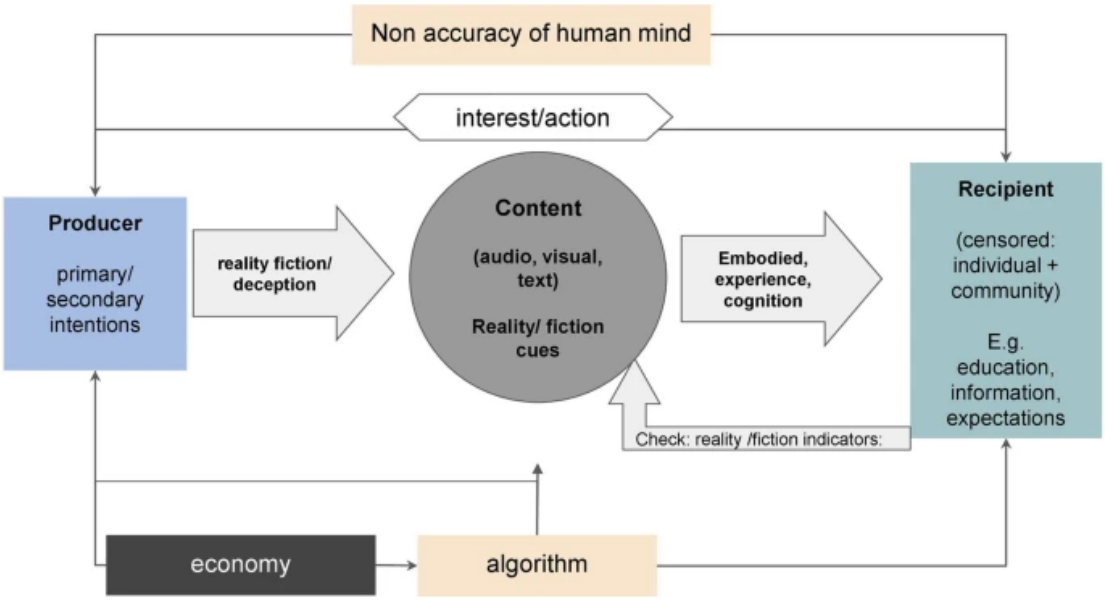

Figure 1: The Reality-Fiction-Gap Model

Let's walk through the model step by step alongside a concrete example. The influencer (producer) posts an ad, which could be for make-up. The primary intention may be set up as giving a friend (recipient) advice, while the secondary intention might be selling the product to make a living. The first level of reality-fiction deception can be the orchestration of personal advice targeted towards the follower as a free, friendly, or even confidential and exclusive recommendation, placed as a product the influencer usually uses privately. The second level of deception is embedded in the general profiling of the influencer, making an effort to convince the audience of their personal ethics in terms of advertisement, e.g., claiming to work together only with brands whose products they love (deception of intimate feelings in an economic context) and have been testing over a long period. Beyond these two examples, many more levels of interest and blurring of reality-fiction cues can be stressed and laid open.

The advertisement (content) is distributed to the follower and beyond, depending on the size and reach of the account, monetary investment in and strategy of the campaign, politics within the platform, and larger societal context. These contexts exercise influence through the algorithm, which controls the distribution of content bundling the stakeholders interests. While the algorithm remains non-transparent, so-called reflexive mediatization is in place (Grenz et al., 2014) being a reciprocal process of observation, (re-)action, and resulting change. This means, influencers and followers – sometimes collaboratively and explicitly, sometimes subtly, sometimes intuitively, and sometimes against each other – practice ways of working with or around the algorithm, trying to outsmart the platform, which again reacts by modifying the logic and digital architecture (Cotter, 2019). As such, the platform, influencers, and followers are in a relationship with reciprocal impact in ever-changing conditions.

The distributed content is perceived both emotionally and cognitively as an embodied experience by the followers. Beyond the actual information it contains cues directed to emotional states and unconscious mechanisms, like a familiar voice (auditive center of the brain) and body language (e.g., facial expression being read as appreciating), as well as platform-specific familiarities and traditions, such as recurring music and performances, enriching the informative content with emotional experiences (e.g. recognition factor). The experience is perceived cognitively based on information such as pricing and popularity. The follower's reaction is communicated back to the producer, the algorithm, and the economic player behind it and is measured in terms of how long and often one watches the ad and how much interaction takes place in the form of liking, commenting, sharing, clicking on internal or external links, and sales. This is a crucial point, in the sense that there is power in the followers, as brands have explicit interests to make any touchpoint with customers a positive experience (Orhan & Macilvaine, 2020), including influencer marketing.

The recipient (follower) is somewhat informed and educated, e.g., knows that social media contains fiction cues and is also explicitly informed about it. That is, as by law, advertisements in many countries have to be explicitly disclosed, a measure installed to protect consumers and to make distinctive what is fiction (Boerman et al., 2018; Federal Trade Commission, 2017; Naderer et al., 2021).

The above sketched, rather clear, communicational act – an influencer sending out a cue, containing some reality and some fiction, including some layers of interest, an algorithm as a distributor with economic interests in the background, conditioned by external and internal politics, and a recipient with a body and some knowledge, reacting, and by that communicating back to the producer – is embedded in a parasocial relationship and severely impacted by the inaccuracy of the human mind, including cognitive bias (Kruglanski, 1989). As such, both influencer and follower (being subjects) bring amongst other needs, hopes, longing, and also experiences, beliefs, and rationalization into the picture, blending the rationale of the communication with personal disposition, emotion, situativity, and interests. As such, the meaning of subjectivity, emotional states, and attachment seem a crucial aspect when understanding parasocial relationships, their meaning, and mechanisms behind it.

Research on the Effects of Advertisement Disclosure

For some time now, studies have been targeting the questions of the effects of advertisement disclosure (when marketing campaigns or product placement is explicitly disclosed e.g. by marking it as "paid ad") and expected negative effects on credibility as the advertisement being an explicit sign of inauthenticity and for content explicitly being biased by economic interests. Against that hypothesis, research shows that the disclosure either has no effect on the parasocial relationship (Boerman, 2020) or that it at least has no negative effect on credibility under certain conditions, e.g., when the advertised content is congruent with the non-advertised content, in terms of interests, values, and style (Belanche et al., 2021; Lee & Kim, 2020). Hwang and Jeong (2016) show in the case of blogs that advertisement disclosure can be labeled as honest opinion, despite the explicit sponsoring, which again leads to a positive evaluation of the content and trustworthiness. Some research even demonstrates that advertisement disclosure leads to higher trustworthiness, which again increases purchase intentions (Evans et al., 2017; Naderer et al., 2021).

These somewhat surprising findings are largely based on quantitative surveys, frequently concluding on implications for effective marketing, and leaving a research gap in qualitative approaches that aim to understand parasocial dynamics and social media from a premise of meaning and the subjects' stance (Janssen et al., 2022).

This leads to the following research questions: How do followers on Instagram interpret explicit fiction cues from influencers? What does this reveal about the meaning of parasocial attachment?

THE STUDY AND ITS METHODS

To understand the meaning of fiction cues – alongside the example of advertisement – in influencer content from the followers' perspective, interviews were conducted with 22 participants, collected in the second half of 2022. For participation, it was obligatory to use Instagram on a regular basis, defined as being online every day and for more than once each day over the last year, and following at least two meso-level (Boerman, 2020) influencers with more than 10,000 followers. Participants were recruited through social media (teach_love.de) and the university by a snowball system. The sample contains 18 female and four male subjects, between 20 and 32 (M= 28) years old from Northern Germany and Denmark. These countries count as WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) countries with the majority of subjects having access to mobile devices, infrastructure, and economic power for lifestyle purchases, just as a certain socialization within neoliberal-capitalist conditions of life (Degen et al., 2022). These conditions include amongst other, individualization, acceleration, marketization and certain ideas of identity, and values (Rosa, 2015; Rose, 2007). Eight participants are students with two of them studying for a bachelor degree and six for a masters degree. The other 14 participants have university degrees (bachelor or master) and work in different sectors (teaching, banking sector, management, clothing, and food industry).

The interviews were conducted following the explorative approach of Gläser and Laudel (2010). Obviously, the interview is carefully prepared, however, when conducted it shall be held as a naturally flowing conversation, where questions are situatively operationalized (and thus it can be called unstructured) and information and aspects provided by the interviewee openly followed up to gain inductive knowledge and new insights beyond theoretical presumptions. The aim is to establish a conversation with as few hierarchies as possible, in a positive atmosphere, and in a setting of two equals, communicating about an object of interest with non-suggestive questions and without normative or moral conclusions.

In the interview's beginning, explorative questions are raised around the social-media usage habits in terms of quantity and quality. This section inquires specifically how often and in which situations one checks in on Instagram and what exactly is done there, e.g., watched stories, interacted with others, and who participated. This is followed by the user's experience and meaning of the usage and consumed content, including questions about feelings, reasoning, and behavior related to the content consumed and the influencer's activities. This also includes inquiries on the accounts they follow and the reason for doing so. In the further course of the interview, more concrete questions are posed, targeting fiction and reality cues, and the perception and evaluation of such. As a concrete example, the interviewer uses the case of advertisement. This targets the identification of advertisement and acceptance, just as the effects on the participants, e.g., clicking links, consequences, and evaluations of their own decision-making and so forth. However, the insights proposed by the interviewees is continuously deepened by the interviewer aiming to understand the participants' reasoning and using psychological techniques, e.g., asking for examples, and in-depth meaning and reflexive interpretations of such. The interviews vary in length between 40 and 83 minutes.

The data analysis follows Mayring's (2000, 2015) content analysis, with an emphasis on inductive coding. In contrast to deductive coding, this means that the analysis starts with the data, carving out insights, instead of searching for theory-based hypotheses in the data. Still, one deductive hypothesis remained as a lens throughout the analysis, anticipating that the data might contain forms of the inaccuracy of the mind and bias when interpreting fiction cues, while the forms of such inaccuracies remained open to be reconstructed inductively led by the data.

The process of the analysis was conducted by a group of three researchers and contains several steps, depicted in Figure 2. Prior to the analysis, the interviews were transcribed.

As the first analytical step, the interviews were split into three and read by three researchers independently, marking and naming all occurring topics. In the second step, the occurring topics were discussed and integrated, and afterwards the related interview sections were paraphrased. Thirdly, alongside the interview sections and paraphrasing, the topics were sorted and organized, reducing redundancies and overlaps. Fourth, the occurring main and subordinated categories were depicted. The developing system of categories was then condensed to more abstract levels (five) and the evolving categories were defined, aiming for descriptions that were unequivocal and distinct.

The process between steps 1-5 is circular, which means one can go back and forth between topics, abstract descriptions, and sorting of subcategories and interrelations between categories until the resulting case of analysis is plausible and intersubjectively comprehensible. This means that the categories evolving in the first interviews are expanded and integrated by the following interviews. Also, categories can be rearranged throughout the analysis. Finally, the entire data set is coded alongside the categories.

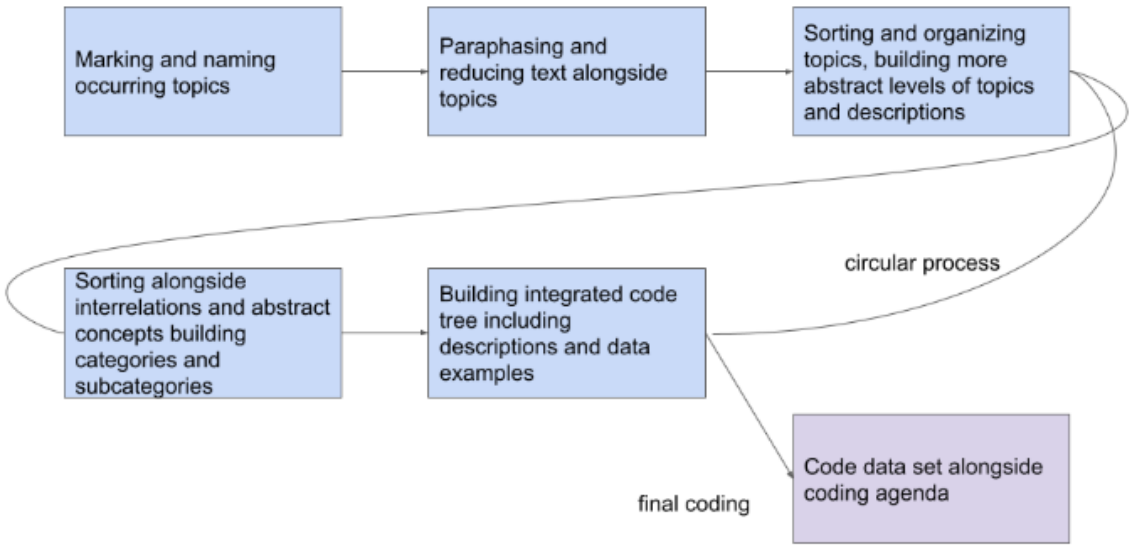

Figure 2: Content analysis following Mayring

FINDINGS: RATIONALIZING FICTION CUES AND PARASOCIAL ATTACHMENT

The findings contain two main categories, each with three subcategories (Figure 3), which are labeled in regard to the interpretation of fiction cues, mechanisms and interpretations, and the role of the relationship. Along the categories, there is an *increase* in identification, positive affect, and parasocial attachment, and a *decrease* of matter-of-fact relevance and sense of the fiction. This seems to correlate with an increase in vulnerability and negative effects on well-being, such as social- and compulsive behavior. However, all interpretations individualize and liberalize the effects of being influenced, with the follower bearing full responsibility. The visualized degrees are not to be quantified as they are grounded on qualitative descriptions. Ambivalences within the cases can occur, however, only within the neighboring subcategories. This means that subjects may fluctuate between interpretations a little, as such, one interviewee can refer to fiction cues as positive attributes and charming flaws throughout the interview. The categories depicted describe tendencies, patterns, effects, and mechanisms on a spectrum.

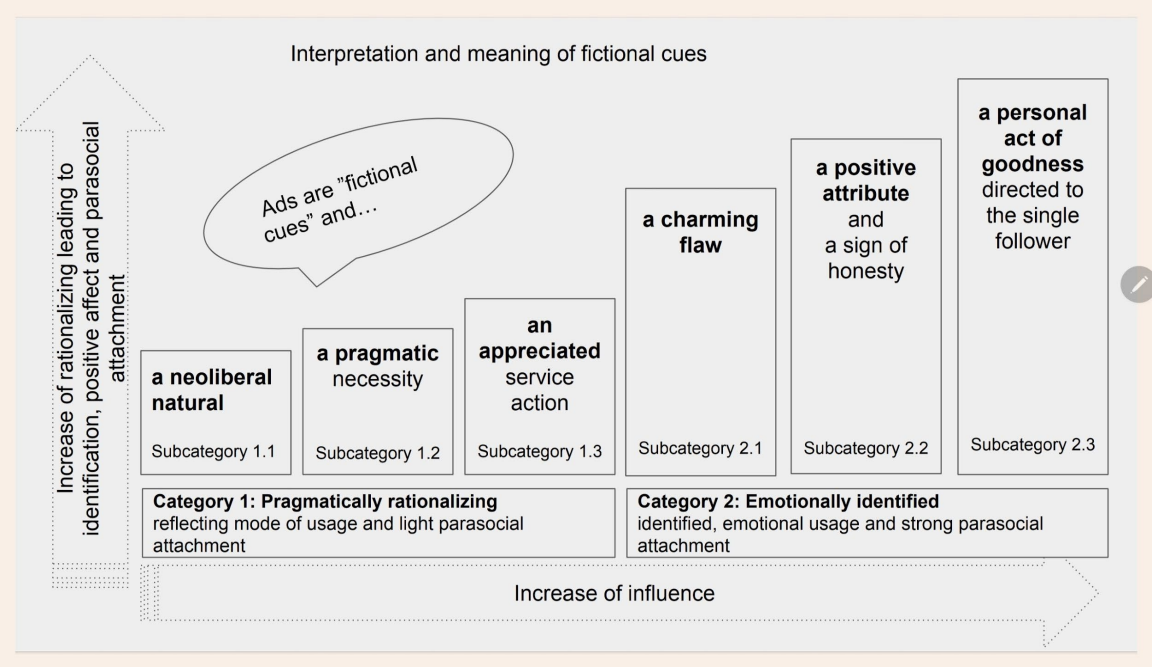

Figure 3: Rationalizing fiction cues and parasocial attachment

The first category of *"pragmatic rationalizing"* includes three subcategories, describing levels of conscious negotiation, a somewhat rational and reflected interpretation of the fiction, where the advertisement is pragmatically accepted and selectively used for the follower's needs and wants. The parasocial relationship remains located in the digital and one-sided (it has a different quality for the follower), however, it is still an enduring attachment including empathy and positive bias. The overall relation may be summed up as, appreciated, related, and capable of influence, yet reflected and with a remaining agency on the follower's side.

The second category is defined as being "*emotionally identified*" and shows emotional wording, compulsive behavior, subordination, pronounced identification with influencers and products, idolizing, and a strong parasocial attachment, having severe meaning for and effects on the follower's life (e.g. overruling negative effects and competing with face-to-face relationships). The overall relation may be summed up as identified and compulsive with addicted-like leanings when showing compulsive behavior or regret, and a parasocial attachment overwriting any fiction cues and (negative) effects.

Below, the categories are depicted alongside their subcategories and data examples, containing, firstly, the interpretation of the fiction cue (advertisement and also filters altering the visual, for example, improving the skin, which was a fiction cue brought up by the interviewees) and, secondly, the quality of the parasocial attachment and its meaning.

Category 1

The mode of being *pragmatically rationalizing*, contains three subcategories called *neoliberal natural* (with influencer behavior being only reasonable within neoliberal capitalism conditioning life), *pragmatic necessity*, and *appreciated service*.

> *What to say. It is what it is, everyone uses it, and I do, too. Does it make us sick and crazy? Maybe. Will it ever change? I don't think so. I mean, we rationally know, when they* [influencers] *advertise products and I see, when they use filters, probably, they don't hide it, anyway. I don't appreciate it, but I don't hate it, either, it's just capitalism and one of its facets. Actually, I hate the filters a bit more, than the advertisement, as this serves no meaning. The advertisement at least is informative and no one forces you to buy anything. The filters only make me feel ugly. But what is all the fuss about in the end?* (female, 31)

> *I am totally aware, it's all fake, the content and everything, but so are media content, billboards, and politicians.* (male, 28)

In subcategory 1.1. ads are seen as "*a neoliberal natural*" with the fiction being a naturalized part of social media and the larger context of the economy and capitalist logic. This modus includes a giving-up understanding of reality-fiction deceptions. As such, users observe and recognize advertisements, using them to decide on products and to get inspiration for lifestyle and brands. However, there occurs a somewhat conscious usage, a reflection of whether one can and might be fooled, and of probable (dis-) advantaging side effects. The parasocial attachment with the influencer is reflected, with the follower ready to unfollow. However, the parasocial relationship is still enduring and builds on empathy and appreciation for the contribution of the influencer.

> *The advertisement is acceptable when it is not too extensive. If it is too much, I might unfollow, but this has not happened yet. We must understand, when we* [followers] *want free content, we have to accept advertisement, how else can influencers survive? I don't know if I want to say, they don't as such deserve interaction, but whatever, they also do not deserve to create everything for nothing in return. ... We could see something positive in it, too. I use this to orient in the market and on products at times. I also must say, I consume significantly more when being online* [laughs]*, but when I am weaning, it stops. So that is not too positive. I don't know, but it's not unethical or something, either.* (female, 28)

> *Filters to me mean nothing. I don't really notice them, I understand that influencers use them, they can not always invest the time to put on make-up.* (male, 26)

> *I can feel that I think about the influencers, one of my favorite ones, deleted her account, and that actually hit me quite hard, this made me think about everything, too.* [laughs] *I got over it quickly though, I mean, I can not remember who it was now, so I guess, all is good."* (male, 32)

In subcategory 1.2 ads are depicted as "*a pragmatic necessity*" and the fiction is understood as being crucial for the influencers and beneficial for the followers. The parasocial relationship is described with an increase in meaning, respect, acknowledgment, and moreover emotional attachment. The relationship, however, is still distinguished from face-to-face relationships as being of less importance. The subjects reflect on being influenced; however, they seem to somewhat consciously agree with it and inspiration is applied on the own terms of their own life. Agency occurs as an idea, in the form of "I could wean" or "I could unfollow" (see below). Overall, it seems like a serious game, but still a game.

> *I chose wisely who I follow, and then I am quite loyal for years. Firstly, I enjoy the content and overall vibe a lot. I use it in my leisure time to relax after work or sports. It often feels like a safe place or my home. It calms me, when I have a conflict with my partner or at my job. Secondly, I want to be influenced. I chose who I follow, as I said, and then I appreciate them finding the good stuff. I like my influencer's style and I often buy their products and create my own looks with them, interiors, clothing and cosmetics. ... I live in the countryside and for me, it would be difficult to keep up with trends, find the right designers, and so forth. I cannot effort being in New York City, shopping, selecting, and keeping up with designers* [laughs]. *I am happy to have my influencers. ... in the same manner, I enjoy filters, as I love the aesthetics. The good ones I download myself, this Tezza app for optimizing pictures for example, and I am happy about it, I have the cutest shoots of my reunion, my baby girl, and other occasions.* (female, 32)

> *I buy their product or ask questions. I sometimes tag them in my posts, or send pictures and review their account and products. This is how it works, but I would not expect them to answer.* (female, 27)

In subcategory 1.3 ads are perceived as "*an appreciated service*", whereby the extent of recognition of the influencers increases. At the same time, there occur strategic ways of reflecting the usage. As such, influencers are consciously selected for what they stand for and, if suitable, applied to the follower's own life in strategic ways, adding value. However, while this category seems aware of the fiction, the followers start not only to include products in their life, but also invest in contact, communicating with, and owing influencers for their service. Furthermore, increasing identification displays with the influencers being seen as part of the followers' life and serving with comfort.

Category 2

The mode of being *emotionally identified* with the subcategories a *charming flaw*, a *positive attribute*, and a *personal act of goodness*.

While the first category and its subcategories show how followers consciously negotiate the fiction, accepting, using, and appreciating it. In category 2, fiction cues are rationalized, their meaning distorted to the opposite, and then function as reassurance of the parasocial attachment. Here, the meaning changes, where the explicit exposure of the fiction exaggerates attachment and trustworthiness. The narratives contain emotional wording, describing situations of feeling overpowered by emotion and acting irrationally (in the participant's own point of view), revealing a high degree of identification and effect on the life of the followers, including fundamental needs. This shows also in defensive behavior against the interviewer and in othering towards other outsiders (from their point of view). The followers here use names (#thebirdspapaya), brands (#womensbest #charlottetilbury), and concepts (#filterfreefriday), indicating an identified orientation with specific contexts, assuming them to be common knowledge.

> [giggles] *weeeee, I just don't think it really matters, they are sooooo beautiful. I see the unfiltered pictures, and they are beautiful on filter-free Fridays, just as on any day with a filter. I think I can view through it, I mean, I know them in any version, you know what I mean. Maybe it means something to someone following for not as long as I have been following. I even see them age. It makes them relatable, I don't know. I am actually relieved that they have shortcomings, too. Like having to use a filter once in a while. Maybe, because they are tired. Who am I to judge, I would have to use a filter every day and not a light one.* (female, 22)

> *I don't really recognize the ads, they don't matter to me. I see them use the products on other occasions, too. Like the women's sportswear – ocean apart and the women's best lines. I see them training in their sports bra, even when not advertising. It proves it's not fake, as if they would do this just for one paid ad, EVERYDAY* [loud, emphasis added]. *I also ask questions about some products, and they always answer and explain, in great detail. This means it's important to them, both the brand and us as followers. So I trust them. ... How could we blame them, I wish I could make a living from just living my life, anyway. ... And try this perspective, at least they test the products, that is more than you get on the free market.* (female, 30)

> *Actually, when I buy a product, and then I think of the influencer who wore it first, I sometimes take a pic and send, and now you ask, I feel somehow connected and strong, as baring a part of her with me and the other girls* [other followers]." (female, 20)

In subcategory 2.1 ads are interpreted as a "*charming flaw,*" making the influencer relatable and human in the first place. The usage of the fiction (also referring to filters as fiction cues) is interpreted as not being of great meaning and rationalized and reinterpreted as something positive, just as the influencer is generally constituted as superior with the follower adoring them. Ads are understood as representing truthful parts of the influencer's life, which they, almost incidentally, happen to use to make a living. Here, admiration, identification, and longing occur as part of the parasocial attachment with the follower arguing the case of the influencer, identifying with them, and differentiating themselves from other followers as being special (e.g., as following for a long(er) timespan). However, the relationship is still understood as being between the influencer and many followers.

> *If an ad is tagged, or marked, what you call it, for me, it means that the person is honest. The bad ones* [influencers]*, do not do it. ... However, I must admit, I sometimes buy products, even if I lack the money. I had a loan once, these short terms one, to buy the recommended Charlotte Tilbury make-up line – I bought it all. It did not really suit me, actually.* [laughs] *Maybe the look was out of my league when I think about it. Once I even leased the same car, but had little fun with it. I don't live in LA and what to use a convertible for.* [laughs] *But okay, leasing the wrong car, that is something happens to many throughout the course of life. My mistakes are not the influencers' fault. They always tag if it's sponsored. I love my influencers being honest. .... My mother is sometimes angry, though."* [Interviewer: Why, when, do you want to tell me more about it?] *"Yes, Christmas, I was excited about her gift, took pictures, and sent them to the Papaya*

> *[#thebirdspapaya], she never answered, and I checked all night if she had seen my message. My mother got furious at me, while I was really disappointed and sad about being ignored by the papaya.* (female, 28)

> *I spent five years in my teens, mimicking make-up styles from content creators. I learned a lot. I work with that skill set now. Formerly we would have had to do vocational training, all that. They do so much for us now, all the expertise is accessible for everyone and free. The fact that I was all under a spell, did not go out for years, and neglected friends, is maybe not so funny. But at least I had the community to rely on, how isolated would I have been without them? Today I am better, but I still check in on them every night, and I fall asleep to their voice in their lives, and this has been for eight years now.* [laughs]" (male, 26)

In subcategory 2.2. the disclosure of the fiction is understood as a "*positive attribute*", a symbol of trustworthiness, being part of a strong and individual attachment with the influencer, which again is related to products. Here the parasocial attachment can compensate for disappointment and lost investment. Failures are individualized and attributed to the self while the self is degraded occasionally, while achievements are interpreted as being connected to the influencer and their content. Identification, admiration, positive affect, and thankfulness are high, and, at the same time, compulsive decision-making and loss of control are described. The parasocial relationship here also reaches into face-to-face relationships and career decisions. On the positive side, followers stress how they have overcome times of crisis using accounts and communities, e.g., when feeling marginalized, isolated, or anxious, serving as a tool for coping and having severe meaning for the followers.

> *Whatever, ads, filters, the fiction, I don't understand the witch-hunt. This is not what it is about. We must talk much more about, what they do for us. In my case, I was so lonely when moved, I had nobody. And the community helped me a lot. They adjusted all my wrong views, seeded by a sick society, by advertisements and the media about bodies and a person's value.* [Interviewer: may I ask who you are referring to? Is this one or more influencers?]. *Yes, it's four influencers, it's a group. They know each other and interact, too. They have a shared follower base, we also comment a lot and have conversations. We give each other so much and if we have to buy a thing here and there to support them and to make it all possible, what is the problem? Maybe you think it's pathetic, but we think the same of you. I feel like, they at least understand me and we understand each other. ... We all hate dating, we can have conversations about men and how they treat women. In real life, I have never had a similarly open conversation. No one tells you how shit dating is. Sure, I buy her books and stuff, she is a self-publisher, really cool. We must stand up for them, this is emancipation.* [Interviewer: and what does standing up mean exactly?]. *Liking, commenting, buying, sharing, this stuff"* (female, 32)

> *I sometimes reflected, on how scary it would be, when Instagram just disappeared. I mean, I grab the phone in the morning, and I scroll when I go to sleep. I often bridge awkward moments and it comforts me. Without this, my style would go south, and I don't know, it really matters to me. I once wanted to go cold turkey, but that did not last longer than six hours.* [laughs] *My boyfriend is sometimes annoyed, but I cannot help it. It's not rational, it's something else.* (female, 20)

In subcategory 2.3 the influencer's use of the fiction in ads and general work are understood as an "*act of goodness*", as a sacrifice for the better and for society and, moreover, directed towards the individual follower. This leads to an attachment characterized by thankfulness, including feelings of dependency, fear to lose the relationship, anticipated helplessness, and owing the influencer. The behavior here is following a set of principles and is strategic, serving the influencers' advantages. The interviewer's questions are at times met with defense, while the identification with the influencer and other followers and community are high. Distinctions and othering towards external subjects show the importance of the processes of social identification. Behavior at times seems addiction-like and led by compulsion.

DISCUSSION

While there are different specifications of the effect on subjects, the principles behind them are similar. The discussion emphasizes, firstly, the general mechanisms, which are discussed in conjunction

with theory of cognitive bias, social relations, and the social self, the essence of the peculiarity linked to vulnerabilities. Finally the findings and their meaning for the broader context of society are presented.

Theoretical Implications

Followers interpret fiction (as in advertisements) generally as of little significance and rationalize fiction cues (as advertisement disclosure). With the advertisement set up relatively congruent with the looks and content of the accounts, it is accepted as part of the conditions on social media and effective, this also counts for the case of lowest identification and signs for attachment.

Congruent to the state of research, the disclosure of the fiction had no negative impact on parasocial attachment. Instead, making the fiction cue explicit is interpreted as an act of honesty and transparency, being counted as a positive attribute and ethical act on the influencer's side, and consequently strengthens the parasocial bond.

Followers show different degrees of identification and related agency, from a somewhat rational and selective gathering of information to highly identified and emotional, addictive-like behavior. This seems to be related to vulnerabilities, with experiences of social exclusion exaggerating the efficiency of influences. Examples described in the data include experiences of marginalization because of being overweight, homosexual, female, male but not a sportsman, divorced, or lonely.

Independent of the strength of identification and vulnerabilities, long-known processes of the social self (Gergen, 2011; Morse & Gergen, 1970; Mummendey & Wenzel, 1999) are adopted for the parasocial relationship. These include positioning through belonging, group identification, and othering (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Robinson & Tajfel, 1997). As such, followers seem to integrate belonging to influencers and their communities in their sense of self; And more, the parasocial relationship at times interferes with relationships and situations in life, e.g., financially in terms of purchases and socially when conflicting with face-to-face relationships and social situations. Followers make space for and on occasion prioritize their parasocial relationship, because it is meaningful to them.

The integration of parasocial relationships in the social self involves beneficial positioning in favor for their own group and the self within the group (Morse & Gergen, 1970; Robinson & Tajfel, 1997). This shows in effects such as loyalty, collective strategies, will to invest and sacrifice (e.g., comfort in real life (non-digital) situations in favor to support the online community), and distinction of the group towards others and again distinction of the self within the group. This is shown when their own group is constituted as being morally superior and the individual follower as distinctively good in comparison to the group, who should be recognized. Such recognition is appreciated in the form of a direct message or reposting. In turn, the parasocial relationship serves with validation, predictability, and immediate comfort, all being social needs and parts of self-worth and self-esteem. Parasocial relationships are non-confrontational (usually there is no feedback, but mass validation and mass acknowledgment) but provide continuous and predictable content (e.g., positive vibes only). As such, they constitute a place of immediate, predictable, and available comfort and are then favored above the ambivalences of relationships in face-to-face. With such crucial social functions for belonging and identity, a reflecting perspective on the parasocial relationship and its consequences overshadowed by its beneficial functions, attachment, and comfort.

On the individual level, parasocial relationships are protected through bias and the inaccuracy of the human mind (Kruglanski, 1989; Kruglanski & Ajzen, 1983). This includes long-known cognitive processes, such as confirmation biases, halo effects, and projections. As such, fiction cues or ambivalent content and behavior (such as advertisement as capitalization of the parasocial relationship) are reinterpreted and attenuated in favor of the influencer. Concretely, this shows in terms of their ethics, beauty, loyalty, or intentions. The constructed positive ascriptions then overshadow, reject, or twist conflict and contradiction, including fiction cues. This shows, for instance, when followers rationalize

economic intentions or accept the inequality of the parasocial relationship and its meaning (the follower being important to the influencer only by the number of followers).

Under the broader perspective of societal meanings, especially the mode of *pragmatic rationalizing* regards ethics and *meaning in neoliberal conditions of life,* including a predominant capitalist order and the resulting alienation and perceived lack of meaning (Rosa, 2015; Rose, 2007). Subjects here show how they have lost faith in both the economy and society when naturalizing reality-fiction-deception as a general condition in life. The sphere of parasociallity is then constituted as being more honest than politics and education, which are perceived as unreliable, and more favorable than face-to-face relationships, which are possibly hurtful. Effects of neoliberal individualization become prevalent, pushing subjects into alternative relational conditions when perceiving the social world as ruthless.

The modes of *emotional identification* emphasize a perspective on *health and ethics*, with addicted-like behavior, including negative consequences on life. These include economic and social consequences, from well-being and relationships to negative effects on lifestyle choices and the body (Hudders & Lou, 2023). Here, vulnerable subjects relocate fundamental needs into parasocial relationships. As such, they seek comfort and security for coping with life. This possibly leads to emotional dependency and an increase in loneliness, which they again bear the full responsibility for in contemporary individualization.

While some of the presented effects of parasocial attachment can be interpreted as concerning, some subjects seem mostly unthreatened, seemingly using the potentials of the parasocial in beneficial ways. This applies, for instance, when using influencer content to find reasonable products one probably prefers. While attachment and rationalizations are still in place as mechanisms in those cases, they seem to interfere less with health, well-being, and relationships beyond the digital, without significant negative effects or distress. Such insights can be used to understand more about how to minimize possible negative effects of parasocial relationships.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

On the political level, both science and politics might recognize that the so-far installed policies of disclosing the fiction probably has reverse effects. A fact that might lead to a somewhat ironic implication is to inhibit the disclosure of the fiction for ethical reasons as being harmful to the consumers. Or, on a serious note, to become more progressive on how to protect subjects, especially vulnerable groups, who seem to be pushed into the parasocial for coping in a societal context that cannot do the job.

On the societal level, in regard to the social self and contemporary relationships, one could reflect on what kind of social context we are producing, where the parasocial relationship is favored before face-to-face relationships, and what are the consequences for how society is organized. Overall, these explorative insights point out possible instrumentalization of the subject's social selves, with mechanisms in place that overwrite cognition by needs for belonging, and attachment, finally leaving subjects in dissonance.

On the individual level, this study points to the relevance of understanding parasocial attachment and its meaning for subjects in terms of psychological, developmental, and health perspectives. It seems relevant to have professionals working with children and young people to understand the meaning and mechanisms of parasocial attachment, be educated, and be competent to secure media competence, and detect possible challenges and needs. This also applies to the therapeutical practice, where practitioners are concerned with subjects and their well-being.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Indeed, some perspectives of the participating subjects can evoke consternation. However, this study takes a specific excerpt of a likely larger and complex phenomenon. Firstly, the study is conducted

with middle-class adults, mostly females, of WERID countries only, and still within this group, it is not a representative sample. Furthermore, the study focused on fiction cues and rationalization, which means that a different approach, e.g., on the potential of parasocial attachment, would bring different perspectives.

Building on the current explorative insight, future research might seek to understand more about the mechanisms and reliability, focusing on (a) quantifiable and vulnerabilities like attachment style, dispositions, demographics, (b) usage patterns and possible factors of prevention, e.g., in the form of education, lifestyle, and social background, (c) cognitive and emotional mechanisms in place when rationalizing the fiction, (d) the impact on face-to-face relationships and well-being, and (e) conditions for the positive potential of parasocial attachment such as media competence and prevention.

CONCLUSION

Based on a qualitative study, this paper examines how parasocial relationships build on attachment and provide significance for followers beyond the concrete context of social media. The findings reveal how parasocial relationships are built on mechanisms related to the social self, including needs for security, validation, and belonging and, as such, how they bring significance to the followers' lives. With this significant meaning, fiction cues (e.g., revealing the relationship being primarily object to secondary intentions like selling products) are overwritten by attachment and positive affect. It is shown how the inaccuracy of the human mind (cognitive bias) rationalizes the fiction which can explain the effectiveness of social media advertisement and the ineffectiveness of its disclosure. This is possible as parasociallity uses the same mechanisms as, and is competitive to, face-to-face settings and their functioning for the social self. While overwriting the rationale with emotional affect might be plausible in some contexts (e.g., face-to-face social interaction and relationships), such functioning bears a different meaning in social media contexts with the relationships established there, being means to economic ends. With such insights, future research is directed to focus on the subjects, their social self, and well-being, in addition to the societal goals and politics relating to organizing human needs ethically.

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