PARASOCIAL INTERACTION DOES NOT FUNCTION AS A RELATIONSHIP MEDIATOR BETWEEN THE INFLUENCER'S ONLINE CONTENT AND THE ADOLESCENT'S PROSOCIAL MORAL REASONING AND BEHAVIOUR

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ABSTRACT:
Parasocial interaction (PSI) is a term describing an audience's false belief of a social experience with a media persona. Among adolescents, influencers are the most respected media personas. Through social networking sites (SNS), they act as models representing specific value preferences and behaviours. The aim of the study was to reveal the relationship between the content published by the most preferred influencers among adolescents (N = 81; 56% female; M_{age} = 14.12) and their prosocial behaviour and prosocial moral reasoning, with the adolescent's PSI to an individual influencer being considered as a mediator. The content of the influencers' contributions on *YouTube* and *Instagram* was analysed. The coding record took the form of the frequency of occurrence of individual phenomena, identifying two higher order categories (prosocial and anti-prosocial content). Parasocial interaction was measured by two PSI Scales,[1] adapted for the environment of the SNS. Prosocial behaviour was measured by the PROS-8 scale,[2] and prosocial moral reasoning by the PROM instrument.[3] Results showed that the influencers significantly differed in terms of the prosocial content, with the differences linked to the influencer's gender and the type of SNS. Examining adolescents, the more hours they spend on SNS per day, the stronger their parasocial interaction with the influencer (r=.281, p<.05) and the less prosocial content they prefer (r=-.294, p<.05). The more they prefer influencers with prosocial content, the more they show developmentally higher types of prosocial moral reasoning (r=.310, p<.05). However, the mediation analysis through hierarchical regression analysis showed that PSI as mediator did not cause a significant change in the model of the relationship between the influencers' content and the adolescents' behaviour and reasoning. The possible interpretations and suggestions for further research are discussed. Although there are similarities between parasocial relations and ordinary social relations, the research also revealed some important distinctions. Some of them are crucial only in the case of character development. Findings suggest that some motivational factors of prosocial behaviour are more strongly linked to PSI than others. Such discernment can be effectively used in the practice of character education.

1   See: RUBIN, R. B., PERSE, E. M., POWELL, R. A.: Loneliness, Parasocial Interaction, and Local Television News Viewing. In *Human Communication Research*, 1985, Vol. 12, No. 2, p. 155-180; SOKOLOVA, K., KEFI, H.: Instagram and YouTube Bloggers Promote It, Why Should I Buy? How Credibility and Parasocial Interaction Influence Purchase Intentions. In *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 2019, Vol. 53, p. 101742.
2   See: BRESTOVANSKÝ, M.: *Prosociálne morálne uvažovanie*. Trnava : Trnava University, 2020.
3   See, for example: CARLO, G., EISENBERG, N., KNIGHT, G. P.: An Objective Measure of Adolescents' Prosocial Moral Reasoning. In *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 1992, Vol. 2, No. 4, p. 331-349.

1 Introduction: On Parasocial Interaction in the Era of Digital Media

The phenomenon of influencers self-representing through social networking sites (SNS) reopens many questions that have long been discussed and researched in the media context. The central issue of the influence of the media on the recipient was reflected mainly in a negative form – a huge body of evidence that violent media decrease helping and increase aggression has been collected.[4]

On the contrary, the positive form of the question is investigated significantly less.[5] In addition, as far as we know, no study has been published examining how the relationship between prosocial content is produced by a well-known media person and prosocial moral reasoning and prosocial behaviour of the recipient mediated by parasocial interaction.

"Parasocial interaction" (PSI) is a term describing an audience's false belief of a social experience with a media persona. An audience usually knows the person well, but the media persona does not have such knowledge about each member of an audience. Therefore, PSI is referred to as a lasting, one-way and non-reciprocal connection between an audience and a media figure.[6] The authors consider this illusion of a face-to-face relationship as one of the main characteristics of the so-called new media (at that time they referred to radio, television and film). According to them, the media persona creates a one-way and non-dialectical interaction with the viewer, who can interrupt the communication at any time, but does not actively create it. This type of interaction is controlled only by the performer and is labelled as parasocial, because participants do not have equal opportunities to communicate. This phenomenon has been most often studied in the context of television,[7] but recent studies have begun to apply it in the context of social media.[8]

The concept of PSI goes beyond the definition of ordinary social interaction in that the viewer's participation in PSI has an imaginary character, due to the fact that the viewer only imagines communication with the character on the screen in their mind.[9] The quality of PSI is then conditioned by the cognitive activity and imagination of the viewer. During PSI, a person uses similar mechanisms as while having everyday social interaction. Based on the reduction theory applied to the PSI phenomenon,[10] individuals actively seek information about another person in order to reduce the initial uncertainty, as their motivation is to learn to predict the other person's actions. The more the uncertainty about another person is reduced, the more the affection for the person increases.

McQuail and his colleagues investigated the specifics of PSI between viewers and soap opera characters. Their study led to exploration of this psychological phenomenon from the perspective of the media and communication science. When asked about how the scene of the car accident that occurred in the programme affected them, the participants replied as follows: *"You feel as if they had been in a real road accident and you'd like to do something for them."* According to the authors, the viewer enters into a mediated pseudo-friendly relationship with a media persona with the intention of finding company at a time of loneliness. In their research, they identify the need for companionship as one of the functions of PSI. According to them, the second function of PSI is the personal identity, which means that the viewers referred to the characters appearing in the programme as similar to them or their friends.[11] The life situations and behaviour of the characters helped the viewers to understand their current or past life situation.[12]

An important part of PSI is the repetitive interaction that strengthens the parasocial bond between its actors. Over time, intimacy between the media character and the viewer is developed, even though it is only a targeted imitation.[13] However, attractiveness plays a key role in this process, which, together with exposure, leads to parasocial interaction itself.[14] The more the media character is interested in interacting with the audience (e.g., using gestures as in conversation, show business jargon, etc.), the more attractive it is to the audience.[15] However, it is not only about social attractiveness, but also about physical attractiveness, while the latter can have a positive effect on the former.[16] Thus, it is possible to deduce that if the viewer considers the media character to be attractive, they will try to make more frequent contact, which results in the formation of PSI.

Related to the phenomenon of parasocial interaction is the term "parasocial relationship" (PSR), which is defined as *"enduring socioemotional bonds of intimacy that audiences develop with media personae similar to real-life social relationships"*.[17] Due to the fact that neither Horton nor Wohl (or their followers) developed explicit definitions that would clearly distinguish PSI from PSR, methodological difficulties arose. In order to prevent them, Vorderer defines PSI only as a process of perceiving media content.[18] Another definition of PSI is that it is an immediate reaction, or in other words psychological response to a stimulus from a media figure.[19]

4   Compare to: ANDERSON, C. A., BUSHMAN, B. J.: Effects of Violent Video Games on Aggressive Behavior, Aggressive Cognition, Aggressive Affect, Physiological Arousal, and Prosocial Behavior: A Meta-Analytic Review of the Scientific Literature. In *Psychological Science*, 2001, Vol. 12, No. 5, p. 353-359; ANDERSON, C. A. et al.: Violent Video Game Effects on Aggression, Empathy, and Prosocial Behavior in Eastern and Western Countries. In *Psychological Bulletin*, 2010, Vol. 136, No. 2, p. 151-173; PAIK, H., COMSTOCK, G.: The Effects of Television Violence on Antisocial Behavior: A Meta-Analysis. In *Communication Research*, 1994, Vol. 21, No. 4, p. 516-546.
5   See: GREITEMEYER, T.: Effects of Prosocial Media on Social Behavior: When and Why Does Media Exposure Affect Helping and Aggression? In *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 2011, Vol. 20, No. 4, p. 251-255; HARRINGTON, B., O'CONNELL, M.: Video Games as Virtual Teachers: Prosocial Video Game Use by Children and Adolescents from Different Socioeconomic Groups Is Associated with Increased Empathy and Prosocial Behaviour. In *Computers in Human Behavior*, 2016, Vol. 63, p. 650-658; PROT, S. et al.: Long-Term Relations among Prosocial-Media Use, Empathy, and Prosocial Behavior. In *Psychological Science*, 2014, Vol. 25, No. 2, p. 358-368; HEAROLD, S.: A Synthesis of 1043 Effects of Television on Social Behavior. In COMSTOCK, G. (ed.): *Public Communication and Behavior*. New York : Academic Press, 1986, p. 65-133.
6   See: HORTON, D., WOHL, R.: Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance. In *Psychiatry*, 1956, Vol. 19, No. 3, p. 215-229.
7   See: AUTER, P. J.: Psychometric: TV That Talks Back: An Experimental Validation of a Parasocial Interaction Scale. In *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 1992, Vol. 36, No. 2, p. 173-181; HORTON, D., WOHL, R.: Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance. In *Psychiatry*, 1956, Vol. 19, No. 3, p. 215-229; MCQUAIL, D.: *Sociology of Mass Communications: Selected Readings*. Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1972; RUSSELL, C. A., STERN, B. B.: Consumers, Characters, and Products: A Balance Model of Sitcom Product Placement Effects. In *Journal of Advertising*, 2006, Vol. 35, No. 1, p. 7-21.
8   See: CHEN, C. P.: Forming Digital Self and Parasocial Relationships on YouTube. In *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 2016, Vol. 16, No. 1, p. 232-254; COLLIANDER, J., DAHLÉN, M.: Following the Fashionable Friend: The Power of Social Media. In *Journal of Advertising Research*, 2011, Vol. 51, No. 1, p. 313-320; RIHL, A., WEGENER, C.: YouTube Celebrities and Parasocial Interaction: Using Feedback Channels in Mediatized Relationships. In *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 2017, Vol. 25, No. 3, p. 554-566; THORSON, K. S., RODGERS, S.: Relationships between Blogs as EWOM and Interactivity, Perceived Interactivity, and Parasocial Interaction. In *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 2006, Vol. 6, No. 2, p. 5-44; TSAI, W. H. S., MEN, L. R.: Motivations and Antecedents of Consumer Engagement with Brand Pages on Social Networking Sites. In *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 2013, Vol. 13, No. 2, p. 76-87.

9   GLEICH, U.: Parasocial Interaction with People on the Screen. In WINTERHOFF-SPURK, P., VAN DER VOORT, T. H. A. (eds.): *New Horizons in Media Psychology*. Wiesbaden : VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 1997, p. 35-55.
10   PERSE, E. M., RUBIN, R. B.: Attribution in Social and Parasocial Relationships. In *Communication Research*, 1989, Vol. 16, No. 1, p. 59-77.
11   See: MCQUAIL, D.: *Sociology of Mass Communications: Selected Readings*. Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1972.
12   Compare to: GILES, D. C.: Parasocial Interaction: A Review of the Literature and a Model for Future Research. *Media Psychology*, 2002, Vol. 4, No. 3, p. 279-305; MCQUAIL, D.: *Sociology of Mass Communications: Selected Readings*. Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1972.
13   Compare to: AUTER, P. J.: Psychometric: TV That Talks Back: An Experimental Validation of a Parasocial Interaction Scale. In *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 1992, Vol. 36, No. 2, p. 173-181; COLLIANDER, J., DAHLÉN, M.: Following the Fashionable Friend: The Power of Social Media. In *Journal of Advertising Research*, 2011, Vol. 51, No. 1, p. 313-320; HORTON, D., WOHL, R.: Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance. In *Psychiatry*, 1956, Vol. 19, No. 3, p. 215-229.
14   See: RUBIN, R. B., MCHUGH, M. P.: Development of Parasocial Interaction Relationships. In *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 1987, Vol. 31, No. 3, p. 279-292; GILES, D. C.: Parasocial Interaction: A Review of the Literature and a Model for Future Research. In *Media Psychology*, 2002, Vol. 4, No. 3, p. 279-305.
15   See also: HORTON, D., WOHL, R.: Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance. In *Psychiatry*, 1956, Vol. 19, No. 3, p. 215-229.
16   See: SOKOLOVA, K., KEFI, H.: Instagram and YouTube Bloggers Promote It, Why Should I Buy? How Credibility and Parasocial Interaction Influence Purchase Intentions. In *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 2019, Vol. 53, p. 101742; RUBIN, R. B., MCHUGH, M. P.: Development of Parasocial Interaction Relationships. In *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 1987, Vol. 31, No. 3, p. 279-292.
17   BOND, B. J.: Parasocial Relationships with Media Personae: Why They Matter and How They Differ among Heterosexual, Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Adolescents. In *Media Psychology*, 2018, Vol. 21, No. 3, p. 458.
18   See: RIHL, A., WEGENER, C.: YouTube Celebrities and Parasocial Interaction: Using Feedback Channels in Mediatized Relationships. In *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 2017, Vol. 25, No. 3, p. 554-566.
19   See also: SCHMID, H., KLIMMT, C.: A Magically Nice Guy: Parasocial Relationships with Harry Potter across Different Cultures. In *International Communication Gazette*, 2011, Vol. 73, No. 3, p. 252-269.

The parasocial relationship gradually began to be perceived as the result of multiple parasocial interactions, while its essential feature is durability, as the relationship itself will last longer than the interactions alone.[20] Thus, PSR arises from a series of parasocial interactions that the individual establishes with the media character. In order to create such connection, the media must be regularly available to the viewer, creating an appearance of intimacy and developing a relationship through the sharing of life experiences.[21]

2 Influencers as Prosocial Models

According to social learning theories, people learn through direct experience or through observation.[22] As described by Buckley and Anderson, a person's behaviour is based on two types of input variables: personal (attitudes, beliefs, emotions, etc.) and situational (media, social settings, context, etc.). Some variables are more specifically relevant to social networking sites, including an individual's history of SNS exposure, aspects of online content, etc. Social media are considered to be an effective platform that allows regular contact with viewers, as they offer a more personal form of interaction compared to television or film. A new kind of media-famous people, so-called influencers, have arisen in this environment. In terms of specific platforms that these people use, YouTubers, Instagrammers (IGs), or TikTokers can be recognised. In order to create a bond with the percipient and to cultivate a sense of trust, the influencer must, by regularly posting new content, create an impression of familiarity and, conversely, reduce doubts. Gradually, the unknown person becomes a friend whose advice and opinions are perceived as trustworthy.[23] More frequent interactions together with the possibility to watch the lives of celebrities increase the audience's perception of intimacy.[24] The concept of influencers as 'people like me', or as friends whose daily life is presented on social networking sites, is based on apparent authenticity (the appearance of direct communication with the audience, such as looking directly into the camera, confiding in the followers about personal problems, etc.). It is specific to this particular type of celebrity that such a celebrity status and the financial reward associated with it can suddenly be achieved by an ordinary person.[25] This was not possible in the past. According to the author, *"influencers are do-it-yourself social media users that create their own digital persona, create their own content and build their own audience".*[26] They present their lives as 'worthy to watch', so they think of themselves as celebrities and behave according to this notion. Such behaviour is attributed to so-called microcelebrities and adds that such self-presentation technique in which people consider themselves as public figures is used, together with the intimacy strategy, to reach viewers. At the same time, they consider their followers to be their fans.[27] In terms of influencer as the model, the importance of their values and behaviour on social networking sites (SNS) is growing. Influencers' popularity just among these young digital natives has been increasing exponentially in the past few years. For instance, 70% of adolescent *YouTube* subscribers say they relate to influencers more than to traditional celebrities.[28]

The two most important characteristics that strengthen an individual's imitation of another person are power and emotion. Observing those who have the situation under control, who help and behave altruistically, regardless of the circumstances, also motivates a willingness to imitate such prosocial behaviour. The appearance of authenticity should thus strengthen the motivational weight of the influencer as a positive model for the adolescent in terms of internalizing their own prosocial thinking and actions.[29]

Online social networks which are created around individual influencers also impact the individual's moral reasoning by creating a similarity within groups. According to moral approbation theory, there is a desire for moral approval from an individual by others.[30] At the same time, however, the approval-oriented moral reasoning has potential to be improved to higher types of reasoning.[31] Prosocial behaviour is defined as any voluntary action intended to benefit others[32] or behaviour involving costs for the self and resulting in benefits for others.[33]

Prosocial moral reasoning (PMR) concerns reasoning about conflicts in which the individual must choose between satisfying their wants and needs and those of others in a context in which laws, punishments, authorities, formal obligations and other external criteria are irrelevant or de-emphasised.[34] Specific types of PMR (hedonistic, approval-oriented, stereotyped, needs-oriented, or internalised) play different roles in altruistic and prosocial behaviour in adolescents.[35] Higher levels of PMR predict both self- and other-reported prosocial behaviour[36] and contribute to stable tendencies to behave prosocially. Higher levels of PRM are acquired through the process of internalisation, that means the gradual shift of the focus of motivation from external motives (approval from others, reciprocity, stereotypes) to internal ones (perception of the needs of others, empathy, one's own need to behave prosocially, harmony between moral emotions, reasoning, and acting, etc.). The optimal environment for such socialisation processes are positive social interrelations – parent-child relationships,[37] siblings,[38] friendship,[39] etc. The question remains, if a parasocial relationship can also partially play the similar role in prosocial reasoning and behaviour development. As the research showed significantly higher preferences of the same-sex persons in terms of parasocial interaction[40] and higher score

20   See: RIHL, A., WEGENER, C.: YouTube Celebrities and Parasocial Interaction: Using Feedback Channels in Mediatized Relationships. In *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 2017, Vol. 25, No. 3, p. 554-566.
21   See: HORTON, D., WOHL, R.: Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance. In *Psychiatry*, 1956, Vol. 19, No. 3, p. 215-229.
22   According to: BANDURA, A.: *Social Learning Theory*. Stanford : Stanford University, 1971; BUCKLEY, K. E., ANDERSON, C. A.: A Theoretical Model of the Effects and Consequences of Playing Video Games. In VORDERER, P., BRYANT, J. (eds.): *Playing Video Games: Motives, Responses, and Consequences*. Mahwah : Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 2006, p. 363-378.
23   RASMUSSEN, L.: Parasocial Interaction in the Digital Age: An Examination of Relationship Building and the Effectiveness of YouTube Celebrities. In *The Journal of Social Media in Society*, 2018, Vol. 7, No.1, p. 280-294.
24   See: PERSE, E. M., RUBIN, R. B.: Attribution in Social and Parasocial Relationships. In *Communication Research*, 1989, Vol. 16, No. 1, p. 59-77.
25   See, for example: RUIZ-GOMÉZ, A.: Digital Fame and Fortune in the Age of Social Media: A Classification of Social Media Influencers. In *ADResearch ESIC International Journal of Communication Research*, 2019, Vol. 19, No. 19, p. 8-29.
26   RUIZ-GOMÉZ, A.: Digital Fame and Fortune in the Age of Social Media: A Classification of Social Media Influencers. In *ADResearch ESIC International Journal of Communication Research*, 2019, Vol. 19, No. 19, p. 14.
27   See: MARWICK, A. E.: You May Know Me from YouTube: (Micro-)Celebrity in Social Media. In MARSHALL, P. D., REDMOND, S. (eds.): *A Companion to Celebrity*. New Jersey : John Wiley & Sons, 2015, p. 333-350.
28   O'NEIL-HART, C., BLUMENSTEIN, H.: *Why YouTube Stars Are More Influential Than Traditional Celebrities*. Released in July 2016. [online]. [2021-07-24]. Available at: <https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/consumer-insights/youtube-stars-influence>.

29   See: ROCHE OLIVAR, R.: *Etická výchova*. Bratislava : Orbis Pictus Istropolitana, 1992.
30   See: JONES, T. M., RYAN, L. V.: The Link between Ethical Judgment and Action in Organizations: A Moral Approbation Approach. In *Organization Science*, 1997, Vol. 8, No. 6, p. 663-680.
31   See: JONES, T. M., RYAN, L. V.: The Link between Ethical Judgment and Action in Organizations: A Moral Approbation Approach. In *Organization Science*, 1997, Vol. 8, No. 6, p. 663-680.
32   See: BATSON, C. D., POWELL, A. A.: Altruism and Prosocial Behavior. In MILLON, T., LERNER, M. J. (eds.): *Handbook of Psychology, Volume 5, Personality and Social Psychology*. New Jersey : John Wiley & Sons, p. 463-484; EISENBERG, N., FABES, R. A.: Prosocial Development. In DAMON, W., EISENBERG, N. (eds.): *Handbook of Child Psychology: Social, Emotional, and Personality Development*. New Jersey : John Wiley & Sons, 1998, p. 701-778.
33   See: WITTEK, R., BEKKERS, R.: Sociology of Altruism and Prosocial Behavior. In WRIGHT, J. D. (ed.): *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*. 2nd Edition. Amsterdam : Elsevier, 2015, p. 579-583.
34   See also: EISENBERG-BERG, N.: Development of Children's Prosocial Moral Judgment. In *Developmental Psychology*, 1979, Vol. 15, No. 2, p. 128-137.
35   See: BAR-TAL, D., RAVIV, A., LEISER, T.: The Development of Altruistic Behavior: Empirical Evidence. In *Developmental Psychology*, 1980, Vol. 16, No. 5, p. 516-524; EISENBERG, N., FABES, R. A.: Empathy: Conceptualization, Measurement, and Relation to Prosocial Behavior. In *Motivation and Emotion*, 1990, Vol. 14, No. 2, p. 131-149; FABES, R. A. et al.: Early Adolescence and Prosocial/Moral Behavior I: The Role of Individual Processes. In *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 1999, Vol. 19, No. 1, p. 5-16; KUMRU, A. et al.: Prosocial Moral Reasoning and Prosocial Behavior among Turkish and Spanish Adolescents. In *Social Behavior and Personality: An International Journal*, 2012, Vol. 40, No. 2, p. 205-214; CARLO, G. et al.: The Structure and Correlates of a Measure of Prosocial Moral Reasoning in Adolescents from Spain. In *European Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 2013, Vol. 10, No. 2, p. 174-189; EISENBERG, N.: *Altruistic Emotion, Cognition, and Behavior*. New York : Psychology Press, 2015; TUR-PORCAR, A. et al.: Empatía en la adolescencia. Relaciones con razonamiento moral prosocial, conducta prosocial y agresividad. In *Acción Psicológica*, 2016, Vol. 13, No. 2, p. 3-14; MESTRE, M. V. et al.: Bidirectional Relations among Empathy-Related Traits, Prosocial Moral Reasoning, and Prosocial Behaviors. In *Social Development*, 2019, Vol. 28, No. 3, p. 514-528.
36   See: CARLO, G. et al.: The Longitudinal Relations among Dimensions of Parenting Styles, Sympathy, Prosocial Moral Reasoning and Prosocial Behaviors. In *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 2011, Vol. 35, No. 2, p. 116-124; BRESTOVANSKÝ, M.: *Prosociálne morálne uvažovanie*. Trnava : Trnava University, 2020.
37   See: PASTORELLI, C. et al.: Positive Parenting and Children's Prosocial Behavior in Eight Countries. In *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 2016, Vol. 57, No. 7, p. 824-834.
38   See also: SAWYER, K. S. et al.: The Contribution of Older Siblings' Reactions to Emotions to Preschoolers' Emotional and Social Competence. In *Marriage & Family Review*, 2002, Vol. 34, No. 3-4, p. 183-212.
39   See, for example: MCNAMARA BARRY, C., WENTZEL, K. R.: Friend Influence on Prosocial Behavior: The Role of Motivational Factors and Friendship Characteristics. In *Developmental Psychology*, 2006, Vol. 42, No. 1, p. 153-163.
40   See: HOFFNER, C.: Children's Wishful Identification and Parasocial Interaction with Favorite Television Characters. In *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 1996, Vol. 40, No. 3, p. 389-402.

in prosocial behaviour in girls,[41] there is a rational assumption that gender will play an important role in the studied relationships.

In sum, we propose that the PSI between recipients and influencers is a mediator of the relation between recipients' prosocial moral reasoning and behaviour and influencers' published online content. At the same time, we consider the age and gender of the respondents to be moderators in this relation, as shown in Figure 1.
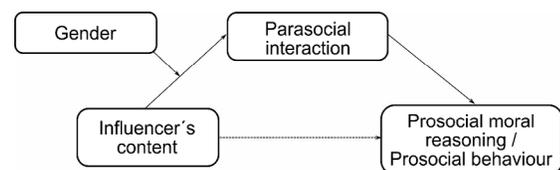

Figure 1: Conceptual model
Source: Own processing

3 Research Methodology

Procedure

In the initial phase of the research, we created a list of five Slovak influencers with the largest number of followers who also produce content relatable for the adolescent age group. We included those who use *Instagram* and *YouTube* as their platforms because these two social networking sites were identified as the most used by young people between the ages of 13 and 17.[42] Excluded from the list were therefore, e.g., influencers with a focus on maternity and family life, as well as people known mainly for their professional orientation and success (such as athletes, actors, singers, etc.). The persons are listed as primarily recognised among the youth just through their production on SNS, in other words, 'to be an influencer' is their main profession (see the Table 1).

Table 1: Top five influencers with the highest number of followers, March 2021

Rank	Profile name	Instagram followers	YouTube followers
1	gogomantv	1,000,000	1,800,000
2	expl0ited_	571,000	975,000
3	lucypug	800,000	543,000
4	menameselassie	387,000	738,000
5	martinahornakova	611,000	479,000

Source: Own processing

In the second phase, the content of the contributions of these influencers was analysed. The content was represented by 5 posts published on *Instagram* and 7 video posts published on *YouTube*. Since any group of followers has a tendency to change dynamically, only the most watched videos published in the last year were included in the analysis. We took a similar approach when selecting posts on *Instagram*. We analysed posts not older than one year, focusing on those that contained at least 300 characters. At the same time, we also analysed so-called hashtags and possible collaborations with brands. The subject of the analysis was also the photograph itself and the communication of the influencer with their followers in the comments section. In the

third phase, the participants were provided with several questionnaires focused on the individual constructs (see below for further description).

Analysis of the Influencers' Content

The aim of the analysis was to examine the published posts of influencers and to divide influencers into two groups based on the frequency of occurrence of specified units (influencer's behaviour and action according to specified categories). The two groups were classified as follows: influencers with dominated prosocial behaviour and influencers with dominated non-prosocial behaviour.

Due to the fact that the content analysis is based on multiple interpretations of the analysis units, in our case *YouTube* videos and *Instagram* posts, individual videos were viewed repeatedly, while influencer's behaviour and communication elements were extracted and combined into individual categories for further examination. The coding record takes the form of the frequency of occurrence of individual phenomena. The record sheets tracked two higher order categories (prosocial and anti-prosocial content) and within them other lower order categories:

- Prosocial content: encouragement and comfort; solidarity; positive evaluation of others; showing gratitude and admiration; helping others, sharing and cooperation; engagement; responsibility and critical thinking; sincerity; assertive conflict resolution; empathy; value thinking and encouraging thinking about values; self-esteem. For example, the engagement category was infused with elements where the influencer did not act prosocially (e.g., helped, supported a project) only out of duty and without enthusiasm, but on the contrary, in videos/posts they showed enthusiasm, involvement, motivation and an active approach to a certain topic, problem or project aimed at good. In this case, we did not see a problem if such engagement was manifested in cooperation with a client, if the goal of the campaign was to create awareness of a particular problem, or the campaign was focused on prevention (e.g., Internet safety).
- Anti-prosocial content: ridiculing others; use of vulgarisms; verbal and physical aggression; selfish behaviour; consumption; mischief; irony and sarcasm; sexual and sexist allusions; spreading lies and hoaxes; incitement to dangerous behaviour; irresponsibility. For example, the category of consumption was infused with such manifestations, when the influencer presented material values (money and material things) only as a sign of prestige, luxury or entertainment, not as a means of prosocial behaviour (help, donation, sharing). The category of anti-prosocial manifestations also included those aimed at supporting the selected group, but the chosen means was inhumane. We considered as one of such sexist videos a post from Selassie entitled – She DID SQUATS FOR ME! Laughter = Donate for a streamer. The video contains a scene where this influencer pretends to have masturbated. The theme of this video is sending a donation to a streamer. The intention itself could be considered prosocial, but he only sent money if he laughed at 'funny' videos. However, the source of the 'joke' was mainly the misfortune of other people (e.g., falls).
- Elements that were neutral in nature were not included in the analysis.

The Sample

Participants were contacted randomly via *Instagram*, additionally the snowball method was used (respondents were invited to nominate other friends, based on age, as a recommended demographic filter). 81 respondents (56% female, mean age = 14.12; SD = 1.81) completed the questionnaires, which were provided online by *Google Forms*. In accordance with the above-cited research,[43] the respondents of this study also nominated *Instagram* and *YouTube* as the two most preferred SNS. 89.2% of youngsters visit the SNS daily, between 3 – 4 hours on average, according to self-reported answers.

41   See: EISENBERG, N., FABES, R. A.: Prosocial Development. In DAMON, W., EISENBERG, N. (eds.): *Handbook of Child Psychology: Social, Emotional, and Personality Development*. New Jersey : John Wiley & Sons, 1998, p. 701-778.
42   ANDERSON, M., JIANG, J.: *Teens, Social Media and Technology 2018*. Released on 31ˢᵗ May 2018. [online]. [2021-04-14]. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology-2018/>.

43   ANDERSON, M., JIANG, J.: *Teens, Social Media and Technology 2018*. Released on 31ˢᵗ May 2018. [online]. [2021-04-14]. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology-2018/>.

Measures

The first part of the questionnaire investigated the participants' preferences in following the individual influencers. They were both provided with the list of the most followed influencers (see Table 1) and also asked through open questions.

The parasocial interaction was examined on two scales. The first scale was a modified version of the PSI Scale,[44] which was primarily focused on PSI with a television news personality. We have modified its content semantically and stylistically for the needs of examining the parasocial interaction between influencers and adolescents. The text of the scale was translated from English into Slovak by two independent persons and subsequently its re-translation by an independent person from Slovak into English was compared with the original. This text adjustment was made so that the individual items did not lose their essence, but at the same time were understandable to our age group while asking about the interaction with influencers. The final version contained 18 items organised in one factor, e.g., "I eagerly look forward to my influencer posting new content", or "I feel as if my favourite influencer is a good old friend of mine". The reliability (Cronbach's alpha) was calculated as .94.

The second part was a scale,[45] which initially surveyed PSI with bloggers on *Instagram* and *YouTube* and their impact on the purchase intentions of their followers. Within this scale, the authors differentiated five factors: Social Attractiveness, Physical Attractiveness, Attitude Homophily, PSI, and Credibility. All 13 items were included in our approach, e.g., "If my favourite influencer created an account on another social media platform, I would start using it too!" (for the PSI domain), or "I find this influencer trustworthy" (for the Credibility domain). The reliability (Cronbach's alpha) was calculated as .94. However, in this study the items were understood as one common PSI category.

Prosocial behaviour was measured by PROS-8 instrument,[46] consisting four prosocial items (comforting, helping, sharing, and contributing to the friendly atmosphere in the group), and four anti-prosocial items (physical, psychical, hidden aggression, and ignoring) on a 4-point Likert scale, e.g., "I like helping others" (for prosocial domain), or "I don't care for others at all" (anti-prosocial domain). The reliability (Cronbach's alpha) of the prosocial domain scale was calculated as .60, the reliability (Cronbach's alpha) of anti-prosocial scale was calculated as .64.

Prosocial moral reasoning was measured by PROM,[47] using five out of seven original stories. Every story with a prosocial moral dilemma contained a list of three behavioural choices as to what the character in the story should do, six reasons why the character should behave in that way (five categories of PMR and a lie/nonsense item) and a ranking of how important each reason was in making their decision. The following text is a sample story from the PROM: *"Sandy was a student at school. One day Sandy was walking into her new class early and saw an older girl teasing and making fun of another girl's clothes. The girl was crying. There was no one else around and Sandy did not know the girls very well, but she had heard that the girl that was being teased was very poor and the older girl had a lot of friends. Sandy thought that maybe she should try to stop the older girl but she was afraid that the older girl and her friends might pick on her and tease her also."*

Each 'category score' is divided by the 'potential category score' to achieve the correct relative strength of the category. The categories are defined based on developmental quality, from hedonistic, approval-oriented, stereotyped, to needs-oriented, and internalised reasoning.

44　　See: RUBIN, R. B., PERSE, E. M., POWELL, R. A.: Loneliness, Parasocial Interaction, and Local Television News Viewing. In *Human Communication Research*, 1985, Vol. 12, No. 2, p. 155-180.

45　　See also: SOKOLOVA, K., KEFI, H.: Instagram and YouTube Bloggers Promote It, Why Should I Buy? How Credibility and Parasocial Interaction Influence Purchase Intentions. In *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 2019, Vol. 53, p. 101742.

46　　See: BRESTOVANSKÝ, M.: *Prosociálne morálne uvažovanie*. Trnava : Trnava University, 2020.

47　　See also: CARLO, G., EISENBERG, N., KNIGHT, G. P.: An Objective Measure of Adolescents' Prosocial Moral Reasoning. In *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 1992, Vol. 2, No. 4, p. 331-349.

4　Results

89.2% of participants visit SNS daily. In this group 3.6% visit SNS for less than 60 minutes, 26.5% 60 – 120 minutes, 22.9% 120 – 180 minutes, 14.5% 180 – 240 minutes, and 21.7% more than 6 hours per day. 48.9% of girls prefer the same-sex influencer, but 81% of boys. Only 6% of respondents regularly talk about influencers with their parents (37.3% not at all, and 24.1% very rarely). The influencers significantly differ in terms of the prosocial content of their posts and videos (see Table 2). The differences are linked to the influencer's gender, but also to the type of SNS. Especially Menameselassie's anti-prosocial content is significantly more prominent on *YouTube* compared to *Instagram*.

Table 2: The prosocial content of individual influencers

Content / Influencer	LucyPug		Menameselassie		Moma		Expl0ited		GogoManTV	
	YouTube	Instagram	YouTube	Instagram	YouTube	Instagram	YouTube	Instagram	YouTube	Instagram
Prosocial	13.29	6.6	5.29	4.6	9	2	3.14	1.6	6.86	2.8
Anti-prosocial	0.57	0	6.29	0.2	2	0.6	7.29	1.2	4.43	0.8

Source: Own processing

Significant correlations appeared between individual variables (see Table 3). The older the adolescents, the more days they spend on SNS per week (r=.252, p<.05) and the more they prefer influencers producing anti-prosocial content (r=.257, p<.05), the more hours they spend on SNS per day, the stronger is their parasocial interaction with the influencer (r=.281, p<.05) and the less prosocial content they prefer (r=-.294, p<.05). The less they discuss the influencers' content with their parents, the more anti-prosocial content they prefer (r=-.314, p<.01). The more they prefer the influencers with prosocial content, the more they show the developmentally highest type of prosocial moral reasoning (r=.310, p<.05). Finally, there is moderate correlation between prosocial behaviour and prosocial moral reasoning (r=.338, p<.01). Boys and girls do not significantly differ in time spent on SNS, but girls are significantly higher in prosocial behaviour and internalised prosocial moral reasoning.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics and correlations of key variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	Boys (n=34) M	SD	Girls (n=45) M	SD
1. Age	1													14.25	1.63	14.02	1.95
2. Time spent on SNS	,252*	1												4.81	0.82	4.76	0.74
3. Time spent on SNS per day	-,074	,b	1											3.29	1.24	3.25	1.26
4. Parents discussions	-,007	,100	,032	1										1.86	0.91	2.24	1.00
5. Influencer's prosocial content	-,235	-,186	-,294*	,120	1									4.09*	1.15	6.76*	2.37
6. Influen. anti-prosocial content	,139	,231	,246	-,116	-,927**	1								3.46*	0.67	1.56*	1.21
7. Parasocial interaction	-,088	,081	,281*	,057	,107	-,142	1							3.01	0.94	3.33	0.84
8. Prosocial behaviour	,057	,095	-,087	,173	,017	-,049	-,011	1						12.11*	2.40	13.38*	1.77
9. Anti-prosocial behaviour	,150	,257*	,155	-,314**	,045	-,076	,148	-,280*	1					8.44	2.03	7.82	2.81
10. Hedonistic PRM	,271*	,210	,086	,067	-,189	,169	,108	-,260*	,182	1				0.189	0.028	0.179	0.041
11. Approval-oriented PRM	,020	-,007	,040	-,168	-,109	,089	-,039	-,163	,197	,206	1			0.183	0.041	0.150	0.052
12. Stereotyped PRM	-,176	-,009	-,024	,080	,051	-,012	-,075	,236*	-,279*	-,403**	-,491**	1		0.205	0.038	0.217	0.031
13. Needs-oriented PRM	-,044	-,183	,059	-,005	-,055	-,002	,093	-,113	-,005	-,333**	-,309**	-,266*	1	0.206	0.034	0.214	0.044
14. Internalised PRM	-,071	,011	-,158	,084	,310**	-,247	-,072	,338**	-,159	-,463**	-,677**	,370*	-,087	0.217*	0.038	0.239*	0.041

Pearson correlations: *p<.05; **p<.01
Independent samples T-test: *p<.01
Source: Own processing

Linear regression was calculated to investigate the predictors of prosocial behaviour and prosocial moral reasoning. All the required assumptions were met. Values with standardised scores higher than 3.29 were considered outliers and were removed from the data. Normality of the score distribution was assessed by examining a normal P-P plot. Homoscedasticity was assessed by examining a scatter-plot of the dependent variables and regression standardised residual, with symmetric error distribution.

The basic linear regression model showed that the influencers' prosocial content had significant effect on adolescents' prosocial moral reasoning, and explained 10.8% of variance in this relation: $R^2 = .108$, $F(1,46) = 5.440$, $p < 0.05$; $\beta = .328$. The mediation analysis through hierarchical regression analysis showed that PSI as mediator did not bring a significant change in F, nay the standardised Beta coefficient is negative (although not significant): $R^2 = .135$, $F(2.46) = 3.278$, $p < 0.05$; $\beta_{content} = .336$; $\beta_{PSI} = -.185$ (see Table 4). The test of collinearity between two independent variables in this model was insignificant (VFI=1.010).

Table 4: Summary of hierarchical regression analysis for variables predicting internalised prosocial moral reasoning

Variable	B	SE B	ß
Step 1			
Influencer's prosocial content	.005	.002	.318*
Step 2			
Influencer's prosocial content	.005	.002	.336*
Parasocial Interaction (PSI)	-.007	.006	-.185

$R^2 = .108$ for step 1 ($p < 0.05$), $R^2 = .135$ for step 2 ($p < 0.05$); *$p < .05$

Source: Own processing

Calculating gender as moderator, we concluded that gender had no moderation effect in the prediction model (see Table 5).

Table 5: Model summary of gender as moderator

Model	R	R²	Adjusted R²	SE	Change Statistics				
					R² Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.420ᵃ	.176	.119	.04	.176	3.066	3	43	.038
2	.427ᵇ	.182	.104	.04	.006	.298	1	42	.588

a. Predictors: (Constant), girls, PSI, Influencer's prosocial content

b. Predictors: (Constant), girls, PSI, Influencer's prosocial content, PSI_x_Girls

c. Dependent Variable: PROM-internalised

Source: Own processing

Based on the moderate degree of correlation between the time spent on SNS, preferred content, adolescent's prosocial behaviour, and PSI, an alternative model of the regression equation was calculated. This model explained the higher percentage of variance comparing to the previously hypothesised one: $R^2 = .244$, $F(3.44) = 4.404$, $p < 0.01$; $\beta_{content} = .016$; $\beta_{time} = -.249$; $\beta_{girls} = .373$. Finally, comparing to prosocial moral reasoning, there are weak relations between the influencers' prosocial content and adolescents' prosocial behaviour.

5 Discussion and Conclusions

This study provides new insights into the relations between the content provided by influencers on social networking sites (SNS) and the adolescents' prosocial moral reasoning and behaviour, investigating the mediation effect of parasocial interaction and the moderating effect of gender. The study produces results leading to some important conclusions. First, we showed that there are significant differences in the quality of the influencers' content, in terms of the defined prosocial characteristics. Male influencers produce more anti-prosocial content, while female influencers provide more prosocial content. At the same time, girls have no preferences when it comes to the sex of influencer, comparing to boys who strongly prefer same-sex producers. This finding is in line with the previous research.[48] The study confirms that gender is an important differentiating factor in prosocial moral reasoning and behaviour.[49] Girls show a higher level of internalised prosocial moral reasoning and are more prosocial in general.

The relation between the influencers' content and adolescents' prosocial reasoning, however, is not mediated by gender, neither by parasocial interaction. A stronger (negative) predictor of influencers' content to adolescents' reasoning is the time spent on SNS.

Parasocial interaction was related to the characteristics that Horton and Wohl described as being reminiscent of face-to-face interpersonal interaction,[50] but its role in empowering the influencer's impact is probably weaker in *moral* reasoning and behaviour comparing to consumer or other types of behaviours.[51]

As development of the prosocial behaviours and reasoning is linked with longitudinal relations[52] and, contrary, parasocial interaction with influencers is relatively dynamic and short-termed, the relation between online prosocial content and recipients' prosociality is probably infused by other mediators (e.g., personality of a recipient) which were not the objects of this study. Although there are similarities between parasocial relations and ordinary social relations, the research also revealed some important distinctions. Some of them are crucial only in case of character development. Gleichhas compared ratings of relationship quality made towards media figures with those made towards friends and neighbours.[53] In most dimensions (confidence, proximity, idealism, strength of character), respondents' best friends were evaluated considerably higher than favourite media figures. The hypothesis that individuals who find face-to-face interaction unrewarding use the Internet as a functional alternative,[54] supports the idea that PSI does not function as a positive but rather as a negative mediator of prosocial tendencies in adolescents. According to the parasocial compensation hypothesis,[55] social anxiety encourages the establishment of parasocial relationships to satisfy the need to belong. Thus, the more socially anxious an individual is, the more they might develop intense parasocial relationships with YouTubers. Naturally, social anxiety is considered to be a barrier in altruistic prosocial behaviour (by contrast to proactive prosocial behaviour which is motivated by the expectancy of a desired outcome).[56] In general, the

48 See, for example: TOLBERT, A. N., DROGOS, K. L.: Tweens' Wishful Identification and Parasocial Relationships with YouTubers. In *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2019, Vol. 10, p. 1-15.
49 See: RAJSKÝ, A. et al.: *Člověk člověku: K prameňom etickej výchovy*. Trnava : Typi Universitatis Tyrnaviensis, Veda SAV, 2016, p. 194-265; EISENBERG, N. et al.: Prosocial Development in Late Adolescence: A Longitudinal Study. In *Child Development*, 1995, Vol. 66, No. 4, p. 1179-1197.
50 See: HORTON, D., WOHL, R.: Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance. In *Psychiatry*, 1956, Vol. 19, No. 3, p. 215-229.
51 SOKOLOVA, K., KEFI, H.: Instagram and YouTube Bloggers Promote It, Why Should I Buy? How Credibility and Parasocial Interaction Influence Purchase Intentions. In *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 2019, Vol. 53, p. 101742.
52 See: PROT, S. et al.: Long-Term Relations among Prosocial-Media Use, Empathy, and Prosocial Behavior. In *Psychological Science*, 2014, Vol. 25, No. 2, p. 358-368.
53 See, for example: GILES, D. C.: Parasocial Interaction: A Review of the Literature and a Model for Future Research. In *Media Psychology*, 2002, Vol. 4, No. 3, p. 279-305.
54 See: PAPACHARISSI, Z., RUBIN, A. M.: Predictors of Internet Use. In *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 2000, Vol. 44, No. 2, p. 175-196.
55 See: DE BÉRAIL, P., GUILLON, M., BUNGENER, C.: The Relations between YouTube Addiction, Social Anxiety and Parasocial Relationships with YouTubers: A Moderated-Mediation Model Based on a Cognitive-Behavioral Framework. In *Computers in Human Behavior*, 2019, Vol. 99, p. 190-204.
56 See: CULOTTA, C. M., GOLDSTEIN, S. E.: Adolescents' Aggressive and Prosocial Behavior: Associations with Jealousy and Social Anxiety. In *The Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 2008, Vol. 169, No. 1, p. 21-33.

internal construction of the prosocial behaviour concept probably plays an important role in measurable outcomes.[57]

Future research in this field should more sensitively recognise both the internal motivation for parasocial interaction and the various types and motivational qualities of prosocial behaviour. In general, there is no prior research on the topic of relations between parasocial interaction with influencers and adolescents' prosocial behaviour and moral reasoning. This study can be understood as one of the first to begin to fill the gap in this field.

There are several limitations to this study. Some of them stem from the very characteristics of the online environment, e.g., significant and rapid dynamic changes in user preferences, especially in the field of influencers' popularity. Additionally, the number of analysed posts and videos has only limited weight in creating a valid picture of an individual influencer's attitudes. The study could also be strengthened by increasing the number of respondents, as well as by avoiding the snowball method which could cause bias regarding the online 'social bubbles' problem. Two PSI scales used in the study,[58] although having a high reliability, did not pass through the validation process for the Slovak cultural environment. The low number of respondents also did not allow us to proceed with the confirmatory factor analysis, so that the items of the scales were understood as one common PSI category, preventing the analysis of individual factors. A possible problem could arise from the questionnaire form, as some of the respondents' responses on the PSI scale could be linked to different influencers; however, the probability of such a misunderstanding was low.

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57   See also: DUNFIELD, K. A.: A Construct Divided: Prosocial Behavior as Helping, Sharing, and Comforting Subtypes. In *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2014, Vol. 5, p. 1-13.
58   See: SOKOLOVA, K., KEFI, H.: Instagram and YouTube Bloggers Promote It, Why Should I Buy? How Credibility and Parasocial Interaction Influence Purchase Intentions. In *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 2019, Vol. 53, p. 101742; PERSE, E. M., RUBIN, R. B.: Attribution in Social and Parasocial Relationships. In *Communication Research*, 1989, Vol. 16, No. 1, p. 59-77.

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