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EDUCATIONAL IMPACTS AND INTERACTIONS CREATED BY SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS REGARDING ACCESSIBILITY IN THE AREA OF COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: The article presents the results of research related to possibilities of moral and intercultural education contained in social networks and accessibility in the area of communication. The aim of the study is to identify and describe the impact of influencers on adolescents in regard to accessibility to information and communication. A software solution was used in order to obtain samples for the analysis of multiple posts published by different individuals in various social networks. The results indicate that opportunities for an effective process of education concerning the aforementioned elements can be observed if the content published by influencers is compliant with certain factors. Some of those factors are as follows: the posts should describe personal examples to which people can relate or can perceive in order to comprehend the challenges connected to accessibility in a better way; the content should comprise explanations that clarify situations and issues, providing information and raising awareness; the followers and the influencers should encourage discussions on these topics, ensuring that decisions should be made and solutions should be found on the matter of accessibility in the area of communication.

Keywords: *influencers, moral education, intercultural education, accessibility, information, communication, social media*

Introduction

The process of communication has been essential for the development and improvement of individuals and society for thousands of years. Pre-historic people communicated with each other through gestures,

sounds, and drawings – they shared vital experience and knowledge about their surroundings with next generations. Over time, the coding, presenting, and decoding of information became more complex and people started to use different means for faster and more productive interactions. With the technological development, the process was improved, as the means of mass communication were invented.

There are scientific theories and debates in the direction of determining the periods in the development of mass media, starting from the early years of human evolution. A consensus has been reached on the fact that in order for mass communication to exist, it must be carried out through specific means of information. The opinion that mass media influence people in two main directions - positively and negatively - has also been unequivocally proven. Starting with the printing of the Bible, thanks to Gutenberg's invention [Mihailov, 2007], mass media have had a significant impact on human life, including the processes of education and upbringing. Discussions on the issue of education in the context of mass media date back to the creation of the printing press, continuing with the invention of the radio and television and are especially intensified today due to technological progress and the Internet, with its undoubted impact on development, socialization, and enculturation of adolescents.

In modern times, mass media, and in particular social media, are extremely developed, being a significant part of the lives of both adolescents and adults. Various platforms and applications offer a wide range of possibilities for interactions - through virtual conversations, videos, and music, with information sharing. Due to the proliferation of devices and programs and the extent to which they are part of everyday life, some people fail to realize the difficulties and challenges faced by individuals with disabilities in terms of communication on the Internet and social media [CDAC, 2018].

There are debates regarding the definition of the term "disability", resulting in the formulation of different definitions. It is generally accepted today that "disability is the result of a dynamic interaction between human health and other personal factors (such as age, gender, personality, or educational level) on the one hand and the

socio-physical environment in which they find themselves. This approach is referred to as the “social model of disability” (Brander et al., 2020). The concept expressed through this model is oriented towards the fact that the productive inclusion and participation in public life of people with disabilities is hindered by public attitudes, by limited access to buildings, information, communication, and education. Therefore, in order for the social inclusion of people with disabilities to be successful, society must change and the environment must develop in the context of providing their access to activities promoting their independence and rights [Chavdarova -Kostova, 2019].

People with disabilities are considered to be the largest minority in the world - over one billion people have some form of disability [World Report 2011]. At the same time, unlike most socio-cultural differences, anyone can become disabled at any time due to an accident, illness, or other causes. According to the European Parliament resolution of 25 October 2011 on mobility and integration of people with disabilities, over 80 million people or about 16% of the total population of the European Union are people with disabilities. All of them have the right to freely access information through various channels and through various technologies and devices.

Access to communication and information is extremely important for full, productive, and fruitful participation in society. Technological progress affects the way individuals communicate, work, use their free time, study, create businesses, consume products and services. Access to social media is not limited to the entertainment aspect as these platforms actually provide wide-ranging content related to different needs and interests. From social media one can be informed about current situations and news, about political, economic, cultural, and social problems and challenges, even to get acquainted with scientific literature. In this context, it is important that various devices, programs, and platforms should be accessible to people with disabilities, thus guaranteeing their right to have access to information, communication, and participation in public life.

There are various disabilities that can obstruct successful and productive online communication. In order to produce and perceive in-

formation, individuals use different senses and cognitive and motor skills, which can be challenging for people with different disabilities. The main categories of disabilities that affect communication are the following:

- Hearing - people who are deaf or have a hearing loss to a degree that prevents them from hearing in full capacity can experience difficulties during the communication process;
- Movement - for people who have cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, or another similar condition it may be hard to move their muscles in order to speak, use a device, or write and read;
- Cognition - for people who have intellectual disabilities from birth, or acquired later in life, the process of communication can be challenging, because they can experience difficulties with listening, remembering, processing information, and with other cognitive processes;
- Language - for people who have aphasia it can be difficult to communicate as they may face challenges when they speak, write, and read [CDAC, 2018].

Theoretical review

People with disabilities affecting communication often experience difficulties during interactions – both online and offline. Many of the activities we are used to and take for granted, such as watching a movie, listening to music, reading books, joining online courses and webinars, talking, and sharing experiences on social media, are burdensome for people with disabilities. For this reason, they cannot always fully enjoy a number of their human rights like equal access to quality education, information, and communication, the right to access public, political, and cultural life, and others. The rights of persons with disabilities are recognized globally, with the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities of 13 December 2006, preceded by several other documents, among the first of which was the UN Declaration of the Rights of Persons with Mental Retardation of 20 December 1971. Among the most recent documents regulating the rights of people with disabilities and ensuring their observance is the European Accessibility Act of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17

April 2019. The aim of the European Accessibility Act is to introduce improvements and innovations related to the lives of people with disabilities and of the elderly, while also addressing the challenges of accessibility in terms of architecture and in terms of information, communication, and technology. The directive's goal is to include persons with disabilities in society by improving their access to different areas, because "an environment where products and services are more accessible allows for a more inclusive society and facilitates independent living for persons with disabilities" [European Accessibility Act, 2019].

Other documents concerning the free access to information and communication are the European Parliament Resolution of 25 October 2011 on the mobility and integration of people with disabilities and the European Disability Strategy, 2010-2020. There is a "strong link between mobility, disability, and social inclusion, especially with regard to free communication and access to communication (including Braille, sign language and other alternative forms of communication), free movement in all spheres of life and access to services" [Concept for changes in the legislation on the application of Art. 21, 2019]. There is a need to provide conditions for full participation in public, political, cultural life for people with disabilities. It is also necessary for a number of products and services in the field of communication to be improved, with solutions to problems related to disabilities to be found. Equal and fruitful participation in society includes the freedom and opportunity for expression of one's opinion, with access and opportunity to receive information, and many other elements, which, especially in the current pandemic situation, are realized in the online environment. There are good practices in terms of innovation in technology and accessibility in communication, and there are websites that offer options for people with disabilities so that they can access information. However, there is still a need for improvements and refinements in this direction, as many platforms, including popular social media, do not offer good enough solutions to the problem of accessibility in the field of communication.

These issues are addressed in the Directive (EU) of 26 October 2016 on the accessibility of websites and mobile applications of public sector bodies. According to the text, the trend towards digitalization on

a global scale requires a rethinking of the ways in which technologies are developed and the principles that are applied in the design of a number of platforms. The main objective is "to ensure that the websites and mobile applications of public sector bodies are made more accessible on the basis of common accessibility requirements", with equal access to information for people with disabilities, without discrimination. It is believed that this will improve the quality of life of people with disabilities in general because the accessibility of information and communication refers to many areas, such as health, professional development, culture, and lifelong learning. Of course, similar standards in the development of technologies, devices, platforms, and applications should be applied in the private sector as well. The most commonly used social media are developed by private companies and websites such as Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok, and the like, with all of them providing opportunities to share information, participate in discussions and events online, view news, movies, and various art forms. People with disabilities need to have equal access and opportunities to actively participate in these platforms, through innovation and solutions in this direction.

According to the Declaration of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe of 21 September 2011 on the protection of freedom of expression and information and freedom of assembly and association in relation to domain names and string names on the Internet, "freedom of expression and the right to receive and impart information, as well as the resulting freedom of the media, are absolutely essential for the development of true democracy and democratic processes". In this context, access to information and communication is crucial in the direction of democracy, interculturalism, social inclusion and social cohesion, which "is becoming increasingly cited as a goal to be pursued by modern societies and through which to achieve peaceful and harmonious coexistence between representatives of different social and cultural groups in society" [Chavdarova-Kostova, 2019, p. 18].

Determined by a number of reasons, including the aforementioned, and the fact that "the rapid development of Internet technologies has changed not only the way of life, but also the behavior and attitudes of people" [Gospodinov, 2011, p. 43], is the importance of

raising awareness about the accessibility in communication, including social media. Here stands out the role of social media influencers, who have the opportunity to present these challenges to society and in particular - to adolescents. In this way, it is presumed that they could contribute on the one hand to the successful process of moral and intercultural education by raising children's awareness of people with disabilities and of inclusive education and on the other by introducing technologies that can be integrated into the processes of training and education supporting the access to information and communication of children with disabilities.

Methodology

The aim of the present study is to identify the educational possibilities contained in the content presented by influencers on social media in regard to moral and intercultural education, with, specifically, awareness of disabilities and accessibility in the area of communication. The theoretical analysis is based on the scientific studies and publications of numerous scientists, including S. Chavdarova-Kostova, V. Gospodinov, V. Mihailov, and others. Additionally, it is based on the review of various documents, which regulate accessibility in communication.

The research included the analysis of 10 profiles of individuals in different social networks. The focus is on the content they share, text publications and videos, with the emphasis on living with disabilities, including social awareness and comprehension and accessibility.

The studied profiles are in the social networks of Instagram, Tik Tok, and YouTube. Anderson and Jiang [2018] claim that Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat are the most popular social networks among teenagers in the USA. However, their research was conducted in 2018 when Tik Tok was not yet popular on a global scale and the statistics for 2020 indicate a change in the popularity of social platforms. Chan [2020] states that the application was the most downloaded one in 2020 with more than 65.2 million installs on a global scale and a high percentage increase from the previous year.

In order to detect the influencers who have a significant number of followers and the opportunity to have an impact on the attitudes of a

large group of people, the Heepsy software was used. The tool allows for advanced searches to be carried out on the basis of keywords that are contained in the publications of individuals. With this method, more than 60 profiles with a high number of followers were obtained, with each presenting content related to different disabilities, awareness about disabilities, advocating for accessibility in communication, concretely in social media. Ten of those profiles were selected for the purposes of this study - these individuals are with disabilities themselves and through their publications they aim to raise awareness on multiple issues and challenges connected to various conditions. The lowest number of followers is 9,018 and the highest - 4 million.

During the research, the profiles were examined and the posts of individuals were read (videos were watched) for 2020, whereas the topic of each post was identified and keywords were detected. All posts, which comprised opinions, ideas, examples, advice, and more topics related to disabilities and accessibility, were distinguished and studied further.

The analysis of the results is presented through a five-degree scale and the profiles are distributed in a table. The first degree represents the lowest impact, therefore the lowest educational possibilities in the direction of moral and intercultural education and comprehension of the need for accessibility in the area of communication, while the fifth degree represents the highest impact. There are three criteria according to which the profiles are distributed in the table and marked with a certain degree: personal example, explanation, and discussion. These specific criteria are chosen because personal example, explanation, and discussion are considered very useful methods in educational practice. Personal example in particular is an educational method, which is related to "the mechanism for imitation and the motive for identification" (Chavdarova-Kostova, 2018, p. 172). With the popularity of influencers on various social media platforms, there are numerous opportunities for executing the personal example method as those influencers may become role models for children and adolescents and enrich the process of education in regard to moral, intercultural, and inclusive education.

In the "personal example" column those profiles are marked in which the influencers show how they operate devices, use social media,

and the Internet in general. In the "explanation" column individuals explain the difficulties of a given disability and answer questions about various aspects of their condition. In the "discussion" column there are posts that aim to create a discussion on the topics of disabilities, accessibility in communication and on people with disabilities and social media.

Results

Table 1 shows the characteristics of the profiles of the influencers. After the profiles were reviewed and characterized the data analysis was conducted. The results are shown in Table 2, distributed through a five-degree scale and according to the three aforementioned main criteria.

Table 1. Individuals who constitute the research sample

| Individual | Number of followers | Theme | Number of posts/videos |
|--------------------------|---------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------|
| @Jazzy | 203,000 | People who are deaf | 176 |
| @Scarlet_May1. | 4 million | People who are deaf | 350 |
| @Lucyedwardsblind | 1.5 million | People who are blind | 288 |
| @Jessica Kellgren-Fozard | 838,000 | People who are deaf | 644 |
| @Izabelle Weall | 146,000 | People who have amputated limbs | 79 |
| @Fifiandmo | 140,000 | People who have cerebral palsy | 2,645 |
| @annieelainey | 26,100 | People with Ehlers-Danlos syndrome | 3,436 |
| @Watch_me_win | 9,018 | People who have cerebral palsy | 514 |
| @Autism_dad | 70,800 | People who have autism | 459 |
| @The_blind | 64,500 | People who are blind | 394 |

From the data in Table 2, it is evident that each of the influencers focuses on challenges that people who have different disabilities experience. Among other topics that the individuals focus on are the access of people with disabilities to information and communication on the Internet, specifically to social networks. Through their posts, the influencers specify various issues that are faced in an online environment on a daily basis: the inability to hear/read videos, music, conversations posted on social platforms, as not all networks provide closed captions for people who are deaf; the inability to see the shared content or the content they produce and to overcome these obstacles; the difficulties related to movement and speech, and how persons with disabilities express themselves despite the hardships.

All of the selected profiles belong to people who have disabilities themselves, and three of them are run by parents of children with disabilities. Individuals use social platforms and the opportunity to appear in front of a large number of followers in order to popularize the topic related to the rights of persons with disabilities. The influencers aim to raise awareness about numerous issues with accessibility in social media (and not only), which they accomplish by sharing their own stories and examples of the struggles they endure. However, they also highlight the fact that people with disabilities can lead full, productive, and happy lives, therefore providing inspiration for others and encouraging them.

Table 2. Results from the research

| Criteria | 1 (Lowest impact) | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 (Highest impact) |
|------------------|-------------------|---------|---------|---------|--------------------|
| Personal example | 1 (10%) | 1 (10%) | 2 (20%) | 2 (20%) | 4 (40%) |
| Explanation | 1 (10%) | 1 (10%) | 2 (20%) | 3 (30%) | 3 (30%) |
| Discussion | 1 (10%) | 2 (20%) | 1 (10%) | 1 (10%) | 5 (50%) |

Table 2 highlights the results from the analysis of individual social network profiles of the influencers. It is evident that only one of the profiles is noted in the column reflecting the lowest impact of the posts. This is estimated on the basis of a number of posts containing personal

examples, explanations, and encouragement for discussion, also through a review of interactions and comments on the influencer's publications. Compared to other profiles, the interactions with the followers are fewer here, therefore the possibilities for the influence are likely to be more limited. The number of followers is also a factor determining the degree of the impact - if it is low, it means that the posts reach a lower number of people than those of other influencers. However, this is not always certain due to the specifics of social media algorithms. In certain cases, not only followers see the posts of an influencer, but also other people who have similar interests.

The table shows that the majority of profiles - 60% for each of the criteria - fall into the last two columns of the scale, marking the greatest impact (and interaction). These influencers share their personal stories and show different challenges regarding access to information and communication. The individuals record videos of situations in which they encounter difficulties. They also watch educational videos, listen to music, and read about different topics, using devices through which they visit social platforms, and others. In this way, they focus on the reality of living with disabilities and have the opportunity to reach children and adolescents, enriching their knowledge, developing their communication skills with people with disabilities and forming in them a positive attitude towards such interactions. Furthermore, influencers help the formation of values in adolescents, such as tolerance, solidarity, support and respect, and understanding. On the other hand, the shared content reaches children and adolescents with disabilities, thus encouraging them and supporting their full inclusion in society.

The profiles in the last two columns of the scale provide detailed explanations of different disabilities and how they affect their lives. Thus, they help to raise people's awareness, shape their attitudes and perceptions towards the acceptance of people with disabilities as full, productive, and accomplished individuals who can participate in the social, political, and cultural life of society and contribute to its overall progress. Detailed explanations also help to notice the fact that people with disabilities can be happy, successful and realize themselves personally, socially, and professionally. Thus, influencers support the

implementation of the processes of intercultural, moral, and inclusive education, as well as the formation of a culture of humanity, tolerance, and social cohesion.

Six of the profiles are noted in the last two columns in terms of the "discussion" criterion. Influencers share content that initiates a series of discussions related to important topics such as social inclusion, tolerance, access to information, and communication. They encourage reflection, the formulation of ideas and concepts, stimulate society to take action and make decisions on facilitating access to information and communication. This is a very valuable approach, as there is a need for progressive attitudes and innovations in this area, which would solve a number of challenges and difficulties.

Conclusion

The presented results allow for several conclusions to be drawn. Firstly, it is apparent from the number of followers and the number of interactions and comments on each of the influencers' posts that these individuals presumably are able to have an impact on the development of children and adolescents in regard to the formation of values and attitudes towards tolerance, acceptance, solidarity, human rights, and humanism. Secondly, the influencers' content comprises various educational opportunities for the formation and development of values and virtues, including the aforementioned. Thirdly, these individuals encourage important discussions in the direction of accessibility in the area of communication. Fourthly, the distinguished criteria (personal example, explanation, discussion) could also be considered as factors which, if implemented in the influencers' content, could enlarge the impact and the interactions which social media influencers create in regard to accessibility in information and communication.

Accessibility for all people in the area of communication is an important topic as if accomplished, it will ensure the social cohesion of society on a global scale and will provide more opportunities for all humans in the direction of personal growth, social, academic, and professional realization and participation in all aspects of society. In this context, more in-depth research is needed, with larger samples, in order

to provide more definitive evidence for the impact of social media influencers in this field.

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