R E V I E W

of the dissertation titled

"Intentional Influence on Unorganized Social Communities"

by Ana Ilieva Khalil,

submitted for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in professional field 3.2 "Psychology," doctoral program "General Psychology"

Academic Supervisor: Prof. Mayyana Mitevska, D.Sc.

Reviewer: Prof. Valeri Stoyanov, D.Sc.

1. Relevance of the topic and general characteristics of the work

Ana Ilieva Khalil's dissertation addresses an undeniably relevant and interdisciplinary issue: the mechanisms of targeted (intentional) social influence within the digital environment. With the advent of algorithmically mediated communication, social networks, and phenomena such as "echo chambers" and "filter bubbles," traditional psychological models of group influence are undergoing a radical transformation. Today, amidst contemporary digitalization and the transformation of social interactions, we are witnessing a new social phenomenon —unorganized social communities. These are diffuse, network-based structures lacking formal leadership or a clear hierarchy; yet, they demonstrate remarkable dynamics and cohesion in shaping public attitudes, driving polarization, and fostering collective action.

The doctoral candidate correctly identifies that unorganized social communities in the digital environment are particularly susceptible to manipulative influence due to their lack of formal structure and stable regulatory mechanisms. Researching the mechanisms through which behavior and attitudes change within social networks holds both significant theoretical value for social psychology and practical applicability in fields such as marketing (including political marketing), media

literacy, and the prevention of hybrid-nature influences (cognitive warfare), among others.

The doctoral candidate sets a scientifically significant research objective: "...to analyze and empirically investigate the manifestation of intentional social influence within unorganized social communities and the role of individual psychological factors in this process" (p. 6).

The dissertation is grounded—both theoretically and empirically—in the thesis that intentional social influence operates through communication strategies that activate psychological and social mechanisms, thereby leading to changes in people's attitudes and behavior.

The dissertation is structured into an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, and a bibliography, spanning 149 pages of printed text.

Chapter One, "Theoretical Foundations of Social Influence in Unorganized Social Communities," establishes the study's foundation by examining social influence not merely as an individual psychological process, but as the result of a complex interaction between the individual and the social environment. The author views social influence as a central phenomenon through which attitudes and behavior are formed and altered. It is emphasized that social influence functions as a regulator of behavior and a means of social integration. Classic approaches (such as those of Cialdini, Tajfel, and Turner) and explanatory models regarding conformity and persuasion have been analyzed. Also included are contemporary integrative models that explain how influence operates through conscious and unconscious processes, wherein the individual does not always recognize the source and nature of the impact.

Particular attention is paid to unorganized communities in the digital environment; characterized by high dynamism and a lack of formal structure, they are susceptible to intentional, manipulative influence. At the end of the chapter, the author proposes an integrative framework that links communication strategies with individual psychological factors and socio-psychological mechanisms within a unified analytical structure. This approach enables the study of social influence as a process determined by the interaction between personality characteristics (values, motivation), group dynamics, and the specific features of the digital environment.

Chapter Two, "Mechanisms and Strategies of Intentional Social Influence," is dedicated to conceptualizing and clarifying the specific tools and pathways through

which social influence is exerted. Individual susceptibility to social influence is explained through cognitive processes (how we process information) as well as emotional and motivational factors; the role of specific personality traits in relation to this susceptibility is also substantiated.

The chapter analyzes the impact of social norms and group pressure, alongside specific communication techniques. Significant emphasis is placed on the media environment and the spread of disinformation.

A dedicated section focuses specifically on the role of social networks, algorithms, and personalized content. They structure the information environment in a way that can amplify specific messages and create "filter bubbles." The chapter concludes by examining approaches to counteracting and protecting against unwanted influence.

The first two chapters lay the groundwork for the empirical study presented in the third chapter, clearly illustrating the author's thesis that influence in the digital age is a complex phenomenon—one presumably significantly shaped by personality traits such as extraversion, neuroticism, and the need for social approval.

The theoretical section of the dissertation demonstrates the doctoral candidate's ability to analyze social, socio-psychological, and personality-psychological phenomena, as well as the interrelationships between them. Each of the two chapters concludes with logical inferences aimed at developing the candidate's own empirical research model; this model seeks to address gaps in the scholarly understanding of a pressing social issue—namely, the factors driving the powerful influence exerted on people's attitudes and behavior in the digital age.

The methodology of the empirical study in Ana Khalil’s dissertation is presented in the third chapter. A significant strength of the dissertation is that two-thirds of its volume is dedicated to the doctoral candidate's own research. This allows for a clearer substantiation of the candidate's scientific and applied scientific contributions.

A quantitative approach was employed for the empirical study, focusing on identifying statistically significant relationships between individual psychological characteristics and susceptibility to social influence.

The object of the study comprises unorganized social communities in a digital environment (social networks, online platforms) that lack formal structures and leaders, while the subject of the study encompasses the psychological mechanisms

of intentional influence and the role of personality traits, values, and the need for social approval.

The stated aim of the empirical study is to examine and analyze "...how intentional social influence manifests in unorganized social communities and how individual psychological factors moderate this process" (p. 51).

The doctoral candidate formulates a central hypothesis, which is broken down into four significant, logical, and empirically testable hypotheses.

The study was conducted using a correlational research design. Based on the synthesized model developed for the doctoral research, the study examines how external communication strategies are "refracted" through an individual's personal characteristics within the digital environment. In other words, the model illustrates the interaction between communication strategies, personality traits, and ultimate behavioral responses.

The following instruments were used to collect empirical data: a custom-designed questionnaire for demographic information and the assessment of digital behavior; the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ); the Social Desirability Scale (Crowne-Marlowe), which measures the drive for positive social evaluation; and the Allport-Vernon-Lindzey Study of Values, used to assess value orientations (theoretical, economic, aesthetic, etc.).

The sample consists of 137 respondents; details regarding their individual and demographic characteristics are provided in the dissertation. There is a predominance of female respondents in the sample—a factor the doctoral candidate has analyzed in depth as a limitation typical of online-based studies.

A variety of statistical methods were appropriately applied to process the empirical data: descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, the chi-square (χ^2) test, and the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test.

The doctoral candidate's key significant findings are as follows:

1. No direct link was established between basic personality variables (extraversion, neuroticism, psychoticism) and indicators of perceived social influence. This refutes simplistic models suggesting that a specific temperament type (e.g., individuals higher in neuroticism or extraversion) is universally more susceptible to digital manipulation.

2. The study found no statistically significant relationship ($p > 0.05$) between the motivation for social approval and experienced social pressure. In other words, individuals with a strong desire for approval do not subjectively perceive their environment as exerting pressure on them.

3. The paradox of "unconscious influence" is clearly substantiated: a significant negative correlation was empirically demonstrated between the motivation for social approval and reported or perceived group influence. The conclusion is fundamental: individuals with the highest need for social acceptance are the most likely to deny or fail to recognize that they are being influenced by the group. They adopt the attitudes of others, internalize them, and experience them as entirely their own autonomous decisions and choices.

4. Age was not found to be a determining factor in the choice of a dominant information channel within the sample ($\chi^2 = 12.34$; $df = 9$; $p = 0.195$). Furthermore, the Kruskal-Wallis test ($H=0.41$; $df=3$; $p\approx0.94$) indicates that the level of motivation for social approval remains similar, regardless of the preferred media source.

The model developed by the doctoral candidate, along with its empirical validation, demonstrates that influence within unstructured digital communities is diffuse, indirect, and horizontal in nature. Normative ambiguity on the Internet drives users to seek "social proof" in the form of likes, shares, and comments. These quantitative metrics serve as an illusory indicator of consensus (echo chambers), triggering unconscious cognitive heuristics and automatic responses.

Beyond their scientific value, the candidate's findings also offer practical utility. The results provide a critical empirical foundation for experts in cyberpsychology, media literacy, public relations, and digital marketing, as well as for specialists in the field of cognitive warfare.

Uncovering the mechanism of "unconscious conformity" offers guidance for the creation of educational programs designed to foster critical thinking and resilience against disinformation.

Overall, the empirical study was meticulously planned and executed. The empirical data underwent appropriate statistical processing, and the qualitative analyses are commensurate with the empirical results—following logically from them while being aligned with the initial hypotheses. Scientific and applied scientific contributions have been made in a significant area of psychological knowledge.

I have found no evidence of plagiarism on the part of the author of the dissertation. Sources have been cited correctly.

The abstract accurately reflects the dissertation itself. The doctoral candidate has presented the research findings to the relevant audience through a series of publications, thereby meeting the minimum requirements set forth in the Act on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Regulations for its implementation.

2. Scientific and applied scientific contributions

I accept the doctoral candidate's self-assessment regarding the achieved scientific and applied scientific contributions as adequate. They can be summarized as follows:

1. The dissertation enriches socio-psychological theory by deriving an integrative model for analyzing intentional social influence beyond traditional organized groups—specifically within the context of the digital environment and unorganized communities.

2. Empirical research reveals how individual psychological factors (personality traits, values, and motivation for social approval) interact with algorithmic and communicative mechanisms of influence.

3. The practical contribution lies in identifying and substantiating approaches to counter digital manipulation, disinformation, and polarization through the development of critical thinking and media literacy.

3. Recommendations and critical remarks

I have no significant critical remarks regarding the doctoral candidate. I recommend that she continue working on the topic by incorporating factors other than personality traits—factors that are well-substantiated and presented in the dissertation—into the design of future empirical studies, in order to further enrich knowledge regarding the nature of the interactions between them.

Conclusion:

1. The dissertation by Ana Ilieva Khalil is thoroughly developed; the author's distinct presence and the doctoral candidate's high level of psychological insight are clearly evident.

2. The doctoral candidate has achieved significant scientific and applied contributions.

3. The formatting of the work complies with the requirements for the presentation of such scientific research.

My overall assessment of the work is positive, providing grounds for me to recommend to the esteemed members of the Scientific Jury that we vote to award the educational and scientific degree of "Doctor" in Professional Field 3.2 Psychology to Ana Ilieva Khalil.

October 15, 2026

Varna

Reviewer:

Prof. Valeri Stoyanov, D.Sc.