

Can You Make Money from Being Queer? Commodification of Queerness on Social Media as Biographical Experience

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Abstract: The article presents a case study of an autobiographical narrative interview with Adam—a young influencer who creates books-related content. Special attention is given to Adam’s relationship with his audience and how it influences his self-perception. Of significant importance to the influencer’s biography are Adam’s non-heteronormative sexual orientation and the stigma associated with it. Using the sociolinguistic tools of Fritz Schütze’s biographical approach and its process structures, Erving Goffman’s theory of stigma, and Anselm Strauss’s concept of social worlds, I attempt to reconstruct the processes related to influencer activity on social media. The analysis reveals tensions between the ideological vision of one’s duties and the necessity to meet the expectations of the audience, including in the context of accusations related to the commodification of queerness. The text attempts to capture the possible biographical meanings of being an influencer and the identity-related entanglements of this role. It also highlights potential disruptions to biographical work caused by activities within social media.

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In 2023, Polish public opinion was shaken by a wave of moral scandals involving sexual misconduct by influencers toward young women, some of whom were underage. This wave became known as the “Pandora Gate.”¹ While individuals connected to social media had previously appeared sporadically in public discourse beyond the internet, it was the first time influencer activities provoked such a large-scale social reaction. Some of the alleged perpetrators involved in the scandal exhibited traits associated with the widespread image of the influencer: attention-seeking, wealthy, and creators of infantilized content primarily targeted at teenage audiences over whom they exercise charismatic authority (Weber 1946). Perhaps it is precisely charisma that explains why, in 2021, 46% of Polish girls aged 10 to 15 wanted to become influencers (Durka, Kwaśniewska, and Skrzyszewska 2021). These figures not only indicate the popularity of influencers among youth but may also be interpreted as a sign that more and more individuals will attempt to pursue careers on social media.

Activity on social media, including the monetization of published content, is emerging as a diversified phenomenon.² Although it is not difficult to find among popular profile owners those who align with public imaginaries of high earnings and charisma, it is impossible to draw a clear boundary between influencers and those who are not (yet) considered as such. Scandals like Pandora Gate direct attention to only a small segment of the influencer

¹ A summary (in English) of the first days of the scandal can be found here: <https://polanddaily24.com/pandora-gate-rocks-poland-popular-youtubers-accused-of-pedophilia/news/31355>. Retrieved February 08, 2025.

² This diversification refers, among other things, to the themes and forms of published content, the degree of public visibility of the creators, and the income associated with it.

milieu and, as a result, obscure an understanding of the processes taking place within it. In this article, I define who the influencer is according to the definition proposed in the book *Influencers and Creators: Business, Culture, and Practice*, which recognizes central the activity of building “relationships with an engaged audience through a regular flow of consistent, authentic,³ and distinctive content posted on at least one social media platform” (Kozinets, Gretzel, and Gambetti 2023:8). I see the main value of this definition in its emphasis on the relational⁴ character of activity on social media. This approach to defining the influencer downplays the importance of quantifiable aspects of profile management (e.g., reach and income), which, in turn, leads to the inclusion of many individuals with small but engaged audiences in the category of influencers.

Despite the growing body of research on social media, most studies focus on the functioning of algorithms, platform users’ habits, or the inclusion of influencers in product promotion. There is also a substantial body of literature based on qualitative social research (e.g., Senft 2008; Abidin 2016; Marwick 2016), but these studies are mostly conducted in Anglo-Saxon contexts. Research that goes beyond the scope of social media activity and reflects on the functioning of this group in other areas of life remains scarce. Considering that so many teenagers express ambitions to become influencers, it may be necessary to examine how such activity is embed-

³ When employing the concept of authenticity, it is important to remember that “contemporary authenticity is a social construction that can be used for strategic purposes” (Hund 2023:169). In social media, the ability to create content perceived by the audience as authentic constitutes a matter of considerable importance.

⁴ Writing about individuals aspiring to become influencers, Stefanie Duguay (2019:7) defines one of the modes of their work as *relational labor*. She compares efforts undertaken on social media to the work of musicians—a profession aimed at the audience (Baym 2018).

ded in the broader life history of those who undertake it. The aim would not only be to investigate the reality of influencers and the phenomena observable within it but also to establish the general framework of mutual intertwinements between this type of activity in social media and biographical experiences and phenomena.⁵

This article addresses the above-mentioned research task through a case analysis based on an autobiographical narrative interview (Schütze 2008a; 2008b) with a young influencer—20-year-old Adam—who creates content within the so-called *bookmedia*⁶ sphere. At the time of the interview, Adam is a student in two cultural studies programs in one of the largest cities in Poland. He chose his field of study due to a passion for literature and professional plans related to the cultural sector. The narrator works in the promotion department of a renowned Polish publishing house. Despite his young age, obtaining this position posed no major challenge as his social media activity had already provided him with extensive connections in the book publishing field. A passion for literature constitutes one of the

central threads that organizes Adam's experiences into a cohesive biographical *Gestalt*. Another crucial dimension of the narrator's identity, which underlies many of his experiences, is his queer identity linked to a non-heteronormative sexual orientation. The analysis aims to identify the possible biographical meanings of being an influencer and the identity-related entanglements of this role. Particular attention is paid to the intersections between social media activity and the narrator's sexual orientation, which, in certain contexts, functions as a stigma (Goffman 2005). A key element in this dynamic is the audience with whom Adam interacts and who significantly influences his self-conception (Turner 2008). The case also highlights the relevance of social worlds (Shibutani 1955) within which influencer activity takes place.

The analysis is primarily grounded in the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism. However, references are also made to concepts drawn from other research traditions—most notably commodification. This concept is introduced to draw attention to the fact that actions undertaken on social media take place within specific economic conditions, making it difficult to avoid the broader consequences of living under capitalism. In sociological literature, commodification is understood as a process through which something that previously existed outside the market becomes integrated into it and begins to operate according to its logic (e.g., Abidin 2016; Ziółkowski, Drozdowski, and Baranowski 2022; Hund 2023; Lo 2024). One of the two definitional features of commodities identified by Karl Marx (1951) is exchange value, which refers to the potential of a good to be traded for another, thereby incorporating it into the larger commodity system. Capitalism exhibits a colonizing tendency, reifying and commodifying ever more spheres of life, ulti-

⁵ Addressing influencers, Ashman, Patterson, and Brown (2018) use the term *autopreneurs*—autobiographical entrepreneurs. However, this category does not serve as a conceptual tool for the type of reflection proposed here.

⁶ The term *bookmedia* refers to an online literary community centered around social media content devoted to books (e.g., reviews, humorous videos related to specific books or emotions experienced while reading certain types of literature, videos showing bookstore hauls, and discussions). I use this *emic* term (the interviewee, for example, talks about “being active in bookmedia” or “having friends from bookmedia”) throughout the article, as it aptly reflects the character of a “subworld of the social world” (Strauss 2012:478) in which Adam participates. The name *bookmedia* is derived from a linguistic practice of detaching the first part of a social media platform's name and replacing it with a prefix indicating the central topic of the presented content, intended to designate a broader space dedicated to that theme (Zajczkowska 2024:175). Within bookmedia, we can distinguish, among others, BookTok (on TikTok), BookTube (YouTube), and Bookstagram (Instagram).

mately turning everything into a commodity. In Adam's case, one particular aspect of commodification—related to his sexual orientation—proves especially relevant to his biographical experience.

About the Interview and Methodology

The interview with Adam was conducted as part of the research project "Post-Transformation in the Perspective of Biographical Experiences of People Born Between 1980 and 2005: A Sociological Analysis."⁷ One of its theoretical assumptions is the impact of social media on social relationships and the organization of everyday experiences. Consequently, one of the project's aims is to capture and analyze post-transformation⁸ social processes—among others, those related to the development and ubiquity of social media—within the biographical perspective of those involved in these processes. This goal is pursued through conducting and analyzing autobiographical narrative interviews, following the approach of Fritz Schütze (2008a). One of the several groups of participants in the project consists of internet creators. The aim is not to interview widely recognizable online celebrities but rather to capture the experiences of individuals who, through their activity on social media, generate regular income (in this sense, online activity constitutes not only a passion but also labor), while remaining "ordinary"

⁷ The project is funded by the National Science Centre (NCN) within the OPUS 21 competition and is being conducted at the Department of Sociology of Culture at the University of Lodz from 2022 to 2026 (grant no. UMO-2021/41/B/HS6/02048).

⁸ The goals and assumptions of the discussed study were formulated based on observations from the project "Experience of the Process of the Transformation in Poland. A Sociological Comparative Analysis Based on Biographical Perspective," which analyzed life stories of individuals born in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Narratives from people born in the 1980s significantly differed from those born in the two previous decades (Kazmierska 2019), leading to the need for further exploration of the social changes visible in the biographical experiences of the youngest respondents.

people in the sense of Alfred Schütz (1946). Within the project, 80 autobiographical narrative interviews were collected, around 20 of which were conducted with internet creators.⁹ I selected the interview with Adam for case analysis for two reasons. First, due to the multidimensional biographical significance of the narrator's activity on social media and the possibility of reconstructing the interactional dimension of this type of labor based on the participant's account. Second, Adam's story reveals the biographical consequences of the commodified character of certain aspects of selfhood grounded in a non-heteronormative sexual orientation. This identity is a significant element of Adam's self-concept¹⁰ and a resource that makes him interesting to an online audience. At the same time, however, it remains entangled in cultural processes that lie beyond the narrator's control.

The autobiographical narrative interview begins with a request to spontaneously tell the story of one's life, offering relative freedom concerning the topics they choose to discuss. This approach aims to obtain a story about events in the narrator's life that can be ordered sequentially. A chronological reconstruction of these events enables the exploration of the processual dimension of the phenomena being studied. The analysis focuses not only on the story content but also on how the stages of life are narrated. There is a close relationship between the way life experiences are recounted and how the storyteller's identity has developed. Fritz Schütze

⁹ The term "internet creator" differs slightly from the concept of "influencer" used in this article. I understand the distinctions between these terms in the same way as Kozinets, Gretzel, and Gambetti (2023). For those interested in differentiating between these categories, I refer them to that publication.

¹⁰ The notion of self-concept refers to an image of oneself that is relatively stable and includes, according to the individual's belief, their truth about themselves (Turner 2008).

tz (2012:152) argues that by recalling stages and episodes of life during the interview, the narrator expresses the structure of their identity as experienced up to that point and extending into the future. Through the improvised story, it is possible to uncover the biographical processual structures¹¹ that have shaped the narrator's life. The analysis of these structures is carried out not only through the main narrative line¹² but also through statements made later in the conversation. After listening to the life story, the researcher encourages the storyteller to elaborate on certain themes that appeared in the story (or were surprisingly absent) and attempts to clarify any ambiguities. Finally, questions related to the specific research project's goals are asked. The interview is then transcribed in detail and analyzed using a comprehensive sociolinguistic toolkit, the most relevant elements of which will be discussed later in the article. It is salient to note that this approach aims to create theoretical models relating to types of socio-biographical processes (Każmierska and Waniek 2020:145). However, the starting point is case analysis, which is not only one stage of the research procedure but also an independent task. Even a single case allows identifying variants of biographical process connections with the phenomenon being analyzed and the individual entanglement in it, making it potentially theoretically representative.

¹¹ Biographical process structures are the fundamental principles that organize a life history (Schütze 2012:157), "basic forms of biographical experience and orientation toward one's life" (Każmierska and Waniek 2020:105 [trans. AD]). There are four basic process structures—the biographical action scheme, the institutional expectation pattern, the trajectory of suffering, and the biographical metamorphosis—each following an internally ordered course. In a life story, these structures intertwine and do not necessarily occur in their fully realized forms. The analysis of individual experiences takes place primarily on the level of language.

¹² The main narrative line refers to the name of the improvised life story developed in response to the researcher's initial prompt that begins the biographical interview.

Adam's Life History and Some Notes on How It Is Told

I will begin with a brief presentation of the sequence of events in the narrator's life, reconstructed in chronological order. Outlining the general course of Adam's life story primarily serves to provide context for the subsequent analyses and to offer a minimal level of structure. The interviewee was born in a small town in the western part of Poland in the early 2000s. He describes his childhood primarily as a period of growing up alongside his brother and a time when his parents introduced him to literature. After completing lower secondary school in his hometown, Adam decided to attend a high school in a larger city. He presents the resulting three-year period of education outside his original place of residence as a time of the most significant changes in his life, influenced by a new peer environment. Meeting people who did not conform to heteronormative standards enabled Adam to develop his identity linked to his homosexual orientation. These new friends made him feel safe. Partly at their encouragement, Adam returned to running social media profiles focused on books—a practice he had previously abandoned—thus beginning his active participation in the world of bookmedia and establishing connections with other creators within it. After about a year of this activity, he was able to start taking on paid commissions from book publishers, creating and posting promotional content on his profiles. Beginning his university program in cultural studies was accompanied by another move. His choice of a new city was influenced not only by the educational offer but also by the presence of people from the social world of bookmedia in that urban center, as well as the location of a publishing house where Adam had an opportunity to work. During his first year of university, Adam decided

to reduce his involvement in running social media profiles, partly due to conflicts with some members of his audience. In search of new activities to fill the gap created by this decision, he began studying a second cultural studies program.

Before undertaking a detailed discussion of the individual themes signaled in the introductory section, it is salient to note that, methodologically, the analyzed interview can be considered unsuccessful. The account elicited in response to the request to tell a life story is short. Moreover, the narrator announced at the very beginning that he would structure the account around books, which, on the one hand, may signal the biographical significance of literature and, on the other, opens the door to omitting many themes that, for various reasons, the narrator does not want or is unable to share. In the first attempt to present his life story to the researcher, the dominant communication scheme is argumentative.¹³ After this initial response, the researcher manages to prompt Adam to begin his story from the beginning, introducing events that allow for a general understanding of the course of his life. However, most of the themes brought up are still not elaborated upon, and several comments and descriptions are marked by a high degree of vague-

¹³ An essential stage in working on a single case is the formal analysis of the text (Każmierska and Waniek 2020), during which an assessment is made on which communication schemes (narrative, argumentative, or descriptive) dominate the account. Each of these schemes serves specific functions. What is particularly significant, however, is the scheme in which particular pieces of information are recalled. Within the argumentative communication scheme, narrators explain the reasons behind their decisions, offer evaluations of certain events and their life as a whole, and present theories related to their identities or the nature of the social frameworks within which their story unfolds. Although argumentative statements can provide highly valuable insights into their attitudes toward events, the fundamental communication scheme that should predominate in a life story is the narrative. This term refers to utterances in which the sequence of events is recounted (Labov and Waletzky 1967:28).

ness. Fritz Schütze (2008b:33) writes about short and disappointing narrative lines in the following way:

Even a quite short main story line of an autobiographical narrative interview can prove to be very enlightening, since it expresses the sequence and concatenation of biographical process structures (or biographical context) in the most straightforward way. Especially the high points of biographical processes, the changes between biographical processes, i.e., the turning points of biography, and the eclipses of socio-biographical processes are expressed in a quite condensed and sequentially contextualized way during a comparatively laconic presentation of the main story line...However, the more detailed interrogatory parts of the interview which follow after the main story line can give important clarifications—especially regarding severe experiences of suffering or shame, which are not or only elusively dwelt on in the main story line.

The quotation fully applies to the interview with Adam. The brief passages summarizing life events (obtained in both attempts to narrate his life story) are later expanded upon. Furthermore, it becomes possible to identify the references behind argumentative comments that would otherwise remain obscure if taken out of context. That is because Adam uses the same predicates relating to his self-concept in the main narrative line as in his later statements. Juxtaposing the sequences in which a given expression appears leads to uncovering difficult experiences related to the failure to meet social expectations concerning sexual orientation.¹⁴ The two aforementioned attempts to tell his life story, which occur in the interview with Adam, are treated here

¹⁴ Perhaps it is precisely due to these experiences and the lack of full reconciliation with them that the narrator struggles to begin telling the story of his life.

as complementary. Although they introduce different themes, each sheds light on distinct aspects of the narrator's biographical figure. Despite analytical attentiveness and rigor, it is important to note that—among other reasons due to the predominantly argumentative-descriptive nature of the interview and the conditions under which it was conducted¹⁵—some of the analyses offered here should be regarded as one of several possible interpretations of the biographical phenomena discussed and their connections to macrosocial processes.

The Role of Stigma in the Relationship with Parents

One of the most vital axes shaping the narrator's orientation toward himself is his relationship with his parents and place of origin. The significance of family relationships is highlighted by the narrator in the first approach to telling his life story, where he presents his family primarily as the environment that socialized him to love literature. Although this theme is touched upon again in the second part of the story, Adam gives it significant context related to his choice of high school and subsequent education there. The narrator talks about these few years of his life as follows:

So, I come from this (2)¹⁶ / yy it's not a small town but a city that's between Leszno¹⁷ and Zielona Gora, in the

Wielkopolskie voivodeship. And there, I also finished lower secondary school, but then I wanted to go somewhere else, you know, I wanted to move up. So, umm, then I went to high school in a bigger city, actually, in Wielkopolskiem, and I think that's when I really opened up. Also and (2) ((smacking sound)) umm, that allowed me to get to know not just horizons connected with books but also with myself, with finding myself. This world is moving so fast now, and, yeah, umm/ (.) it's very quick, that sometimes I remember, I wasn't always as open as I am now, and I didn't always have that knowledge, those possibilities. So, I'm really grateful, that, y (.) well, to my family, who are very open, who pushed literature on me, sometimes/ maybe not pushed, but encouraged me, showed me different possibilities...So, I kinda moved from that yy small town, then to high school...I was very active, when it came to my school, umm. I also got more into activist, political/ more, I got more into politics, more into my rights. Also, umm, a lot of people, for example, talk about non-binarity as something new, fresh. I already encountered that in high school with my friends...But also, in high school, my bubble was really open, soothing, I felt like myself there. So, yyy (.) yeah, I was really lucky with a lot of people who taught me a lot, recommended, expanded my horizons.¹⁸

From the above quote, we learn that the decision to pursue education outside his hometown became a turning point (Strauss 2013:92), resulting in a significant change in the narrator's identity. It is not entirely clear whether starting a new stage of education involved partially moving out of the house and returning on weekends or if it was more about commuting daily to another city. In a later part of the interview, the narrator mentions that during the

¹⁵ Adam was informed that he was asked to participate in the interview because of his activity in bookmedia, so he may not have wanted to talk about his experiences unrelated to this area. That provides an alternative interpretation to the arguments presented later in the discussion.

¹⁶ The transcription of the quotes was made according to the following rules: (2) indicates the length of a pause; (.)—a pause lasting up to one second; / stands for an interrupted statement; underscore—words pronounced with particular emphasis; (()) represents a comment on the transcription; ... stands for deleted fragments.

¹⁷ All geographical names and other proper names have been anonymized.

¹⁸ Due to the volume of the material, parts of the narrator's argumentative statements and the subsequent narrative relating to bookmedia and studies have been omitted.

pandemic, he stayed in the city where his school was located, which might suggest the first option. The issues related to the desire to *move up* were not elaborated upon. Regardless, it can be stated that one of the conditions for the turning point was the change of environment, possibly also reinforced by temporary distance from his family. The narrator says that it was the high school period that helped him in *finding* himself. He also notices a change in his self-perception. The difference between who he was then and who he is now mainly lies in being *open*. The term “open” is used repeatedly by Adam, referencing both himself and others. Later in the interview, this word is used to describe the mental state that allowed him to communicate his sexual orientation to his parents. In the interview, the term “open” seems to function as a predicate for experiences related to the development of a non-heterosexual identity and the anxiety stemming from a sense of difference. Thus, the turning point, in which Adam had the opportunity to “see things in a new light” (Strauss 2013:92 [trans. AD]), reshaped his identity concerning his relationship to his sexual orientation. After commenting on his transformation, the narrator expresses gratitude toward his family and then expands on his high school experience, which I will return to later.

Both in the quoted statement above and throughout the entire interview, the narrator emphasizes the extremely positive significance of his family for his development and declares that he received tremendous support from them. These declarations also appear when Adam is directly asked by the interviewer about his relationship with his parents:

I have very open parents, I have very tolerant parents, very smart, who/ whom I’m a fan of...Same with music, with rock, with festivals, uh, once Woodstock,

now Poland Rock. I have very festival-like parents, uh, we often go together. Recently, from the things we did together, maybe it was Aerosmith that we went to. Um, so (.) it’s great that I have such an open family and I’m also very lucky because mm, I also don’t hide this, it’s not any secret/ I don’t always bring it to the forefront because I believe that also a person isn’t just their uh sexual orientation or gender identity because I am a queer person. There was a lot of acceptance here, a lot of support. Uh, and that’s great. I’m very happy about that. I have a lot of privilege, I/ I’m very lucky, and I want to experience that luck and that kind of acceptance too. I also think that in my media ((swallowing)) I give such a signal.

This fragment initially appears to describe an ideal relationship between a child who does not meet societal expectations regarding sexual orientation¹⁹ and their parents. However, further analysis of the excerpt and other parts of the interview raises doubts about how Adam’s biographical experience aligns with the vision he describes.

Queer identity (or *openness*) and relationships with family coexist in both of the excerpts cited so far. It is precisely in response to a question about his relationship with his parents that the narrator first reveals his sexual orientation during the interview, leading to a shift from a suspected to an open context of awareness²⁰ in the interaction between the re-

¹⁹ Although in this quote (as well as throughout most of the interview), Adam uses the term “queer person,” it later becomes clear that, in his case, the experience of queerness is linked to sexual orientation. I will elaborate on the issue of queerness further in the following part of the article.

²⁰ The context of awareness is related to the information that the participants in the interaction possess about each other’s identities and what each party thinks the other knows about them. In an open context, participants are clear about their identities and about the other’s awareness of those identities. In a suspected context, at least one of the participants in the interaction suspects (but is not certain) what the true identity

searcher and the participant. The stigma of non-heteronormativity does not render the possessor discredited but only discreditable. This means that the problematic attribute is not immediately visible, and the individual can manage its visibility, knowing it might be seen as socially undesirable (Goffman 2005). While the “intrusiveness” of the stigma of non-heteronormativity seems to have decreased over the years, the narrator’s reluctance or hesitation to disclose his identity is particularly understandable in the Polish context.²¹ Managing the visibility of stigma is an utterly salient issue for Adam. The narrator did not explicitly tell his parents about his sexual orientation but merely signaled it by mentioning his time spent in gay clubs and meetings with a boyfriend.²² Adam treats the acceptance of these indirect references as sufficient.

Statements regarding both relationships with parents and one’s sexual orientation or queerness have been formulated in an argumentative or descriptive communication scheme, which may indicate a biographical unprocessedness of the experiences related to

of the other participant is or what their view is on the identity of the first participant (Glaser and Strauss 2008:286).

²¹ Poland regularly ranks last among European Union countries in the “Rainbow Europe” ranking compiled by the International Lesbian and Gay Association. The study includes factors such as legally guaranteed equality regardless of sexual orientation, anti-discrimination laws, legal protection for same-sex unions, reproductive rights, the occurrence of hate speech, and freedom to engage in civil actions (ILGA 2024). Queer individuals in Poland not only receive no support from the state but are also portrayed in public discourses as a threat to Polish culture (Korolczuk 2020), although the situation is changing since the right-wing party Law and Justice lost its parliamentary majority (Smietana 2024).

²² Avoiding conversations about sexual orientation while simultaneously ensuring that close individuals are aware of it is a common strategy for coping with the problematic nature of one’s identity. In Poland, this is primarily used by older lesbians and gay men (Mizielńska, Struzik, and Król 2023). For younger individuals from a younger generation, the lack of open discussions about sexual orientation is felt as a lack of support from the family (Mizielńska and Stasińska 2017).

them. In other words, they have not been worked on properly. Biographical work refers to the efforts undertaken to organize past life events and make them meaningful in relation to one’s development. It also encompasses the process in which an individual makes decisions regarding future actions that would most support the development of the shaping biographical whole (Schütze 2012:160). Although arguments play a vital role in the linguistic presentation of identity development, they should support the narrative. As Fritz Schütze (2008a:173) writes:

The communicative scheme of extempore narration is the most elementary means to focus on, to present and to understand the flow of events making up the smaller and greater changes of one’s (everyday and biographical) life, and these changes are very deeply connected with—sometimes more and sometimes less decisive—historical changes of one’s social surroundings.

The lack of references to events shaping relationships with parents and to the “moral career” related to sexual orientation (Goffman 2005:66) constitutes a significant marker of unfinished biographical work around these two issues and their intersection.²³ A notable point here is Adam’s very young age. The fact that certain problematic identity issues have not been anchored in deeper reflection on the course of his life so far may be related to the relatively short passage of time that has not allowed him to deal with difficult experiences. However, the linguistic strategies involving, among other things, retreating into arguments and descriptions may suggest that Adam is attempting to conceal the pain of certain events, not only in front of the researcher

²³ The biographical thread of Adam’s work around sexual orientation and its connection with process structures and contexts of awareness in relation to his parents mirrors the case of Marco, discussed by Katarzyna Waniek (2021).

but also in front of himself, which would prevent him from working through them.

The previously mentioned turning point, which occurred during Adam's high school years, happened in his biography not only because of the distance from his previous environment but also because of the people he met in his new school. In the first interview excerpt, he describes his friends as *open* and *soothing*, with whom he feels like himself. Adam talks about the political and activist interests that emerged at that time, concerning his rights, as well as the fact that some of his friends were non-binary. In one of his statements, he mentions that it was the people he met during this period of his life (along with other creators from the bookmedia world) who make up his *found family*, which he places on par with his biological family.²⁴ It is probably with them that Adam has the opportunity to test his identity, without the fear of being discovered by his family.²⁵ Their acceptance leads to a positive evaluation of the possibility of continuing to present himself in this way. Importantly, the narrator also announces in the mentioned excerpt his actions around representation and advocacy for queer people, which he undertakes on his social media profiles. While the issue of queerness hardly appears in the narrative communication scheme, Adam, since the moment he revealed his identity, often refers to it in his arguments and formulates several comments about the essence of this phenomenon, one example of which is the following excerpt:

Queer is also (.) something that goes beyond the norm, it's not something you can (.) just put in a drawer. Recently, a friend of mine said something really cool: that he didn't come out of the closet just to let himself be put back in some drawer.

The metaphor of queerness used by Adam aligns with the understanding of this category by theorists who contributed to solidifying the communities functioning under this label. The term "queer" allows different groups of individuals who do not fit into heterosexual expectations regarding sexual orientation and gender to unite. Sexuality is often understood as something fixed, while queer signifies movement, change, and everything that is "in-between" (Sedgwick 1993:8). Queer theorists emphasize that this concept not only gathers people interested in a common goal but also aims to denaturalize the very categories of sexuality and gender, even leading to the perception of these categories as limiting and threatening individual freedom (Jagose 1997). Alexander Doty (1993) states that queer also carries hope—and perhaps even a mission—of ending heterosexual hegemony, which is only possible through the implementation of a concept that does not follow the regimes of knowledge (such as the rigidity of categories related to sexuality) underlying them but transcends them. Despite the revolutionary potential and ambition inherent in the concept of queerness, non-heterosexual individuals function within heteronormative societies and are subject to the influence of their institutions, which provide the social framework for their experiences (Green 2002). In Adam's case, while he is somewhat familiar with the assumptions of queer theory, this understanding does not become linguistically embedded in concrete experiences that would be integrated into the biographical whole, typically expressed in spontaneous narration. Perhaps its de-

²⁴ The introduction of the concept of a found family by the narrator serves as another reason why it seems that his relationships with his parents are less than ideal compared to what Adam would like them to be.

²⁵ Erving Goffman argued that homosexual individuals, by managing the visibility of their stigma, take actions to protect themselves from having the problematic attribute discovered by family members (2005:90).

naturalizing and, therefore, complex nature makes it difficult to perform the biographical work.

The Social World of Bookmedia and Social Media Activity

The development of the narrator's non-heterosexual identity is realized, among other things, through his literary passion. In response to a question about changes in his literary tastes, Adam primarily refers to novels focused on same-sex romantic relationships. These books had particular significance during his teenage years because they presented Adam with an alternative model to the heteronormative one and offered ways to realize an identity related to homosexuality. The narrator sees the growing number of books with such representations targeted at young readers as carrying hope for the popularization of alternative ways of life. In contrast, Adam criticizes the portrayal of queer identities in mass media, stating that such representations exploit the minority for financial gain.²⁶ In the case of the publishing industry, Adam seems not to pay attention to the market-driven conditions of its functioning,²⁷ remaining enchanted by the world associated with it.

In both approaches to telling his life story, the narrator embraces literature not only as an object of individual passion but also as a part of group actions that have many dimensions:

²⁶ Researchers point out that the actions of corporations (including media and film conglomerates) are primarily focused on profit. The queer community is a niche consumer group that needs to be "catered to" (Guidotto 2006), often merely attracting its attention with the promise of queer representation that ultimately remains unfulfilled (Woods and Hardman 2022).

²⁷ One of the ways to distinguish books from other commodities is by attributing them with transformational value, allowing for the exploration of various aspects of human experience (Wright 2005). Adam presents the transformational value of books by referencing the possibility of seeing himself in non-heteronormative characters.

It just somehow drew me toward cultural studies, where I'm now in my second year (.) with a literature specialization, so I'm constantly creating myself around this bubble. Umm, I sometimes say it's like a sect because, well, sometimes it's just that both the friends from this circle and I work and engage in this circle, and I'm studying in it.

Then I ended up in Wrocław, which is also simply a unique city, yyy one of a kind, where I feel safe, where I feel understood, and where a large part of the publishing world is, not only (.) business-wise because here are also some of the biggest publishing houses, umm, Publishing House A, Publishing House B, but also this book space, the book influencers. There are quite a few of them here, my friends personally. Well, we also know each other from work because/ it's also nice that many of these people who started their work, I mean, started with passion (.) working in book media, later found themselves in these publishing houses and they bring freshness, so I'm glad I can meet with people who are shaping this market, who have fresh ideas, and from whom I can get support. For example, when I have some, umm (.) I don't know, some sadness inside or some problem. They understand me, which is great because I can have these people around me.

Activities related to books organize the narrator's life. Studies, work in publishing, creating content on social media, and friendships—these areas have been organized in such a way that they create a "bundle of activities" (Strauss 1991:236) within the social world²⁸ surrounding literature.²⁹ Adam is particularly engaged in its subworld,

²⁸ Adele Clarke (1991:131) defines social worlds as "groups with shared commitments to certain activities, sharing resources of many kinds to achieve their goals, and building shared ideologies about how to go about their business."

²⁹ Adam participates primarily in activities related to the promotion, publishing, and consumption of books.

which emerged as a result of the advent of new technology³⁰ that allows for the promotion of reading and the exchange of impressions from books. This subworld is associated with producing and consuming content related to books on social media. In the narrator's statements, it is referred to as bookmedia.

Adam does not recount how his involvement in the bookmedia subworld originated and developed when asked to tell his life story. However, later on, the researcher's questions stimulate the narrative, based on which it is possible to trace the course of events related to running social media accounts. Adam's profiles gained enough popularity to allow him to earn money by posting advertising content aimed at his audience. The narrator began his bookmedia journey during his lower secondary school years when he created an Instagram account for book reviews. However, he paused this activity, and in the summer before his first year of high school, he deleted his account. Later, he wondered whether to return to publishing on social media and started consulting it with his friends. He received not only approval but also support in the form of sharing his first posts. Adam began by posting on Instagram and later created an account on TikTok³¹ as well. On this platform, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, he hosted nearly daily live streams for three months, during which he talked about books. The narrator also mentions the initiatives he took with other creators and

the awards he received for his work. For a time, this world completely "consumed" him (Strauss 2012:476). The account of these events is complemented by descriptions of interaction scenes with high school friends, other bookmedia creators, and his audience. After a while, Adam decided to reduce his involvement in the bookmedia social world. One of the reasons for this decision is negative interactions with his audience.

The Concept of Self in Interactions with the Audience

An important context for Adam's interactions with his audience is the fact that the narrator openly presents himself on social media as someone with a non-heteronormative identity. Additionally, his ambitions include educational and activist efforts regarding queerness, which he directly informs the researcher about after revealing his stigma. Mentions of the awareness of the need to fight for his rights also appear in his spontaneous narrative when retelling his life story. The narrator presents himself as someone with the knowledge necessary to carry out such actions. He wants to be an advocate for his minority group. In his statements, Adam refers several times to two public figures who serve as his role models. Both are homosexual men who are experts in the field of culture and provide media representation for those bearing the stigma associated with sexual orientation. It seems that these figures set the standards for Adam's achievements. They also influence his concept of self (Turner 2008), which has been shaped by ideological ideas about the possible outcomes of his actions. Adam sees himself as someone who is carrying out a mission for the emancipation of people with non-heteronormative sexual orientations. However, this concept of self is threatened.

³⁰ In this context, the term can be understood in two ways: technology in its everyday meaning, as well as "ways of performing actions of social worlds" (Strauss 1991:236).

³¹ In the context of this platform, there is talk of a new phenomenon that leads to an increase in reading among young people and influences the marketing strategies of publishing houses concerning young adult literature (Zajaczkowska 2024:175).

When discussing his activities in bookmedia, the narrator becomes aware of accusations made by several people watching the content posted on his TikTok profile. These accusations can be divided into two categories. The first includes comments attempting to question how much of his online popularity is due to his efforts. According to these voices, Adam's reach is not a result of hard work but rather his minority status: his queer identity and gender (with women dominating the bookmedia world). According to those making such accusations, both attributes are seen as bait to attract viewers' attention. The second category of accusations includes allegations of homophobic attitudes, manifested in the use of a term describing homosexual men that is considered offensive. The narrator attempted to explain that, as a person belonging to the group to which the term applies, he has the right to use it.³² He considers attempts to forbid him from using it a result of an outrageously ignorant lack of knowledge. Although these accusations did not constitute a massive attack, the situations in which they arose were particularly painful for Adam. His activity in bookmedia was focused on his identity (Turner 2008:279) and served as a form of seeking recognition. For this reason, within his interactions with the audience, the narrator was constantly sensitive to the emerging images that could either confirm or refute his developing beliefs about himself and his future possibilities.³³ The emergence of an image of himself inconsistent with his concept of self led Adam to take corrective actions aimed at reducing this dissonance and maintaining a positive image in front of others and himself. Tem-

porarily, the narrator stopped posting on TikTok, where the critics had come from. Later, he returned to posting there but refrained from monetizing his content.³⁴ At the time of the interview, Adam was still earning money from his bookmedia activities but he was only publishing promotional materials on Instagram.³⁵

At this point, it is essential to return to the issue of Adam's sexual orientation in relation to his parents, specifically the lack of open conversations about it, which is probably one of the reasons why this area of biographical work has not been completed. The narrator's identity functions in a completely different way on social media, where his sexual orientation is not only mentioned but also widely discussed. Erving Goffman writes that stigma, as a "highly discrediting attribute," always functions in specific relationships (Goffman 2005:33). This same attribute may function in very different ways for different people: what may be considered a stigma by some can be completely normal or even elevating for others.³⁶ While in his relationship with his parents, the narrator has not managed to transition into a fully open context regarding his sexual orientation, in the online space, this may make Adam appear as someone interesting, exceptional, and with much to offer to the audience.³⁷

³⁴ One of the challenges faced by influencers is finding the right balance in the amount of sponsored content they can post without being accused by their audience of lacking authenticity and focusing solely on financial gain (Hund 2023).

³⁵ There are significant differences in the ways of self-presentation across different social media platforms (Scolere, Pruchniewska, and Duffy 2018).

³⁶ Goffman provides an example of higher education, which, in some contexts, is concealed (Goffman 2005:33).

³⁷ The issue of whether Adam's parents watch his content is not determinable based on the interview. Even if they regularly followed the content he published, it does not translate into having in-depth conversations about his sexual orientation.

³² Argumentation presented by Adam is based on the principles of language described by Erving Goffman (2005:62-63).

³³ The issue of being attentive to the reactions of the audience could also be considered in terms of the dependence of influencers on their audience and the necessity to adapt to its expectations (Senft 2008).

The Problem of Commodifying Queerness

During the interview, the narrator reflects on the connection between his non-heterosexual identity and the attention he has managed to gain:

And also, um, a lot of people tried to discredit it, saying that I achieved something not through my hard work but just because I'm a guy. Well, it's clear that this is some kind of advantage in this community, right? Because I'm in the minority, I can attract attention. I'm also that sort of (.) stereotypical Netflix (.) um, I mean, I'm a stereotype created partly by Netflix, of a gay friend, right? Who is very friendly, pleasant, someone you can feel safe around. I think I also gave that sense of safety, so people were drawn to me.

In this statement, Adam refers to the phenomenon of Netflix—a streaming platform particularly known for producing queer TV shows (Bradbury-Rance 2023). He mentions how his similarity to the homosexual characters in these shows arises from possessing traits that can fulfill certain needs of the audience. His non-heteronormative identity forms the basis for building relationships with other social media users with similar experiences.³⁸ This quoted fragment appears directly after the first mention of

³⁸ A common practice among influencers, especially in Western contexts, is to share their stories of discovering and revealing their sexual orientation to others (Lovelock 2017; Abidin 2019). This offers a form of self-realization that others can follow. Revealing intimate details provides influencers with a sense of authenticity, which is crucial for gaining an audience. Queer influencers often attract niche audiences. As a result, collaborating with them is valuable for companies looking to advertise their products to a specific demographic (Kozinets et al. 2023). However, queer creators must remain cautious and carefully balance engaging in lucrative collaborations with publishing content that is perceived as more authentic and not commercially driven. They can easily lose the support of their community if it becomes apparent that their involvement with queer identity was leveraged for financial gain (Raun 2018).

the accusations Adam has faced. It thus serves as a response, reflecting on how some aspects of these accusations might be justified. In later utterances, Adam discusses the functioning of non-heterosexual representation in mass media, highlighting its exploitative nature. He indirectly refers to his right to be a spokesperson for this group. According to him, this right stems from two factors. First, he is a person with an authentically homosexual identity, and second, he has a deep knowledge of the history of the queer movement. Adam tries to justify the accusations he faces by pointing to the commodification³⁹ of queerness, which happens, among other places, in the media. From Adam's perspective, those accusing him of using his orientation as a tool for gaining audience attention lack the resources to distinguish his actions from the exploitative practices of media corporations. However, the issue with publicizing one's image on social media is that it begins to function in an area of extremely high commercialization. Establishing relationships with the audience can happen when a creator presents themselves as someone with traits or skills that potential viewers find interesting and are willing to exchange their attention and time for. What traits are perceived this way, however, has a cultural basis. In Adam's case, his sexual orientation becomes a resource, the value of which is partially determined by macro-processes related to the commodification of queerness (Guidotto 2006).

Biographical Process Structures and Adam's Influencer Activity

Referring to the beginning of his social media activity, Adam primarily describes his experiences using language characteristic of a biographical ac-

³⁹ This category does not have an *emic* character.

tion scheme.⁴⁰ He uses expressions that signal intentionality and recounts interactions and dialogues in which he calculated the possible next steps. This biographical action scheme emerges as the dominant structure in Adam's engagement with the social world of literature. When asked about his plans, Adam declares his wish to become someone connected to culture—an expert in his field, someone who “talks about it [about culture].” At the time of the interview, his ambitions were not directly tied to a career as an influencer. Instead, his planned path of development was more connected to his university studies. For him, social media activity primarily offers an opportunity to immerse himself in the literary world and to test his skills in reviewing books. To talk about culture, an audience is needed. For Adam, building relationships with audiences through book-media profiles is a good starting point for gathering his future listeners.

However, to succeed in his desired area, Adam will have to undergo biographical work that can help him develop resilience against negative audience feedback. His partial withdrawal from social media was, among other things, a result of the fact that the accusations he faced concerned an area of experience that he has not yet worked through. Moreover, it appears he does not yet allow himself to consider that this area might require such work. His non-heteronormative sexual identity is linked to painful experiences that have not yet been integrated into his biographical whole. At the same time, these experiences carry metamorphic⁴¹ potential for the

narrator's biography. Going through this process of metamorphosis could perhaps lead Adam to become a spokesperson for the homosexual minority, one who acts based on a deep understanding of the needs of that community. However, this metamorphosis appears to be stalled—likely due to the lack of an open context in his interactions with his parents regarding his sexuality. There also seems to be a need for deeper reflection on his entanglement in the commodification of queerness in social media spaces. Paradoxically, Adam's online activity centered on his sexual orientation may hinder his ability to do the necessary biographical work. Prematurely assuming the role of educator and activist reinforces the impression that the narrator's homosexuality no longer requires further reflection. An excessive focus on the role of the family in shaping his passion for literature may lead to the same conclusion.

Summary

Adam is an example of a person who becomes a successful influencer at a very young age. His case demonstrates the active role of the audience in shaping how internet creators perceive themselves. Adam seems particularly vulnerable to the impact of criticism directed at him in the virtual space. This vulnerability may arise, among other things, from the fact that he is still at the threshold of adulthood and has not yet established a solid identity. Another reason likely lies in the absence of a thorough biographical work surrounding difficult experiences related to the sense of alienation concerning the heteronormative model (represented, among other things, by his parents) that governs the world he was socialized into. At the same time, Adam's case presents the many social entanglements of sexual orientation, which may carry the potential

⁴⁰ The biographical action scheme is a process structure expressing an individual's plans through which they shape their life—often rooted in their passions and interests. Within this structure, the individual engages in intentional actions aimed at achieving a defined goal (Schütze 2012:157).

⁴¹ Metamorphosis is a process structure within which an individual discovers previously unknown potential, initially feeling lost and gradually developing new skills.

for creative metamorphosis, function as a stigma whose visibility requires management, or be treated as a commodity for exchange in social media. For a long time, the narrator treated his social media channels as a space for actions he perceived as advocacy for his minority, but reactions from some members of the audience led to the suspension of this activity and a change in the management of the commodification of his content.

The interview with Adam highlights the connection between social media and extensive social worlds, such as the literary world, or specifically, bookmedia, in his case. Many of the activities within this subworld extend beyond the internet, and it is also possible to function within spaces entirely unrelated to social media but focused on literature. The

social world at the core of which Adam belongs is a source of his values and life aspirations. The narrator primarily functions in environments that lie at the intersection of the literary and queer worlds, seemingly enchanted by them. This, perhaps excessive, enchantment sometimes hinders his critical perspective on certain conditions of their activities, such as the market-driven nature of some bookmedia practices. Much suggests that Adam will continue to pursue his development within a biographical action scheme, in line with aspirations naturally forged through participation in the intersection of two worlds tied to his essential identifications. Although the narrator's plans could be carried out independently of social media, it was the start of his influencer activity that allowed him to fully participate in the literary social world.

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