

## **What are the functions of online relationships in communities on Instagram?**

In today's society social media platforms and the opportunities to connect on them are highly valued. Especially when it comes to topics such as political education, lifestyles or illnesses, people are increasingly looking for support on social media and communities located there. These communities offer them a safe space and support, which is partly not to be found in the "offline world". Some of these communities form around an influencer, who then takes on a special role and forms a hitherto little researched form of relationship with the other group members - in this case called followers.

With our research we seek to better understand which relationships exist in such communities on Instagram between an influencer and his/her followers and which functions they fulfil. A particular focus here is on the reciprocity of the relationship. In addition, the relationships among the followers within the community will be examined more closely. A distinction is made here according to the type of participation in the community.

The hypothesis arises that due to social identity processes, shared norms and the feeling of appreciation and belonging to a group, the followers around an influencer form a community that perceives itself as such and actively interacts with each other. Whether the influencer takes on a special central role in the community and acts as an opinion leader because he or she is considered to be particularly competent will be investigated. In doing so, we will also consider the extent to which influencers utilize emotional labour and, in particular, deep acting in order to claim a central role and whether influencers and followers perceive their relationship as being on (alleged) equal terms and reciprocal.

To examine these hypotheses, a community on Instagram is surveyed using a partially standardized questionnaire. This community is identified by its thematic orientation with regard to the sustainability lifestyle as well as its size according to the number of followers (micro-influencers).