#unfollow on Instagram –
Factors that have an impact on the decision to unfollow public figures

Liv Tasja Oßwald

Institute of Communication Science, University of Hohenheim, Stuttgart, Germany, August 2020

Carolin Werning

Institute of Communication Science, University of Hohenheim, Stuttgart, Germany, August 2020

Abstract:

The social media platform Instagram allows users to subscribe to various people from their immediate circle of acquaintances or to follow public figures. Recent research has identified reasons concerning the discontinuance of social media use and the unfollowing behaviour on certain social media platforms. However, little is known about the unfollowing behaviour on Instagram and what causes users to unfollow public figures in particular. This study was the first trying to find out what factors influence users between the ages of 20 and 29 years of age to unfollow public figures. To this end, a total of nine qualitative guideline interviews were conducted with users recruited via Instagram. The interviews were analysed by means of an summary qualitative content analysis. Thereby, a total of eleven factors could be identified. The first factor relates to the negative feelings that arise when the content is received. The second and third factor relates to the public figure: behaviour and communication. The fourth, fifth and sixth factor relates to the frequency of posts, stories and the same content. The seventh, eighth, ninth, tenth and eleventh factor relates to content, but in different aspects: advertising, design, lack of identification, unfulfilled expectations and changes.

1. Introduction

Every day, millions of Instagram users scroll through their timeline, view stories or post content themselves. With more than one billion monthly users worldwide (We Are Social, Hootsuite & DataReportal, 2019), this social media platform offers them as private individuals, but also as public figures, the opportunity to interact with other users. Studies on the motivation to use Instagram show that not only family, friends and acquaintances, but also public figures and brand fan pages are gladly followed (Tang, Chen & Gillenson, 2019). For many users, this is a chance to get a supposed insight into the lives of their role models. They can follow the everyday life of their role model, receive first-hand information about private or professional life and know which products the public figure is promoting by following him or her on Instagram and subscribing to his or her channel. Therefore, it's not surprising that the accounts on Instagram with the most subscribers are among public figures: the football star Cristiano Ronaldo (205 Mio. Follower), the singer Ariana Grande (176 Mio. Follower) or the actor Dwayne "the Rock" Johnson (173 Mio. Follower).

Public figures are defined as "[…] well known individuals who receive excessive public attention, typically for their involvement in entertainment or sport. [They] are prevalent in all forms of media, from magazines and television to Facebook and Instagram." (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016, p. 37).

But over and over again it happens that public figures lose followers. But what is the reason for this? Many studies have so far dealt with the discontinuance of social media use in general (Maier, Laumer, Weinert & Weitzel, 2015; Zhang, Zhao, Lu & Yang, 2016; Cao & Sun, 2018; Nawaz, Shah, Nawaz, Asmi, Hassan & Raza, 2018) or with unfollowing behaviour on other social media platforms (Xu, Huang, Kwak & Contractor, 2013; Maity, Gajula & Mukherjee, 2018; Jeong, Zo, Lee & Ceran, 2019; Youn & Kim, 2019; Zhang, Ma, Zhang, Ding & Yang, 2019). Results also show that Instagram use has negative consequences such as dissatisfaction, negative mood (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016) or reduced self-esteem (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015) when viewing the images. But are these the reasons for the unfollowing behaviour?

Yet, no study has looked at the reasons why users unfollow public figures on Instagram. Therefore, in this study we interviewed Instagram users between the ages of 20 and 29 years to understand their reasons to unfollow public figures on Instagram and to enhance the existing research findings regarding unfollowing behaviour.

2. Literature review

2.1 Instagram use and consequences

The social media platform Instagram, unlike Facebook or Twitter, places images at the center of the posts. The concept promotes the need to perfectly stage oneself or one's own lifestyle. In recent years, the daily usage time has increased from 90 minutes in 2012 to 138 minutes in 2018 (GlobalwebIndex, 2018).

The increasing usage and reception of the often perfectly staged images also arouse the interest of recent research. The users are confronted with different contents, which do not necessarily have a positive effect. The images trigger social upward comparisons among the recipients, which in turn have a negative impact on mood and satisfaction.

2.1.1 Social Comparison

The theory of social comparison was developed by Festinger (1954) and states that people have an innate drive to compare themselves with others in terms of abilities, opinions and appearance. The information drawn from the comparisons is used to experience one's own possibilities and limitations but can also have negative effects such as depression (Hwang, 2019). A distinction is made between upward and downward social comparisons (Schemer, 2007). Comparisons with people from the direct environment are called horizontal comparisons and occur most frequently. However, comparisons are also made with fictional and/or real media persons (Hoffmann, 2018). Thus, in relation to Instagram, an upward social comparison takes place if, for example, a person feels less attractive when looking at a picture than the person shown in the picture.

Hwang (2019) examines the different types of social comparisons (upward, downward and horizontal) and their effect on depressed mood. The results show that the activities of users on Instagram lead to social comparisons, especially upward comparisons. These upward comparisons, in turn, lead to more depressed mood, whereas downward comparisons reduce depressive mood. Instagram use does not necessarily lead to depressed mood, but the social comparisons that take place mediate the effect. While Hwang (2019) examines social comparisons in general in relation to other people, Brown and Tiggemann (2016) distinguish between attractive celebrities and attractive peers. For example, women have a higher level of negative mood and dissatisfaction with their own bodies after viewing Instagram images of attractive celebrities and attractive peers than after viewing travel images. The effects of the images on negative mood and dissatisfaction with one's own body are mediated by means of appearance comparisons (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016). Even though there is no difference

between celebrities and peers in their research, Brown and Tiggemann (2016) point out the role of celebrities in the media and the attention they attract to the person.

Further findings indicate negative effects of social comparisons, triggered by viewing Instagram images. Such are negative effects on men's satisfaction with their own bodies (Fatt, Fardouly & Rapee, 2019), their own body perception as well as their self-esteem (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015) and self-confidence (Slater, Varsani & Diedrichs, 2017). The negative effects of Instagram use, caused by social comparisons, can be reduced by taking a break from usage. Fioravanti, Prostamo and Casale (2020) show in their study that a one-week break in usage has a positive effect on women's subjective well-being compared to women who continued to use Instagram during that week. Especially women who show a tendency to social comparisons in terms of appearance show an increase in positive affect within this week. Affect is one of the two dimensions of subjective well-being and can be divided into positive and negative affect. Positive affect includes feelings and experiences that are relatively unstable, such as joy, flow, happiness and ecstasy (Diener, Suh, Lucas & Smith, 1999).

The results show that social comparisons caused by Instagram usage can have negative effects on the users. By not using or taking a break from Instagram for a while or social media platforms in general the effects can be reduced. In particular, users who are prone to social comparisons may benefit from these breaks. Unfollowing a particular person could be similar to the break or short pause as mentioned before.

2.2 Unfollow on social media

So far, there are hardly any studies that examine why users on social media platforms unfollow other users. Studies have mainly dealt with the question of why users stop using social media platforms in general (Maier et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2016; Cao & Sun, 2018; Nawaz et al., 2018). The results show that there is a perceived overload. An overload of information, knowledge, communication or social and, in some cases, technology overload, which exceeds an individual's ability to deal with it. In response to this overload, users show social network fatigue (Zhang et al., 2016) or exhaustion (Cao & Sun, 2018; Maier et al., 2015).

Zhang et al. (2016) define social network fatigue as "negative emotional reactions to social network activities, such as tiredness, boredom, burnout, indifference, and lower interest" (Zhang et al., 2016, p. 906). In the end, users have the intention to stop using social media

(Zhang et al., 2016; Maier et al., 2015). However, social overload, information overload and Social Network Site exhaustion also lead to a higher level of regret and dissatisfaction, whereby regret in particular has a direct influence on the intention to stop (Nawaz et al., 2018).

Which factors lead to unfollow someone has so far been investigated primarily with regard to the social media platform Twitter. Maity et al. (2018) examine the content of posts on Twitter from users who lose followers and find several factors related to the content and the language used in the posts. Xu et al. (2013) focus on the characteristics of the relationships between Twitter users and the resulting unfollow behaviour.

2.2.1 Social Exchange Theory

Zhang et al. (2019) investigate social media users unfollow intentions based on the social exchange theory (SET) in relation to the social media platform WeChat. SET considers individual behaviour and interpersonal communication from a cost-benefit perspective. Individuals compare the subjectively perceived benefits with the subjectively perceived costs of behaviour such as social exchange. Social exchange between individuals refers to the exchange of intangible social costs and expected benefits such as knowledge, respect and friendship and is based on social attractiveness: Only if both persons benefit from the exchange and thus have a benefit, they will continue to exchange with each other (Gefen & Ridings, 2002).

The perceived costs can be divided into actual costs and opportunity costs. Actual costs are the time and effort a person spends, whereas opportunity costs include the opportunities a person misses to enjoy time with family and friends and uses social media instead. Since WeChat users want to obtain knowledge and information via the platform, for Zhang et al. (2019) knowledge and information represent the perceived benefits. On the one hand, the results of the study show that the actual costs have a greater positive influence on the intentions of the users than the opportunity costs. Thus, WeChat users will unfollow if they perceive high actual and opportunity costs. On the other hand, the intention to unfollow is reduced if the users perceive the information as increasingly useful (Zhang et al., 2019).

2.2.2 Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Social media platforms like Instagram allow users to openly communicate their ideas, opinions and information, which ultimately leads to a perceived heterogeneity. As a result, users may come into contact with content that does not correspond to their own opinions and

thus experience dissonance (Jeong et al., 2019). According to the Cognitive Dissonance Theory (CDT), individuals strive for a balance in their cognitive system, which occurs when cognitions that are linked to one another in terms of content are consistent and free of contradictions. When cognitions are inconsistent, individuals experience this cognitive dissonance as psychologically unpleasant and feel the need to reduce it (Festinger, 1957). One possibility of reduction is to change behaviour, whereby individuals avoid perceiving the heterogeneous opinions. This avoidance behaviour is called selective exposure. With regard to Facebook, Jeong et al. (2019) show that users implement selective exposure by unfriending a person or hiding posts. In this context, hiding is used rather than unfriending, because unfriending is perceived as a more extreme and consistent strategy (Pena & Brody, 2014). On the social media platform Instagram, the unfriending function corresponds to the unfollow function.

2.2.3 Psychological Reactance Theory

Users of social media also show an unfollowing behaviour in connection with the Psychological Reactance Theory (PRT) as a reaction to so-called native advertising.

Social media platforms are used for personalised advertising (social media advertising), which draws the attention of users to specific brands and products. In order to avoid rejection and make the advertising less obvious, advertising content is increasingly designed as editorial content and is only identified as advertising by the addition of the word "sponsored" (Evans, Phua, Lim & Jun, 2017; Wojdynski 2016). But even the placement of this so-called native advertising involves rejection and reactance (Wojdynski, 2016). If users recognise the manipulative intention of the advertising, they critically examine it and counter the manipulation with negative feelings or attitudes (van Reijmersdal, Lammers, Rozendaal & Buijzen, 2015). PRT explains this reaction: individuals feel reactance when their freedom to behave in a certain way is threatened by attempts of persuasion. The motivational arousal aims to restore the threatened freedom and prevent further threats by the individual resisting or reacting against the persuasion attempts (Brehm & Brehm, 1981). Youn and Kim (2019) examine young adults aged 18 to 29 in relation to native Facebook ads in the feed and ask them about their reaction to the ads. Reactance manifests itself in two types of reactions: cognitive and behavioral. The cognitive responses include scrolling, turning out or ignoring and therefore are more passive, whereas the behavioural responses include blocking, hiding or unfollowing and therefore are more active (Youn & Kim, 2019).

2.2.4 Unfollow brand fan pages

Another form of advertising are brand fan pages: Companies use social media platforms to build a relationship with their customers via brand fan pages. However, customers also partly unfollow these brand fan pages, which Tang et al. (2019) take as an opportunity to investigate the underlying motivations for unfollowing them. In a qualitative and a subsequent quantitative study, they identify five categories: dissatisfaction with information quality, dissatisfaction with service quality, expection disconfirmation, interest shift and person brand unfit, with expectation disconfirmation having the greatest influence on the intention to unfollow.

2.3 Research aims of this study

The overview of the studies on the use of Instagram and the resulting consequences but also on the discontinuance of social media use and the underlying causes, show that research in these areas has already gained some insights. However, studies on the reasons for unfollowing public figures are sometimes lacking in relation to Instagram and only refer to the unfollowing of brand fan pages. The reasons for unfollowing public figures have not been studied yet. The results of research on unfollowing behaviour in relation to other social media platforms so far suggest a connection with social comparisons, social exchange, cognitive dissonance and reactance. The aim of this study is to use an open approach to identify factors that influence people's decision to unfollow a public figure on Instagram. The following question is examined in this study: What factors influence users aged 20 to 29 years to unfollow public figures on Instagram?

3. Methods

The data used in this study were obtained from a total of nine qualitative interviews and evaluated by means of a qualitative content analysis. Qualitative interviews enable the detailed analysis of a few cases and the identification of causes and effects (Gläser & Laudel, 2010), in this case concerning unfollowing behaviour.

3.1. Sample

The participants were initially recruited via the social media platform Instagram. For this purpose, a post was published on the researchers' private profiles in October 2019 to draw attention to the link in the profiles in the "Biography" section. The post was intended to address people who had already unfollowed a public figure on Instagram and invited them

to participate in the study. Using the link in the researchers' profiles, the participants were asked to take part in a short quantitative survey.

On the one hand, this was to ensure that the participants were between 20 and 29 years of age. As the main user group of Instagram in Germany is aged between 14 and 29 years (ARD/ZDF, 2019) and the main user group worldwide is aged between 25 and 34 years (We Are Social, Hootsuite & DataReportal, 2019), we decided to limit the age range to 20 to 29 years for our study. And secondly, to ensure that they have already followed a public figure and are interested in participating in the qualitative survey. The post and the link to the quantitative survey were active for a total of one week. A total of 38 people took part in the survey, but only nine of them met all the criteria and were interested in taking part in the subsequent survey. Three of the participants were male, six female and all were between 20 and 29 years old.

3.2 Data collection

The participants who had qualified for the survey were then contacted by e-mail to arrange a date for the interview.

The interviews were conducted either in person or by telephone and were each conducted by one of the two researchers and recorded with an audio device. The duration of the interviews varied between 10 to 15 minutes. The participation was voluntary and was not rewarded with any gratification. For the survey, the form of the problem-centred interview was chosen with a partially standardised procedure. The form comes very close to an open conversation and is focused on a specific problem (Keuneke, 2017). A qualitative guideline was developed for this purpose. It was structured in such a way that the participants could first get used to the interview situation with an introductory question. Then the interview was started. The participants were asked to remember the last time they unfollowed a public figure and to report about it. In order to allow the respondents to report their experiences, thoughts and feelings as freely as possible, questions were only asked if necessary. In addition, questions about general Instagram use were also asked at the end of the interview. Finally, the participants were given the opportunity to add things and make comments or suggestions.

It turned out that the respondents reported in varying degrees of detail about their experiences of unfollowing a public figure.

3.3 Data analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed using transcription software and evaluated by means of a qualitative content analysis using the program MAXQDA. The method of analysis used was the summarizing qualitative content analysis according to Mayring (2015). This involves reducing the collected data material in several steps in such a way that the essential contents are preserved and, through abstraction, a manageable corpus is created which still reflects the basic material well (Mayring, 2015). In a first step, the content-bearing text passages were paraphrased (Z1 rule) and brought to a previously defined level of abstraction (Z2 rule). The two reduction steps originally planned by Mayring (2015) were limited to a single reduction step, as no added value would have resulted from a different procedure. Thus, the material was reduced by deleting paraphrases with the same meaning (Z3 rule) and by bundling or constructing new paraphrases (Z4 rule). The individual paraphrases were also marked with thematic headings such as "reason to unfollow", "Instagram use" etc. This provided a better overview of the thematic focuses mentioned in the interviews and simplified the subsequent creation of a category system.

When creating the category system, an inductive category formation was used, that means the categories were developed along the text.

4. Results

As part of the survey, participants were interviewed about their frequency and type of Instagram use. It was found that almost all of the respondents use Instagram on a daily basis and follow friends, acquaintances, family members, as well as various public figures and other public sites. Many indicated that they scrolled through their own feeds during their daily use, looked at the stories or used the search area to look for new content or to find it spontaneously. In addition, it became clear from the interviews that unfollowing someone can trigger different emotions. While some stated that they felt relieved after having unfollowed a person, others did not care. About the decision process to unfollow or not, some respondents reported that in their case it was a spontaneous decision to unfollow. Others reported that the process took longer. For some, the degree of awareness of the public figure was also a determining factor in the decision. For example, respondent (G) indicated that the degree of awareness of the public figure had an influence on the length of time it took to make a decision not to follow him or her. For example, respondent (G) indicated that she was willing to give a person with a high level of awareness a second chance before

deciding to unfollow him or her. In contrast, respondent (E) stated that the awareness of the public figure did not influence his decision not to follow him or her any more:

> Nah, it doesn't matter. So if I just don't like the content presented to me anymore, then I'll unfollow. So I do not care if he has 13 million followers or not. I follow for example Leonardo DiCaprio and I like all the content he posts and if I just don't like it anymore, then I won't follow him anymore.

A total of eleven factors have been identified that influence people's decision to unfollow a public figure on Instagram (Figure 1). The first factor relates to the negative feelings that arise when the content is received. The second and third factors relate to the public figure: behaviour and communication. The fourth, fifth and sixth factors relate to the frequency of posts, stories and the same content. The seventh, eighth, ninth, tenth and eleventh factors relate to content, but in different aspects: advertising, design, lack of identification, unfulfilled expectations and changes.

Figure 1: Overview of the factors
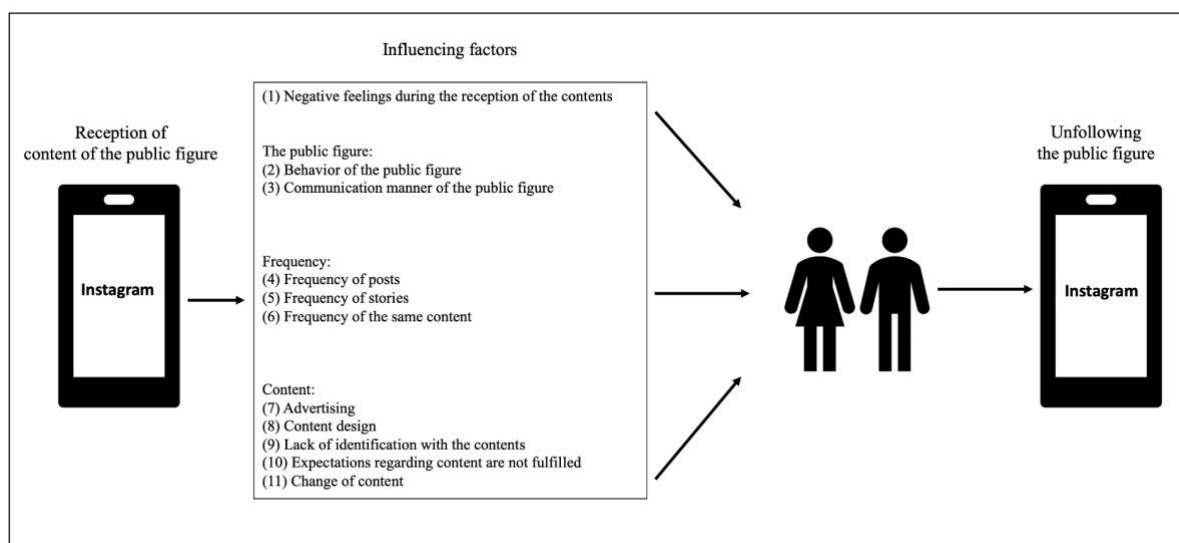
4.1 Factor 1: Negative feelings during the reception of the contents

The respondents stated that they feel negative feelings during the reception of some content and that they therefore decide to unfollow the person. These negative feelings can be caused by different things. Respondent (D) stated that these feelings arise when she is confronted with content that represents a seemingly perfect world. As an example, she mentioned a

couple she had followed on Instagram and who were constantly posting about their love and travel.

When asked what feelings these images triggered in her, she replied:

> Yes, I don't know, at first I feel […] somehow bad, […] because then the ego says: "Yes great, they have something you don't have" and then I have to actively ask myself: "Yes, do I want that? But this exchange, this inner dialogue, it uses up so much energy that I don't want to spend (laughter).

Another respondent reported feeling envy when she does not feel good about herself and then is repeatedly confronted with photos of a person on Instagram who is on a journey. This leads her to unfollow the person.

Respondent (G):

> […] because sometimes there is often the danger that you don't want to see it anymore, because you are somehow jealous / in your subconscious you are somehow jealous when you see again, 'Wow, he travels again here and there and there, I don't have to put up with that right now, when I'm already having a shitty time anyway, I'll just unfollow her now'.

4.2 Factors 2 and 3: Behaviour and communication manner of the public figure

The public figures behaviour was mentioned as a possible factor influencing the decision to unfollow. Here, respondent (D) cited as an example of such behaviour to commit a crime or to join a right-wing party.

Respondent (D):

> I think there are still a thousand reasons, so in the end, if such a public figure would somehow commit a crime now or suddenly join the AFD […].

In addition to behaviour, the communication manner was also identified as an influencing factor. As example, respondent (D) cited that on the one hand a resource-oriented, loving and appreciative form of communication was important for her and that a negative form of communication was a reason for her to unfollow.

4.3 Factors 4, 5 and 6: The frequency of posts, stories and same content

One influencing factor mentioned in all interviews is the frequency of content posted. This refers both to the frequency of posted posts and the frequency of uploaded stories. Respondents generally found it annoying when too many posts and too many stories are

posted by the public figure. For the respondents, this was a reason to stop following the public figure. Respondent (H) made it clear that the combination of frequency and the meaningless content of the posts was also the reason for her to unfollow:

> So often also the content, because if the stories are too much and they just talk a lot of stuff and don't get to the point. That was really too much spam for me at some point, so that's mostly the mass of content, but then it just doesn't make any sense qualitatively and is just jabbering (laughs) yes.

Respondent (I) reported similar experiences:

> […] the stories were too much for me on Instagram. Because some people post a lot of stories and that's too much for me and when I mute them, it's pointless, because if the posts annoy me too, then that's too much for me and then I just unfollow them. So probably because they posted irrelevant things that were too much for me, because of the amount.

But the opposite can also lead to unfollowing the public figure, respondent (A) noted that he has already unfollowed a public figure who has posted too rarely. Another influencing factor is the frequency with which content on similar or identical topics is posted. In this context, one respondent cites as an example when a person only posts on a topic such as nutrition and the variety of topics is no longer available.

Respondent (F):

> If someone now suddenly posts so unbelievably crassly, for example, only about nutrition, then at some point it is also too much for me, if he had a mix of nutrition, sport and fashion before and now the other parts have shifted.

4.4. Factor 7: Advertising

Some of the respondents made it clear that they feel disturbed when public figures do too much advertising on Instagram. This refers to posting posts as well as stories in which product placements, collaborations, contests or other forms of advertising are posted. Respondent (C) was particularly disturbed by the product placements. She perceived this as spam:

> I can't tell you exactly who that was, but I can remember that I've been unfollowing more often when the content just gets too much for me because they just spam. Especially when it goes in the direction of some products where it just pisses me off […].

The frequency or quantity of posts is also a factor and almost similar to factor 4, 5 and 6, as respondents primarily cited posting of advertising as disturbing when there is too much or too many posts with advertising. This was reported by respondent (G):

> So this was a contestant from a reality show or a dating series and I - so I followed him and then just didn't follow him anymore because his stories were so annoying, because he was just always doing product placements and advertising for something and yes that just got on my nerves.

4.5 Factor 8: Content design

A further influencing factor to unfollow someone is the way in which the postings are designed. Unnatural poses or artificially staged pictures that do not appear authentic, with captions that have no meaning, were cited as a reason for unfollowing a person.

This is what respondent (G) stated:

> These are often simply any posts, where they just lie with great outfits somehow so unnatural with their foot at the top of the stairs and then drink their coffee. Nobody in this world drinks coffee like that, which makes me think: 'I won't follow you anymore, it just looks stupid'.

In addition, one of the respondents (E) said he found posting videos annoying because, depending on where he was, he was not always able to play the videos with sound and thus could not access the actual content and information that interested him.

4.6 Factor 9: Lack of identification with the content

In addition to the design of the contents, a further influencing factor mentioned was the lack of identification with the contents. This lack of identification can be caused by the fact that the public figure begins to express himself/herself politically, the contents do not correspond to the respondent's own lifestyle or statements made by the public figure do not correspond to the respondent's own moral concepts or opinions. For example, respondent (F) noted:

> I remember one of them was just a lifestyle blogger and she started to express herself politically and that didn't work for me […].

Respondent (E) also cited as a reason for his decision to unfollow that he could not identify with the contents and that they no longer entertained him:

> For example, I unfollowed Bones MC because he posted content that I could no longer identify with. Or rather, that no longer entertained me and then it just got on

my nerves, what I got shown there. In addition, a lack of identification can also result from a lack of interest in the posts or stories, or from a lack of entertainment.

In addition, a lack of identification can also result from a lack of interest in the posts or stories, or lack of entertainment.

4.7 Factor 10: Expectations of content are not fulfilled

By following a page or a person, there is also an expectation of the contents to be found there. For example, respondent (I) explains that he follows musicians in order to get current information about concerts and new EPs. However, he had to find out that some musicians also post a lot about their private life and this again did not correspond to his interest.

Respondent (I):

Yes, probably because I (...) wanted to have information about the things the person does. So with musicians it will probably have been concerts or new albums, new EPs, like when they come out or something. And some artists take their private life very seriously and that is, as I said, a bit too much for me at some point. But the reason why I followed them was because of information about their artistic work.

The expectations of respondent (A) were not fulfilled, as his need for certain information was not sufficiently met:

In the case of Emma Watson, I originally followed her because of her activism. But then I noticed that I get more information or sometimes more interesting information from other sources.

However, if the content does not meet expectations, this need not be a direct reason to unfollow the public figure. The decisive factor in this case is whether or not the content is still of interest to the recipient.

According to the respondent (A):

I think so, so if the content changes and it's no longer the expectation I have, but it's still good content that I'm interested in, then that wouldn't be a problem. But if it changes in another direction, which I don't like, then that would be a reason to leave.

4.8 Factor 11: Change of content

Also a change of the contents can be a factor of influence not to follow a public figure further on Instagram. Respondent (H) explained:

So I just follow people when I notice: 'Okay, I'm interested in that for a short period of time' and then either I stick with it or I notice: 'Yes, the content doesn't suit me at all anymore' […].

But even here, not every content change must lead to unfollowing him or her. Respondent (F) explains this with an example:

I mean, it could be, with Luisa Dellert for example, I've been following her since she was still fitrio and her fitness content was good for me and now her eco-content is good too. And that's why I stayed there, so not every change of strategy necessarily leads to a loss of success, but it has to fit anyway / the new profile has to fit.

4.9. Reasons to follow a person of public life again

In the context of this research, it was also of interest whether people are willing to follow a public figure they have once unfollowed again in the future. The opinions among the respondents were very different. While some of the respondents could well imagine to follow the persons again if their contents changed and the frequency of posts and stories was reduced, other respondents were not interested in following the persons again. This is how respondent (B) explained in response to the interviewer's question:

Interviewer: Could you imagine following this person again if something changes?
Respondent (B): I don't think so, there are so many bloggers or influencers, whether you go back to someone now, I don't think so. I think maybe someone new.

Another reason given was that the profile is no longer viewed and that you would not notice a change in content. Respondent (F) made it clear that she would not follow a person who had once made a political statement in the future either. She justified her opinion in this way:

Whereby I think with those who once expressed themselves politically, with one of them I know that she doesn't say anything political anymore, but that doesn't change anything for me, that she just has the attitude in the background and just noticed that in my opinion she just noticed that the positions she represents don't perform and that's why she just keeps her mouth shut, but that's why it wouldn't be an option to follow her again, even if she takes nice pictures.

5. Discussion

This study examines what causes unfollowing a public figure on Instagram. Based on nine qualitative interviews, eleven factors have been identified that illustrate that the reasons for unfollowing a public figure on Instagram are very diverse. Some of the factors can be put into context with the previous study results on unfollowing behaviour and discontinuance of social media use, especially Instagram use. The theories on which the previous study results are based, the theory of social comparisons, social exchange theory, cognitive dissonance theory and psychological reactance theory, can therefore also be linked to some of the factors and be applied to unfollowing behaviour regarding public figures.

The negative feelings that occur during the reception of the content (factor 1), which the respondents report and which ultimately lead to unfollowing, can result from an upward social comparison taking place. The respondents describe that they see contributions that represent an apparently perfect world or that show a journey and they compare these contributions with their own everyday life. Through the comparison they perceive their own everyday life as less great, which results in an upward comparison. As the results of Hwang (2019) and Brown and Tiggemann (2016) show, these comparisons lead to a negative mood, as the respondents also report. To avoid this negative mood, they unfollow. That a break from Instagram use can lead to a more positive mood is also shown by the results of Fioravanti et al. (2020). Although the study examines the effects of a short break of one week, it can be assumed that a permanent break in the sense of abstention has similar effects. Factors 2 and 3 (behaviour and communication manner of the public figure) relate to the public figure as a person and refer to the resulting cognitive dissonance and the associated avoidance behaviour through unfollowing. The behaviour displayed by a public figure on Instagram and the communication with his or her followers can be perceived as not congruent with the own attitude, as reported by the respondents. By avoiding the content that causes dissonance users try to reduce the unpleasant feelings that are related to them. As the results of Jeong et al. (2019) show, Facebook offers the option of hiding content or unfriending the friend who posted the content. Instagram, on the other hand, provides the option to unfollow.

The frequency of posts, stories and the same content (factors 4, 5 and 6) are also influencing factors that lead to unfollowing. Frequency is a factor that has so far been generally considered in relation to the discontinuance of social media use (Maier et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2016; Cao & Sun, 2018; Nawaz et al., 2018). However, the study results can also be

applied to Instagram use and unfollowing behaviour. Perceived overload, the overload in terms of information conveyed in the frequent posts, stories and the same content, results in exhaustion (Cao & Sun, 2018) and/or negative emotional reactions (Zhang et al., 2016). The negative emotional reactions manifest themselves in that the respondents perceive the frequency as disturbing and for this reason choose to unfollow. Thus, the presence of only one specific topic and frequent posting about it can also lead to unfollowing. As the results of Nawaz et al. (2018) in particular show, information overload can lead to regret and dissatisfaction, which has an influence on the discontinuation of use.

The frequency can also refer to advertising (factor 7), which appears as product placements, cooperations, competitions or in other forms in the articles and stories. As with the posts and stories in general, respondents find it annoying when too much is posted or uploaded. In this context, an information overload and the corresponding consequences can be assumed. A further aspect in this context could be the reactance in relation to the advertising itself. As the study by Youn & Kim (2019) shows, reactance in relation to native advertising on Facebook leads to unfollowing. This reaction results from the rejection and reactance towards personalised or sponsored advertising (Wojdynski, 2016), because respondents perceive the frequency of advertising as a threat due to the persuasion attempts it contains. In order to prevent the threat, they react against it (Brehm & Brehm, 1981) by unfollowing the public figure.

In addition to advertising as content, other factors also relate to the content: the design of the content, the lack of identification with the content, expectations of the content are not fulfilled and changes of the content. The design of the content (factor 8) refers to staged, unauthentic-looking images with unnatural poses and meaningless captions, but also to the uploading of videos where it is not always possible for the respondents to play them back with sound. These aspects cause the respondents to unfollow.

The lack of identification with the content (factor 9) leads to cognitive dissonance, similar to the behaviour and communication manner of the public figure (factors 2 and 3), which is to be reduced by unfollowing as the results of Jeong et al. (2019) concerning Facebook show. The cognitive dissonance is caused for example by (political) statements made by the public figure that do not correspond to the opinion or moral concepts of the respondent, or even if the content does not correspond to the respondent's lifestyle.

Similarly, respondents also unfollow if their expectations of the content are not fulfilled (factor 10) or the content changes (factor 11). According to social exchange theory, respondents unfollow because they expect a benefit for themselves (Gefen & Ridings, 2002).

In the case of the respondents, for example, information on certain content such as artworks represents the benefit. Since the content does not contain this information or no longer contains it due to a change, the benefit is also not fulfilled, and the respondents end the social exchange and unfollow. Intentions to unfollow increase if the users perceive the information as less useful over time (Zhang et al., 2019). But not fulfilling expectations of the content is not necessarily a reason to unfollow. The crucial factor is whether the content continues to interest the respondent. If so, then the respondents will continue to have a benefit from the content that justifies the costs associated with following a person.

The eleven factors have some similarities with the five categories identified by Tang et al. (2019) as to why people unfollow brand fan pages. In both studies, one reason why people unfollow brand fan pages is that the followers are dissatisfied with the content because their expectations are not fulfilled (expectation disconfirmation and factor 10: expectations regarding content are not fulfilled). Another reason is that the content does not match the interests of the follower (person brand unfit and factor 9: lack of identification with the contents). Tang et al. (2019) identify the category interest shift, which refers to the change in the interests of the follower. The factor 11: change of content, on the other hand, refers to a change in content that is ultimately relevant for the follower, which is why he or she follows.

In addition to the reasons for unfollowing public figures, the reasons for following public figures again were also considered. However, the opinions of the respondents are very different in this context. The main aspects that would have to change for people to follow again were the content and frequency of the posts and stories. However, the essential prerequisite for these changes to be noticed at all is that the profile of the public figure has to be seen. Re-following depends on whether the decision to unfollow was mainly motivated by the public figure himself or herself, his or her behaviour and statements, or by the design and frequency of the content. If it was due to the public figure, it is unlikely to follow him or her again. However, if the content was the trigger, it depends on whether the changes are perceived and accepted.

5.1 Limitations

The present research is not without limitations. First of all, it should be critically noted that the lack of research on the unfollowing behaviour in general and particularly concerning public figures on social media platforms and Instagram is reflected in the selection of

literature. The problem became apparent when reviewing the current state of research, as hardly any literature or studies concerning unfollowing behaviour on Instagram are available. As a result, a considerable research potential can be ascribed to the topic in general.

Within the framework of this study, a total of 9 interviews were conducted, so they may be not exhaustive. Although the main purpose of this study is to provide a first basis on which further research can and should be built, further interviews may provide more information. During the survey itself, problems of comprehensibility occurred in some cases, that are due to the interview location or the interview situation. This was partly due to the fact that telephone interviews had to be conducted, as the respondents either did not have time for a personal meeting or have a distant residence. As a result, it had to be ensured that both the respondent and the interviewer had a good telephone connection to ensure a pleasant interview atmosphere. The interviewer also had to make sure that the telephone connection was sufficient to record the interview. Another point to consider is the interview situation itself. This can have an influence on how freely and honestly people express themselves. The fact that not all interviews were conducted in person, but partly by telephone, may also have influenced the respondents. The telephone situation thus had the potential to make the respondent feel insecure because they could not see the interviewer or his facial expressions and gestures, and the audio quality was not always good.

6. Conclusion

The results of the study show that there are many reasons to unfollow a public figure on Instagram. The eleven factors identified mainly relate to negative feelings during reception, the public figures themselves, the frequency with which they post content and stories and the content itself. It is relevant for the possible re-following whether the reasons for unfollowing related to the public figure per se or to the other factors. If the other factors were the cause, it is more likely that respondents will follow the public figure again. It should be noted that the theories underlying previous research findings on unfollowing behaviour are also related to the eleven factors. This study provides new insights for research although further qualitative interviews would probably provide new and deeper insight into the factors.

Regarding future research, a review of the factors found from a quantitative perspective would be of interest. Another interesting topic regarding future studies would be the review

of connections with the theories that can be derived from the results of the studies to date using existing items and scales.

This study offers exciting insights not only for researchers, but also for public figures to learn why their followers are unfollowing them and, if necessary, to make changes regarding their behaviour, their way of communicating or the frequency and design of their content.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare that they have no potential conflicts of interest with regard to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

References

ARD/ZDF (2019). Onlinecommunities. Retrieved on 27th February 2020 from: http://www.ard-zdf-onlinestudie.de/whatsapponlinecommunities/

Brehm, S. S. & Brehm, J. W. (1981). *Psychological reactance: a theory of freedom and control*. New York: Academic Press.

Brown, Z. & Tiggemann, M. (2016). Attractive celebrity and peer images on Instagram: Effect on women's mood and body image. *Body Image*, 19, 37-43.

Cao, X. & Sun, J. (2018). Exploring the effect of overload on the discontinuous intention of social media users: an S-O-R perspective. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 81, 10-18.

Diener, E., Suh, E. M., Lucas, R. E., & Smith, H. L. (1999). Subjective Well-Being: Three Decades of Progress. *Psychological Bulletin*, 125(2), 276-302.

Evans, N. J., Phua, J., Lim, J., & Jun, H. (2017). Disclosing Instagram Influencer Advertising: The Effects of Disclosure Language on Advertising Recognition, Attitudes, and Behavioral Intent. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 17(2), 138–149.

Fatt, S. J., Fardouly, J., & Rapee, R. M. (2019). #malefitspo: Links between viewing fitspiration posts, muscular-ideal internalisation, appearance comparisons, body satisfaction, and exercise motivation in men. *New media & society*, 1-15.

Festinger, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes. *Human Relation*, 7(2), 117-140.

Festinger, L. (1957). A theory of cognitive dissonance. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Fioravanti, G., Prostamo, A., Casale, S. (2020). Taking a Short Break from Instagram: The Effects on Subjective Well-Being. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 23(2), 107-112.

Gefen, D. & Ridings, C. M. (2002). Implementation Team Responsiveness and User Evaluation of Customer Relationship Management: A Quasi-Experimental Design Study of Social Exchange Theory. *Journal of Management Information Systems*, 19(1), 47-69.

Gläser, J. & Laudel, G. (2010). *Experteninterviews und qualitative Inhaltsanalyse* (4. Aufl.). Wiesbaden: VS Verlag.

GlobalWebIndex. (2018). Durchschnittliche tägliche Nutzungsdauer von sozialen Medien weltweit in den Jahren 2012 bis 2018 (in Minuten). Retrieved on 23th January 2020 from: https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/475072/umfrage/taegliche-nutzungdauer-vonsozialen-medien/

Hoffmann, D. (2018). Körperbilder in der Kommunikationsforschung. In K. Lobinger (Hrsg.), *Handbuch Visuelle Kommunikationsforschung* (S. 1-20). Springer: Wiesbaden.

Hwang, H. S. (2019). Why Social Comparison on Instagram Matters: Its impact on Depression. *KSII Transactions on Internet and Information Systems*, 13(3), 1626-1638.

Jeong, M., Zo, H., Lee, C. H., & Ceran, Y. (2019). Feeling displeasure from online social media postings: A study using cognitive dissonance theory. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 97, 231-240.

Keuneke, S. (2017). Qualitatives Interview. In L. Mikos & C. Wegener (Hrsg.), *Qualitative Medienforschung* (pp. 302-312). Konstanz und München: UVK.

Maier, C., Laumer, S., Weinert, C., & Weitzel, T. (2015). The effects of technostress and switching stress on discontinued use of social networking services: a study of Facebook use. *Information Systems Journal*, 25(3), 275-308.

Maity, S. K., Gajula, R., & Mukherjee, A. (2018). Why did they #unfollow me? Early detection of follower loss on twitter. *Proceedings of the International ACM SIGGROUP Conference on Supporting Group Work (7 January 2018), Sanibel Island, United States*, 127-131.

Mayring, P. (2015). *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse. Grundlagen und Techniken* (Vol. 12). Weinheim: Beltz.

Nawaz, M. A., Shah, Z., Nawaz, A., Asmi, F., Hassan, Z., & Raza, J. (2018). Overload and exhaustion: Classifying SNS discontinuance intentions. *Cogent Psychology*, 5(1), 1-18.

Pena, J. & Brody, N. (2014). Intentions to hide and unfriend Facebook connections based on perceptions of sender attractiveness and status updates. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 31, 143-150.

Schemer, C. (2007). Wem Medienschönheiten schaden: Die differenzielle Anfälligkeit für negative Wirkungen attraktiver Werbemodels auf das Körperbild junger Frauen. *Zeitschrift für Medienpsychologie*, 19(2), 58-67.

Slater, A., Varsani, N., & Diedrichs, P. C. (2017). #fitspo or #loveyourself? The impact of fitspiration and self-compassion Instagram images on women's body image, self-compassion, and mood. *Body Image*, 22, 87-96.

Tang, Z., Chen, L., & Gillenson, M. L. (2019). Understanding brand fan page followers' discontinuance motivations: A mixed-method study. *Information & Management*, 56(1), 94-108.

Tiggemann, M. & Zaccardo, M. (2015). „Exercise to be fit, not skinny": The effect of fitspiration imagery on women's body image. *Body Image*, 15, 61-67.

van Reijmersdal, E. A., Lammers, N., Rozendaal, E., & Buijzen, M. (2015). Disclosing the persuasive nature of advergames: moderation effects of mood on brand responses via persuasion knowledge. *International Journal of Advertising*, 34(1), 70–84.

We Are Social, Hootsuite & DataReportal (2019). Ranking der größten sozialen Netzwerke und Messenger nach der Anzahl der monatlich aktiven Nutzer (MAU) im Januar 2019 (in Millionen) [Graph]. Retrieved on 27th February 2020 from: https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/181086/umfrage/die-weltweit-groessten-socialnetworks-nach-anzahl-der-user/

Wojdynski, B. W. (2016). The Deceptiveness of Sponsored News Articles: How Readers Recognize and Perceived Native Advertising. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 60(12), 1475–1491.

Xu, B., Huang, Y., Kwak, H., & Contractor, N. S. (2013). Structures of Broken Ties: Exploring Unfollow Behavior on Twitter. *Proceedings of the ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW) (February 23-27 2013), San Antonio, TX, United States*, 871-876.

Youn, S. & Kim, S. (2019). Newsfeed native advertising on Facebook: young millennials' knowledge, pet peeves, reactance and ad avoidance. *International Journal of Advertising*, 38(5), 651-683.

Zhang, S., Zhao, L., Lu, Y., & Yang, J. (2016). Do you get tired of socializing? An empirical explanation of discontinuous usage behaviour in social network services. *Information & Management*, 53(7), 904-914.

Zhang, G., Ma, L., Zhang, X., Ding, X. Y., & Yang, Y. P. (2019). Understanding social media users' unfollow intentions: take WeChat subscriptions as an example. *Online Information Review*, 43(7), 1081-1097.