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FROM FEMA TO THE FEED: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF J. P. STERIJA'S FEMA AND THE INSTAGRAM INFLUENCER PHENOMENON

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This paper explores the phenomenon of contemporary Instagram influencers through a comparative analysis with a classic work of Serbian literature, *Pokondirena tikva* by Jovan Sterija Popović. The starting point is the sociological concept of the "spirit of the small town" (small town mindset) by Radomir Konstantinović (*Filosofija palanke*, 2020), which enables an understanding of the cultural and social patterns that connect the literary character Fema and today's digital influencers. The research examines the similarities and differences in habitus, cultural capital, and performative identity between Fema as a paradigm of "empty pretentiousness" and influencers as self-proclaimed authorities in the contemporary media space. The study introduces the author's original concepts of the "**influencers of nothing**" and the "**culture of nothingness**" to critically examine how digital self-presentation and symbolic performance shape contemporary notions of authenticity, visibility, and social legitimacy. The analysis is based on an interdisciplinary framework encompassing literary theory, theatre studies, media sociology, cultural studies, cultural policy, and arts management. Special emphasis is placed on the comparison between the institutional and extra-institutional dimensions of culture, from the national theatre and canonical dramatic tradition to the algorithmic dynamics of social networks. The methodological framework of the paper is grounded in a comparative analysis and a qualitative approach, incorporating in-depth, structured interviews with experts. Interviews with Professors Ivan Pravdić and Ksenija Radulović provide an additional phenomenological dimension, highlighting how theatre and digital networks can be understood as spaces of social representation and identity formation. The results indicate continuity between the pursuit of social legitimacy and aesthetic prestige in Fema's historical context and today's influencer practices, opening up space for a deeper understanding of identity construction and cultural authority in the 21st century.

Key words: Instagram and the phenomenon of influencers, cultural policy and management, social networks and digital self-presentation, interpretative paradigm, Jovan Sterija Popović; *Pokondirena tikva*, comparative analysis, qualitative methodology, interdisciplinary approach, art and identity.

1. From Stage to Feed: Why *Pokondirena tikva* Matters in the Digital Age

This research begins with a comparative analysis between the literary character Fema from Sterija's *Pokondirena tikva* (1838) and the contemporary phenomenon of Instagram influencers. Although separated by temporal and cultural contexts, both phenomena raise questions of self-presentation, identity legitimation, and social ascent based on symbolic capital rather than actual competencies. The character of Fema thus represents a paradigmatic example of "empty pretentiousness" while influencers in digital culture often function as self-proclaimed authorities in social, aesthetic, and cultural matters. The paper,

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through its interdisciplinarity, connects literary theory, theatre studies, cultural policy, institutional culture, media sociology, and digital studies.

The starting point of the research lies in the sociological concept of the "small-town mindset," which analyses cultural and social patterns of provincial mentality and closedness, and which can also be interpreted through the contemporary digital context.

Konstantinović (2020) describes the "spirit of the small town" as a closed mental horizon that does not find its full realization in the material world but exists primarily as an idea. This spirit tends toward closedness and self-sufficiency, yet in its striving it reveals itself as a "wandering" and paradoxical phenomenon, it is universally possible precisely because it is equally impossible everywhere. The spirit of the small town seeks to create a world that perfectly corresponds to its aspirations of closeness and static nature, but that world does not exist in reality; it remains an abstract projection striving toward the "nothingness of eternity." In this way, the phenomenon of the small town becomes more than a sociocultural framework, it is a metaphysical construction expressing the longing for an ideal yet unattainable order (Konstantinović, 2020).

Within the methodological approach, a special place is given to two expert contributions: Professor Ivan Pravdić (Academy of Arts, Novi Sad), whose work operates in the fields of dramaturgy, performing arts, and digital performance. He deals with the relationship between theatre, media, and digital spheres, emphasizing that performativity always involves improvisation, empathy, and the uniqueness of ritual in changing social circumstances (Pravdić, 2025). His expertise opens space for the analysis of the relationship between classical drama and new media practices in the digital environment.

On the other hand, Professor Ksenija Radulović (Faculty of Dramatic Arts, Belgrade), a theatre scholar and theatre historian, has in her research particularly addressed interpretative paradigms of Sterija's works, with an emphasis on changes in the stage reception of the classics. As Radulović (2006) points out, contemporary directorial practices, especially in the productions of Dejan Mijač, have significantly altered the paradigm of reading Sterija "off-context," while at the same time confirming the modernity, complexity, and enduring value of his texts.

In this way, the interdisciplinary framework of the research includes literary analysis, institutional practices, and the digital aesthetics of social networks, while the expert interviews contribute to shaping answers to the research hypotheses.

2. Methodological Framework, Hypotheses, and Research Objectives

The selected key terms conceptually shape the research that connects the literary analysis of Sterija's *Pokondirena tikva* with the phenomenon of contemporary Instagram influencers. Methodologically, the paper is based on comparative analysis and a qualitative approach, exploring the interpretative paradigm through which the literary character Fema can be viewed in the contemporary context of digital media. Special emphasis is placed on the aesthetics of social networks and digital self-presentation, as well as on the dynamics in which identities are shaped through institutional culture and cultural policy, but also in informal spaces of digital communities.

The phenomenon of "empty pretentiousness," present in Fema, is compared with the emergence of self-proclaimed experts among influencers, who often claim authority in matters of society, culture, and identity. Parallel reading enables an interdisciplinary approach, in which literary theory, theatre studies, cultural studies, and media sociology jointly investigate the transition from a 19th-century dramatic character to the digital "characters" of the 21st century.

The qualitative method includes in-depth structured interviews with experts, which were used as the primary source of research. The research involved:

Professor Ivan Pravdić (Academy of Arts, Novi Sad), whose scholarly and artistic work develops in the field of dramaturgy, performing arts, and digital performance. Pravdić (2025) emphasizes that performativity necessarily includes improvisation, empathy, and the uniqueness of ritual, thereby opening space for comparative analysis of the relationship between classical dramatic practice and new media modalities in the digital environment.

Professor Ksenija Radulović (Faculty of Dramatic Arts, Belgrade), who focuses on the interpretative paradigms of Sterija's works and the contemporary reception of literary classics. Radulović (2018) shows that institutional theatre often reproduces state and national narratives, which, from a comparative perspective, can be related to the algorithmic dynamics and power structures shaping digital networks.

These expert insights contribute to the phenomenological dimension of the research. The phenomenology of the work relies on the idea that both theatrical and digital contexts are spaces of identity formation and social representation. While theatre in the past largely reproduced national narratives, digital networks today create micro-performative spaces in which social visibility becomes a form of cultural capital.

Empirical research shows that even short-term forms of social exclusion in digital space, for example the absence of tagging in Instagram posts, can produce negative

emotional and social consequences because they threaten basic needs for belonging (Büttner & Rudert, 2022).

3. The Phenomenon of "Influencers of Nothing" and the "Culture of Nothingness"

The starting point of this research arises from a phenomenon the author defines with the terms "influencers of nothing" and "culture of nothingness". This phenomenon illustrates the paradox of the digital age: although the activities of contemporary influencers are often devoid of real cultural contribution, their power to shape identities, moods, and consumer habits reaches planetary dimensions. Just as Fema in Jovan Sterija Popović's *Pokondirena tikva* aspired to "noble" status through imitation and superficial appropriation of foreign cultural forms, so too do today's influencers construct their digital identities through performative aesthetics, linguistic hybridizations, and rituals of self-presentation that rarely possess real authenticity.

Their field of action transcends local cultural and institutional frameworks and extends to a global level, creating a universalized "small town" in which the aesthetics of image and instant impression replace real competencies and lasting cultural values. In this sense, the "influencers of nothing" become global symbols of the "culture of nothingness," in which meaning is reduced to the constant reproduction of visual and emotional effects. The algorithmic environment of social networks is thereby constituted as a new institutional framework, devoid of tradition, yet potentially infinite in the creation of visibility.

Based on this theoretical framework, two research hypotheses were defined:

Hypothesis 1: Processes of self-presentation and striving for social legitimacy in both Fema and contemporary influencers are structured according to similar patterns of "pretentiousness", an attempt at ascent through symbolic rather than real competences.

Hypothesis 2: Changes in the interpretative paradigm of *Pokondirena tikva* in contemporary theatre can serve as an analytical model for understanding the aesthetics of social networks and the phenomenon of influencers in the digital age.

This research framework enables the integration of literary theory, dramaturgy, and media sociology into a single analytical matrix, confirming that the character of Fema from the 19th century is relevant for a deeper understanding of the performative and aesthetic patterns of contemporary influencer culture.

This research aims to shed light on the continuity and differences between literary and digital cultural phenomena, with special emphasis on the comparison of Fema from Sterija's *Pokondirena tikva* and contemporary Instagram influencers. The focus of the research is on

how identity, authority, and cultural capital are constructed and contested through different media forms, from theatrical institutions and national cultural frameworks to the algorithmically structured space of social networks. This represents the paradox the author defines as "influencers of nothing" and "culture of nothingness", where minimal real contribution produces globally visible consequences in the shaping of identities, moods, and consumer habits. By analyzing the self-presentational practices and symbolic strategies of contemporary influencers in relation to the literary model of Fema, the paper seeks to show that processes of digital aesthetics and algorithmic visibility have profound parallels with the theatrical and literary patterns of the 19th century.

The ultimate goal of the research is to confirm or challenge the proposed hypotheses and to offer an interdisciplinary model of analysis that connects literary theory, dramaturgy, media sociology, and cultural studies, thereby creating a new perspective for understanding the impact of social networks on contemporary cultural processes in cultural and arts management.

4. Implications for Cultural Policy and Management

The development of cultural and arts management as an academic discipline has significantly advanced cultural practice in the international context and has opened space for the professionalization of managing cultural institutions. However, in Southeastern Europe this field has still not been fully affirmed as a key professional competence that can contribute to the long-term development of cultural and artistic practices. Its future affirmation requires the integration of contemporary theoretical and practical approaches to management in the cultural sector, in which culture is viewed as a system that can be consciously shaped, organized, and structured. Such an approach enables the development of artistic production, distribution, and reception within a broader social framework (Dragičević Šešić & Stojković, 2013).

This moment can be considered crucial for shaping the cultural future of Southeastern Europe, where the continuity of intellectual and cultural heritage becomes a key lever for cultural strategists. The analysis shows the existence of two parallel but interconnected developmental paths: on one hand, the institutional strategies of national theatres, and on the other, contemporary tendencies of digital culture and its algorithmic models. National theatres in post-socialist states can be understood as coordinated systems aimed at preserving cultural continuity and the effectiveness of cultural policies (Zelić, 2025).

Nevertheless, the historical marginalization of theatre and its withdrawal from positions of social and political centrality have led to a gradual reduction of its influence (Schmidt, 2020).

In this sense, digital culture, as well as the phenomenon of influencers, emerge as new forms of cultural representation and distribution. The phenomenon of "empty pretentiousness" in Sterija's Fema can be compared to processes of self-presentation on social networks, where influencers assume the role of informal cultural mediators. This transition from institutional to algorithmic cultural legitimation opens new directions for shaping cultural policies and managing the performing arts in the digital age.

When examining the interaction between cultural institutions and their audiences through digital platforms, it becomes evident that many theatres underestimate the strategic value of two-way communication. Active engagement with audience feedback could strengthen participation and foster a sense of belonging; however, most institutions remain largely passive, missing opportunities to develop contemporary, participatory relationships with users. This highlights the need for more dialogical and inclusive approaches within cultural policy and management frameworks (Mavrin, Šebo, & Glavaš, 2022).

It is important to emphasize that certain forms of influence and susceptibility to influencer trends often reflect on cultural policies, especially in transitional states which, in their pursuit of greater visibility among audiences and consumers, often succumb to the logic of the "small town." Cultural capital in these contexts is shaped according to the dynamics of instant gratification and short-term effects rather than sustainable development strategies. In contrast, serious and strategic cultural management in Western Europe and beyond clearly structures cultural trends and directs them toward long-term goals.

In this process, the phenomenon of the "influencers of nothing" and the "culture of nothingness" represents a particular challenge: fragmented knowledge and a lack of cultural credibility are reproduced through visual and discursive forms that selectively take only those elements necessary for the momentary post, without real contribution to cultural value.

Similar patterns are also visible in the field of consumer decisions. Research has shown that social networks significantly shape the ways in which consumers choose products and brands, with decisions often interpreted as a form of risk management (Fletcher & Gbadamosi, 2024).

Although the literature records various aspects of the influence of social networks, gaps still remain, especially in understanding consumer engagement in brand communities online. Such engagement shapes brand perception, emotional attachment, and user loyalty (Santos, Cheung, Coelho, & Rita, 2022).

In this context, the phenomenon of influencers can be seen as a form of informal mediation between brands and consumers, where personal charisma and digital self-presentation create symbolic capital. In this way, the parallel with Fema's "pretentious" aspirations toward status and recognition is confirmed, in both the literary and the digital context, the same need for legitimation in the public sphere is emphasized, whether institutional or algorithmic.

5. Ephemeral Theatre of Influence: Intertextuality, Cultural Capital and the Spirit of the Small Town in the Digital Age

The phenomenon of contemporary influencers on social networks, particularly on Instagram, can be viewed as a form of ephemeral¹ theater in which interpretations, trends, and aesthetic matrices are of exceptionally short duration – often disappearing at the very moment they become visible. The dynamics of the "first seconds" of reception determine the value of digital content, while the representation itself quickly recedes before a new wave of posts. This cultural model is reflected in the metaphor of the soap bubble, which accurately depicts the way identities are constructed and dissolved within digital communities.

This phenomenon is not without cultural-historical continuity. Sterija's comedy *Pokondirena tikva* (1838) had already, in the 19th century, presented the phenomenon of "empty pretentiousness," that is, the aspiration for social ascent through symbolic rather than real capital. The character of Fema represents a paradigmatic example of self-presentation and social aspiration based on imitation of cultural patterns, which can be read in parallel with today's influencers, who often appear as self-proclaimed authorities in aesthetic, social, and cultural matters.

Just as contemporary digital platforms reproduce and reinterpret cultural patterns through ephemeral and algorithmically shaped forms, so too has the change of interpretive paradigms in the history of theatre held deep social significance. Radulović (2024) points out that in the post-war period, radical aesthetic shifts, from the abandonment of socialist realist normativity to postmodern recontextualization, represented a conscious strategic reshaping of cultural policy. These shifts not only shaped theatrical practices but also redefined the very idea of cultural authority, opening space for new forms of symbolic capital and social visibility.

¹ *Ephemeral theatre* refers to the concept of the transience and unrepeatability of theatrical performance. Every performance, even when based on the same text and direction, is inevitably unique because it takes place in a specific time and space, involving the audience, social context, and circumstances of the event. *Ephemerality* (Lat. *ephemeros* – "lasting one day," transient) in theatre emphasizes that a performance cannot be fully reproduced or archived, but as an event, it disappears the moment it ends. In contemporary theatre studies, this concept is often linked to performativity and the ritual dimensions of performance, which always occur in the specific encounter between performers and audience. As Phelan notes, "performance art cannot be documented; once it is, it becomes that document and ceases to be performance art" (Phelan, 1993, p. 31).

The contemporary "theatre of influencers" functions within a similar semiotic framework: its aesthetics of superficiality, performative self-presentation, and market legitimation reproduces what Radulović (2019) identifies as a persistent cultural mechanism in the works of Jovan Sterija Popović, the attempt to achieve elevation through symbolic rather than genuine competence. Sterija's oeuvre, which merges the rationalism of the 18th century and Enlightenment ideas with the anticipation of 20th- and 21st-century poetics, reflects not only a transition between epochs but also a lasting struggle between authentic cultural emancipation and its caricature.

Within this continuity, Fema emerges as an archetypal figure of "pretentiousness", a subject who imitates cultural patterns without real grounding in knowledge or experience, which in the digital age transforms into the phenomenon of the "influencer of nothing". It is precisely in this figure, caught between the pathos of aspiration and the irony of imitation, that one recognizes the contemporary "small town mind-set" (cf. Radulović, 2024), now globalized and distributed through digital media.

In this way, theatrical and digital spaces become parallel laboratories of identity representation: both produce the spectacle of self-presentation and the deception of reality, but also the possibility of its critical unveiling. The influencer phenomenon, therefore, is not merely an aesthetic or media occurrence, but a symptom of a profound cultural crisis of knowledge and values, what the author defines as a "culture of nothingness".

In this sense, Sterija's² creative work provides the foundation for understanding the cultural self-reflection of the "small town", a closed society in which the individual, despite limitations, becomes the bearer of an emancipatory impulse. It is precisely this ambivalence, between Enlightenment rationalism and social satire, that makes his oeuvre paradigmatic for understanding contemporary digital forms of self-presentation, where "influencers of nothing" reproduce the same social dynamics through spectacle and superficial visibility.

Structures of self-presentation, aspirations for social legitimization, and symbolic imitation in the 19th century continuously refract into the digital epoch through what we may call "influencers of nothing" and the "culture of nothingness." Fema's intervention in the identity of the apprentice Jovan – her "renaming," instrumental transformation of space, and decree on new behavior – dramatically illustrates the mechanism by which someone with marginal resources acquires the semblance of authority and taste:

² Jovan Sterija Popović (1806–1856) was a playwright, prose writer, and literary theorist, widely regarded as one of the founders of modern Serbian literature. He was the founder of the Society of Serbian Letters (the predecessor of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts), the "Theatre at Đumruk," the National Theatre, and the National Museum. His comedies, characterized by irony and social critique, reflect the spirit of the Enlightenment and the early development of civic culture in Serbia. Popović's comedies intertwine Enlightenment ideas with social criticism, and his female characters—particularly in *Pokondirena tikva*—embody emancipatory potential within a patriarchal framework (Radulović, 2019).

This mechanism is clearly seen in Scene Six, when Fema orders Jovan to change his name and social behaviour:

FEMA: "That is impertinence! Listen, I'm telling you for the last time not to mention what has been. You would embarrass me, you insolent one, even in front of some stranger. ..."

JOVAN: "Then why did you call me?"

FEMA: "I called you to give you a rule so you will not behave as before or like these sluts. First and foremost: you will no longer be called Jovan..."

FEMA: "Coward, that is noblesse ... you will no longer work as before, you will only follow me, me and the greatest madames – madames, damn them, I couldn't get it right at first... you will kiss their hand and help them down from the carriages..."
(Pokondirena tikva, Scene Six; Popović, 1986).

This stage moment reveals how naming, the adoption of aesthetic rituals, and performative aesthetics construct symbolic capital. Fema, although herself "nothing," creates the semblance of social elevation through ritualized imitation. Precisely therein lies the parallel with contemporary digital influencers, whose "something" is grounded in algorithmic visibility rather than actual competencies or cultural content.

Theoretically, the analysis relies on the concept of cultural capital, habitus, and social mobility in Pierre Bourdieu, thereby opening a space for understanding the ways individuals use symbolic resources to secure social visibility. In this context, Konstantinović's "spirit of the small town" is especially relevant – a closed mentality of provincial consciousness which, though tied to a local framework, acquires global reach in digital space. On social networks, it manifests itself through rapidly established but equally rapidly disappearing values and trends.

Through the prism of intertextuality, which Julia Kristeva (1960s) defined as the property of a text to establish relations with other texts (Juvan, 2013), one can also view the relationship between literary patterns and contemporary digital discourses. As Kostić and Panić Cerovski (2022) show, intertextual practices (such as quotations, allusions, or pastiche) are present in the discourse of advertising messages, which can be linked to the digital branding of influencers.

As Julia Kristeva originally formulated, intertextuality implies not merely the coexistence of texts but the continuous transformation of meanings through their interaction. Each text, as Kristeva (1980) notes, is a "mosaic of quotations", a site where cultural, ideological, and aesthetic discourses intersect. In the same way, the digital persona of an influencer may be read as an intertextual construction, assembled from fragments of popular culture, fashion, language, and online performance. This approach allows us to interpret digital self-presentation as a dynamic semiotic field where literary mechanisms of imitation, parody, and adaptation are reactivated in algorithmic form.

An important aspect of digital culture is also language. Although British English still dominates in the educational context in Europe, due to the global predominance of American media, average social network users are exposed to American English in everyday communication (Tomović, 2022). In this way, English functions as the *lingua franca* of the digital age, further homogenizing the global aesthetic matrix of influencers.

Social networks such as YouTube, Instagram, and X are also key channels of cultural education and representation. Pattier (2021) shows that so-called "edutubers" contribute to shaping knowledge and aesthetics in the field of art and culture, thereby confirming that the digital sphere is not only a space of ephemeral visibility but also a form of informal education.

On the other hand, research also shows the dark side of digital interaction. According to Büttner and Rudert (2022), exclusion from posts (e.g., not being tagged on Instagram) triggers feelings of social exclusion, which can lead to the endangerment of basic needs and a lowering of mood. These findings build upon Williams's (2009) temporal need-threat model, which indicates that experiences of ostracism have a strong and immediate psychological effect. For this reason, the phenomenon of influencers cannot be viewed solely through the prism of aesthetic and symbolic capital, but also through the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in digital communities.

Ultimately, the review of literature confirms that the phenomenon of influencers merges dimensions of intertextuality, cultural capital, institutional culture, and digital aesthetics, thereby opening space for a comparative analysis with classical literary and theatrical models. Sterija's *Pokondirena tikva* provides a paradigmatic framework for understanding today's "theater of social networks," in which identities, status, and authority are constructed and deconstructed almost in the same moment.

5.1. *Literary Synergy: Fema, Jovan, and Analogies with Influencers*

Sterija's *Pokondirena tikva* provides an exceptionally fertile ground for comparative analysis with the phenomenon of contemporary influencers. Key moments of the comedy illustrate the dynamics of social ascent and identity construction through performative gestures and symbolic props. Particularly indicative is the character of the apprentice Jovan, who, after being renamed by Fema, transitions from the role of an assistant to a sort of "interior designer" and self-proclaimed arbiter of style:

JOVAN³ : "Master Mitre, watch who you are speaking to! I am no longer Jovan, but Hanz, Jean, or, if you cannot remember that, Johan. Whoever calls me an apprentice is

³The character of Jovan in *Pokondirena tikva* functions as a paradigm, an example of the transformation of a lower-ranking assistant into a self-proclaimed "designer" and arbiter of taste under Fema's ambitious influence. Fema, by decree, redefines his identity (Jovan adopts names such as "Hanz, Jean... Johan"), imposing on him the adoption of

doomed by my lady mistress... See this wardrobe? Out with it, the room must be empty, because they say that people in fashion have everything empty in the room... See this wall? Here we will arrange some scantily dressed men and young women with exposed chests..." (Popović, 1986).

This transformation illustrates mechanisms of symbolic legitimation through the imitation of foreign cultural patterns. The analogy with influencers becomes clear: although they often lack formal knowledge or linguistic competence, they create performative authority through "invented" forms of communication, especially in English. Like Jovan's parodic attempts at speaking "high languages," contemporary influencers invent accents, mix words, and create a hybrid idiom through which they build an image of global belonging, revealing a continuity of "empty pretentiousness" from the 19th century to the digital age.

6. Interpretative Considerations and the Phenomenology of Digital Ephemerality – Authenticity and Self-Presentation in the Digital Space

The digital age has transformed the way cultural and social identities are shaped, with social media serving as a fundamental space for self-presentation and legitimation. In this sense, the phenomenon of influencers can be understood as a specific form of digital performance, characterized by ephemerality and dependence on current trends, fashion, and hype (Dunđerović, 2023).

Hegel's understanding of drama as the synthesis of content and form, "the highest stage of poetry and of art generally" (Hegel, 1975, pp. 1158–1159), provides a conceptual foundation for interpreting contemporary digital self-performances. In his *Aesthetics*, Hegel emphasizes that drama embodies human action in its fullest dialectical tension between inner intention and external realization. Extending this idea to the digital realm, online performances can be seen as a new form of dialectical theater, in which the self becomes both actor and spectacle. Within algorithmically conditioned visibility, the individual continuously negotiates between authenticity and construction, permanence and ephemerality. This transposition of Hegel's aesthetic logic into the digital context allows for a deeper understanding of the ontological instability of identity in the age of social media.

Hegel's idea that drama represents contradictions and oppositions can therefore be extended to contemporary digital performances: both theater and digital platforms operate

roles and gestures associated with the upper class — rearranging furniture, introducing "fashionable" props, and publicly displaying "noblesse." This situation relies on a mechanism of imitation and symbolic borrowing of status: Jovan's new position is performative and externally refined rather than based on actual knowledge or competence, stemming from the comic structure of the text itself and enhancing the satirical effect of Fema's "pretentiousness." (Popović, 1986).

on the same principle of dualism between the real and the constructed, the present and the absent, the permanent and the fleeting. Performative acts in digital spaces thus take the form of a dramaturgy of ephemerality, in which identity is subject to constant modification and adaptation according to algorithmically structured patterns of visibility (Pravdić, 2023).

The role of influencers in this context can be described as a form of digital performance: they are not merely promoters of products or ideas, but performers who "teach, promote, and encourage audiences toward certain meanings and beliefs" (Dundžerović, 2023). Their role is therefore similar to that of theatrical or performative artists, shaping images and narratives within the collective imagination of the audience, producing and reinforcing social values and cultural codes.

A particular challenge in this perspective is the relationship between authenticity and artificiality. Pravdić (2023) introduces the concept of "time design" to describe the dramaturgy that governs the perception of time and meaning in digital and live performances. In the same way, influencers construct "presence time" in which their image circulates, but this presence is often fragile, temporary, and tied to current trends and viral moments. In this sense, the influencer phenomenon can be analyzed as an example of digital ephemerality, a cultural pattern marked by a short lifespan and the constant need for reaffirmation in the digital sphere.

Furthermore, contemporary discussions about artificial intelligence raise additional questions of authenticity and performative identity. As Nikolić and Vučenović (2024) note, artificial intelligence in media and culture simultaneously represents a utopian and dystopian tool, capable of creating new forms of creativity as well as manipulation. In this light, influencer ephemerality is connected not only to the logic of social media but also to the accelerated transformations of digital technologies that redefine the boundaries between real and artificial, personal and collective, spontaneous and programmed.

The influencer phenomenon is closely tied to the ephemerality of cultural trends: content that dominates in the first few seconds of a post quickly loses relevance and disappears like a "soap bubble." Sterija's comedy, as a fantastical depiction of social ambition and cultural mimesis, can be read as a precursor to today's digital aesthetics. "*Pokondirenost*" emerges as a structural pattern, the desire for social ascent through imitation and simulation rather than real competence.

In this sense, literary analysis intertwines with the phenomenology of contemporary digital practices. Language, fashion, interior design, or algorithmic feeds all function as forms of symbolic capital enabling visibility, even though authority is often self-proclaimed and temporary. Particularly significant in both cases is the use of foreign language codes: while

Fema and Jovan employ parodies of French and German, today's influencers create inauthentic variations of English, further confirming the intertextuality of cultural phenomena.

In the contemporary digital environment, social media platforms do not function solely as channels for information exchange but also as arbiters of consumption, lifestyle, and identity patterns among young people (Martínez Pérez, Cuenca Orellana, & Dueñas Mohedas, 2024). Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube shape new spaces for self-presentation, where adolescents, especially girls, undergo processes of identity reification, often through sexualization and stylization of their own bodies. These processes raise questions of gender implications but also confirm that social media functions as "small towns" in which performative identity replaces real competence.

Moreover, recent research indicates that influencers are increasingly recognized as precarious cultural workers whose labor is conditioned by algorithmic and market logic (Lukan & Čehovin Zajc, 2024; Alacovska, 2022). Their existence often relies on fragmented forms of income, with cultural capital replacing material stability. In this sense, the "wageless life" of cultural producers parallels Fema's aspiration toward "noblesse", both phenomena show how symbolic legitimation can become more important than real economic or social value.

Further studies confirm that influencer credibility is more closely tied to physical attractiveness than to the level of self-disclosure, with credibility and parasocial interactions becoming key factors in shaping consumption intentions (Mutiarasari, Hartini, Sangadji, & Lina, 2025). Behavioral patterns thus extend beyond individual consumption into the realm of identity-based affiliation. Finfluencers, as a special type of niche influencer, further demonstrate how social media influence penetrates finance, shaping perceptions of investment risk and consumer decision-making (Hasanah et al., 2025; Yao, Meng, & Wei, 2025).

At the macro level, the influencer phenomenon demonstrates a dual dynamic: on one hand, they act as content producers, and on the other as mediators of empty discourse, whose main effect is shaping the audience's immediate mood and consumer preferences. As Sučić and Hromadžić (2024) emphasize, social media and marketing agencies are key actors in constructing a space where visual superficiality becomes the dominant form of communication, legitimation, and an effective method for promoting and distributing products, albeit in subtle and insidious ways.

Social media shapes patterns of communication and self-presentation, where authenticity is often constructed through algorithmic mediation and the competitive dynamics of visibility (Mahboobi, Pishvae, Kermani, Jahromi, & Taghipour, 2026). "Genuine presence"

thus does not result from real competence but from performative positioning in a space that favors spectacle and the branding of everyday life.

As shown by fashion influencer moms, authenticity relies on persuasive self-promotion and emotional labor rather than objective expertise (Cuevas, Lee, & Recalde, 2024). This pattern strongly echoes Sterija's Fema, whose pretentiousness reveals the same mechanisms of creating status without substance:

FEMA: "That's impertinence! Do you hear me? I'm telling you for the last time, don't you ever bring up what happened again!" (Pokondirena tikva, Pozorje šesto; Popović, 1986).

7. Public Reception and the Politics of Ridicule: A Comparative Framework between Fema and Influencer Personalities

This conceptual diagram visualizes the complex network of relationships between the literary character Fema from Sterija's *Pokondirena tikva* and the contemporary figure of the social media influencer. Through a structure of directed connections, it illustrates how processes of self-presentation, social legitimization, and performative identity are transformed from the theatrical to the digital medium.

The conceptual diagram presented below visualizes the interdisciplinary web of relationships between the literary figure of Fema from Jovan Sterija Popović's play *Pokondirena tikva* (1838) and the modern figure of the digital influencer. As a visual instrument of analysis, the diagram articulates the transition from 19th-century literary satire to 21st-century digital self-presentation, highlighting the continuities and transformations in the way identity, social legitimacy, and symbolic capital are shaped, simulated, and consumed.

At the center of this comparative structure stands Fema, a paradigmatic example of "pokondirenost" (pretentiousness), the desire for upward social mobility based on imitation rather than real knowledge or cultural competence. Sterija's literary model, rooted in the spirit of civic satire, anticipates contemporary forms of performative superficiality and self-promotional aesthetics that define the digital age. Fema, in her illusion of social prestige, fails to distinguish the real from the symbolic, making her a precursor of today's *influencers of nothing*, individuals who, out of ignorance yet amplified by technology, reproduce patterns of behaviour, opinion, and style devoid of genuine content or competence.

The following diagram (Figure 1) summarizes the theoretical and analytical framework of this research, providing a visual synthesis of the relationship between literary theory, dramaturgical principles, and influencer culture.

The diagram clearly presents this evolution of symbolic mechanisms through four interconnected layers:

Literary Layer – Fema and Jovan as a satirical pair of opposing values: illusion and reason, imitation and authenticity.

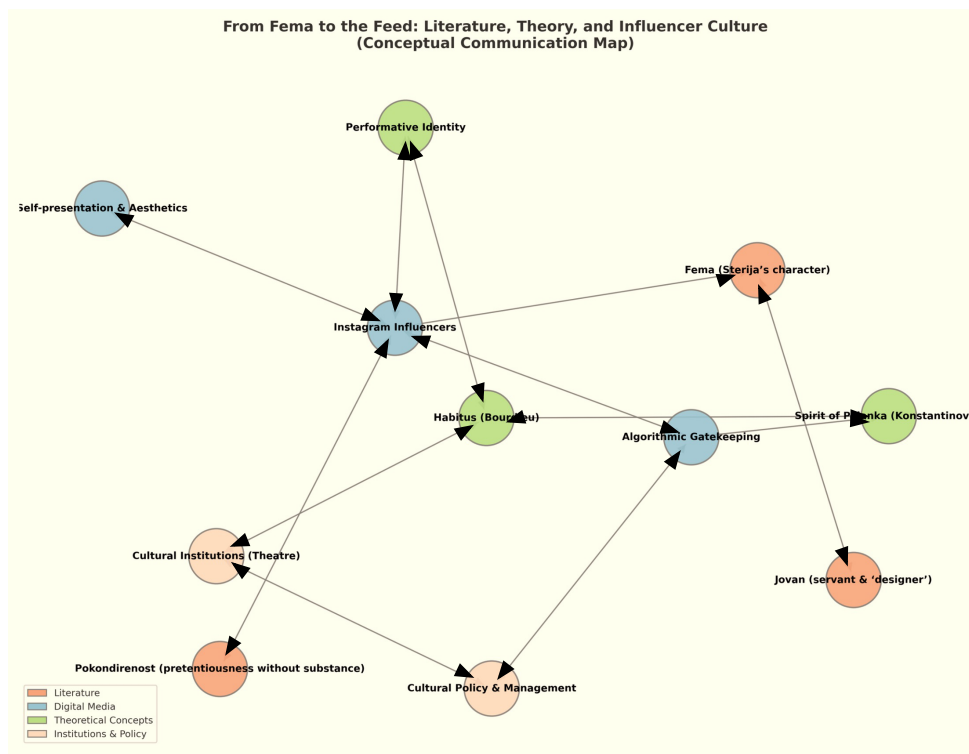
Theoretical Layer – includes Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* and Konstantinović's *Duh palanke* (small-town mindset) as key tools for understanding social behaviour, cultural mimicry, and the collective illusion of progress.

Media Layer – digital influencers, algorithmic mediation, and the aesthetics of self-presentation, where the algorithm replaces the audience and visibility becomes the currency of social recognition.

Institutional Layer – theatre, cultural policies, and management as domains that still attempt to preserve authentic values against the market and aesthetic emptiness of digital culture. The directed arrows in the diagram indicate the dynamics of transmission and transformation of meaning, from the literary stage to the digital screen, from social satire to market aesthetics, from ridicule to self-promotion. In this network, the *Duh palanke* becomes the algorithmic spirit of the platform: closed, repetitive, and self-satisfied within its own mirror. Thus, the diagram depicts not only "the path from Fema to the feed," but also the process of cultural deconstruction of authenticity, the transition from knowledge to ignorance, from critical to imitative, from humanistic to algorithmic. Through this visual synthesis, the research confirms the thesis that contemporary digital protagonists, like Sterija's Fema, are products of the *culture of nothingness*, in which social relevance results from performance rather than substance, as the author concludes.

Figure 1.

Literature, Theory, and Influencer Culture *Diagram designed and conceptualized by the author based on research findings and theoretical analysis (October 2025).*



Description:

The diagram visualizes key concepts and their interrelations within the comparative framework of J. P. Sterija Popović's *Fema* and the contemporary phenomenon of Instagram influencers.

Diagram description: *Literature, Theory, and Influencer Culture* visualizes key concepts and their interrelations in a comparative study of the literary character *Fema* from *Pokondirena tikva* by Jovan Sterija Popović and the contemporary phenomenon of Instagram influencers.

This theoretical grounding resonates within the conceptual diagram presented in the study. On the left side of the diagram is the literary foundation - *Pokondirena tikva* and the character *Fema*, who, through her aspiration toward "nobility" and linguistic hybridity, becomes a metaphor for social ambition and superficial cultural capital. This literary layer is connected to theoretical frameworks from Bourdieu (*habitus*, cultural capital), Konstantinović (small-town mindset), and Kristeva (intertextuality).

Kristeva's framework is crucial here, as it bridges the literary and the digital by revealing how meaning circulates between different symbolic systems. Within this diagram, intertextuality functions not only as a textual phenomenon but as a model of cultural

transmission, connecting the satire of Sterija's 19th-century stage to the performative aesthetics of social media. The influencer's persona, like Fema's self-fashioned identity, is constructed through borrowed linguistic and visual codes, demonstrating how intertextuality evolves from a literary strategy into a social and algorithmic practice.

At the center of the diagram are theoretical bridges linking the literary and digital worlds: performative identity, cultural politics, institutional and algorithmic control, and the aesthetics of self-presentation. On the right side is the digital phenomenon of influencers, represented through Instagram and other platforms. This side emphasizes dimensions of authenticity, self-presentation, market logic, and algorithmically mediated visibility. Influencers are depicted as contemporary "character types," whose identities are shaped and legitimized within the digital public sphere.

Along the bottom axis of the diagram is cultural politics and management, which connect both worlds, the institutional framework of theatre and national cultural institutions on one hand, and the non-institutional, algorithmically mediated dynamics of social media on the other.

The diagram thus demonstrates the continuity of cultural aspirations from the 19th century to the digital age, highlighting how patterns of "pokondirenost" and the pursuit of symbolic status are reproduced across different historical and media contexts.

8. Analysis of Two Interviews: Confirmation of Hypotheses and Scientific-Artistic Interpretation

- Analysis of the Interview with Professor Ivan Pravdić: *Between Satire and Self-Presentation: A Dialogue on Dramaturgy and Digital Culture*

The interview with Professor Ivan Pravdić represents a key analytical chapter of the study, as it confirms both hypotheses through an interdisciplinary dialogue between dramaturgy, cultural theory, and media studies. Based on thematic guidelines, the expert's responses not only provide empirical support for the research theses but also enrich them with new interpretive insights.

Confirmation of Hypothesis 1: Patterns of "pokondirenost"

Already in the first question, concerning methodological challenges, Pravdić clearly emphasizes that motivation is central in both dramatic and digital performance. Just as Fema sought symbolic elevation through language and manners, contemporary influencers strive "to be seen," employing aesthetic and communicative codes that create the illusion of

competence. This response fully confirms the hypothesis that processes of self-presentation and the pursuit of social legitimation are structured according to patterns of "*pokondirenost*." As the expert notes, the phenomenon is based not on actual but on symbolic competencies, whether in fashion advice or linguistic "*nov-govor*."

Confirmation of Hypothesis 2: Theatre as an Analytical Model for Digital Aesthetics

Pravdić's answers to questions about dramaturgy and habitus emphasize the importance of theatre as an anthropological constant and dramaturgy as a methodologically flexible discipline capable of interpreting strategies of digital self-presentation. This confirms the hypothesis that changes in the interpretation of *Pokondirena tikva* can serve as a model for understanding the influencer phenomenon. Theatre, as a field of live performance, allows for a deeper understanding of what digital media merely simulates, authenticity, presence, and direct contact.

The comparison of Fema and contemporary influencers raises questions about habitus, cultural capital, and performative self-presentation. As Professor Pravdić notes, "habitus, as reliance on habit, is the dominant structure of the bio-robot as the socially most available identity" (Pravdić, personal communication, 2025)⁴. In contemporary society, this is recognized as a field of simulation, appropriation, and alienation. This observation confirms the hypothesis that self-presentation processes in Fema and influencers follow the same patterns of "*pokondirenost*," where aspirations are shaped through symbolic rather than actual competencies.

"Small-town mindset" and Digital Communities

In this response, Professor Pravdić offers a valuable comparison: Konstantinović's paradigm of the "small-town mindset," originally situated within Balkan conservatism, in the digital age becomes a global pattern of "fashionability" and algorithmically conditioned communities. This further expands the hypothesis of cultural continuities, as digital platforms do not "overcome" the small-town mind-set but replicate it globally. The professor also points out that Konstantinović's concept of the "small-town mindset" can be applied to digital communities, as "*subcultures of contemporary social networks increasingly rely on uncritical fashionability subject to marketing targeting and strategies*" (Pravdić, personal communication, 2025). In this way, the phenomenon of Fema, as a literary character aspiring

⁴ Interview with Professor Ivan Pravdić, Full Professor at the Academy of Arts, University of Novi Sad, conducted via e-mail correspondence from Novi Sad as part of the scientific research project From Fema to the Feed: A Comparative Study of J. P. Sterija's Fema and the Instagram Influencer Phenomenon (research author, 1 October 2025).

to "nobility," finds a contemporary parallel in the digital space, where influencers strive for social legitimation through aesthetic and symbolic codes.

Dramaturgy as a Tool for Understanding Digital Performance

This response opens a particularly important perspective: dramaturgy is recognized as a discipline that not only interprets but also methodologically participates in structuring digital practices. Comparing dramaturgical tactics and influencers as "*well-organized groups*" confirms that the theatrical apparatus is key to understanding digital performativity.

National Cultural Institutions and Digital Platforms

The comparison between theatre and digital platforms highlights the unique value of cultural institutions in preserving direct experiences of communal engagement. In contrast to the digital logic of spectacle and attention monetization, theatre remains a space of authentic empathy and aesthetic experience, directing cultural policy toward defending and revitalizing institutional habitus.

Aesthetic and Linguistic Codes

Here, Professor Pravdić clearly confirms that Fema's linguistic experiments are analogous to influencers' "nov-govor," with both producing empty signs lacking semantic grounding. This insight strongly confirms the hypothesis of continuity between satire and digital self-presentation.

An especially interesting observation concerns language and aesthetics: "*Popović applied a Babylonian 'nov-govor' in the character of Fema, where the semantic level becomes blurred and lost, and consequently the pragmatic level becomes unfounded and false, which can be directly recognized in most influencers today*" (Pravdić, personal communication, 2025). This phenomenon of linguistic hybridity and stylized artificiality in *Pokondirena tikva* is reflected today in the digital discourse of influencers, especially through the mixture of local languages and English expressions, often without real semantic grounding.

Influencers as "Comedy of Character"

This response by Professor Pravdić further consolidates the hypotheses: influencers are analyzed as a contemporary "comedy of character," where the constant affirmation of the same identity leads to the emptiness behind the spectacle. This is precisely the dramaturgical pattern linking Fema and contemporary digital "pokondirene tikve."

The interview brilliantly confirms both hypotheses: self-presentation and social legitimation processes in Fema and influencers rely on the same patterns of symbolic capital, while theatre provides a key analytical model for understanding digital aesthetics. It also confirms the radical thesis of the study regarding "influencers of nothing" and the "culture of nothingness": despite their global visibility, influencers do not produce lasting cultural value but reproduce the aesthetics of empty signs, as satirically depicted in Fema.

At the level of cultural policy, this insight calls for redefining institutional and educational strategies to connect theatre, interdisciplinary research, and cultural management in defending authentic cultural production. The interview with Professor Pravdić thus not only confirms both hypotheses but also opens new research directions in digital self-presentation and performing arts.

- Analysis of the Interview with Professor Ksenija Radulović: *Changes in the Interpretive Paradigm and the Phenomenon of Fema in the Context of Digital Self-Presentation*

The interview with Professor Radulović represents a crucial segment of the research project From Fema to Feed, as it establishes a theoretical bridge between classical theatre studies and contemporary media practices of digital self-presentation. Given the scientific and institutional authority of the interviewee, the interview was methodologically structured as a qualitative analysis of expert discourse, allowing for valid confirmation of the hypotheses.

Changes in the Interpretive Paradigm and Confirmation of Hypothesis 2
Professor Radulović's response to the first question is highly significant for confirming the second hypothesis, according to which changes in the interpretive paradigm of *Pokondirena tikva* can serve as an analytical model for understanding the aesthetics of social media. She clearly situates the historical moment of paradigm shift in the 1970s, through the work of Dejan Mijač, whose reading of Sterija's text broke the traditional Biedermeier framework and shifted emphasis from the Enlightenment moral lesson to the tragic dimension of Fema as a literary and social phenomenon.

This reinterpretation of the classic text, which Radulović notes "became binding for subsequent generations", demonstrates the transformative potential of directorial theatre. Such a shift is not only aesthetic but also epistemological: it changes how we understand the social dynamics between desire and possibility, between authentic identity and symbolic imitation. In this sense, the contemporary digital space can be seen as a kind of "directorial theatre" of algorithmic culture, where reality is shaped through staged forms of self-presentation and spectacle.

Analogous to Mijač's approach, which interprets Fema's superficial cultural aspirations as a symptom of structural limitations, the digital world of influencers can be interpreted as a continuation of the same aesthetic, an aesthetics of "pretending," where symbolic capital is built on imitation rather than real competencies. This directly confirms the research thesis on the continuity between 19th-century literary satire and contemporary digital representation phenomena.

Fema as a Persistent Cultural Pattern and Confirmation of Hypothesis 1
In response to the second question, Professor Radulović specifies that the "phenomenon of Fema" can be understood as a persistent cultural pattern transcending geographical, historical, and social boundaries. This confirms the first hypothesis about similar patterns of self-presentation and the pursuit of social legitimation in Fema and contemporary influencers. She emphasizes that the "small-town mindset", understood as a mental structure of closedness, conformity, and symbolic prestige, is no longer limited to the provinces but has become globalized. In this sense, "the world has become a global small town," where social visibility and status are based on the aesthetics of self-promotion.

Fema's desire "to cultivate herself" is recognized as a precursor to today's algorithmic self-improvement, the need to be seen, imitated, and to belong to an idealized model of social success. Reading Fema as the "19th-century influencer" allows for a deeper understanding of how symbolic capital and social legitimation rely not on knowledge or authenticity but on performativity and perception. This confirms the study's key concept, *pokondirenost* as a structure of self-presentation, that unites the literary, sociological, and digital layers of the phenomenon.

Interdisciplinarity and Theoretical Framework

The response to the question on interdisciplinarity further confirms the research goal, linking literary theory, dramaturgy, and media studies into an integrated scholarly framework. Professor Radulović insists on "organic" interdisciplinarity, which does not mechanically merge disciplines but does so intrinsically through the logic of the research subject. This approach enables the constitution of a new scientific model that combines literary tradition, stage practice, and digital aesthetics.

Pokondirenost, Self-Presentation, and Technofeudalism

In her response, Professor Radulović lucidly extends the analysis to the contemporary society of spectacle and "technofeudalism." She emphasizes that influencers are not the cause

but the symptom of a society that has lost criteria of authenticity and expertise, turning knowledge into a commodity and visibility into a measure of value.

This insight fully confirms the author's conceptual formulation of "influencers of nothing" and the "culture of nothing." In both cases, we are dealing with a symbolic economy of emptiness, a space in which attention is capitalized and social status is built on the illusion of presence. Professor Radulović also accurately identifies a paradox: the contemporary intellectual, to be "visible," must adopt the same self-presentation mechanisms as an influencer - must "brand" themselves. Thus, the digital space becomes a field of total aestheticization of social roles, erasing distinctions between cultural authority and market popularity. The interview with Professor Radulović not only confirms both hypotheses but also deepens the theoretical framework of the study, providing a strong argumentative basis for the comparative analysis of Fema and contemporary influencers.

Confirmed Hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Fema's and influencers' self-presentation derives from the same pattern of symbolic imitation and the pursuit of social legitimation through external signs of status.

Hypothesis 2: Changes in the interpretive paradigm of 20th-century theatre (especially through Dejan Mijač's direction) offer a model for analysing digital aesthetics, where classical dramaturgical structures are transferred into algorithmically mediated self-presentation.

Finally, Professor Radulović's interdisciplinary reflection confirms the study's gointegrating literary theory, theatre studies, and media sociology into a model for understanding digital culture as a new form of *pokondirenost*.

In this perspective, "influencers of nothing" and the "culture of nothingness" are not mere metaphors but diagnostic categories of contemporary society: a symptom of a society that, like Fema, has lost the distinction between the real and the symbolic, between knowledge and imitation, between culture and algorithm.

The comparative analysis of literary and digital discourse shows how patterns of self-presentation, social legitimation, and performative identity largely overlap in Fema from Sterija's *Pokondirena tikva* and contemporary influencers who exist on social media as "influencers of nothing." Based on the interview with Professor Radulović, the first research hypothesis is confirmed. Self-presentation and social legitimation processes in Fema and digital creators are structured according to similar patterns of *pokondirenost*, i.e., attempts at social ascent through symbolic rather than actual competencies.

As Radulović emphasizes: "They [influencers] are simply a product, if not the result, of the spirit of the age, which cares little for expertise, knowledge, dedication, authenticity, or

the nuances that should characterize critical thinking" (Radulović, personal communication, 2025)⁵. This statement corresponds with the thesis that contemporary digital culture favours the aesthetics of superficiality, where authority and credibility are not based on real knowledge but on mechanisms of algorithmic visibility and emotional consumption. In this sense, Fema and today's influencers share the same semiotic space - a space of symbolic transformation of social signs into personal capital. Her *pokondirenost* becomes a metaphor for the performative identity of the digital subject, who builds social status through projection, imitation, and continuous self-branding.

This also confirms the second research hypothesis: changes in the interpretive paradigm of *Pokondirena tikva* in contemporary theatre can serve as an analytical model for understanding the aesthetics of social networks and the influencer phenomenon in the digital age.

Just as Fema in Sterija's dramaturgy aspired to "feel a touch of the big world" and "learn French," today's digital subjects aspire to symbolic access to global visibility, a world that, as Radulović precisely concludes, "in one way or another becomes a global small town." This global small town is a space where content is produced without real meaning, while the very act of visibility is treated as proof of existence and success. In this context, "influencers of nothing" represent a symptom of a broader "culture of nothing", a post-aesthetic and post-authentic framework in which communication replaces content, and self-presentation becomes the primary form of social existence.

"And as for Fema, let us not forget that she still tries to cultivate herself; unlike the other characters in Sterija's play, she senses that the world does not end at the fence at the edge of her village. She understands that somewhere beyond, there exists a different world. But today, the world is, in one way or another, a global small town, and that is probably a significant difference" (Radulović, personal communication, 2025). In this context, content is produced without real meaning, while the very act of visibility is treated as proof of existence and success. Here, "influencers of nothing" represent a symptom of a broader "culture of nothingness", a post-aesthetic and post-authentic framework in which communication substitutes for content, and self-presentation becomes the primary form of social existence.

⁵ Interview with Professor Ksenija Radulović, Full Professor at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts, University of Arts in Belgrade, conducted via e-mail correspondence from Belgrade as part of the scientific research project From Fema to the Feed: A Comparative Study of J. P. Sterija's Fema and the Instagram Influencer Phenomenon (research author, 6 October 2025).

9. Conclusion – Key Findings

The analysis of Jovan Sterija Popović's comedy *Pokondirena tikva* in the context of contemporary digital phenomena of self-presentation and influencer culture demonstrates a strong continuity of cultural patterns connecting the 19th and 21st centuries. Both contexts are grounded in symbolic imitation, performativity, and the pursuit of social legitimacy through the appearance of competence. The central character Fema, who embodies the mechanism of "pokondirenost" in Sterija's satire, finds her contemporary counterpart in the "influencers of nothing." These digital subjects reproduce the same patterns of superficial elevation - constructing identity through signs rather than content, through form rather than knowledge. This thesis is repeatedly confirmed in expert interviews with Professor Ksenija Radulović and Professor Ivan Pravdić, whose insights provided empirical verification of the hypotheses and an interdisciplinary interpretation of the phenomenon.

Results of expert interviews and evaluation of hypotheses

Confirmation of *Hypothesis 1*: Patterns of "pokondirenost". In the interview with Professor Ivan Pravdić, the expert emphasizes that both theatrical and digital performances rely on the same motivational structures: "Motivation is key in both dramatic and digital performance; just as Fema strove for symbolic elevation through language and manners, so too do contemporary influencers seek to be seen." (Pravdić, personal communication, 2025). This confirms the first hypothesis that the processes of self-presentation and social legitimization in Fema and contemporary influencers are structured according to patterns of "pokondirenost." The contemporary "novel language" of influencers, as Pravdić observes, reflects a "Babylonian language in which the semantic plane is lost, and everything becomes pragmatically unfounded and false" (Pravdić, personal communication, 2025).

Confirmation of *Hypothesis 2*: Theater as an analytical model for digital aesthetics Pravdić highlights theater as an anthropological constant and dramaturgy as a discipline that enables understanding of digital performative practices. "Habitus, as reliance on habit, is the dominant structure of the bio-robot as the socially most available identity" (Pravdić, personal communication, 2025), which confirms the thesis that the theatrical apparatus can serve as an analytical model for decoding digital practices of imitation and self-presentation.

"Small-town mindset" and the global digital community

Pravdić emphasizes that digital platforms "are not an overcoming of the small-town mindset, but its planetary replication," because "subcultures of contemporary social networks rely more on uncritical fashionableness subject to marketing strategies" (Pravdić, personal

communication, 2025). This insight confirms the breadth of cultural continuity and the transformation of a local pattern of provincialism into a global algorithmic phenomenon.

Significant contribution of the interview with Professor Ksenija Radulović Radulović emphasizes that shifts in the interpretation of Sterija's poetics and theatrical aesthetics are simultaneously shifts in cultural thought - theater becomes a laboratory for the representation of identity, while digital media simulate authenticity and presence. As she notes, "shifts in the interpretative paradigm can provide a model for analysing the dynamics of digital identity and influencer culture." (Radulović, personal communication, 2025). This analysis links Sterija's satire and contemporary performance culture through the shared mechanism of imitation and symbolic capital.

10. Scientific conclusions

Interviews with both experts confirm the proposed hypotheses and open the way for a new scientific paradigm in which theatre is understood as an epistemological tool for analysing digital culture. The processes of self-presentation among influencers and Fema reflect the same semiotic patterns: imitation, appropriation, and the pursuit of symbolic legitimation.

Here, the central, fundamental thesis of the study regarding "influencers of nothing" and the "culture of nothingness" is confirmed: digital visibility replaces actual cultural content, while aesthetic form is used as a substitute for value. Just as Fema "makes something out of Jovan" through the act of naming, the digital network produces an "influencer" from an ordinary subject - through a performative act of self-presentation that does not create lasting cultural value, but circulates signs.

In the concluding section of the study, the interdisciplinary approach connecting the fields of literature, theory, and influencer culture (*Literature, Theory, and Influencer Culture*) enabled the visualization and interpretation of key concepts and their interrelations within a comparative framework between the literary character Fema from Jovan Sterija Popović's *Pokondirena tikva* and the contemporary phenomenon of Instagram influencers. This study demonstrates how the fundamental patterns of symbolic imitation, performativity, and social legitimation are reproduced across different historical, aesthetic, and technological paradigms.

As the author emphasizes, in the digital sphere of self-promotion, possibilities are often perceived as limitless, while criteria for objective evaluation are suppressed in favour of the aesthetics of appearance and the logic of visibility. This process reflects the mechanisms Sterija satirically exposed in the character of Fema, an aspiration toward elevation based on the superficial adoption of cultural forms rather than actual competence. In this sense, digital

culture repeats the structure of "*pokondirenost*," where social status is constructed through aesthetic form and media exposure rather than knowledge and cultural substance.

This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in the way younger generations engage with digital patterns of self-presentation. The disproportionate influence of influencers shapes young people's imaginaries, who, within the "digital culture of nothingness," adopt patterns of empty representation, imitation, and self-production without substantive content. As the analysis shows, this reproduces a contemporary form of the "small-town mindset", a closed loop of symbolic relations dominated by fashionableness, algorithmic conformity, and the illusion of belonging.

Sterija's characters, Fema and Jovan, thus experience their full reincarnation on digital platforms: their interplay of social elevation, imitation, and performative presentation becomes a paradigmatic model of contemporary digital existence. Fema becomes a proto-influencer, and Jovan a symbol of the intermediary in the attention economy. Their relationship, originally comic and satirical, in today's digital context acquires global dimensions, revealing a deep structural similarity between 19th-century literary satire and 21st-century social media aesthetics.

In conclusion, this research introduces and contextualizes the concepts of the "**influencers of nothing**" and the "**culture of nothingness**" as critical theoretical constructs for understanding the paradoxes of contemporary digital culture, a sphere in which visibility often substitutes for essence, and performative identity emerges as the dominant form of social and cultural legitimation. This is not merely a passing media phenomenon but a symptom of a deeper cultural shift: from a knowledge-based society to a performance-based society, from value to visibility, from content to sign. It is precisely in this transition that the contemporary challenge for cultural policies and educational systems is reflected - how to preserve space for authentic creativity, critical thinking, and aesthetic relevance in a world where "being seen" has become more important than "being."

11. Conclusion and Future Research Directions

- Confirmation of *Hypothesis 1*: The processes of self-presentation and social legitimation in Fema and influencers are structured according to patterns of "*pokondirenost*" - advancement through imitation and superficial adoption of forms.
- Confirmation of *Hypothesis 2*: Dramaturgy and theatre theory provide a key analytical model for understanding digital aesthetics and performance culture.

Broader Implications: The phenomenon of **"influencers of nothing"** and the **"culture of nothingness"** demonstrates that digital platforms have become a globalized "small town", a space of appearance, visibility, and imitation without substance.

Directions for Future Research: Future studies should expand the analysis to empirical research on digital audiences and algorithmic dramaturgy (so-called *algorithmic performativity*), with an emphasis on reception processes and the social production of meaning. Interdisciplinary approaches that combine theatre studies, media sociology, and semiotics will enable a deeper understanding of how the "culture of nothingness" structures contemporary forms of identity, power, and belonging. Furthermore, future research would benefit from engaging more actively with contemporary international theoretical developments, either affirmatively or critically, in order to position the analysis within broader scholarly currents and ensure awareness of emerging conceptual trends. Such an approach would open space for comparative studies and enrich the theoretical foundation of subsequent work.

Translated by Dušan Bojović

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