

Girls – Instagram – Eating Disorders

How model and fitness influencers can intensify eating disorders

New study on the significance of influencers in the context of eating disorders

Munich, 17 July 2019 – 143 people affected by eating disorders were questioned about their Instagram use and the role of influencers in the context of their illness. The study shows that influencers from the field of fashion modelling, such as Heidi Klum or Lena Gercke, can intensify an overcritical relationship with one's own body. Fitness influencers like Pamela Reif or Anne Kissner encourage girls and women to exercise more and to imitate the eating behaviour of the influencers, thus accompanying them on their path to an eating disorder. But influencers like Fine Bauer, a 'curvy model' who stands for body positivity, can also help people to recover from an eating disorder.

For many girls and women, Instagram is part of their journey into an eating disorder, but in individual cases it can also contribute to their recovery. This is shown by a recent study conducted by the International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television and by the Landshut University of Applied Sciences, and presented at the annual conference of the Bundesfachverband Essstörungen (BFE, the German Association for Eating Disorders). In collaboration with the BFE and the Schön Klinik, the study surveyed 143 people who are currently being treated for eating disorders, of whom 138 are women and girls.¹

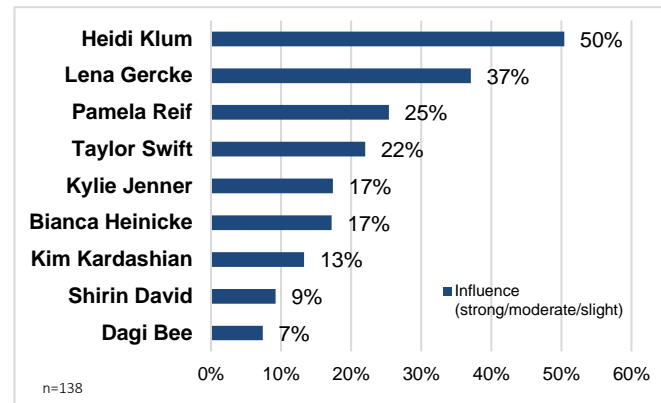
Posting pictures on Instagram has consequences in real life

Three quarters (74 %) of the girls and women with eating disorders are active on Instagram and post pictures of themselves. It is very important to them to look "slim" in their pictures, but also to "show their best side" and to seem "natural". To achieve this, seven out of ten of the respondents (72%) use filter apps, e.g. to correct skin imperfections, lighten their teeth, or make their face and body slimmer. Yet despite the editing, the women and girls surveyed do not believe that their own pictures bear comparison with those of others. Their dissatisfaction with their own real body increases, they begin to change their eating and exercise regimes, the virtual world impinges on real everyday life. In this process, influencers offer orientation with regard to values and concrete action.

¹ The survey used a questionnaire with open and closed questions, which was distributed to the subjects via their therapists. 26 facilities specializing in eating disorders, from all over Germany, took part in the study.

Influencers like Heidi Klum and Pamela Reif as companions on the path to illness

When asked whether there are specific well-known personalities who had a particular influence on the development of their eating disorder, the respondents mention a number of names. Half of the women and girls questioned state that Heidi Klum had at least “a slight influence” on the development of their eating disorder. One in three describe Lena Gercke, the winner of the first season of *Germany’s Next Topmodel*, as significant.



A quarter of those surveyed see fitness influencer Pamela Reif as having had an impact on their eating disorder; 18% go so far as to say that she had a “very strong influence” on their illness. Another name repeatedly mentioned as particularly influential is Anne Kissner. For example Frauke, aged 22, who has been under treatment for anorexia for four years, gives the following description: “I compared the quantities/calories they ate with mine, and I thought that such a small amount of food/calories was normal + healthy”. Frauke lost 18 kg within one year, thus developing anorexia. Eating disorders are complex psychosomatic illnesses, so it is not just influencers who contribute to their development. Yet influencers embody values, show goals in life, and can become concrete role models for unhealthy eating behaviour.

When influencers help in the healing process

Just as fitness influencers promote the need for a very thin body, constant dieting and fitness, so influencers can also expand the ideal of beauty, and encourage a positive way of dealing with one’s own body. There is, for example, explicit mention of Fine Bauer: as a plus-size model, she helped Leonie, aged 31 and under treatment for bulimia for 19 years, to accept her body and recognize that it is possible and acceptable to have “more of a tummy”.

“These positive examples show that we urgently need more realism, more individuality, and more diverse body images in the media landscape as a whole, but especially among the influencers”, says Dr. Maya Götz, the director of the study at the International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television. “Influencers have a strong impact on young people”, stresses Prof. Dr. Eva Wunderer, who provided scientific support for the study at the Landshut University of Applied Sciences. “They have to be aware of this responsibility. Something that generates a lot of clicks is not necessarily good for their followers too.”

Press Release



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