

The self-presentation of influencers on Instagram and its significance for girls

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS OF A SERIES OF STUDIES

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A series of studies has investigated what characterizes the self-presentation of successful female influencers on Instagram, and what this can mean for the self-presentation of girls on Instagram.

They smile into the camera with their perfect faces, and pose in beautiful places. Their bodies are super-slim, their clothing from fashionable brands. What influencers present, especially on Instagram, is a perfect world of fashion, travel and trendy lifestyles. Since it was launched in 2010, the image-based platform Instagram has been one of the fastest-growing global social networks, and is used by a billion users worldwide every month (as of June 2018).¹ In 2016, Instagram announced that every minute, more than 40,000 photos and videos were being uploaded, i.e. nearly 60 million items per day (Instagram, 2016). This makes Instagram an extremely attractive platform for online marketing and influencers; the focus on pictures and videos allows a very direct form of self-presentation with a high market value (Rainie et al., 2012).

For young people in Germany, Instagram is the most popular online service after YouTube and WhatsApp, having seen a surge in popularity over the last year. Instagram use is especially high among 14- to 15-year-olds: 73 % of adolescents use it daily or several times a week (Feierabend et al., 2018). If young people are on Instagram,

they mainly follow people they know personally (97 %), but also stars or celebrities (influencers) (81 %), and they comment on photos and videos from other users (81 %). At least 85 % of the 12- to 19-year-olds who use Instagram post photos and videos themselves (Feierabend et al., 2018). A series of studies conducted by IZI jointly with the MaLisa Foundation has examined what characterizes the self-presentation of successful influencers on Instagram, and what this might mean for the self-presentation of girls on Instagram. What follows is a summary of the findings (see also Götz, 2019; Götz & Becker, 2019).

HOW FEMALE INFLUENCERS PRESENT THEMSELVES ON INSTAGRAM

Approach 1: What female influencers post about themselves

Influencers, i.e. people who start social interactions by posting content (texts, images, audio, video) on a subject area, frequently, regularly, and on their own initiative, are the new role-models of today's preteens and teenagers. Their appeal lies mainly in the image they transmit of themselves: the impression they give of being authentic, honest, and experts in their field, and of having similar values to their target group (Scott, 2018). Self-branding becomes their cultural capital, and

thus the basis for their commercial success (Khedher, 2014). Self-marketing becomes a constitutive element of life (Hearn, 2008, p. 211).

In order to position themselves appealingly as a brand for their followers, it is essential for influencers to post photos of themselves regularly. Each picture individually is part of their self-branding, as is the account as a whole. To analyse how women present themselves here, the first step was a descriptive standardized content analysis of the Instagram accounts of the 10 Instagrammers with the highest number of followers, looking at 30 randomly chosen images from each account. The images (n=300) were coded according to who can be seen with what image segment, and whether there is any obvious sexualization or eroticization. The analysis showed that female influencers mainly post pictures in which they themselves are the central focus (76 % of all images). There are also photos in which they can be seen with friends or colleagues (12 %), and pictures with their partner (9 %). Occasionally they also post pictures of themselves with dogs or cats, rarely with their own children. Thus the visual self-branding is primarily based on the person of the influencer herself, supplemented by other people from her life. In the pictures, the influencers are mainly visible in full-body shots including their feet (35 %) or in portrait shots with face, shoulders and part of the upper body (35 %). There are also

pictures showing their bodies down to the buttocks (15 %) or knee (12 %). Photos showing only the face, without the shoulders, are rare (4 %). Overall, in 6 out of 10 photos the influencers' bodies are the central focus of their self-branding, in 4 out of 10 their faces. In most of the images (78 %) the influencers are not obviously sexualized or presented in an erotically inviting way, but they are sometimes flirtatiously provocative (10 %) or sexualized (7 %). Here, however, there are clear differences between the individual Instagrammers. While the singer Shirin David mainly presents her body and its curves, clearly sexualizing herself in the process, the twins Lisa and Lena, for example, present themselves without explicit eroticization or sexualization in all their pictures.

Approach 2: A high degree of similarity, but with a USP – a qualitative look at the accounts

Despite all the obvious similarities, the profiles do show individual tendencies. The qualitative analysis of the profiles shows, for example, how Dagi Bee presents herself as someone who is "genuine" and "deeply admired and loved by her boyfriend, then husband" – and who has particular competence in the area of make-up design. Bibi (from BibisBeautyPalace) presents herself mainly in the shared intimacy of her everyday life with her boyfriend and later husband, including phases of pregnancy and as a young mother. These are images of a fulfilled life of idealized femininity. In contrast, Heidi Klum's Instagram account presents her primarily as a woman of many facets. She appears alone much more seldom than all the other influencers, and instead shows herself with her boyfriend and friends, sometimes in intimate situations and an informal atmosphere, thus presenting herself as a spontaneous and very much socially integrated person. The more closely the accounts are examined,

the more clearly tendencies and slight differences emerge. The basic tendency remains, however: all the pictures, without exception, show beautifully presented and/or cheerful women, extremely slim, with long, styled hair and no skin blemishes or visible flab.

Approach 3: Analysis of poses, gestures and gaze behaviour

To expand the spectrum of influencers and systematically explore the key research questions (about supra-individual, recurring details relating to poses, facial expressions and gaze behaviour in self-presentation), the number of influencers was increased to $n=66$ in the next phase. Female Instagrammers who are followed by girls (aged 14 to 19) were selected, and again $n=300$ images were chosen. This time the focus was on photos in which the influencers appear on their own, and which have obviously been staged for a professional camera shot.

The analysis investigated whether recurring patterns appeared. The following points become evident: female influencers are always very thin, with long hair and well-groomed, made-up faces. In the photos, the influencers repeatedly present themselves in similar postures. They usually stand asymmetrically in a position that optimizes their body shape. Typical poses are:

- one leg turned out to the side,
- accidentally crossed legs,
- the "S-curve"
- a "spontaneous" glance over the shoulder.

Typical gestures are a hand raised to the hair or face, as if by chance. Recurring patterns can also be identified in their gaze behaviour:

- the provocatively erotic gaze,
- the intense, direct gaze,
- the playfully innocent gaze (Ill. 1),
- the introspective gaze,
- the dreamy gaze into the distance.

Overall, the media analysis shows 3 types of self-presentation among female influencers, in the pictures where they appear alone: the erotically attractive woman, the likeably naïve woman, and the beautiful woman, casually photographed. All 3 types are forms of traditional presentations of femininity.

People who in many respects differ markedly as individuals are representing themselves in an astonishingly similar way, with the same gestures, in similar places, and with a similar portfolio. In this way the "Instafamous" (Spech, 2016) define – for those who follow them and take their cues from them – the parameters of what being an attractive woman today involves, and present a consistently similar post-feminist masquerade (see McRobbie, 2010).

SIGNIFICANCE FOR ADOLESCENTS

Adolescents are online for somewhat over 3.5 hours per day, and 73 % use the social network Instagram daily or several times a week. They follow influencers and people they know personally, make comments, and post photos and videos of themselves (Feierabend et al., 2018). This makes Instagram, at present, the biggest platform for visual self-presentation by adolescents worldwide. Girls and young women in particular post vast



Ill. 1: A recurring pattern in gaze behaviour: the playfully innocent gaze



Screenshot from Instagram © ohohc couture

Screenshot from Instagram © female Instagram user³

Ill. 2 and 3: The girls in the case studies travel to the same places as well-known influencers and copy their staged images

numbers of pictures of themselves here, presenting their life and identity to others (de Aguiar Pereira, 2016). This offers young women new opportunities to make themselves visible, show themselves in their own distinct identity, and give themselves a voice. Yet even a superficial glance shows that an astonishing similarity prevails among these images. How does this come about? Qualitative case studies and a representative survey were carried out to investigate this question.

Case studies on the self-presentation of girls (aged 14 to 16)

7 individual case studies were used to examine how girls create their posts on Instagram, what is important to them here, and what they avoid. The studies show that the girls have mostly been on Instagram for longer than a year, and post photos regularly. They themselves are the central focus of their presentation. The photos they post are not random, but usually strategically stage-managed.

In this presentation, their facial expression, hair and posture are particularly important to them; all of these things are meant to look “perfect” and “natural”. They would never upload a picture that was “not perfect”, where

they did not look slim, for example, or had messy hair or no make-up. The girls are prepared to invest considerable effort in producing these pictures, and often take up to 20 attempts before they achieve the perfect “natural” and “spontaneous” picture.

They learn what a perfect picture looks like from the influencers, copying their postures and their little tricks, and using filters to remove unwanted people from their photos and smooth out irregularities and perceived inadequacies in themselves. Looking back, they started off by posting a wider range of images of themselves, but over time this has developed increasingly towards the perfect picture. They are now embarrassed by their older self-presentations, in which they are more individual, for example, and more focused on fun than perfection. A “post-feminist masquerade” is emerging as the new cultural dominant (McRobbie, 2009, p. 63). The explicit role-models for this are female influencers and their self-presentation on Instagram.

Comparison between the self-presentation of successful female Instagrammers and girls

In the next step, the 300 images of successful influencers were compared

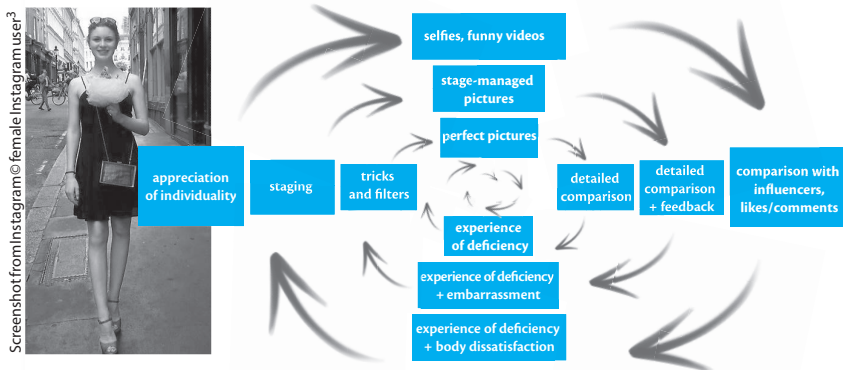
with the pictures of the girls from the case studies. There were obvious and striking similarities. Both present themselves as very slim (in some cases editing with filters), always with strategically selected poses and facial expressions, with make-up, and with no skin blemishes. Both influencers and “normal” girls show typical poses in their self-presentation (S shape, casually crossed legs, hand in hair etc.). If possible, the girls travel to the same places as the influencers and copy their staged images down to the last detail (Ill. 2 and 3).

Besides the pressure of always having to present and edit themselves, what this means for the girls is that most facets of their self and most of their everyday experiences are not given any space in their self-presentation. Their own identity can only be shown within a very narrow framework, which is shaped by influencers and thus (in part) by the fashion and beauty industry, although the girls are not able to discern this connection. Are the girls from the individual case studies an exception?

Representative survey

In a representative sample of $n=846$ adolescents aged between 12 and 19, 404 of them girls,² selected findings from the individual case studies were tested to see if they were relevant for adolescents in general and girls in particular.

The result that emerged was that 3 quarters of all girls at least sometimes upload pictures to social networks. In this self-presentation, girls find it particularly important to show themselves as “cheerful” (90 %), at their best (87 %) and “as slim as possible” (81 %), and at the same time to look as natural as possible (88 %). To achieve this, 49 % of the girls at least sometimes use filter software, without seeing any contradiction between this and their desire to look “natural”. 69 % touch up their hair, 70 % make their skin smoother, and a third change the size and colour of their eyes or make their



III. 4: The development of self-presentation in increasingly stereotypical forms

belly flatter (33 % for each of these). Here there are significant similarities with the people they are following. There is a 94 % probability that those following a model or YouTuber will find it important to look slim. Girls who follow beauty YouTubers more often use filters and more often touch up their make-up. All those who follow Heidi Klum at least sometimes use filters to improve their skin, and most of them whiten their teeth in their photos. So the girls in the individual case studies are anything but exceptions.

Conclusion

The study shows that girls who present themselves on Instagram usually do so with a very critical attitude towards their natural appearance. Female influencers have a significant and demonstrable role-model function for the way girls present themselves. They accept them unquestioningly as ideal figures, and try to follow them in appearance, gestures, expressions, location etc. The result is masquerade-like repetition of the same poses, again and again. As the girls' own appearance normally does not meet the standard, they use tricks and filters to compensate, to make their bodies seem "spontaneously natural". This leads to a distortion of the understanding of "natural" and "spontaneous", and the masquerade

becomes the unquestioned standard, allowing no divergence. The edited image seems more natural than the real appearance (Kleemans et al., 2018). In an ever-narrowing circle, the self-presentation of the girls – but also that of the professionals – becomes more restricted and more identical (III. 4).

NOTES

¹ <https://de.statista.com/infografik/14364/anzahl-der-monatlich-aktiven-nutzer-von-instagram/> [7 March 2019]

² Conducted by ConKids & Youth. The sample, selected at 150 BIK sample points, is apportioned by quota according to the respondents' age, sex and migration background, school attendance/school-leaving qualification, distribution by federal state and municipality size class, and marital status of the mother, and is representative of the population of all 12- to 19-year-olds in private households in Germany: 6.1 million, of whom 5.29 million are in the former West Germany and 0.81 million in the former East Germany. The representativeness of the young people surveyed corresponds to a probability sample of the same magnitude; at a significance level of 90%, the confidence interval for $n=846$ is (in the worst case) $\pm 3.99\%$ as a sampling error. The field work was carried out from 2 to 31 March 2018.

³ Permission has been given to use the pictures of the respondents in an academic context in the framework of this study; any further use and/or reproduction without explicit permission is prohibited.

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