

# “Why can’t I be so perfect?”

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FEMALE INFLUENCERS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF EATING DISORDERS

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**In a study, people being treated for eating disorders were asked what role influencers played in the development of their illness – and in their life with it.**

“In the case of Lily Collins, Heidi Klum, Lena Gercke, it was a strong influence. It all looked so perfect”, recounts Lina, aged 16, who has been undergoing treatment for anorexia for a year. After 2 periods of hospitalization, she is now receiving further support in outpatient therapy.

For women and girls who use Facebook, there is evidence of a connection between looking at pictures of particularly slim women and increased criticism of their own physical appearance (see e.g. Mingoia et al., 2017). This trend is still more pronounced for the online platform Instagram, which has an even stronger visual focus. For young women, following beauty influencers goes hand in hand with a greater internalization of thin body images (Cohen et al., 2017) and with more extensive use of filters to improve the body in selfies (Götz, 2019). An Australian study has shown that even if girls know the images have been altered with filters, they find them more beautiful and more natural than realistic photos (Kleemanns et al., 2016). It is therefore not surprising that the increased use of Instagram among young women (aged 18 to 25) is accompanied by a higher degree of self-objectification and a tendency to compare themselves with influencers, with the result that Instagram use as a whole is seen as having a negative impact on well-being and body satisfaction (e.g. Brown &

Tiggemann, 2016; Fardouly et al., 2018). Dissatisfaction with their own body, perfectionism, and a strong focus on the feedback of others are typical of people with eating disorders (Wunderer, 2015). So far there has been very little detailed research on which tendencies and connections appear here. This is the starting point for the study carried out by IZI, in collaboration with the Bundesfachverband Essstörungen e. V. (BFE, the German Association for Eating Disorders) and the Schön Clinics.

### THE STUDY

The study as a whole investigates how people with eating disorders use social networks for self-presentation, to what extent they use filters, what feelings accompany this, what significance influencers<sup>1</sup> have in this context, and to what extent Instagram use has an impact on real life and the course of the illness. The subjects were surveyed by means of a questionnaire with mainly open questions and some standardized items.<sup>2</sup> Participation was voluntary and the data were gathered anonymously, in compliance with data protection regulations.<sup>3</sup>

The participants were n=143 people who were undergoing treatment for an eating disorder at the time. They were between 13 and 52 years old at the time of the survey, mostly female (n=138), as well as 4 men and 1 non-binary person. The surveys took place in 26 facilities<sup>4</sup> in Germany.

### THE FINDINGS

In many areas, the posting behaviour of those affected by eating disorders is similar to that of girls in general (cf. Götz, 2019). Their activities on Instagram are similar, but they more often describe an overcritical relationship to their own body, and doubts or repetitive worries “about whether the post was the ‘right’ decision or not” (Viola, aged 19). Girls and women with eating disorders care even more about likes and comments than the girls in the representative survey (cf. Götz, 2019), and are more likely to edit their photos with filter apps. Their corrections begin with body-related aspects: they touch up their skin, whiten their teeth, and make their face or body narrower. Nearly 8 out of 10 of those affected by eating disorders (77 %) state that the editing of photos also triggered changes in real life, encouraging them to exercise more and change their eating habits, e.g. eating more healthy food or going on a diet. For many – not for everyone – certain influencers were particularly significant here.

“I thought I had to exercise, eat etc., the same amount as them, so my body would always look like in their photos, but of course that’s very unrealistic. They were leading what I imagined to be the perfect life on Instagram.” (Shareen, aged 18, in treatment for anorexia and bulimia)

Half of the 138 women and girls surveyed state that Heidi Klum had at least “a slight influence” on the development of their eating disorder.

## RESEARCH

For Lena Gercke, the winner of the first season of *Germany's Next Topmodel*, the figure is 37 %, and for Pamela Reif, the fitness and lifestyle influencer, it is 1 in 4.

### “Why can't I be so perfect”

Pamela Reif had a “very strong” influence on the development of the eating disorder of just under 2 out of 10 respondents (18 %). In the qualitative analysis of the statements, it becomes clear that in her case in particular the well-toned and extremely slim body which she displays gives the idea that it is possible to look exactly the same. This necessitates a life with a “very disciplined healthy diet”, or at least this was the impression of Ann-Kathrin (aged 23), who has been in treatment for anorexia for 4 years. Florentine (aged 17), treated first for anorexia, then for bulimia, admired the influencers: “Their pictures are always perfect.” This was very much in line with her own ideals, but increasingly led to the despairing question: “Why can't I be so perfect?”

For some of the girls and women being treated for eating disorders, this very direct adoption of body-image ideals led them to also adopt the exercise regimes and diets shown by the influencers in their videos. A name frequently mentioned here was BodyKiss (Anne Kissner). In her videos on YouTube she shows, sometimes in detail, how she herself “lives in deficit”, to deliberately reduce her weight.

The beginning of one of her videos offers a prime example:<sup>5</sup>

Anne Kissner, successful lifestyle and fitness influencer, is standing in her kitchen. She looks directly into the

camera, and says that at the moment she is “tracking” again because she has got a bit out of shape. Probably none of her viewers will understand this, she says, but she feels as though she has got out of shape. She then shows why: muesli on the shelf, and (accompanied by threatening Thriller music) gummibears from the previous evening on the table. “Tracking”, i.e. tracking her calorie consumption, involves recording the calories from each meal in an app. She then demonstrates what her breakfast looks like, taking frozen strawberries and weighing them. 106 grams is all she is allowed...

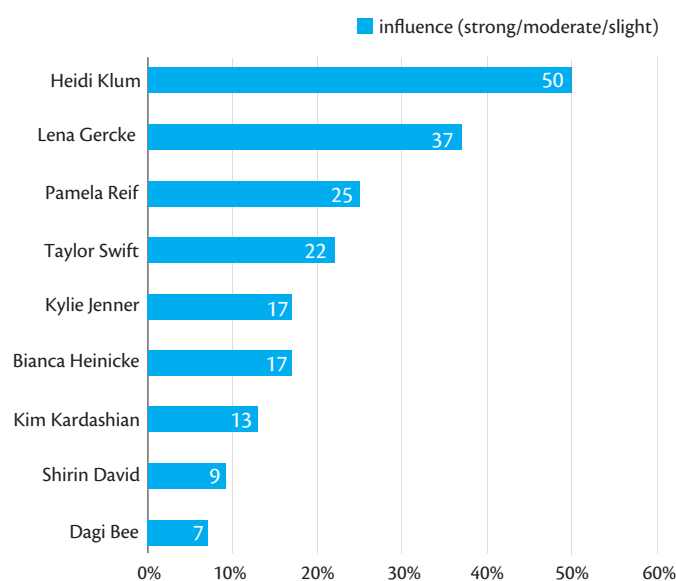
Viola, aged 19 and in treatment for anorexia for 5 years, describes how her enthusiasm for the influencer BodyKiss (Anne Kissner) was initially driven by admiration and enjoyment of sport. But gradually she began to count calories more and more, like BodyKiss: “It then became an instrument for the eating disorder.” The enthusiasm “became a compulsion, a feeling that I had to do everything ‘right’, that I had to calculate calories in order to lose weight or avoid gaining weight.”

### “Does this make me happy?”

Viola goes on to say that she felt increasingly guilty in the evening if she had

exceeded her daily calorie allowance but was still hungry or had an appetite. The feeling of being wrong and deficient grew stronger and stronger. Frauke, 22 years old and in treatment for anorexia for 4 years, describes how she took her cues from the lifestyle of Anne Kissner and other fitness influencers: the eating habits, the constant dieting, the excessive exercise. “I compared the quantities/calories they eat with mine, and I thought that such a small amount of food/calories was normal + healthy.” Frauke lost 18 kg within a year, and developed anorexia. She spent eight months in a clinic, then, after a relapse, went to a clinic specializing in eating disorders for another 10 months, and is still undergoing inpatient treatment. In the light of her current experience, she would advise younger girls to distance themselves firmly from the apparently happy lifestyles presented, and to ask themselves: “Does this make me happy? Who am I, what makes me who I am?”

Certainly neither Frauke's nor Viola's eating disorder was caused by Anne Kissner alone. Eating disorders are complex illnesses, which are caused by many different factors and point to deeper problems (Wunderer, 2015). Nonetheless, (social) media have an influence on girls' and young women's ideals and ideas about what makes a happy and healthy life. So for example the format *Germany's Next Topmodel* can have a negative impact on their perceptions of their own bodies, promoting the idealization of very thin bodies and encouraging conformity and the suppression of their own physical feelings (Götz & Mendel, 2015). Influencers determine the current trends of youth culture. They exert influence by



III. 1: Influencers who, according to the self-assessment of the respondents, had at least “a slight influence” on the development of their eating disorder

(seemingly) offering an authentic and completely open view of their lives, and in doing so not only set trends for brands and fashion, but also promote certain lifestyles and products which are unquestioningly accepted as ideals. The qualitative analysis of the statements of those affected by eating disorders also shows that it is not always a case of directly adopting the ideas of an influencer. Anastasia, 15 years old and in treatment for a binge eating disorder, explains that it was not just one person who influenced her, but “more the whole ‘feeling’ that is spread on Instagram, and the values that are transmitted”. The constantly repeated beauty ideal of an extremely slim body, combined with the apparently perfect, fulfilled lives displayed on Instagram, exerts enormous pressure, especially on girls with strong perfectionist traits and low self-esteem – 2 common features of people with eating disorders. As the influencers give the impression that they are presenting their lives authentically, their followers’ own lives with their everyday cares, failures and problems seem deficient in comparison.

Thus it is not only their own bodies that seem deficient in comparison; rather, the whole life they are leading is bound to seem comparatively unspectacular, sad and unsuccessful.

The qualitative analyses also show, however, that in some cases influencers can – from a subjective perspective – contribute to recovery. For example Anke, 21 years old and in treatment for anorexia for a year, tells of the empowering effect of the influencer DatJulschen. A key element in this influencer’s self-marketing is that she presents herself with unedited images. She emphasizes how determined she is to show more reality on Instagram and YouTube, and thereby motivate her followers to accept their own bodies. For Anke, this was very helpful: “DatJulschen has been important, especially in the last few months, and has often made me realize that not everything is

the way it seems.” Individual respondents also tell of the empowering force of alternative body images, in the sense of body positivity. Leonie, who was 31 at the time of the survey and had been in treatment for bulimia for 19 years, describes how Fine Bauer supports her on her path to recovery:

“Fine Bauer is a plus-size model. Since I’ve been following her, I think I can have a bit more of a tummy and it’s OK.”

Just as fitness influencers successfully promote the need for a very thin body, constant dieting and fitness, it is also possible to expand the ideal of beauty, and encourage a positive way of dealing with one’s own body. The essential prerequisites are more realism, more individuality, and more diverse body images in the media landscape as a whole, but especially among the influencers. As the study shows, influencers have a significant impact on the ideals and body images of girls and women, as well as on their exercise and eating habits, and can therefore encourage behaviours linked to eating disorders. ■

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> It became evident that male influencers were not significant from the point of view of the respondents, so in this article it can be assumed that the term ‘influencer’ refers to female influencers.

<sup>2</sup> The questionnaires were distributed to individuals affected by eating disorders via therapeutic facilities. The field work was carried out from 4 April to 15 May 2019.

<sup>3</sup> The names used in the following are pseudonyms.

<sup>4</sup> 3 clinics, 7 therapy/counselling facilities, 16 therapeutic living communities

<sup>5</sup> “DIÄT UPDATE | SO esse ich im DEFIZIT” (Diet update | this is how I eat in deficit), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sy1vXogYiKo> [2 July 2019]

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