

Be vulnerable.

Instagram influencers on mental health issues.

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Abstract

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Content posted by social media influencers on Instagram impacts the societal perception of mental health disorders and possesses the ability to reduce stigmatization. By answering the research question “How are mental health issues portrayed by social media influencers on Instagram?” with the sub-questions “What visual and communicative structures are used by social media influencers to address mental health issues on Instagram?” and “How does a parasocial relationship develop between social media influencers that focus on mental health issues and their followers?” this master thesis provides a comprehension of common practices applied and representation constructed by social media influencers, who publicly address their personal struggles with mental health disorders. Through conducting a mixed method approach, qualitative figurative cluster analysis of the images and thematic analysis of the captions posted by three social media influencers on Instagram, the following insights are revealed. In total 300 images with captions were studied.

As an overview, it can be stated that a positive portrayal, focusing on recovery and not hurdles caused by mental health disorders, occurs. Stigmas and stereotypes are not supported by the connotative messages communicated on the three studied Instagram accounts. The shared images mainly do not contain visual cues to mental health disorders, are beautified and predominantly captions reveal their personal mental health journey with an optimistic tone. Further, visual and communicative structures are evident, namely disjointedness of captions and images, captions changing the narrative of the image, implementation of symbols, self-presentation practices and personification of vulnerability. Moreover, a parasocial relationship is established by the social media influencers on a visual as well as textual level. The type of picture (selfie or close to mid-range shot), the location (e.g.: bedroom), the depiction of private moments (e.g.: vacation or partying with friends) and images showcasing the social media influencers in vulnerable moments are detected as visual indicators of developing a parasocial relationship. Additionally, the informal choice of language and creating a sense of community through words like “we” as well as hashtags present the linguistic factors signifying a connection with the followers.

KEYWORDS: *Mental health portrayal, Social media influencers, Mental health, Instagram, Stigma*

Preface

Psychology meets media studies – writing this master thesis enabled me to combine my academic knowledge with a topic that is close to my heart. Awareness about the importance of mental health is increasing, nonetheless, during my research I discovered that particularly the visual representation of mental health issues on social media is not studied extensively. Hence, it makes me proud to contribute to the knowledge of how Instagram content shapes our perception of mental health. I want to thank my master's supervisor, Dr. Charlotte Bruns, for her constant support and valued input. Particularly her profound expertise about visual analysis and the insights that can be uncovered from pictures opened new perspectives for me. Further, I would like to express my gratitude to my family for encouraging me throughout the process and who made this master's possible.

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1. Introduction

Social media influencers play a role in shaping the representation of mental health by sharing their personal experiences with mental health issues. The published content possesses the ability to raise awareness and decrease the stigma about mental health issues, however, also can elicit in the viewer negative responses like for instance unhealthy behaviour (Lind & Wickström, 2023, p. 2). Stigmas need to be taken seriously, as they affect people with mental health disorders in a severe manner, for instance, stopping them from seeking help (Choudhry et al., 2016, p. 2814). Gonzalez-Polledo and Tarr (2018, p. 160) highlight the capability of shared content on social media to reduce stigmatization by portraying the person beyond the mental health disorder and changing the narrative to contradicting stereotypes. An interesting example is presented by Franssen (2020, p. 90), who addresses the case of popstar Demi Lovato. Lovato transparently shared her recovery from and journey with mental health disorders like bipolar disorder or eating disorder. The article concluded that through the parasocial relationship she established with her community and by sharing her story on various platforms including social media, Lovato diminished social distance and reduced negative stereotypes around these mental health disorders (Franssen, 2020, p. 103). For this research the focus is on social media influencers and not celebrities, who openly share their mental health journey, however, the study by Franssen (2020, p. 90) provides an introduction to the analysed topic and acted as a starting point for this master thesis.

1.1 Societal relevance

The societal relevance is revealed by the potential of social media influencers to impact the understanding and awareness about mental health issues by posting content on digital platforms. Further, stigmas and particular norms linked to mental health disorders can prospectively be influenced by digital influencers as they openly communicate their story (Lind & Wickström, 2023, p. 2). Moreover, according to J. M. Sontag (2018, pp. 13-15), how mental health disorders are visually portrayed impacts the evoked emotions in the viewer. The content is divided into three categories in the article namely: suffering, treatment and recovery. Images depicting people suffering from depression evoked negative emotions and less aspiration to seek help in comparison to pictures showcasing people who recovered (J. M. Sontag, 2018, p. 1). Hence, the chosen frame of the social media influencers to display their mental health journey has an impact on the stimulated behaviour of the followers. Concludingly, from a societal perspective, studying the content of social media influencers who address mental health issues is relevant due to the capacity to decrease stigmatization as well as the reactions elicited in the followers. Social media platforms enable to spread of messages to a broad international audience and therefore need to be considered a key channel as well as a force for shaping the perception of mental health issues (McCosker, 2018, pp. 4748-4749).

1.2 Scientific relevance

Current academic research has not studied how the symbioses of visuals on Instagram posted by social media influencers discussing their mental health disorder create a connotative image of mental health. The article of McCosker (2018, p. 4748), which investigates the role of peer mentors on online forums regarding mental health, or the interview study by Lind and Wickström (2023, p. 1), who elaborate on how social media influencers portray mental health, have not included the examination of the visual representation of mental health. Researchers studying visuals but not on social media are Thompson (2012, p. 395) who undertakes a discourse analysis on the visual language employed on a website of a mental health community and J. M. Sontag (2018, p. 1), as previously mentioned, who analyses the role of visual framing in mental health communication in an experiment among students. Moreover, studies of the textual element, the captions and comments, discussing mental health disorders on Instagram exist, for instance, in the article by Andalibi et al. (2015, p. 233) the written reactions to self-disclosure about mental health issues are revealed. Therefore, this master thesis closes a research gap by examining how the shared images of social media influencers, who disclose their personal experience with mental health disorders, as a whole, meaning that not solely images directly depicting mental health issues are considered, portray mental health issues. Additionally, the interplay of the images and the captions is studied.

This leads to the following research question: “How are mental health issues portrayed by social media influencers on Instagram?” with the sub-questions “What visual and communicative structures are used by social media influencers to address mental health issues on Instagram?” and “How does a parasocial relationship develop between social media influencers that focus on mental health issues and their followers?”. To gain a coherent comprehension of the analysed content and provide an extensive answer to the research questions, a qualitative mixed method approach consisting of a visual analysis of the content by conducting the method figurative image cluster as well as a thematic analysis to study the captions is performed. The data is sampled from three social media influencers, whose identity remains anonymous due to ethical reasons. To be able to support the results by presenting image examples, a visual anonymization technique is established, which provides insights for further research on how to treat sensitive data. The practice is explained in the ethics section of this paper.

1.3 Thesis structure and overview

The first section of this master thesis, the theoretical framework, outlines insights of academic literature about the concepts of self-presentation, parasocial relationships between social media influencers and their followers as well as stigma and stereotypes about mental health disorders. Additionally, the role of images together with common practices (e.g.: use of symbols) in mental health communication, the theory of communicative genres by Bergmann and Luckmann (1995) and image clusters by Müller (2020, pp. 2-3) are discussed. The second section, research design,

elaborates on the applied methods, the sampling procedure and ethical considerations, hence, in combination with the theoretical framework is the foundation for the following part namely the results. Self-presentation practices, beautifying techniques, and patterns in the posts to challenge stereotypes as well as create a parasocial relationship are being uncovered in the results. Finally, the conclusion provides a clear answer to the research questions, implications for further research and ends with a final remark highlighting the importance of understanding the portrayal of mental health to reduce stigmatization.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Self-presentation on social media

2.1.1 Definition and Goffman's perspective on underlying motivations

A stage with countless tools (e.g.: stories, comments or posts) and chances for strategic self-presentation is provided by social media networks (Hollenbaugh, 2021, p. 80). Intentionally sharing information which supports the aimed image of oneself is the definition of self-presentation according to Schlosser (2020, p. 1), who discusses in her article how self-presentation in contrast to self-disclosure practices occur on social media. Hollenbaugh (2021, p. 84) labels self-disclosure, sharing private information such as feelings or emotions, as an essential part of self-presentation, since by deciding which personal details an individual is revealing, an authentic or desired image of oneself is formed. Nonetheless, it must be noted that the understanding of self-disclosure as being a method of self-presentation by Hollenbaugh (2021, p. 84) is not shared by Schlosser (2020, p. 2), who comprehends the concepts as follows. Self-disclosure means communicating true insights about oneself, not taking the possible negative effects on one's perceived image into account. In contrast, strategically mentioning information with the aim to fit the coveted way how to be viewed by others, illustrates self-presentation. In other words, self-presentation includes facts, if they underline one's desired image, and self-disclosure solely true information without conditions (Schlosser, 2020, p. 2).

To understand why there is a need for an "ideal" self-presentation, the concepts of socialized routines as well as idealized performances by Goffman (1973, p. 35) must be elaborated, as they offer a possible answer to this question. People learn how to act and behave in certain roles based on societal norms. For instance, when hosting a dinner party, it is expected of the inviting people to serve plenty of food, dress accordingly and entertain the visitors. This behaviour represents a socialized routine, as a dinner solely among family members has a different procedure (Goffman, 1973, p. 38). Additionally, people perform in a manner that is aligned with people's expectations or stereotypes to fit a certain role. An eight-year-old child might deny being interested in TV shows targeted to a five-year-old to maintain the expected standards of their age. Behaviours, which do not conform with the societal ideal, are commonly acted out in private (Goffman, 1973, pp. 41-42). This distinction of how to present oneself in which setting and the concealing of particular aspects can be connected to the concept of self-presentation by Schlosser (2020, p. 2), meaning that information about oneself that contradicts the desired image is hidden.

2.1.2 Social media parameters impacting self-presentation and disclosure

The extent and content of shared information from a user are impacted by certain attributes of social media platforms (Velten et al., 2017, p. 221). To comprehend the relationship between particular affordances and self-presentation, Hollenbaugh (2021, p. 84) discusses the factors of anonymity, persistence and visibility. Being anonymous or partially anonymous (a particular individual cannot be confirmed as the source or the source is unknown) allows the users to detach

their offline from their online persona and decreases the feeling of being observed, therefore, people tend to share more information (Hollenbaugh, 2021, p. 85; Scott, 1998, pp. 387-391). Nonetheless, even though more information is posted, does not necessarily mean true facts. Anonymity provides the opportunity to reinvent oneself and create a desired image (Hollenbaugh, 2021, pp. 85-86). For how long the posted content is visible to other users, namely the persistence, is connected to the degree of self-disclosure. On Snapchat, for instance, the sent picture is solely available to the viewer for some seconds and the photo album is not accessible to other users. Therefore, Snapchat users tend to reveal more private information compared to platforms where the content remains accessible for an extended period of time (Choi & Sung, 2018, p. 2291; Hollenbaugh, 2021, p. 86). Lastly, not being able to manage to whom the posts are visible, for example on a public story, leads to users deciding with greater caution which aspects or insights are revealed. This is the case due to the loss of control over the audience and the threat that the posted content is misused or understood in the wrong context (Hollenbaugh, 2021 pp. 85-86; Velten et al., 2017, p. 229). Coming back to (Goffman (1973, p. 38), users adapt the degree of self-disclosure based on the setting of the platform to fulfil the societal norm or in other words to behave appropriately.

2.1.3 Self-presentation and disclosure practices on social media

After defining the concepts and the impacting parameters of social media networks, the question arises of which practices for self-presentation take place. Possessing two accounts on a social media platform (e.g.: Instagram), one to present the “ideal” and the other the “authentic” self, is a common behaviour (Kang & Wei, 2020, p. 1; Yau & Reich, 2019, pp. 8-9; Zillich & Riesmeyer, 2021, p. 7). According to Kang and Wei (2020, p.7), the underlying motivation to have two accounts is being able to present oneself in two manners. On the account which is public and possesses a larger number of followers, the user posts content that supports the perceived appropriate and desirable image. The pictures tend to be conservative and not intimate. In contrast, the account made for close friends and is set private is the place to share funny moments, authentic pictures, snapshots from daily life and posting inside jokes (Kang & Wei, 2020, p. 7).

The study of Zillich and Riesmeyer (2021, p. 7) about the self-presentation behaviour of adolescents on Instagram, reveals similar patterns of behaviour. Adolescents create a so-called “private, private” account where they post authentic pictures for their close friends, and on the “spam account” staged content is shared to fit the social norms of a larger followership (Zillich & Riesmeyer, 2021, p. 7). Additionally, Yau and Reich (2019, p. 8) summarize the reasons for two accounts that on the one for their close friends, users do not have to follow the “self-presentation norms”, as they address a trusted audience. Linking the insights of the two account practice to the definition of self-presentation and self-disclosure by Schlosser (2020, p. 2), the public account can be categorized as self-presentation, posting content that fits the coveted image, and the private account as self-

disclosure, sharing accurate information independent from the possible negative effects on one's image (Kang & Wei, 2020, p. 1; Yau & Reich, 2019, pp. 8-9; Zillich & Riesmeyer, 2021, p. 7).

Furthermore, visuals play a key role in establishing an image and therefore can be seen as the main tool for self-presentation (Choi & Sung, 2018, p. 2295; Hollenbaugh, 2021, p. 84). Strategically coordinating the captions, pictures, and colours to convey a unified image illustrates a common practice for self-presentation. For instance, a user chooses the photos, the caption and the editing style to possess a coherent "natural look" in the profile (Zillich & Riesmeyer, 2021, p. 6). Other tools and aspects of social media tactically utilized are selecting specific people to tag on a post, deleting non-fitting posts, asking friends to like/share the content, adapting the disclosed information to who views it (e.g.: "close friends" stories) and planning posts in advance (Yau & Reich, 2019, p. 9; Zillich & Riesmeyer, 2021, p. 8).

2.2 The influencer-audience relation

2.2.1 Role of vulnerability in marketing and influencer-follower relationships

Platforms like Instagram are full of pictures presenting individuals in a positive and flattering light. Users aim to portray themselves from their best side, using social media as a channel for strategic self-presentation (Hollenbaugh, 2021, p. 80; Yau & Reich, 2019, p. 9; Zillich & Riesmeyer, 2021, p. 2). Due to that reason, being publicly vulnerable by addressing one's mental health issues seems contradictory to the predominant shared content, which can lead to the viewer interpreting the posts as authentic and trustworthy according to Lind and Wickström (2023, p. 3). Being perceived as trustworthy is a key factor in gaining credibility. Therefore showing social media influencers as vulnerable can be strategically used as part of a marketing strategy, as followers can comprehend disclosing sensitive personal information as a sign of established trust and increase the source's credibility (Leite et al., 2022, p. 2; Lind & Wickström, 2023, p. 3).

It is to mention that this direct connection between displaying vulnerability to a broad audience and an increase in trust is questioned in certain literature (Baruh & Cemalcılar, 2018, pp. 3-4; Bazarova, 2012, p. 14; Leite et al., 2022, p. 2). Bazarova (2012, p. 2) highlights the role of the receiver, in the case of social media namely the followers, in interpreting the disclosure of vulnerability and that their perception impacts whether it is relationship-enhancing or labelled as inappropriate for the platform. On the other hand, Ernala et al. (2018, p. 62) characterize social media platforms as progressively being a chosen channel to share and address mental health related content. Further, Pretorius et al. (2022, p. 6) point out in their research article focusing on mental health professionals as social media influencers, that in order to attract new followers, there is a focus on sharing entertaining content about mental health related topics. Hence, it is not only about communicating messages about mental health but also about captivating the user to increase engagement (Pretorius et al., 2022, p. 6). Additionally, the focus on the marketing benefits can be underlined in the case of especially mental health professionals not indicating the limit of how the

shared content is able to genuinely improve the viewers' mental health and provide a reliable source of consultancy. The emphasis is more on the entertaining aspect and consequently gaining followers (Triplett et al., 2022, p. 130).

2.2.2 Parasocial relationship: definition and development

Another motivation besides marketing goals is establishing a parasocial relationship with the community. The parasocial relationship theory allows to have a clear comprehension of the phenomenon. Hoffner and Bond (2022, p. 1) define a parasocial relationship as a one-sided relationship of the follower with the social media influencer. Through watching the content on a frequent basis and picturing an interaction with the social media influencer, an emotional bond with the followed account as well as a feeling of being part of a community is created (Hoffner & Bond, 2022, p. 1). By revealing intimate information about personal struggles with mental health issues, the social media influencer is able to strengthen the parasocial relationship and to change from being considered as another digital celebrity to a friend (Lind & Wickström, 2023, p. 3). By establishing a parasocial relationship, followers feel emotionally closer to the social media influencer and are more open to discard stigmata or negative preconceptions towards mental health disorders, which they have priorly formed (Franssen, 2020, p. 103). Therefore, the concept of parasocial relationships is an explanation of why social media influencers can shape the conception of mental health issues within their community (Lind & Wickström, 2023, p. 3).

2.3 Communication about mental health on social media

2.3.1 Themes in mental health communication

After addressing the social media influencers' connection with their followers, the insights of academic literature about mental health related content on social media have to be elaborated. Pretorius et al. (2022, p. 5) mention six types of content about mental health issues that are shared by social media influencers. Describing symptoms, tips to find information, risk factors, self-help advices, finding professional help, and how to ask for support are the main detected themes (Pretorius et al., 2022, p. 5). Further, in her study about interactions within a support group for people suffering from psychosis, Chang (2009, pp. 1508-1509) found different forms of supportive communication. This article adds deeper insights into the shared content of mental health issues. Firstly, sharing information about professional help presents the initial category, which overlaps with the type of content stated by Pretorius et al. (2022, p. 5). Secondly, posting inspiring and motivating words to underline the importance of self-love is the next form of a supportive message. This type can be linked to the next category called emotional support, which includes showing empathy as well as optimism about getting better. Thirdly, encouraging affected people to enlarge their social group with individuals who are also in the same situation in order to feel less lonely illustrates the last segment (Chang, 2009, pp. 1508-1509).

Lee et al. (2020, p. 7) analyse the posted visual content specifically on Instagram under the hashtag #mentalhealth and reported dominant themes. It stands out that over 50% of the assessed 758 images portrayed general wellness activities for instance working out or eating healthy. Approximately 27% of the images illustrate a testimonial or to rephrase it a user's personal experience with mental health issues. Additional noticeable findings are that around 25% consisted of promoting products connected to mental health as well as nearly one-third included a call to action, which tries to engage the viewer with the content (Lee et al., 2020, p. 7). The share of almost one third of the content focusing on engagement under the hashtag #mentalhealth stated in the article of Lee et al. (2020, p. 7) underlines the insight by Pretorius et al. (2022, p. 6) that the goal of posting mental health related content is often not solely addressing or creating awareness about the topic, but further to increase the engagement with the viewers.

2.3.2 Role of the audience in mental health communication

The article by Andalibi et al. (2015, p. 231) that discusses Instagram pictures related to depression goes one step further and analyses the captions in combination with the photos. A noteworthy insight is that the users who post content about their experience with depression, tend to have the audience in mind. From directly addressing the followers in the caption with "you" or asking questions is evidence that the person sharing the content is aiming to directly talk to the viewer. Additionally, a sense of community is established by claiming to be one of many and that the person is going through the same mental health issues as their followers (Andalibi et al., 2015, p. 233).

The social media influencers' willingness to post their personal mental health stories also increases with the received engagement by the followers commenting, sharing or expressing their empathy (Ernala et al., 2018, p. 70). Therefore, by establishing and engaging with a community as elaborated by Andalibi et al., (2015, p. 233), the social media influencer gets encouraged to post about their mental health issues (Ernala et al., 2018, p. 70). A certain co-dependency becomes evident. Regarding creating a feeling of a community, hashtags act as important facilitators on Instagram. Due to the possibility of searching for all the posted content under a specific hashtag, it allows users to find other accounts that address mental health as well as the person who shares the post to reach a broader audience (Lee et al., 2020, p. 8; Mercier et al., 2020, p. 6). For instance, the hashtag #mentalhealth in the caption enables the post to be discovered without difficulty by users, as by directly searching for the hashtag all tagged posts appear. Interestingly, Feuston and Piper (2018, p. 9) state in their article, that hashtags related to mental health disorders are not commonly used when reposting content of other users.

2.4 Visualizing mental health

2.4.1 Importance of imagery in mental health communication

On Instagram, the primary mode through which users communicate mental health struggles is predominantly visual imagery (Andalibi et al., 2015, p. 234; Lee et al., 2020, p. 1). In other words, captions act as for instance a description, however, the visual content could be understood independently of the accompanying textual element (Andalibi et al., 2015, p. 234). Furthermore, images evoke more emotions and are more effectful in reducing stigma than text (J. M. Sontag, 2018, p. 1; Subramanian & Santo, 2021, p. 59). In numbers, a study about images related to depression on Instagram shows that 13% of the captions described the visual, 35% added information about the context or extra insights, 32% included mostly the same information as the image and 20% were detached from the image (Andalibi et al., 2015, p. 233). The portrayal of mental health is particularly interesting, as mental health issues possess visible as well as invisible aspects. Weight gain or loss due to eating disorders for instance are physically observable, whereas depression or anxiety are not always externally recognizable (Feuston & Piper, 2018, p. 9). Therefore, the question arises of how the invisible factors are represented in the shared imagery.

2.4.2 The function of symbols and imagery type

Utilizing figurative images constitutes a way to communicate mental health issues including the invisible aspects. Thompson (2012, p. 395) conducted a discourse analysis on the visual language employed on a website of a mental health community. The research found that symbolic pictures are used to portray mental health issues. For instance, images of surreal landscapes are deployed as they symbolize nature, which connotes peacefulness and wellbeing. This enables to portray mental health issues in a neutral and not provocative manner as well as conveys a positive image (Thompson, 2012, p. 406). S. Sontag (2003, p. 81) explains in her book that experiences or occurrences, in this case mental health disorders, are either “beautified” or “uglified” in visuals. In relation to the previously mentioned example of using landscapes to illustrate mental health issues, a case of beautifying becomes evident. If a photograph “beautifies” an incident, the aim is to communicate that the viewer is not morally responsible for taking action. Whereas an “uglified” image evokes the viewers to change or see their accountability (S. Sontag, 2003, p. 81).

Figurative images and symbols are an option to visually represent mental health issues. The utilization of cliches or symbols that are commonly connected to mental health issues reduces the time of the decoding process of the viewer or in other words makes it easy for the viewer to understand the meaning of the visual (Thompson, 2012, p. 407). Due to this, cliches grab the attention of the viewer fast (Dillon, 2006, p. 293). Besides the factor of attention, Subramanian and Santo (2021, p. 52) investigated which style of visuals, particularly photographs vs. cartoons, are most effective in decreasing stigma about mental health disorders. Their study revealed that people respond to

photographs compared to cartoons portraying mental health issues with more emotions like compassion or being able to relate to the struggles (Subramanian & Santo, 2021, p. 59).

Insights about what visual elements are applied to address the topic are provided by Lee et al. (2020, p. 1), as they undertook a content analysis of 758 images on Instagram with the hashtag #mentalhealth. The author distinguishes between illustrative and photographic visuals, which possess other underlying intentions of the person who shares them. Photographs give the impression to represent the reality and therefore are perceived as more authentic than illustrations (Lee et al., 2020, p. 3). The insights shared by Subramanian and Santo (2021, p. 59) align with this statement, showing that photographs are considered to be more credible and humanizing compared to illustrations. Moreover, health partitioners occasionally display people in photographs to underline the seriousness of mental health issues, as photographs can be seen as evidence of the problem. By comparison, illustrations are effective in communicating information through a more conceptual portrayal of mental health (Lee et al., 2020, p. 3). To put it differently, photographs evoke more emotions and a sense of capturing the “truth”, therefore are impactful in communicating the severity of mental health issues. Illustrations are perceived as more factual and due to that employed to share information.

2.4.3 Impact of the colour palette

Besides the type or content depicted in a picture, the colour arrangement needs to be considered, as it elicits different emotions and subconscious responses in the viewer (Madden et al., 2000, p. 92). Won and Westland (2017, p. 2) conducted experiments to uncover the meanings associated with colours and report the following insights. Respondents labelled the colour blue as peaceful, calming, and thoughtful, whereas, red as exciting and active. The words connected to green are similar to blue but further include health, fresh and natural. Black brought forward words ranging from sad, fear and anger to old, power and dignity (Won & Westland, 2017, p. 2).

Warm and cold colours are being differentiated by Clarke and Costall (2008, p. 407). Warm colours (e.g.: red, yellow, or orange) stimulate more active emotions in the viewer, whereas cold colours (e.g.: green or blue) tend to be sedating. Nonetheless, specific colours in the groups vary in the connected emotions. For instance, red evoked passion, orange happiness or yellow being cheerful. Green repeatedly was related to nature by respondents and reminded them of peaceful landsides. Additionally, blue was also linked to nature, but more specifically water and the words soothing or calming (Clarke & Costall, 2008, pp. 407-408). The information provided in the article by Madden et al. (2000, p. 99) predominantly complies with the discussed colour meanings, however, the colours are interpreted in a range. On the left side are adjectives like active, exciting, or violent whereas on the right end, examples are passive, calming, or peaceful. Going from left to right, the colours are sorted as followed: red, orange, yellow, black, brown, blue, and green. Therefore, it is indicated that red as well as green are most dominantly associated with the terms from the left or the right side (Madden et al., 2000, p. 99). However, not only the type of colour impacts the stimulated response, but also the

hue as well as brightness play a significant role. In brief, lighter and less intensive colours convey more positive emotions than the opposite. An example illustrates that a pale as well as light tone of yellow is interpreted as happier compared to a darker and more saturated yellow (Clarke & Costall, 2008, p. 408).

On top of considering visual aspects like photos causing more emotional responses than illustrations or text (Lee et al., 2020, p. 3; J. M. Sontag, 2018, p. 1; Subramanian & Santo, 2021, p. 59), the usage of symbols (Thompson, 2012, p. 407) or the colour arrangement, J. M. Sontag (2018, pp. 13-15) discusses the importance of the aimed response. Pictures displaying people suffering under for instance depression trigger negative responses and can even lead to enforcing problematic behaviour. In contrast, choosing the frame of people recovering from a mental health disorder inspires as well as stimulates positive emotions like being motivated to seek help. Concludingly, when sharing visual content regarding mental health the reaction of the viewer must be considered by the selected frame and portrayed behaviour (J. M. Sontag, 2018, pp. 13-15).

2.5 Stigma and stereotypes about mental health

2.5.1 Definition of stigma and stereotypes

As previously mentioned, cliches and widespread perceptions are commonly used to visualize mental health issues (Thompson, 2012, p. 407). In order to be able to detect stereotypes, cliches or stigmas about mental health disorders during the data analysis of this study, it is vital to dive into existing academic literature. To ensure a clear comprehension of how the terms are understood in this research, brief definitions follow. Stigma consists of the parts “labelling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination” (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 377). Stereotypes play a role in how stigmas evolve, concludingly stigmas are the result of stereotypes (Gee et al., 2007, p. 98). Additionally, it is of interest to see whether these stereotypes are represented or not by the analysed social media influencers since stigmas have serious negative effects on the affected people. For instance, the stigma of people suffering from mental health issues as being mad is a major reason for them to not seek help (Choudhry et al., 2016, p. 2814). Gee et al. (2007, p. 99) point out that stereotypes which can result in stigmata predominantly originate from negative attitudes within communities towards mental health issues.

2.5.2 Research insights about mental health stigma and stereotypes

Being incompetent, not to be taken seriously or even dangerous are widespread attributes linked to people with mental health disorders (Gee et al., 2007, p. 98). Link and Phelan (2001, p. 369) agree that people with mental health issues are being labelled as dangerous. In media outlets like films characters with mental health disorders are often represented as violent (Harper, 2005, p. 466). According to Choudhry et al. (2016, p. 2812), common perceptions about people with mental health disorders include that they are experiencing the emotions “fear, guilt, anger, helplessness, pain,

anxiety, and sadness”. Furthermore, beliefs about their behaviour range from talking to oneself, lack of hygiene to isolation (Choudhry et al., 2016, pp. 2812-2813).

How movies targeted for children portray people with mental health disorders is discussed in the article by Eisenhauer (2008, p. 16). Affected characters reassemble and therefore reinforce the stereotypes of being insane, a lunatic or a freak. Additionally, physical attributes include for instance rotten teeth, hairy/sharply shaped eyebrows and a small distance between their eyes. The negative stereotypes associated with the affected characters imply that they are not trustworthy and devalue them as a person. Moreover, Eisenhauer (2008, pp. 14-15) analyses the historical perception and reveals that people with mental health issues were labelled as beasts, animalic and dangerous. Drawings and paintings were made explaining how people with mental health issues can be visually identified with cases directly comparing people to animals. Additionally, Gonzalez-Polledo and Tarr (2018, pp. 167-168) underline how the visual features of people with mental health issues were aimed to be highlighted by elaborating on the case of a doctor editing the photos taken of patients in a way to make the seemingly visual cues more dominant. The motivations of these illustrations were to help society to detect affected people and therefore protect them from people with mental health issues, as they were stigmatized as dangerous (Eisenhauer, 2008, pp. 14-15; Ernala et al., 2018, p. 63).

2.5.3 Social media’s contribution to decreasing stigma and stereotypes

The perception of people with mental health issues is changing. Particularly in Western societies, the public discourse, also on the internet, is evolving to see affected people as contributing and valuable members of society (Thompson, 2012, p. 396). Gonzalez-Polledo and Tarr (2018, p. 160) indicate that on social media platforms people with mental health issues and doctors share content that contradicts the previously elaborated stereotypes and aim to decrease the stigmatization. By showing the person behind the illness, and sharing everyday life moments on social media platforms it is attempted to change the societal perception (Gonzalez-Polledo & Tarr, 2018, p. 160). For reducing stigma about mental health disorders, images are an impactful approach according to J. M. Sontag (2018, p. 3), hence, analysing Instagram, a visual-focused platform, presents valuable insights into the perception of mental health issues.

Due to the given scope of this research, solely an excerpt of the academic literature about stigmas and stereotypes regarding mental health issues is discussed. It is to be noted, that this topic is significantly broader, however, the addressed insights allow a certain awareness for the data analysis.

2.6 Establishing relationships through visuals

2.6.1 Influence of visual characteristics on relationship development

Different factors have to be considered when analysing which relationship a picture conveys between the viewer and the portrayed person. Zappavigna (2016, p. 276) describes the role of the aspects social distance and attitude in creating social relationships through visual content. The factor

of social distance addresses how a person is positioned in a picture. A close up shot, meaning that the distance between the camera lens and the person is small, conveys a sense of intimacy with the viewer (Zappavigna, 2016, p. 276). An example of a popular type of picture on social media with a small distance from the camera is the selfie (Lasén, 2015, p. 61; Miguel, 2016, p. 1; Pounders et al., 2016, p. 1880; Souza et al., 2015, p. 221). Selfies are a structured form of interaction (i.e. there is a common composition of how a selfie looks like) and as the face of the person is in the focus, it represents an effective form of self-expression as well as communicating emotions (Souza et al., 2015, p. 221). According to Aiello and Parry (2020, p. 63) and Miguel (2016, p. 3), selfies are a form of intimate self-presentation, which can be interpreted through the insights by Zappavigna (2016, p. 276) that close-up shots communicate intimacy to the viewer. Nonetheless, self-portraits shared on social media platforms are not limited to the selfie and other types of pictures include for instance a close up shot of a certain body part (Aiello & Parry, 2020, p. 63).

A mid to long-range shot where the image possesses a broader angle and the person takes up less space in the image, conveys distance between the portrayed person and the viewer. This also indicates a less private and more distant relationship. Moreover, the factor attitude discusses what degree of objectivity or subjectivity a visual conveys. The angle of the picture impacts how involved or detached the viewer feels. A frontal angle engages, but an angle that is not directly facing the presented person disengages the viewer (Zappavigna, 2016, p. 276). Another aspect of conveying a close relationship to the viewer is the perception of being able to see the person's private life (Miguel, 2016, p. 3). Popular practices include sharing snapshots taken in one's private home (e.g.: selfies taken in the bedroom) and pictures from vacations, with family members or friends and festivities (Lasén, 2015, p. 73; Miguel, 2016, p. 3).

2.6.2 Practices on social media

Phone photography in combination with the opportunity to share images in real time due to the emergence of social media platforms creates a sense of intimacy. The viewer gets the impression of being part of the person's daily life, as it is possible to easily capture and share moments (Zappavigna, 2016, p. 272). Posting these insights into a person's private life has become a standard on social media, which before tended to be perceived to be too intimate to reveal to the public sphere (Miguel, 2016, p. 1). This type of image communicates the sense of "you could be here with me" and therefore enables to create a feeling of getting to know the person who upload the visuals (Zappavigna, 2016, p. 272).

Visuals which show human faces tend to engage the viewer more than images without. The engagement in this context is understood as receiving "likes" and "comments" on a social media platform (Wu & Hong, 2022, p. 5). Faces attract the viewers' attention since human beings get information such as how someone is feeling by reading a person's facial expressions as well as visual

features. Therefore, people are conditioned to recognize faces due to the considerable amount of information they can receive from observing them (Bakhshi et al., 2014, pp. 965-966).

2.7 Image clusters – seeing beyond the isolated photograph

2.7.1 Defining image clusters

Images appear not isolated but in relation to other images on Instagram. As we scroll through our feed on social media platforms visuals are followed by visuals or when we look at an account, we see several pictures arranged in a raster called a feed. How groups of images create meaning as a bundle, can be elaborated with the theoretical framework about image clusters by Müller (2020, pp. 2-3). Photographs serve a more essential purpose in social communication than solely representing and capturing objects from the real world. They are symbolic themselves as they are combined with other photographs and the relations between them depict meaning beyond the image itself (Müller, 2020, p. 5). Principles of composition and montage have to be considered when identifying image clusters. Firstly, social as well as creative aspects shape clusters and establish a unique style. Secondly, detecting patterns and principles which connect individual images to a cluster is essential. A technique to make these underlying principles visible is to arrange and rearrange the images within a cluster (Müller, 2020, p. 8).

2.7.2 Understanding image clusters

The human perception is shaped by comparison and countless options of how images are understood are possible. In what context, the images accompanying and how they are arranged impact how a visual is interpreted. Generally speaking, what people have experienced in the past influences how they comprehend the now. Hence, the relation of iconic representation (e.g.: shapes, colours, or themes), element arrangement, and visual appearance of the images in comparison to each other establish meaning. The communicative effect occurs through the interaction of the images and a cluster should not be interpreted as a collection of visuals with individual meanings. The analysis of the arrangement and the principles of the images is the foundation for choosing the images as well as organizing them in a manner that captures the full underlying meaning. A widely known illustration that explains this phenomenon, is a drawing between a photo of a duck and a rabbit. Depending on which image the viewer is looking at, the duck or the rabbit, the drawing reassembles either the duck or the rabbit (Müller, 2020, pp. 16-17).

Analysing image clusters offers understanding beyond through which similarities images can be bundled. In a sociological context, it reveals how visuals emphasize individuals, groups, topics (for this research mental health) and how the combination of images supports a certain understanding. In social communication, images can be clustered into three main categories: iconic, narrative, and classificatory (Müller, 2020, p. 18). Iconic image clusters are guided by the differences and similarities of images that communicate certain ideas, beliefs, or attitudes within an iconic framework.

Moreover, narrative image clusters reproduce a story, a process or development of events. A logical chronological order is present, for instance, images that portray a biographical course. Finally, themes, certain events or a specific timeline shape the classificatory image clusters. Other characteristics that were previously mentioned (e.g.: visual similarities) are neglected and the chosen logical way of arranging the images is followed (Müller, 2020, p. 25).

2.8 Communicative genres and social media

The existing academic insights about how mental health conditions related topics are addressed are interesting in the context of the theory of communicative genres by Bergmann and Luckmann (1995). In essence, the theory claims that how people communicate with each other depends on the communicative genre, for instance, individuals express themselves differently while being a reporter on a news channel compared to when gossiping with friends. The concepts of linguistic structures and institutional structures are essential in relation to communicative genres. The choice of language (e.g.: vocabulary or syntax) used within a conversation presents the idea of linguistic structures. Moreover, the context in which the interaction occurs, whether at school or at home, depicts the institutional structures. Social systems and organizations along with norms shape the way people communicate. In other words, the setting of a courtroom impacts the language in which people express themselves. Informal language used by a lawyer is not appropriate while defending a case. However, the linguistic structures also influence the institutional structures, as the choice of language elements can form and cultivate a certain institutional structure. The combination of a linguistic structure and institutional structure within a communicative genre is a solution to a communicative issue within a social context. To put it another way, people know how to talk with their parents compared to their teachers because it is a different communicative genre with a certain linguistic structure and institutional structure (Bergmann & Luckmann, 1995, pp. 289-292).

Within this proposed research, communicative genres which appear on social media are aimed to be analysed. Which visual elements, form of language or stylistic features are used in the content of the social media influencer to share their mental health issues is investigated. The theory of communicative genres by Bergmann and Luckmann (1995) functions as a part of the theoretical framework.

3. Research design

3.1 Methodology

To answer the research question “How are mental health issues portrayed by social media influencers on Instagram?” with the sub-questions “What visual and communicative structures are used by social media influencers to address mental health issues on Instagram?” and “How does a parasocial relationship develop between social media influencers that focus on mental health issues and their followers?” a combination of visual figurative analysis and thematic analysis is chosen. As Instagram posts consist of a visual and textual element (the caption), investigating the photos and the captions ensures to capture the full underlying meaning-making process. For the images figurative cluster analysis whereas for the captions thematic analysis is conducted.

The figurative cluster analysis is based on the framework by Müller (2020, p. 2), which not only analyses each image isolated but additionally within a cluster. By analysing the cluster, the advantages of being able to understand how the combination of the pictures and their relation to each other create meaning. Images are not solely archiving real-life moments, rather, how they are arranged and rearranged represent a shared language and establish a distinctive way of expression (Müller, 2020, p. 1).

Figurative cluster analysis is suitable, as it enables one to grasp symbolic meaning, relationships as well as representation of mental health with the process of assembling and reassembling images within a cluster, which is not possible by studying the visuals individually (Müller, 2020, p. 19). Comparing the individual visuals within a cluster allows to notice similarities as well as differences between them. Moreover, semantic structures are able to be uncovered as in a cluster it becomes evident which aspects are visually highlighted and patterns are present (Müller, 2020, p. 17). Moreover, it is adequate for studying Instagram accounts, as on the platform images are always seen in combination by scrolling through the feed or viewing the account page. Therefore, it is crucial to include the relationship of the photos, as they appear in a symbiosis (Müller, 2020, p. 19).

For this research, the steps derived from the article of Müller (2020, pp. 8-18) are applied. The first step is selecting the images, for which the research question and sub-questions of this master thesis provide a framework. To answer the main question “How are mental health issues portrayed by social media influencers on Instagram?” three social media influencers, which address openly their mental health issues, are selected and in total 100 images per account are analysed. Hence, the selection of the visuals is preset by the design of this research (Müller, 2020, pp. 8-18). This is followed by arranging the images in a cluster. Three types of image clusters are possible: iconic, classificatory, and narrative, of which the first two are fitting for this research. Detecting similarities and differences of the selected images which result in an iconic quality briefly elaborates how iconic image clusters are formed. Visual structure or composition are examples of aspects in which bundles of visuals can be found. Determined by logical factors like a certain theme or a set timeframe characterize classificatory image clusters (Müller, 2020, p. 25). Furthermore, the next step is to

interpret the connection between the visuals and uncover the underlying meanings, ideas as well as perceptions that are conveyed by the clusters. Even though the different steps are explained in an order, it is to mention that the assembling and evaluation parts are iterative. This repeating process of cluster rearrangement and additionally considering the findings within the literature review enhance validity. Additionally, describing the cluster with words presents an essential part of the method (Müller, 2020, p. 11).

Thematic analysis enables to uncover underlying patterns and meaning-making processes by structuring the data into themes. To understand how shared meaning is established, it is essential to compare and analyse the themes beyond the individual case. Therefore, the insights come from investigating the complete data set and drawing conclusions by seeing the data as creating meaning as a whole (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 57). Flexibility within the process as well as the provided framework, which explains step by step how to carry out the research, presents the benefits of using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 58). For this research, the six-phase approach is applied.

Firstly, researchers have to immerse themselves in the data by repeatedly reading and rereading the text in this case captions. Secondly, initial descriptions or tags highlight aspects of the data, which could be relevant for answering the research question. Thirdly, by searching for patterns or similarities in the initial codes, themes are formed. In brief, a theme represents an interesting aspect or a pattern of meaning in the data in connection to the research question. Furthermore, the created themes are evaluated regarding their relation to the research question as well as whether they should be solely a code in the next step. After, the themes must be named, and the researcher has to be able to describe the meaning of them. The last step includes writing the results down (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 60-69).

Reliability and validity in this research are provided by the following measures. By documenting the steps during the research in the form of notes and explicitly stating the connections to the theory as well as the literature review, reliability is enhanced. It is crucial, that the process and the steps taken by the researcher are comprehensible. Further, validity is an important aspect of every research, which will be addressed through continuously contemplating the theoretical framework and insights from the literature review. Due to the iterative nature of qualitative studies, this cycle of going back and forth between the data and academic literature is given. Lastly, avoiding potential biases is ensured by the researcher reflecting on her own position in the process. Taking notes plays an important role, as they allow the researcher to reflect on the thoughts made during particularly the data analysis (Silverman, 2020, pp. 361-371).

3.2 Sample and sampling strategy

The sample consists of three Instagram accounts of social media influencers labelled as social media influencer one (SMI1), social media influencer two (SMI2) and social media influencer three (SMI3) who share their journey with mental health struggles. The accounts are chosen based on the

following criteria. The shared content must include more than one post, which addresses their own experience with mental health issues. Further, business accounts of professional therapists, who promote their business, were not included. To provide diversity, the three social media influencers are living in different countries. Moreover, the images samples are equally selected from each Instagram account. The most recent 100 posts per account are collected by taking a screenshot. Stories, videos, comments, and reels are excluded. Nonetheless, the cover picture of a reel is considered. There are no more specific sampling criteria, as according to the figurative cluster analysis all pictures together create meaning and therefore not only the posts about mental health are chosen (Müller, 2020, p. 1). For the figurative cluster analysis, the total of 300 posts are analysed. The captions of the selected Instagram posts are analysed with thematic analysis; however, the sample size and content are identical.

3.3 Operationalization

The main concepts namely social media influencers, mental health issues, visual and linguistic structures as well as parasocial relationships are operationalized to ensure clarity.

Social media influencer. Individuals, who frequently share content about a topic or their daily life on a social media platform with their community, are considered social media influencers. Additionally, characteristics like experts within a field and trusted advisors are common (Triplett et al., 2022, p. 127). Moreover, social media influencers can be grouped into mega (over a million followers), macro (over 100.000 followers), micro (over 100 but under 100.000 followers) and nano influencers (under 100 followers). In this case, micro-influencers are being studied, which are predominantly common people (not celebrities) who are known for their knowledge of a specific topic (Pretorius et al., 2022, p. 2).

Mental health issues. Classified mental health disorders are chosen for this proposed research. To ensure a clear guideline and avoid confusion, only mental health disorders mentioned by the WHO are considered. All three mental health issues are officially categorized as mental health disorders on the WHO website, which is based on the International Classification of Diseases 11th Revision (ICD-11) (World Health Organization: WHO, 2022).

Visual and linguistic structures. The definition by Bergmann and Luckmann (1995) for visual and linguistic structures is applied. The aesthetic, visual stylistic elements or the colour contribute to the meaning creation of the post as visual structures and hence are investigated factors. Moreover, language aspects like for instance vocabulary fall into the category of linguistic structures. These two concepts originate from the theory of communicative genres and are understood as elaborated in the theoretical framework (Bergmann & Luckmann, 1995, pp. 289-292).

Parasocial relationship. A parasocial relationship is a one-sided relationship of the follower with the social media influencer, which is created as the follower becomes emotionally attached by frequently viewing the content and feeling like they are getting to know the social media influencer

according to Hoffner and Bond (2022, p. 1). Especially by showing vulnerability, for instance sharing mental health struggles, and interacting with the audience, a parasocial relationship is established (Lind & Wickström, 2023, p. 3).

3.4 Analysis

The data was retrieved from the official accounts of SMI1, SMI2 and SMI3 by gathering screenshots from the most recent 100 published posts. After proceeding with the previously described sampling process, the collected data will be securely stored in the researcher's laptop as well as on an external drive. Different programs are used for the analysis, namely Adobe InDesign, Adobe Illustrator, Adobe Photoshop, MAXQDA and Word. MAXQDA is chosen, as its tools enable structured coding and making notes while keeping an overview. Moreover, the application InDesign will be used to arrange and rearrange the clusters, but the output will further be examined on MAXQDA. In addition to the software MAXQDA and InDesign, the researcher will take notes during the process on Word, to allow to comprehend the researchers' thoughts.

3.5 Ethics

Mental health issues are a sensitive topic; therefore, the following measures are taken to ensure a high ethical standard. This research analyses three social media influencers discussing their personal experience with mental health disorders and wants to guarantee that no harm or negative consequences occur for the individuals. Murphy and Sashi (2018, pp. 306-307) mention identity (revealing the person's identity), attribute (sharing characteristics or information that enables tracking it back to the individual), and inference (disclosing data where the person behind it can be detected by the context) as three main aspects that have to be considered when protecting a person's information. Due to this, the social media influencers' names will be anonymized by using SMI1-3. Additionally, the type of disorder and place of origin will not be mentioned, to guarantee that the identity cannot be revealed from the context.

Further, the amount of followers is not disclosed based on the same argument. Solely the master thesis supervisor as well as the researcher have access to this information. The collected data is securely stored on the researcher's laptop and external drive, which are not accessible to third parties. Furthermore, if visuals from the Instagram accounts are shared in the master thesis in the result section, they are edited with Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator. Firstly, faces are covered, and tattoos are removed. Secondly, to keep the original colours but hide the identity of the person depicted, the background is the original of the image, however, the person is made unrecognizable by deleting details (tattoos, jewellery, etc.). Thirdly, as it is crucial that the faces are visible in the category "Visual construction of vulnerability", the faces are changed with generative AI on Adobe Illustrator. These actions are crucial since even though the social media influencers actively choose now to publicly address their mental health issues, there is a possibility that in the future they do not want to

be associated with them. It is the responsibility of an ethically aligned researcher to provide the measurements that the investigated individuals have the choice to delete their content in the future and not be associated with their mental health disorders through a master thesis.

Discussing mental health disorders can be triggering and sensitive for the reader of this master thesis. Consequently, both the shared images and the choice of language are aimed to be as neutral as possible. Photographs showing delicate aspects of mental health disorders, for instance, physical cues, are not included. Also, the selection of words to describe the content is aimed to not reveal the social media influencer's identity (information that can be linked to their person) and be general as well as neutral.

4. Results

In the forthcoming section, the results of the visual figurative cluster analysis and the thematic analysis of the textual captions are elaborated. The first classificatory image cluster “Beautifying mental health disorders? Portrayal of a life beyond the illness” with the subsections “Visually illustrating a joyful life” and “Portraying consistency and routines” reveals how the combination of images represents that people with mental health issues are not defined by them and can experience a fulfilled life. Moreover, the image cluster “Mindful self-care advocates: challenging stereotypes through self-presentation” includes two subsections namely “Nature as symbol”, which is bundled in an iconic manner, and the classificatory “Depiction as self-care experts”. Representing the social media influencers as mindful and experts in self-care practices characterizes this image cluster. Furthermore, “Visual construction of vulnerability” is structured in two subsections: “Personification of vulnerability”, iconic image cluster, and “Revealing physical effects of mental health disorders”, classificatory image cluster. This image cluster illustrates how the social media influencers visually display vulnerability and physical changes caused by their mental health disorder. Key examples of the image clusters are presented in the results, which are representative of the entire cluster.

4.1 Beautifying mental health disorders? Portrayal of a life beyond the illness

The first figurative image cluster is of a classificatory manner. Meaning that the images are bundled based on a certain theme and not regarding other factors (e.g.: visual characteristics) (Müller, 2020, p. 25). In the data, it became evident that the selected social media influencers present aspects beyond their mental health struggles by posting snapshots of positive experiences in their life. “Visually illustrating a joyful life”, the first subcategory, includes a broad range of visuals that show the social media influencers doing activities that convey the impression of giving them happiness. Smiling faces and light colours for instance are indicators of the positivity of the portrayed experiences. Visuals representing people who openly speak about their mental health issues travelling, grabbing coffee, going out with their friends, dancing as well as spending time with their pets contradict the stereotype of affected human beings solely isolating themselves, being sad or helpless (Choudhry et al., 2016, pp. 2812-2813). “Portraying consistency and routines”, the second subcategory, contains images displaying the social media influencers handling daily life tasks such as working or cooking. Apart from the content of the pictures, their uniform composition throughout the feed, particularly in the case of SMI2, connotatively impart a certain steadiness as well as habitual behaviour. Insights of this subcategory reject the stereotype of people with mental health issues not being capable of managing daily life tasks as well as not acting as productive members within society (Eisenhauer, 2008, p. 16; Gee et al., 2007, p. 98).

In the theoretical framework, it is stated, that captions are predominantly descriptions of the images, which can be understood without reading the text (Andalibi et al., 2015, p. 234). For this figurative image cluster “Beautifying mental health disorders? Portrayal of a life beyond the illness”

the visuals and the captions are not contradictory, meaning that the caption does fit the image. However, the captions are mostly extensive and provide either contextual information, interaction with the viewer or experiences from the social media influencers' journey with mental health issues. The last point is particularly interesting, as from the visual figurative analysis the connection to mental health disorders was not evident. Therefore, the captions added meaning to the image, for instance, if only observing the image of Figure 1, the viewer sees a smiling person posing with their cat, but the caption describes that she is celebrating the anniversary of quitting a harmful behaviour. As a consequence, the caption changed the narrative of the image from a snapshot of a person with their pet to a motivational post to get better. Conclusively, captions highlight the link to mental health, which is not communicated in the visual element. As it is chosen to not showcase visual cues linking to mental health struggles, according to S. Sontag (2003, p. 81), the shared photographs are “beautified” and therefore do not evoke questions about the behaviour of the depicted and the observing person.



Figure 1 example of beautifying practices.

4.1.1 Visually illustrating a joyful life

Due to the fact that photographs not merely document experiences, but in combination create meaning and possess a unique way of expression, the following insights are uncovered (Müller, 2020, pp. 1-5). The variety of depicted activities and experiences convey that people with mental health struggles are able to experience life with multiple facets. The images do not contain visual cues (symbols, clichés or text) related to mental health, which expresses that the identity of the analysed social media influencers is not limited to their illness. Hence, the visual image cluster possesses the connotative message that people with mental health issues are not confined to their struggles, but engage in activities, have friends, relationships, and travel, to mention a brief overview of themes appearing in the data.

The captions under the shared pictures on the one hand underline the connotative messages of the visuals, on the other hand, link these experiences to the mental health struggles of the social media influencers. Figure 2 represents an instance of the caption changing the narrative. A person smiling and posing in front of a sightseeing attraction during a trip is the information revealed by the picture, however, in the caption SMI2 is sharing her experience with a mental health disorder and how her biggest wish for the community as well as herself is to be happy.



Figure 2 example of a caption changing the narrative.

An example of the captions having a descriptive function is provided in Figure 3. Again, the photograph shows a person walking through a sightseeing attraction, but in this case, the caption includes facts about the visited place and travel tips.



Figure 3 example of a picture with descriptive captions.

Even though this figurative image cluster is organized in a classificatory way, visual similarities concerning composition and colour choices are evident. The images of SMI2 and SMI3 have predominantly a uniform assembly of the portrayed elements: the person in the centre and a close to mid-range shot. As the person is on the one hand present and on the other hand clearly visible due to the narrow frame, the viewer is able to see the face clearly. Faces in images are attention stimuli and communicate emotions through facial expressions (Bakhshi et al., 2014, pp. 965-966). It

stood out that a smiling face is present in all the images, which underlines the insight that a positive portrayal is aimed at. Moreover, the close to mid-range shots establish a sense of intimacy between the social media influencer and the viewer (Zappavigna, 2016, p. 276), which can enhance parasocial relationship establishment. Furthermore, the captions present cues that the social media influencers aim to create a relationship. A sense of community is established by both the choice of words and the hashtags. “We” and “us” are repeatably used and reduce the perceived distance between the social media influencer and the viewer. It suggests that the community of people struggling as well is addressed. Also, the hashtags hint at the social media influencers being part of the community, as they include the name of the disorder combined with words like “family” or “community”. This form of language use falls into the detected categories of talking about mental health by Chang (2009, pp. 1508-1509) namely conveying a sense of community to underline that people viewing the content with similar mental health issues feel less alone and perceive being connected with the social media influencers.

In addition, finishing the text with a direct question to the viewer, for instance, “What do you do when you feel low?”, is a common structure. Again, this indicates that the social media influencer is directly talking to the viewers and lets them be part of their journey. Further, signing the caption with their name is another linguistic style that reoccurred, which reassembles the structure of a letter. Using a heart emoji presents another linguistic choice, that reduces the distance to the follower and enhances the parasocial relationship. Due to the fact, that a heart emoji symbolizes “love” or is sent between friends/lovers to express intimacy/closeness. In summary, the linguistic style of the captions is informal and reduces the sensed distance between the social media influencer and the follower. Regarding the structure, common ways to arrange the text are evident often ending with a direct question to the viewer or a heart emoji.

Particularly pictures of SMI3 contain a bright and warm colour palette with a focus on yellow and green. This can be explained by nature and sunflowers being a reoccurring motive throughout her Instagram feed. Figure 4 exemplifies how sunflowers are incorporated into the visuals of SMI3 and the colour palette. Nonetheless, it is to mention that the colour green appears more prevailing in other photographs.



Figure 4 example of sunflower as a symbol and colour palette of SMI3.

According to Clarke and Costall (2008, p. 407), green is commonly associated with nature and possesses the connotation peaceful. Won and Westland (2017, p. 2) also link green to peaceful but add the adjective calming and natural. The colour yellow evokes emotions such as happiness or being cheerful (Clarke & Costall, 2008, pp. 407-408). Concludingly, it becomes evident, that the colour choices underline the visual connotative message of people with mental health issues being able to enjoy and have a happy life. In comparison, SMI2 does not possess a consistent colour palette. In pictures capturing for instance club nights the colours are more from the dark manner also caused by the lighting conditions. Travelling or cooking photographs tend to be more lightly coloured. Even though the visuals have different colour palettes, they can be described as colourful. The contrast can be seen in Figure 5.



Figure 5 colour palette of SMI2.

Figure 6 illustrates a key example of this subcategory. SMI2 is wearing a colourful outfit as well as makeup. Furthermore, the visual is a close shot allowing the viewer to clearly see her smiling. Her eyes are closed, giving the impression of her enjoying the moment.

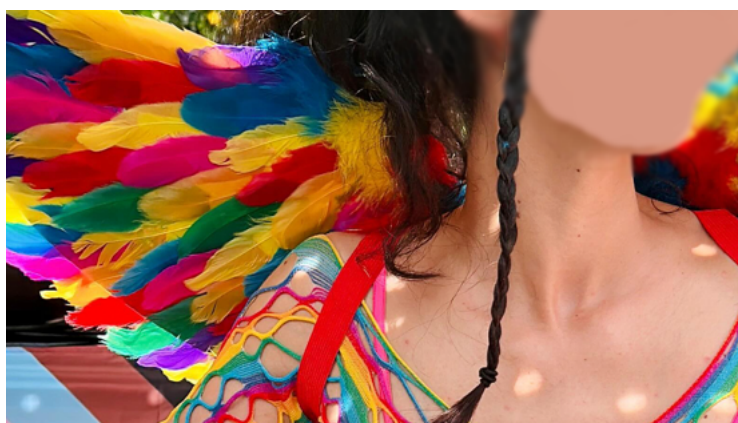


Figure 6 key example for the subcategory “Visually illustrating a joyful life”.

4.1.2 Portraying consistency and routines

The subcategory “Portraying consistency and routines” is to a great extent similar to “Visually illustrating a joyful life” in regard to the composition of the visuals. With one main exception, that

SMI1 does not show herself in the images. This signifies that the aim of the shared visuals is tending to communicate information rather than elicit emotions since no person is visible (Bakhshi et al., 2014, pp. 965-966; Souza et al., 2015, p. 221). Nevertheless, the content of the images differs. In this category, all three social media influencers posted fitting visual content, from snapshots of office desks, the social media influencers doing their work, cooking routines to daily workouts. According to Müller (2020, p. 1), it is essential to interpret the images within the cluster, as by the relation of the visuals to each other the underlying message becomes visible. By connecting the images to each other in this cluster, the connotative meaning of the visuals representing that the social media influencers have a productive schedule is evident, which dissents the stereotype of people with mental health issues not being active members of society (Thompson, 2012, p. 396). It conveys the image of them being able to pursue a career, having a steady daily routine and being capable of taking care of themselves. By breaking these stereotypes also the stigma is being impacted, since stereotypes are a part of how stigma is created (Gee et al., 2007, p. 98).

The images displaying the social media influencers pursuing their job or academic progress, are accompanied by captions adding information about the job/project they are doing. In this case, the captions simply provide either context or description of the portrayed activity. In summary, it includes answers to the questions: what, where, for whom and why. Align with the subsection “Visually illustrating a joyful life”, the visuals do not possess visual cues linked to mental health, but the captions address the social media influencers' mental health struggles by for instance explaining how their mental health disorders made it more difficult to pursue the illustrated activities. Figure 7 presents a snapshot of SMI1 sitting at the beach with a smile, which visually communicates a positive experience. Nonetheless, the caption describes an incident where mental health issues have led to the social media influencer not starting or completing a work-related project. This is one example of how the caption to a picture representing a happy snapshot can add a different perspective to it.



Figure 7 example of a contrast between a picture and a caption.

Furthermore, advice about what activities or routines have helped the social media influencers to improve their mental health issues is frequently combined with images portraying hobbies or

routines. A picture of SMI3 holding a pot with a self-grown plant accompanied by a caption that elaborates how gardening has facilitated lifting the mood and getting out of a more difficult phase in her mental health journey is shown in Figure 8.



Figure 8 example of a mental health tip.

Patterns in the linguistic style and structure are evident. Descriptions of lows in their journey with mental health issues ended with a motivational aspect. A key example is a caption that shares how the social media influencer was not able to participate in the planned projects and had to take time off. However, the text ends with the statement about how this period enabled her to reflect on what is important in life, namely family as well as selfcare, and now she is grateful for the experience. Furthermore, comparing this image cluster to “Visually illustrating a joyful life”, a contrast is present between the previous colourful, wide variety of portrayed activities and about commonly understood the “free time” of a person to more reoccurring tasks and consistent motives. Figure 9 is an example of the visualization of a workout routine, which is repeatedly shared by SMI2. The person is in the centre doing the workout with a plant in the background.



Figure 9 example of reoccurring visual composition.

As the composition of the image as well as the location are consistently the same, a steadiness and routine in the daily life is being communicated. Nonetheless, the fact that the image cluster “Visually illustrating a joyful life” possesses the elaborated contrast, the connotative meaning of a consistent and structured daily life is underlined. Concludingly, this illustrates how the differences and similarities of images within a cluster convey meaning (Müller, 2020, p. 1).

4.1.3 Discussion

The question of whether self-disclosure or self-presentation is conducted arises by analysing the results of the cluster “Beautifying mental health disorders? Portrayal of a life beyond the illness”. Following the definition by Schlosser (2020, p. 2), which differentiates between the aim of self-disclosure and self-presentation, cues for a strategic construction of a desired image can be detected. Therefore, the data indicates self-presentation and not self-disclosure practices. Particularly in the subcategory “Visually illustrating a joyful life” the display of smiling faces and positive experiences are dominant, also in cases where in the caption the personal mental health issues of the social media influencers are addressed. In the view of Hollenbaugh (2021, p. 84) self-disclosure is a part of self-presentation, meaning that the two concepts are not mutually exclusive. Nonetheless, by clearly distinguishing between self-presentation and self-disclosure, differences in the content become apparent, which connotes meaning based on the theory of figurative image cluster by Müller (2020, p. 25). Hence, for this master thesis, the understanding of Schlosser (2020, p. 2) is chosen, however, it must be highlighted that different opinions occur in academic literature whether the concepts are binary.

For instance, in Figure 2 a picture of a person smiling in front of a sightseeing attraction, which is combined with a caption describing personal struggles with mental health, is presented. Due to the visual mainly determining the evoked emotions (J. M. Sontag, 2018, p. 1; Subramanian & Santo, 2021, p. 59), it is reasonable to conclude that the positive connotation of the image impacts how mental health (e.g.: as serious or innocuous) is interpreted in the text and that a photograph of for example a sad facial expression would change the perception of the caption. In line with the concepts of beautifying and uglifying by S. Sontag (2003, p. 81), people actively choose pictures that either trivialize or aggravate the depicted motive, the analysed Instagram content beautifies mental health issues. In consideration of the consistent combination of pictures displaying smiling faces and happy moments with captions about mental health issues, it is apparent that the social media influencers strategically self-present themselves on the platform to achieve an ideal portrayal (Schlosser, 2020, p. 2) and by selecting beautified visual content impact how their followers perceive the severity of mental health disorders (S. Sontag, 2003, p. 81).

A theoretical explanation for the described posting behaviour is provided by Goffman (1973, p. 35) with the concepts of socialized routines and idealized performances. It is a common conduct on Instagram to strategically present oneself in a flattering manner (Hollenbaugh, 2021, p. 80; Yau & Reich, 2019, p. 9; Zillich & Riesmeyer, 2021, p. 2). Therefore, this type of posting behaviour represents the social norm and is practised to align with societal expectations, since not following socialized routines/ the ideal could cause negative responses from in this case the followers (Goffman, 1973, p. 35). The social media influencers might choose to focus on the positive portrayal of mental health issues to act according to the social norms of Instagram and avoid consequences (e.g.: losing followers or negative comments).

Even though self-presentation instead of self-disclosure as well as beautifying the content can have the effect of followers not understanding the seriousness of mental health disorders, J. M. Sontag (2018, pp. 13-15) points out that too explicitly showing sensitive and possibly triggering aspects of mental health disorders (e.g.: self-harm) can lead to the viewer imitating the behaviour or having problematic emotional reactions. Moreover, the content of this cluster contradicts stereotypes about affected people as it focuses on joyful and relatable everyday life experiences (Gonzalez-Polledo & Tarr, 2018, p. 160). In summary, beautifying and concentrating on a positive portrayal of mental health can avoid causing harmful reactions or behaviours of the viewers and reduce stigma (Gonzalez-Polledo & Tarr, 2018, p. 160; J. M. Sontag, 2018, pp. 13-15).

4.2 Mindful self-care advocates: challenging stereotypes through self-presentation

The underlying meaning that the social media influencers practice a mindful, peaceful, and balanced life is revealed by the second figurative image cluster. Strategic self-presentation practices define this cluster since the use of symbols and content creation specifically tailored for the audience takes place. Further, it becomes evident that the social media influencers actively strive to distance themselves from stereotypes and portray themselves as self-care advocates. In the first subsection “Nature as symbol” the visuals are organized in an iconic manner, or in other words, based on reoccurring similarities or differences (e.g.: symbols or visual characteristics) (Müller, 2020, p. 26). Presentation of the social media influencers in nature represents the main connecting similarity of this image cluster. Moreover, the subsection “Depiction as self-care experts” is due to the uniting theme, self-care practices, of the selected photographs a classificatory image cluster (Müller, 2020, p. 26). These two image clusters are grouped under the same title “Mindful self-care advocates: challenging stereotypes through self-presentation”, as especially on social media platforms visuals appear never isolated but in relation to each other (Müller, 2020, p. 19). Even though the two subsections are arranged differently (iconic and classificatory image clusters), the symbioses of them conveys the representation of the social media influencers as serene and harmonious.

4.2.1 Nature as symbol

Walking into a lake, a leaf of a tree held against the sun or sitting in a field full of blossoming flowers are repetitive scenes shared by the analysed social media influencers. Additionally, nature symbols occur occasionally in a less direct manner, for instance, SMI3 wears clothes with flower print, most dominantly sunflowers. In this specific case, the sunflower can be recognized as a symbol for the influencer. Figure 10 presents an example where the sunflower is evident on her dress and the flowers she is holding.



Figure 10 example of a sunflower as a symbol.

Thompson (2012, p. 406) elaborates in her article how nature can be applied as a symbol to communicate peacefulness and calmness. Using for instance landscapes in the context of addressing mental health online allows a non-provocative way as well as conveys a positive image of mental health disorders (Thompson, 2012, p. 406). The choice of colours underlines the positive and non-confrontational approach to discussing mental health issues. Warm and nature related colours (green, blue, yellow, brown) characterize the visuals. As previously described in the image cluster “Beautifying mental health disorders? Portrayal of a life beyond the illness”, green is associated with peacefulness and calmness, yellow with being cheerful and happy (Clarke & Costall, 2008, pp. 407-408; Won & Westland, 2017, p. 2). According to Müller (2020, p. 26), the detection of in this case similarities is vital when forming an iconic cluster. The colour palette illustrates a visual characteristic that the pictures of this image cluster have in common. Figure 11 showcases an example by SMI3 where a photo of a leaf being held against the sun in seemingly a forest is seen. It illustrates how nature is a dominant theme in the pictures and the above elaborated colour palette.



Figure 11 example of "Nature as symbol".

The captions for this subsection are not descriptive and there is predominantly no direct connection to the images (e.g.: not providing information about what is being seen in the visual) in the case of SMI2 and SMI3. Similar to the previous image cluster, the photos do not contain visual cues to mental health issues. The captions create the connection by sharing their personal struggles as well as the ups and downs they have experienced. A pattern in how the shared stories are structured is

evident: starting with a quote or a catchy first line, followed by elaborating the moments they have struggled with mental health issues, ended with a motivational outlook. Compared to the other clusters, the captions are noticeably extensive and share deep insights about their personal experiences. A unique linguistic structure is apparent in the captions of SMI2 since the text often reassembles a poem.

An exception occurs in the Instagram feed of SMI1 since a dominant scene is her in front of trees or bushes holding up a card. Short statements which function as a title of the caption are handwritten on a white piece of paper. An example is presented in Figure 12. Possible explanations for combining her face with a written statement can be found in the literature. Wu and Hong (2022, p. 5) point out that faces are displayed in pictures on social media platforms to increase the engagement of the followers (e.g.: likes or comments), as they evoke more emotions than solely a text. Displaying a person with a mental health disorder is additionally a technique applied by health partitioners to underline the seriousness of the disorder (Lee et al., 2020, p. 3). Hence, SMI1 either combines the written text with a self-portrait to attract the attention of the followers or to emphasize the importance of the message. It is to mention, that physical traces of the mental health disorder are visible, which could be a reason for including herself in the picture.



Figure 12 usage of text in the image.

Clues to convey a sense of a parasocial relationship or community are occurring both in the images and the captions. Close up and mid-range shots (including selfies) are predominantly how the visuals are framed. On the basis of the insights by Zappavigna (2016, p. 276), close up shots minimize the perceived distance between the social media influencer and the viewer. Further, the social media influencers directly speak to the followers by choosing formulations like “we”, “us” and “you”. Additionally, the usage of the heart emoji underlines the communicated intimate and close relationship.

This category also possesses pictures that give the impression of being taken by a professional and in the caption the perception is verified by tagging photographers. Especially SMI2 shared artistic photographs in regard to the editing and framing. Figure 13 illustrates a key example; the social media influencer is in the middle of the water in a fancy dress. On account of the anonymization technique, which is explained in the ethics section of this paper, the high resolution is not visible. Nonetheless, the staged scene and the assembly of the picture reveal that this example is not a snapshot but is composed. Even though it is not stated by the social media influencer, the shared content indicates that it is planned as well as consciously utilized for self-presentation purposes. The fact that it is taken during a photoshoot (also other images are shot at the identical scenery and mention the same photographer) and the long poem-style caption under the image fit the description of popular self-presentation practices on social media by Yau and Reich (2019, p. 9) as well as Zillich and Riesmeyer (2021, p. 8).

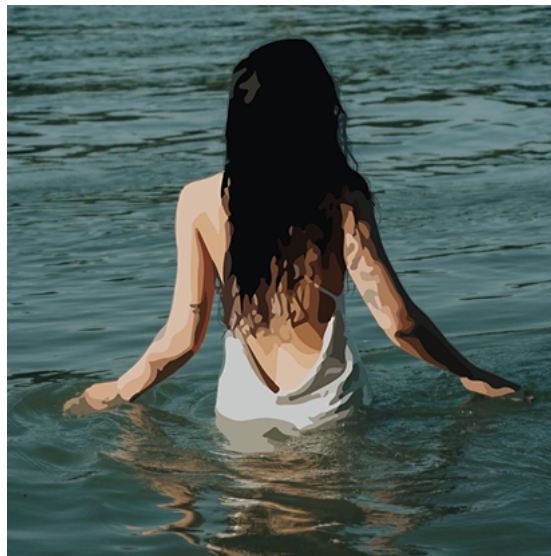


Figure 13 example of a staged picture.

The combination of nature related visuals and captions containing the social media influencers' mental health stories with a motivational tone result in a positive as well as inspiring representation of their mental health journeys. The struggles and negative symptoms of mental health disorders are being “beautified” by the choice of imagery and tone of the storytelling (S. Sontag, 2003, p. 81). In the framework to categorize mental health discourses provided by Chang (2009, pp. 1508-1509), this cluster falls into the encouraging and optimistic category. The connotation of the content, namely that people with mental health issues are peaceful and balanced, contradicts the stereotype of individuals with disorders as violent occurring in diverse media outlets (e.g.: movies) (Harper, 2005, p. 466) and the stereotypically associated emotions like angry, anxious or sad (Choudhry et al., 2016, pp. 2812-2813). Therefore, the shared visuals on Instagram by the social media influencers communicate a representation of people with mental health disorders as opposed to the previously discussed stereotypes.

4.2.2 Depiction as self-care experts

Visuals capturing self-care routines, wellness practices, healthy food or workouts are popular on Instagram under the hashtag #mentalhealth according to Lee et al. (2020, p. 7). The following subcategory “Depiction as self-care experts” contains content that aligns with this trend and adds the layer of self-presentation as experts, since the social media influencers share content that can be seen as guides or tutorials. Hence, the underlying aim is to educate, spread awareness and highlight their knowledge. However, the concept of self-care is understood differently by each social media influencer. SMI1 and SMI2 have the most significant contrast, since on the one account self-care includes mainly healthy eating and physical exercise. The other account, SMI1, focuses on mindset as well as self-love related tips. For instance, in Figure 14 notes on stickers with encouraging words are hanging on the mirror and in the caption, she elaborates how affirmative words are a great source of selflove and emphasizes the impact of self-love on a person’s well-being.

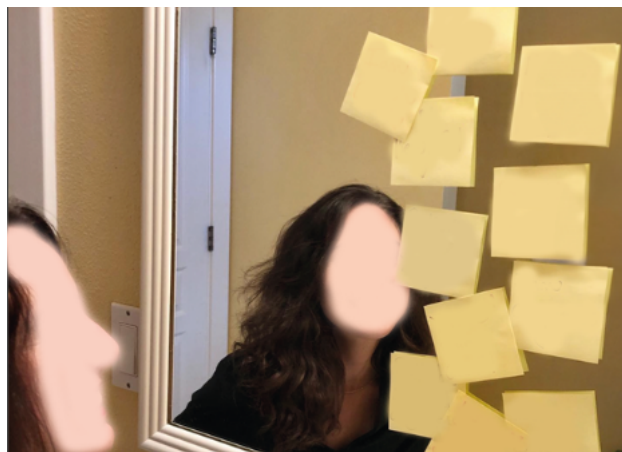


Figure 14 selflove practice.

As noted previously in the section “Portraying consistency and routines”, a repetitive and with the same image composition type of content are the workout routines by SMI2. Andalibi et al. (2015, p. 231) highlight that when crafting an Instagram post, reaching the audience plays a key role. Therefore, addressing them directly is a typical practice, which is evident in all the above as well as this image cluster. Nonetheless, the workout routines reveal an even higher consideration of the audience because they are designed as a step-by-step tutorial for the followers. In other words, while producing the content the audience is the focal point. Categorizing this form of content in regards to the framework by Pretorius et al. (2022, p. 5), it can be labelled as self-help advice. Additionally, the same characteristics emerge from the cooking guide posted by SMI2. In Figure 15 the frequently chosen visual characteristics are shown: her in a sports outfit presenting the food with a smile on her lips.



Figure 15 example of a cooking tutorial.

The focus of the content shared by all social media influencers is on providing tips surrounding the topic of mental selfcare. Ranging from explaining how going on so called mental health walks, self-reflection, breathing exercises to focusing on their mindset has improved their well-being in general, but also their mental health. Hashtags were often used to emphasize the connection to mental health, even if not stated above in the caption. In the data of SMI2, the link to weight loss is made using hashtags. A key example is #healthyweightloss in the cooking content. Meaning is created by the interplay of visuals (Müller, 2020, p. 1), thus, it is to question whether pictures showing close-ups of her body, which did not mention weight loss in any manner, still get interpreted as “the goal” by the followers. Figure 16 demonstrates an instance of a body close up.



Figure 16 body close up.

Regarding the linguistic structure of this cluster, aspects such as informal, addressing the viewer, choice of emoji as well as extensiveness are identical to the previously discussed clusters. A phenomenon unique to this cluster is sharing instructional captions. Cooking recipes, workout routines, step-by-step guide for breathing exercises briefly summarizes it. Where the pictures are taken is interesting in this image cluster. Getting the perception of peeking into someone's personal

life establishes a sense of intimacy. Sharing pictures shot in a private home represents a way to let the followers look behind the scenes or in other words to see the social media influencer beyond their public persona (Lasén, 2015, p. 73; Miguel, 2016, p. 3). For this image cluster, widespread locations include the living room, bathroom, and kitchen.

It can be summarized that this image cluster connotatively portrays the social media influencers as experts in techniques to improve one's mental health, since they are sharing their know-how, as well as presenting themselves as people who foster their well-being, both physically and mentally. The shared content paints a picture of people with mental health disorders which contradicts the stereotype of affected human beings as not taking care of their physical appearance (Choudhry et al., 2016, pp. 2812-2813; Eisenhauer, 2008, p. 16) and not being in control of their emotions (Choudhry et al., 2016, p. 2814).

4.2.3 Discussion

For this image cluster, a contradiction between the captions and the visuals is noticeable. In the image cluster "Beautifying mental health disorders? Portrayal of a life beyond the illness" it is also the case that mental health issues are dominantly mentioned in the caption and not visible in the image, nonetheless, in this instance there is no relation between the image and the text. SMI2 and SMI3 tended to post images of scenes in nature, but the caption describes their mental health journey without delving into the relevance of the displayed image for the discussed topic. In comparison, in the subcategory "Visually illustrating a joyful life" snapshots of travels are shared, however, in the caption a reference is made to how the trip plays a role in their mental health journey. Further, it appears that photos were specifically selected or made for the text. One example is the images from SMI2, which are taken during a photoshoot, that are combined with extensive captions reassembling a diary entry or a poem. Moreover, the colour palette and the editing style are coordinated to match, which presents a self-presentation technique elaborated by Zillich and Riesmeyer (2021, p. 6). Thus, the shared posts are strategically constructed and thought through, even to a higher degree than the previous cluster, since the desired image and the audience appear to be considered in the production process of the content. Moreover, how particularly adolescents feel about their bodies and life can be impacted by the ideals presented in the content of social media influencers (Lind & Wickström, 2023, p. 2). Therefore, the combination of cooking content with the weight loss related hashtags and close up shots of a body in a bikini on the account of SMI2 can have an effect on the perception of the followers regarding their physical appearance.

Linking these insights to the concepts of self-disclosure vs. self-presentation by Schlosser (2020, p. 2), the social media influencers single out the information to publish on Instagram based on which image aimed to convey. Additionally, the choice of images beautifies their experiences with mental health disorders (S. Sontag, 2003, p. 81). Whether this is the correct behaviour is not to be judged within this master thesis, nevertheless, the representation of mental health issues on the

analysed accounts contradicts common stereotypes and visuals are an influential mode to reduce stigma (J. M. Sontag, 2018, p. 3). Additionally, Lind and Wickström (2023, p. 2) emphasize the role of the content shared by social media influencers about mental health not only in creating awareness or a place for discussion but also in challenging norms and comprehension of wellbeing. Due to stigmas negatively affecting people with mental health disorders, for instance, causing them to not reach out for help, the need to reduce them is not to be underestimated (Choudhry et al., 2016, p. 2814).

4.3 Visual construction of vulnerability

How the selected social media influencers portray vulnerability on their Instagram accounts is revealed by the image cluster “Visual construction of vulnerability”. The first subcategory “Personification of vulnerability” is of iconic manner and discusses the usage of selfies to display the social media influencers in moments that they are undergoing emotional distress caused by their mental health disorder. Further, in “Revealing physical effects of mental health disorders” the images have in common that they display visual cues of the social media influencers' mental health issues, hence, the images are arranged in a classificatory way (Müller, 2020, p. 25). Due to not only the captions addressing but additionally the photos presenting mental health issues, this figurative image cluster stays in contrast to the other discussed clusters. Images are more effective in evoking emotional responses than text (Lee et al., 2020, p. 3; J. M. Sontag, 2018, p. 1; Subramanian & Santo, 2021, p. 59), since the viewer perceives them as more authentic (Lee et al., 2020, p. 3) and credible (Subramanian & Santo, 2021, p. 59). Concludingly, it is of particular interest to understand how the social media influencers chose to present the challenges and difficult times in their personal mental health journey.

4.3.1 Personification of vulnerability

Smiling faces occurred mainly in the posted content elaborated in the other figurative image clusters, therefore, encountering sad facial expressions is noteworthy. SMI2 and SMI3 shared pictures where it conveys the impression that they have been crying. Watery eyes, swollen areas under the eyes, facial redness and a sorrowful gaze are visual indicators. It is to mention that while for SMI3 this type of image reoccurred throughout her feed, SMI1 solely published one picture. As the type of image, both social media influencers chose the selfie. According to Souza et al. (2015, p. 221), sharing selfies constitutes a proficient approach to transmitting emotions, which can be explained by the sense of intimacy established through the small distance between the camera and the person as well as that the face is clearly visible (Souza et al., 2015, p. 221; Zappavigna, 2016, p. 276). Additionally, as the social media influencers do not heavily sob in the pictures, meaning that solely facial characteristics like teary eyes hint towards crying, a close-up picture enables to viewer to read the emotions.

Further, the selfies of the social media influencers can be differentiated by visual characteristics. A snapshot taken spontaneously in the moment describes the impression given by the selfies of SMI3 whereas the image by SMI2 conveys the perception of being staged or carefully selected. This conclusion is made based on the factors of image composition, whether the social media influencer is posing and the resolution of the picture. Figure 17 illustrates this contrast. On the left-hand side, despite the facial cues to crying, namely red swollen under eyes, teary eyes and facial redness, the image gives the impression of being staged since the arms are positioned to act as a frame for the face, the hair falls perfectly (no hair in the face) and the pose does not seem natural (sitting on the floor leaning on the couch). Further, the light illuminates the face evenly (probably in front of a window). On the right-hand side, besides the aforementioned facial cues, the face is frowned. The lighting in the picture appears to be not thought through (comes from the back), the image is shabby (not high resolution) and part of her face is covered with a scarf. Plainly formulated, SMI2 aims to present herself in a flattering light while expressing negative emotions, while SMI 3 shares a snapshot from an authentic moment.



Figure 17 contrast in crying selfies.

The location where the images are shot creates the impression of observing the social media influencers in a private moment, as the setting predominantly is on the couch or in bed. The gaze of the social media influencers is directed towards the viewer, which is engaging as well as an attention catcher (Zappavigna, 2016, p. 276). Expect directly looking into the camera and the image being a selfie, the visual characters deviate in the case of SMI1. The one selfie which presents a vulnerable moment is taken in a hospital bed, wearing a face mask with a sad facial expression, but not crying. Nonetheless, in the caption, it is stated that the reason for the hospital visit is a chronic illness and whether there is a connection to the mental health disorder is not mentioned. Additionally, a consistent colour palette is not evident, nonetheless, the images can be described as significantly less colourful compared to the previous image cluster.

Even though the imagery differs significantly from the insights of the previous figurative image clusters, the text in the captions is almost identical. Starting with briefly describing the emotions felt in the moment of the picture, sharing information about the specific mental health

disorder, pointing out what has helped to improve their situation (e.g.: therapy) and ending with encouraging words reassembles a pattern in how the captions are structured.

By accompanying the caption about challenging moments with their mental health disorder with a selfie visually displaying emotional distress not only expresses vulnerability *but gives vulnerability a face*. In other words, through the symbioses of the written text about a personal vulnerable situation and a close-up picture of a face with a sad expression, the described vulnerability is personified. Personification occurs in a way that the concept of vulnerability is linked to a person, in this case, the social media influencers. The “crying selfie” can be interpreted as a visual symbol of a low moment in their mental health journey, as it is repeatedly and uniformly applied by the social media influencers to showcase negative emotions or in other words vulnerability. Further, it stands out as a symbol because no other type of shared image displays any signs of emotional distress, on the contrary smiling faces are dominant. Therefore, the “crying selfie” can be recognized as a distinct visual expression of vulnerability.

4.3.2 Revealing physical effects of mental health disorders

Whereas the subcategory “Personification of vulnerability” focused on concrete visual characteristics (e.g.: selfie), within this subcategory all images displaying cues to mental health issues are included. Images of the account by SMI2 do not fit this figurative cluster, however, it is to note, that mental health disorders are not always noticeable physically. Without revealing which mental health disorder due to ethical reasons and privacy concerns, it can be stated that in the case of SMI2 physical signs are not that apparent. Pictures depicting physical changes throughout the years and different phases in the course of the mental health disorder are shared by SMI1 and SMI3. For this, a photomontage with pictures shot in different periods, often in comparison to prior years, is a repetitive format. Creating a photomontage includes active editing of the content and selecting pictures from the past to illustrate the physical changes. Therefore, it can be assumed that the social media influencers planned this type of content, which Yau and Reich (2019, p. 9) and Zillich and Riesmeyer (2021, p. 8) identify as a common practice for self-presentation on Instagram. Additionally, SMI3 displays current physical changes caused by her mental health disorder in mirror selfies and phone pictures.

The social media influencers mostly smile in the images, even if they are displaying severe physical changes caused by mental health disorders. SMI3 for whom her mental health issues led to drastic weight gain, is hugging her belly repeatedly in pictures. Shaping her hands into a heart holding them in front of her stomach or pulling up her T-shirt to uncover the full stomach illustrate other examples of how she presented the weight gain in visuals. These gestures connote that she is accepting the symptoms of her mental health disorder and fosters a kind approach to deal with them. Also, the captions underline the positive and encouraging connotation by reminding the followers to practice selflove and that it is ok to experience physical changes. Furthermore, SMI1 posted a photomontage with three pictures containing two capturing moments where severe physical changes

are visible and one showing her in a healthy condition. Nonetheless, she is smiling in all three. In the caption she expresses that her deepest regret is not seeking help earlier and this type of mental health disorder can be mortal, however, she emphasizes that a full recovery is possible, and she is happy now as seen in the third image of the photomontage. This example can be interpreted as a visualization of the steps in her journey to recovery.

In summary, the representation of mental health disorders in this figurative image cluster contains besides portraying physical traces, which can be shocking for followers to see, signs of beautifying the visual content as explained by S. Sontag (2003, p. 81). Firstly, the facial expression is dominantly smiling. Faces tend to grab the attention of the viewer and help the viewer to determine how to feel about a picture (Bakhshi et al., 2014, pp. 965-966), thus, the smiling face could ease the negative feelings caused by the displayed consequences of the mental illness. Secondly, body language like hugging herself, particularly in the case of SMI3, reinforces the positive portrayal. Lastly, the tone of the text in the captions is encouraging and contains the underlying message of a full recovery being achievable. The images of phases that the social media influencers were severely suffering from mental health disorders can be categorized as warning signs.

4.3.3 Discussion

Using symbols linked to mental health issues in images facilitates a fast comprehension of the message communicated through the visual (Thompson, 2012, p. 407). Elaborating it based on the figurative image cluster “Personification of vulnerability”, crying signifies that the social media influencers are experiencing negative emotions or going through a challenging period without the follower reading the caption. Based on the frequent reoccurrence of the social media influencers capturing themselves crying in a selfie in combination with the caption expressing that they are struggling with their mental health disorder, the “crying selfie” can be identified as a symbol used to display vulnerability. Further, faces in general are catching the attention of followers (Bakhshi et al., 2014, pp. 965-966) and the dominant content on Instagram presents the users in a flattering light highlighting the positive aspects of one’s life (Hollenbaugh, 2021, p. 80; Yau & Reich, 2019, p. 9; Zillich & Riesmeyer, 2021, p. 2). Therefore, sharing a selfie which portrays vulnerability provides a way to not only stand out on the platform but also to appear trustworthy and authentic, as the social media influencer posts content that does not align with the common self-presentation behaviour (Lind & Wickström, 2023, p. 3).

In regards to the concepts of self-presentation vs. self-disclosure elaborated by Schlosser (2020, p. 1) these type of images convey that the social media influencers practice self-disclosure, meaning that they share honest information not considering the societal ideal. However, the selfie posted by SMI2 features cues of self-presentation techniques, namely being strategically planned and staged (Yau & Reich, 2019, p. 9; Zillich & Riesmeyer, 2021, p. 8). This image cluster presents that a clear categorization in either self-presentation or self-disclosure practices as defined by Schlosser

(2020, p. 1) is not possible. Moreover, the explanation of Hollenbaugh (2021, p. 84), meaning that self-disclosure is an element of self-presentation, is more accurate. However, it is not describing the observed pattern of *strategic* self-disclosure with the element portraying vulnerability. Hence, a third type namely “strategic vulnerability disclosure” is introduced to capture the behaviour of revealing difficulties with mental health disorders combined with cues of strategic self-presentation. It summarizes the content which possesses the characteristics of self-disclosure (e.g.: sharing negative emotions), and self-presentation (e.g.: strategically arranging a post). In Figure 17 a key example is visible, since SMI2 discloses personal struggles and visually displays herself as vulnerable, nonetheless, features of the image (e.g.: lighting) as well as the caption (e.g.: including a list with tips that help to deal with emotional distress) indicate a self-presentation approach, implying that the social media influencer thought through in which way she wants to display vulnerability on Instagram.

The insights of the subcategory “Representing difficulties with mental health disorders” reveal that the visuals showing the physical effects of the mental health disorder are beautified (S. Sontag, 2003, p. 81) and the connotation is to either show full recovery is possible or to act as a warning sign. The dominance of smiling faces present in images portraying the negative aspects of mental health disorders and the positive as well as encouraging tone of the captions are key aspects pointing out that the social media influencer chose to beautify their content. This can have the consequence that the shared images do not communicate the severity of the mental health disorders. Nonetheless, J. M. Sontag (2018, pp. 13-15) emphasizes in her article that explicitly displaying mental health disorders can evoke negative emotions in the viewer or even cause triggering problematic behaviour. Hence, the question arises whether beautifying pictures of mental health disorders is a necessity to avoid provoking imitation or overwhelming the followers.

Lastly, the concepts of socialized routines and idealized performances by Goffman (1973, p. 35) explain why social media influencers use common symbols and practices to beautify the images depicting physical effects of their mental health disorder. On Instagram, the typical posting behaviour includes highlighting the favourable aspects of oneself (Hollenbaugh, 2021, p. 80; Yau & Reich, 2019, p. 9; Zillich & Riesmeyer, 2021, p. 2), which concludingly results in the social norm of the platform. To avoid negative responses from the audience, the shared content must align with the customs (Goffman, 1973, p. 35). Hence, beautifying the images and choosing to display negative emotions in a more reserved manner, namely the crying selfie, provides a posting behaviour that fits the socialized routine on Instagram.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Mental health portrayal by Instagram influencers

With the findings of the mixed method approach, figurative image cluster and thematic analysis, the research question “How are mental health issues portrayed by social media influencers on Instagram?” with the sub-questions “What visual and communicative structures are used by social media influencers to address mental health issues on Instagram?” and “How does a parasocial relationship develop between social media influencers that focus on mental health issues and their followers?” can be answered. Three figurative image clusters constitute the outcome of the analysis namely: “Beautifying mental health disorders? Portrayal of a life beyond the illness”, “Mindful self-care advocates: challenging stereotypes through self-presentation” and “Visual construction of vulnerability”. As an overview it can be stated that a positive depiction of mental health issues occurs on the social media influencers' Instagram accounts. Positive meaning that the shared images and captions draw attention to how life is not limited by mental health disorders or practices that helped them to get better, rather than focusing on suffering under symptoms or pessimistic thoughts.

The first image cluster, “Beautifying mental health disorders? Portrayal of a life beyond the illness”, connotes that mental health disorders do not restrict the affected person from enjoying life (e.g.: to travel or to party with friends) and being able to have a structured as well as productive daily routine. Moreover, whereas the previous cluster emphasized what the social media influencers *can do despite their mental health disorder*, the second image cluster, “Mindful self-care advocates: challenging stereotypes through self-presentation”, focuses on *who they are* or in other words personality traits and attributes. The social media influencers are portrayed as mindful, balanced and self-care experts, emphasizing how they grew as a person from their mental health struggles. Lastly, the third image cluster, “Visual construction of vulnerability” reveals that if negative emotions are depicted in an image, the main format is a selfie. Additionally, photomontages are used to display physical changes caused by the mental health disorder, nonetheless, the portrayal highlights the current healthy state and emphasizes treating them with self-love as well as acceptance.

On the level of the visuals a positive portrayal of mental health issues is achieved by beautifying practices (S. Sontag, 2003, p. 81), strategic self-presentation techniques (Schlosser, 2020, p. 2) and implementing visual elements that underline the positive connotation, for instance, nature as a symbol to convey peacefulness as mentioned by Thompson (2012, p. 395). Additionally, the revealed themes in the captions emphasize that the social media influencers aim to inspire, inform, and highlight an optimistic point of view regarding their mental health disorder. Moreover, the mixed method approach of figurative image clusters and thematic analysis enabled to draw these conclusions. How the relation of the visuals to each other, the impact of visual characteristics (e.g.: colour palette) as well as the implementation of symbols (e.g.: nature) create meaning is revealed through the figurative image clusters (Müller, 2020, p. 5). Further, the thematic analysis of the captions enabled to discover that a contradiction between the images and the captions exists, which

allowed to detect that the images are beautified and part of a self-presentation strategy. Additionally, to comprehend further the establishment of a parasocial relationship with the followers the thematic analysis plays a key role. Studying the captions revealed that a positive portrayal is further aimed through the text since even though mental health struggles are more extensively addressed, the focus is on ending with a positive outlook, sharing advice to get better based on their personal experience and underlining that the social media influencers are on their way to recovery. In the following subsections reasons for this conclusion are elaborated and the sub-questions are addressed.

5.1.1 Visual and communicative structures

What visual and communicative elements are applied to achieve the positive portrayal is discussed in the following section and provides an answer to the sub-question “What visual and communicative structures are used by social media influencers to address mental health issues on Instagram?”. In connection to the theory of communicative genres by Bergmann and Luckmann (1995, pp. 289-292), the insights provide a comprehension of the main visual and linguistic structures on Instagram regarding discussing mental health issues.

Disjointedness of captions and images. The first detected pattern illustrates the discrepancy between the text in the captions and the content of the photos. A picture with no visual cues relating to mental health disorders is combined with a caption elaborating on the social media influencers' personal struggle with mental health. A striking instance is evident in the image cluster “Mindful self-care advocates: challenging stereotypes through self-presentation”, more specifically the subcategory “Nature as symbol”, where a visual depicting a leaf of a tree is matched with a caption sharing extensive insights about the persons' challenging experience with the mental health disorder. Another common behaviour is connecting images showing the social media influencers smiling with elaborations of their mental health struggles. Based on the framework by S. Sontag (2003, p. 81), this practice can be labelled as beautifying the images, meaning that the images are strategically selected to trivialize the topic and to not communicate a moral responsibility.

Types of captions. Two forms of captions are identified in the data, the descriptive and the changing type. Andalibi et al. (2015, p. 233) mention the descriptive caption, the one providing information about what is seen in the image, and it is apparent in this study. Nonetheless, the changing type has been found in this research and denotes a caption that changes the narrative of the image. For instance, in the data snapshots from travels are combined with a caption addressing how mental health issues impacted the trip. Hence, the caption shifts the meaning of the image from solely a travel experience to communicating information about mental health.

Visual symbols and personification. In the shared content symbols and personification techniques occurred. Thompson (2012, p. 406) states that nature is commonly showcased in communication about mental health to connote peacefulness and wellbeing in order to discuss mental health disorders in a non-confrontational and positive manner. Nature appears as scenery and

symbol in the images published by social media influencers, particularly dominantly when elaborating on difficult phases of their mental health journey. Moreover, the “crying selfie” is ascertained as a symbol of low phases or emotional distress. It is categorized as a symbol due to its repeated usage to embody negative emotions and as personification since by illustrating the social media influencer crying in combination with being vulnerable, it *gives vulnerability a face*. Further, in the subcategory “Revealing physical effects of mental health disorders”, physical gestures are used to demonstrate a certain connotation. A key example is the gesture of hugging her belly to showcase that the social media influencer is accepting the physical changes caused by the mental health disorder.

Self-presentation practices. Drawing mainly on the insights of Yau and Reich (2019, p. 9) as well as Zillich and Riesmeyer (2021, p. 8), strategic self-presentation techniques are detected. Firstly, following a colour palette to convey a desired image is evident in two out of the three image clusters. Secondly, poses in images, facial expressions (e.g.: the dominant “smiling face”), editing style and assembly of the images (e.g.: angle) seem to be strategically aligned to establish the positive and happy image of the social media influencers. Thirdly, linking to the aforementioned insights, symbols (e.g.: nature) and beautifying practices as elaborated by S. Sontag (2003, p. 81) are utilized to support the desired image. Particularly for displaying vulnerability in the image cluster “Visual construction of vulnerability”, a third category describing content that reassembles a symbiosis between self-presentation as well as self-disclosure practices is formed namely “strategic vulnerability disclosure”. It captures the patterned behaviour of disclosing difficulties with mental health or emotional distress while containing self-presentation techniques. In other words, outlines that the portrayal of vulnerability is practised in a planned manner.

5.1.2 Parasocial relationship development

How a parasocial relationship is established through both the images and captions is explained in the next paragraphs and therefore answers the sub-question “How does a parasocial relationship develop between social media influencers that focus on mental health issues and their followers?”. On a visual level, intimacy and the sense of knowing the social media influencer is created by the type of picture (selfie or close to mid-range shot) (Zappavigna, 2016, p. 276), the location (e.g.: bedroom) and depiction of private moments (e.g.: vacation or partying with friends) (Lasén, 2015, p. 73; Miguel, 2016, p. 3). Also, the images displaying the social media influencers as vulnerable, namely the selfies capturing them crying and the photos showing the physical changes caused by the mental health disorder, give the followers the perception that they are authentic and trustworthy (Lind & Wickström, 2023, p. 3), since it is opposing the dominant content on Instagram, only presenting users in a flattering light and using images for strategic positive self-presentation (Hollenbaugh, 2021, p. 80; Yau & Reich, 2019, p. 9; Zillich & Riesmeyer, 2021, p. 2).

Moreover, the parasocial relationship is also strengthened by the informal choice of language, addressing followers directly by asking questions or using words such as “we” or “us”. The words

“we” or “us” and hashtags including terms such as family also create a sense of community, which is an essential aspect of a parasocial relationship (Hoffner & Bond, 2022, p. 1). Extensive captions sharing details about their mental health journey are common in the data and can change the impression of the social media influencer as another Instagram celebrity to a friend because the follower gets the impression of getting to know the private person behind the social media influencer (Lind & Wickström, 2023, p. 3).

5.2 Limitations and implications for further research

Within this master thesis, limitations and suggestions for future research emerged. The book “Regarding the pain of others” with the concepts of beautifying and uglifying images by S. Sontag (2003, p. 81) provided a framework to understand how people's suffering is portrayed and what response in the viewer is evoked based on it, nonetheless, the focus is on war photography and social media is not addressed. Therefore, analysing further the visual representation of mental health struggles specifically on Instagram in regard to practices to either trivialise or aggravate the severity is recommended for future research. Moreover, within this master thesis, the content of the social media influencers is studied, but the reaction of the followers is not included. For further research it is of interest to investigate the evoked emotions in the viewer to social media posts displaying mental health disorders, also in connection to whether beautified vs. uglified images cause different reactions. The importance of subsequent research is underlined by the insights shared by J. M. Sontag (2018, pp. 13-15), since the possibility of triggering problematic behaviour by sharing explicit images of people suffering is evident. Concludingly, comprehending the perspective of the followers of the social media influencers sharing their personal experiences with mental health disorders is important for creating guidelines on social media platforms to avoid causing harmful behaviour.

Videos are not considered in this research, however, present a popular form of content on Instagram. The representation of mental health disorders in reels on Instagram and other video-based platforms like TikTok illustrates an opportunity for further research. Interactions between the social media influencer and the followers increase the parasocial relationship between them (Hoffner & Bond, 2022, p. 1), however, the comment section under the posts is not studied in this research and would provide insights about the engagement. As parasocial relationships are one reason why social media influencers can impact the perception of their followers about mental health (Lind & Wickström, 2023, p. 3), it is suggested to investigate the communication between the social media influencers and the followers about mental health related topics.

Another aspect revealed in the study, which presents a topic for further research, is the question of how bodies are portrayed in the images and whether problematic behaviour can be triggered. How especially young people discern their bodies and life is influenced by the ideals depicted on the accounts of social media influencers (Lind & Wickström, 2023, p. 2). In the analysed feed of SMI2, cooking content with weight loss related hashtags and close-up shots of a body in a

bikini are apparent. As pictures create meaning in relation to each other (Müller, 2020, pp. 16-17), the assumption can be made that the bikini picture is interpreted as the weight loss goal. Further analysis of how body ideals are communicated on Instagram, with a focus on accounts discussing mental health, is recommended, since the targeted followers, people who can relate to the mental health issues or even are affected themselves, represent a possibly sensitive audience.

Finally, on account of the scope of this master thesis, one type of picture, namely the illustration of quotes or phrases, is not included in the study. This decision was made based on the argument that images are perceived as more authentic (Lee et al., 2020, p. 3), credible (Subramanian & Santo, 2021, p. 59) and are more impactful to reduce stigma in contrast to illustrations (J. M. Sontag, 2018, p. 1; Subramanian & Santo, 2021, p. 59).

5.3 Societal implications

Stigmas and stereotypes can have severe negative effects on people with mental health issues from not seeking help to feeling isolated (Choudhry et al., 2016, p. 2814). Visual content shared on social media platforms presents an impactful approach to reducing stigmatization of affected people (J. M. Sontag, 2018, p. 1; Subramanian & Santo, 2021, p. 59). Distributing content that contradicts societal stereotypical perceptions (Gonzalez-Polledo & Tarr, 2018, p. 160) and social media influencers addressing mental health due to the parasocial relationship with their community (Franssen, 2020, p. 103; Lind & Wickström, 2023, p. 2) are influential approaches to reduce stigma. This illustrates the societal relevance behind this master thesis, which contributes to understanding how social media influencers portray mental health disorders, critically discusses the posting behaviour with academic literature and provides new theoretical insights. The retrieved societal implications include input for guidelines on Instagram and guidance for non-stigmatizing portrayal.

Input for guidelines on Instagram. The findings revealed that sensitive and possibly triggering topics are addressed mainly in the captions, not the images. Guidelines on allowed and prohibited content should focus on the textual element, as within this master thesis the captions are detected to be the primarily channel to communicate about personal stories/information about mental health disorders. Additionally, the analysed social media influencers include advice on how to deal with mental health issues (e.g.: recommended breathing exercises) and present themselves as experts. Hence, in connection with the article by Triplett et al. (2022, p. 130), which discusses the problematic aspect of mental health professionals on social media not highlighting that their content cannot replace professional help (e.g.: therapy), it is suggested for social media platforms to establish guidelines that social media influencers must mention the limitations of their content. For instance, a disclaimer stating that the shared posts do not substitute professional help.

Guidance for non-stigmatizing portrayal. The study of the three social media influencers brought forward that the shared content contradicts stereotypes, therefore, the insights of the described practices offer an exemplary approach for other individuals or organisations who want to address

mental health on Instagram without reinforcing stigma. Particularly the element of portraying the affected person “behind” and not limited to the mental health disorder presents an essential practice to avoid reinforcing stereotypes. The image clusters “Beautifying mental health disorders? Portrayal of a life beyond the illness” and “Mindful self-care advocates: challenging stereotypes through self-presentation” outline how the SMI’s applied it on their accounts.

Lastly, this master thesis creates awareness about the topic and hopefully, it inspires other researchers to contribute to comprehending the status quo, how content on social media platforms is presenting mental health disorders now, and more importantly, *how it should be*.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Declaration Page: Use of Generative AI Tools in Thesis

Student Information

Name: Alisa Marina Längle

Student ID: 658350

Course Name: Master Thesis CM5000

Supervisor Name: Dr. Charlotte Bruns

Date: 26/06/2024

Acknowledgment of Generative AI Tools

I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works autonomously.

I declare that I have used generative AI tools, specifically ChatGPT and Grammarly (not the premium version), in the process of assisting with specific aspects of thesis work.

Extent of AI Usage

I confirm that while I utilized generative AI tools to aid in content creation, the majority of the intellectual effort, creative input, and decision-making involved in completing the thesis were undertaken by me. I have enclosed the prompts/logging of the GenAI tool use in this appendix.

Ethical and Academic Integrity

I understand the ethical implications and academic integrity concerns related to the use of AI tools in coursework. I assure that the AI-generated content was used responsibly, and any content derived from these tools has been appropriately cited and attributed according to the guidelines provided by the instructor and the course. I have taken necessary steps to distinguish between my original work and the AI-generated contributions.

Any direct quotations, paraphrased content, or other forms of AI-generated material have been properly referenced in accordance with academic conventions.

By signing this declaration, I affirm that this declaration is accurate and truthful.

I take full responsibility for the integrity of my assignment and am prepared to discuss and explain the role of generative AI tools in my creative process if required by the instructor or the Examination Board. I further affirm that I have used generative AI tools in accordance with ethical standards and academic integrity expectations

Used AI Prompts:

- Another word for...
- Another way of saying... [pasting my own phrases; not parts of articles; **note**: never copied content of ChatGPT – idea generation]
- Check the APA7 referencing... [pasting specific references, not my whole thesis]



Signature: Alisa Marina Längle

Date of Signature: 26/06/2024

Appendix B: Image clusters

Cluster: Beautifying mental health disorders? Portrayal of a life beyond the illness

Subcategory: Visually illustrating a joyful life



Figure B1 Image cluster.

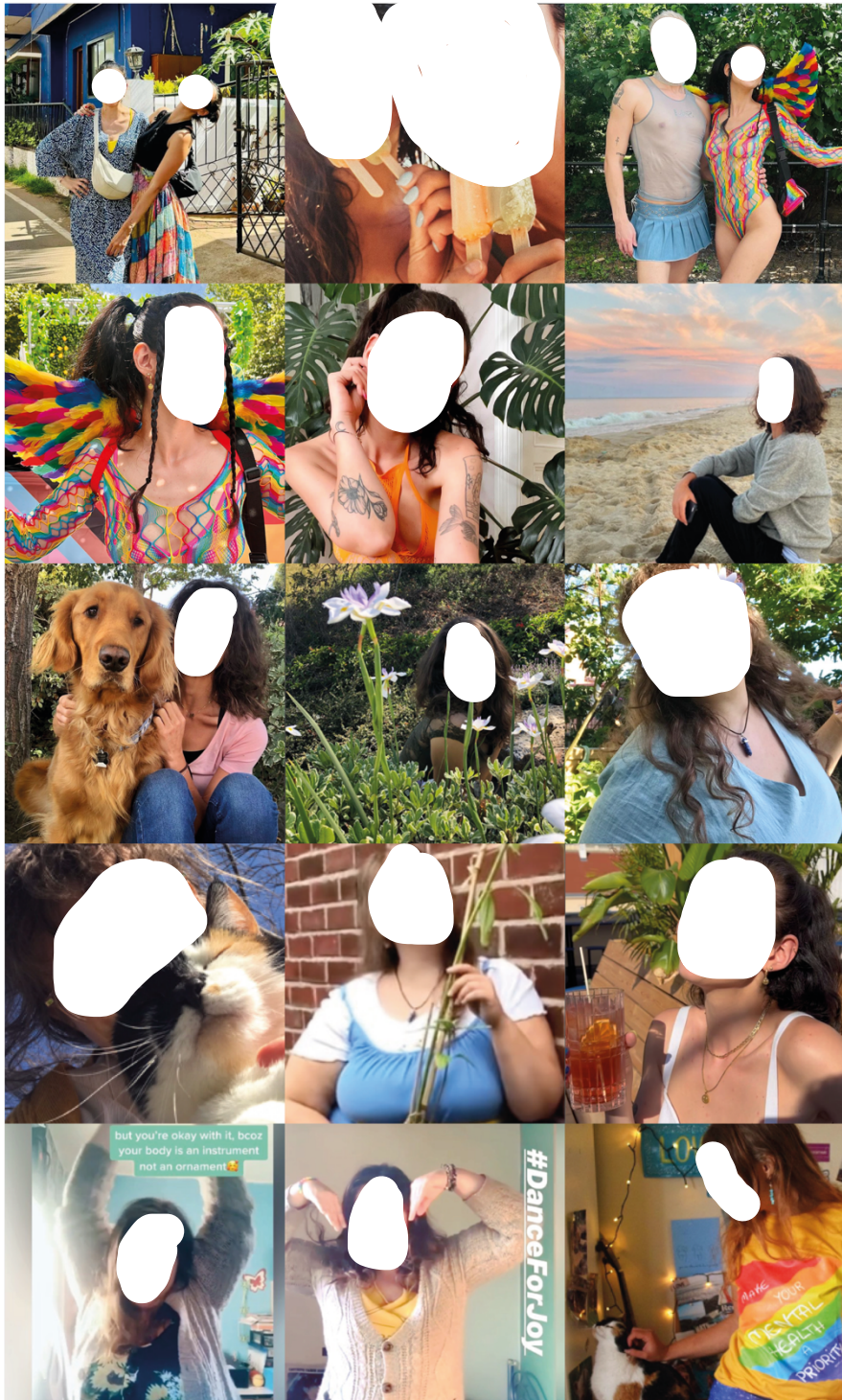


Figure B2 Image cluster.



Figure B3 Image cluster.

Cluster: Beautifying mental health disorders? Portrayal of a life beyond the illness

Subcategory: Portraying consistency and routines



Figure B4 Image cluster.

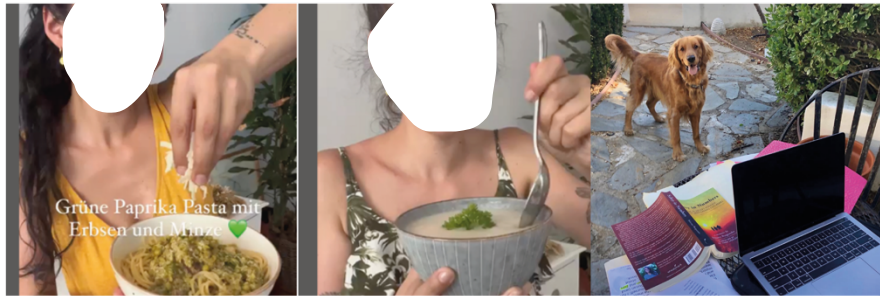


Figure B5 Image cluster.

Cluster: Mindful self-care advocates: challenging stereotypes through self-presentation
Subcategory: Nature as symbol



Figure B6 Image cluster.



Figure B7 Image cluster.



Figure B8 Image cluster.

Cluster: Mindful self-care advocates: challenging stereotypes through self-presentation

Subcategory: Depiction as self-care experts



Figure B9 Image cluster.

Cluster: Visual construction of vulnerability
Subcategory: Personification of vulnerability

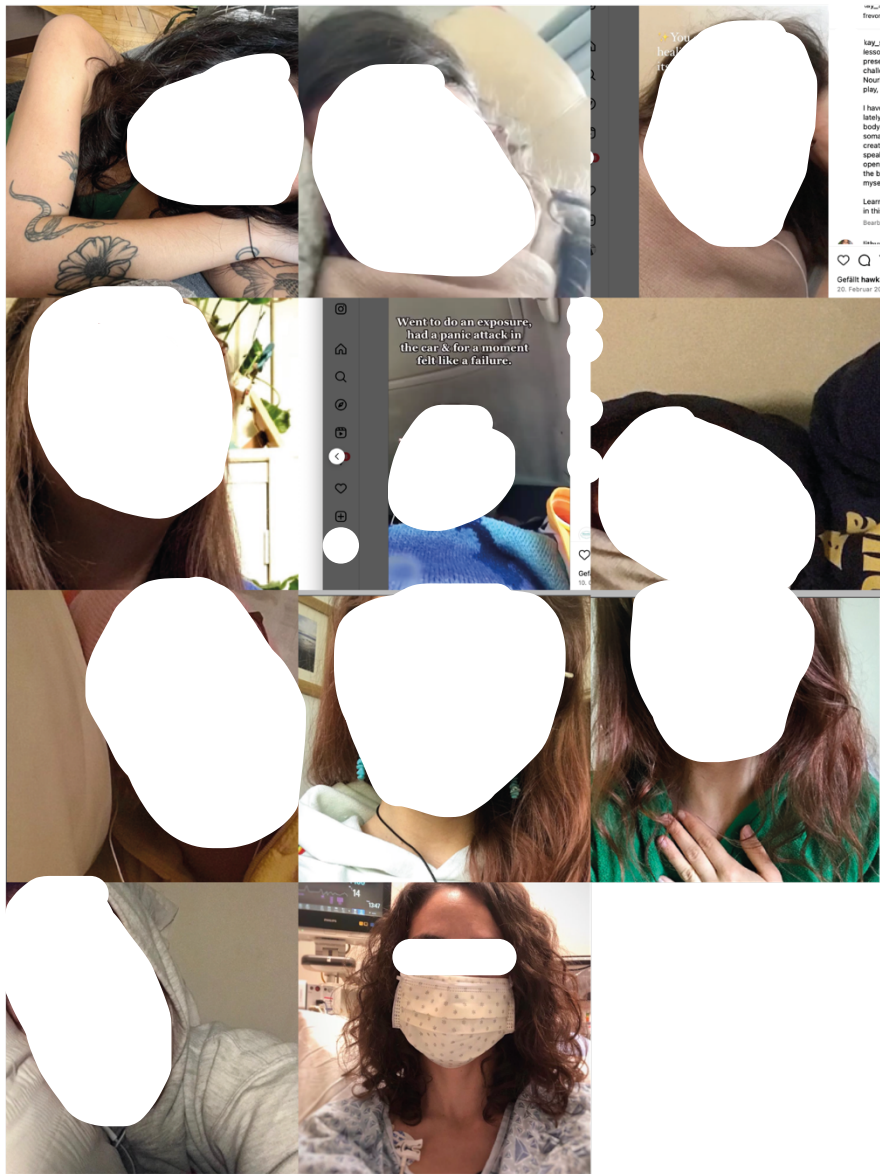


Figure B10 Image cluster.

Cluster: Visual construction of vulnerability

Subcategory: Revealing physical effects of mental health disorders

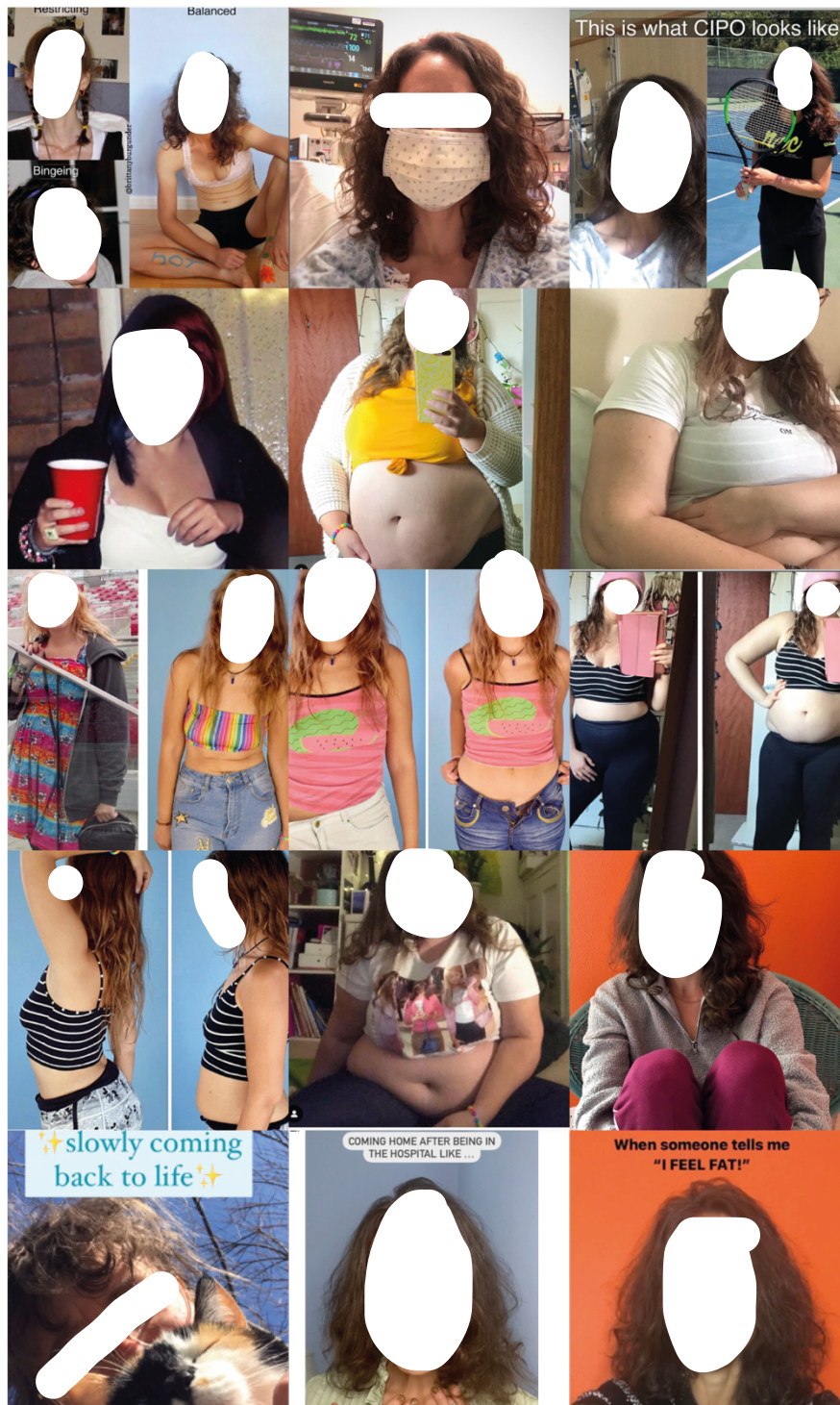


Figure B11 Image cluster.



Figure B12 Image cluster.

Appendix C: Theme book

Theme	Description	Codes	Examples
Linguistic structure	This theme reveals what choice of language, and stylistic choices (emojis) are present. In brief it can be summarized as informal, intimate, like addressing a friend/a community.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Heart emoji - Using the word “us” - Signature with name - Direct question to the viewer - Hashtags that include references to mental health disorders or key words like “self-care” - Motivational words - Poems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What’s been the most beneficial thing for your mental health so far this year? 😊✨ - 💜 - #anxietyrecovery, #panicdisorder, #seasonal depression
Handling daily life	Captions that fit the content of the visual cluster “Consistency and routines”, as they describe their work life, routines they have implemented in their daily life, educational progress/achievements, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Educational success - Work / project description - Hobbies description 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ich freue mich, verkünden zu können, dass ich meine Abschlussprüfung erfolgreich bestanden habe! 🎉📚 Aber wisst ihr was? Die wilde Fahrt ist noch nicht vorbei! Nächster Halt: Fachspezifikum! Haltet euch fest, Leute, es wird ein aufregendes Abenteuer! 🚀🔥

Denkt daran, Träume haben kein Verfallsdatum. Bleibt dran, strebt nach vorne und gebt niemals auf, wofür eure Seele brennt! 🔥🌟

Enjoying life	Captions that fit the visuals of “Visually illustrating a joyful life” – mostly describing the experience, adding information or an inspirational quote.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Travel experience description (places they went, encounters they made...) - Going out with friends (who they were with and “how much fun they had”) - The happy moments (describing how for instance “dancing” gave them positive energy) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tag 2 in Delhi. Die Stadt ist laut, wild und unfassbar spannend. Wir waren heute im Humayun's Tomb, wo wir ein wenig Ruhe vom hektischen Straßenlärm bekommen haben und dann essen und Shops schauen in Hauz Khas Village. Morgen geht es mit dem Zug in Richtung Taj Mahal.
Motivational captions	Captions providing a positive outlook for seeking help, striving to feel better and working on yourself are included in this theme.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What you can experience if you feel better (e.g.: travel) - Now I am happy (stating how much happier they are since they have overcome certain aspects of their mental health disorder) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Celebrating being another year older, wiser and cuter 🥳🥳 Not only am I & Millie celebrating another lap around the sun, but I also realised this is my fourth year of being SOBER!!! my old

- I am proud (Expressing being proud of those trying to get better/seeking help)

way or dealing with anything was to drink and then drink some more. If someone told me I would be spending my 20s being sober I would've probably laughed in their face and then got more drunk. Now, as another sober year passes, I'm even more certain that I want to remain sober. The amount of healing that's allowed me to do, especially in the last year it's mind blowing! Feeling a lot and not numbing it can be both incredibly overwhelming and beautiful at the same time. But I wouldn't have it any other way. Here's to celebrating the ups and down of life and recovery. And a reminder to everyone that that's worth

celebrating even when it's not your birthday. 😊 I'm immensely grateful for this platform, the opportunities that I have thanks to it and to every single one of you, for being a part of my journey and allowing me to be a part of yours. 🙏 Thank you for your continuous support, it has literally been life changing. Thank you for sharing your stories with me. Thank you for helping me to never feel alone in the struggles. THANK YOU!

💛💜💛💜💜

Negative effects of mental health issues on productivity/work	Captions describing how their mental health issues made it harder for them to complete tasks/be productive are included in this theme.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Negative effects (how mental health issues negatively affected work/productivity.) - Feeling sad (describing their “low” days) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 📸 PHOTO DUMP! "Hold on tight" is the best catchphrase to describe how the year 2021 unfolded for me. Many of the things I had intended
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to do didn't go as planned,
and I was forced to live with
constant instability. Good
intentions, good thoughts,
good choices and good
actions do not always
guarantee a good outcome.
I experienced some
unexpected setbacks with my
health, and I had to take a
step back from participating
in many activities and
projects. Despite the difficult
curveballs life threw at me, it
was also tremendously
giving. As I reflect on this
year, my mind zeros in on
times filled with laughter,
joy, family, new experiences,
gratitude and a wealth of
personal growth. Living in
the moment and staying
present is not easy, but it

allows you to fully absorb and interact with your surroundings. This year illuminated what matters most to me, and it reinforced my priorities and values - and for that I feel fortunate.

Information about how to get better

Captions providing information about therapy, routines that helped them to feel better, tips and tricks are included in this theme.

- Importance of a routine (e.g.: daily mental health walks)
- Experience with therapy
- Spending time with friends, family and pets to feel better
- Hobbies (e.g.: gardening)
- Helpful therapies/techniques

- Gardening has been so beneficial for my mental health this year. Through hopelessness, stagnancy, grief and fear at the beginning of the year. To igniting more hope, appreciation and groundedness as I watched the first seeds sprout. It's been bringing me so much joy tending to these plants and seeing them grow 🥰🙏🌻 What's been the most beneficial thing for your

mental health so far this year? 😊✨

Their journey

Captions sharing their personal journey, describing the moments that were hard for them, and expressing their thoughts are discussed within this theme.

- Doubtful thoughts (e.g.: moments they doubted whether they could get better)
- Describing their lowest moments
- Progress in getting better
- Hospitalization, therapy
- Importance of getting help/severity of mental health disorders

- Sometimes, this is hard for me to remember. Sometimes, I don't want to be a work in progress anymore. I want to skip past the progress and just be Buddha instead. Sometimes, I (almost) get embarrassed by how much I talk about my mental health in front of thousands of people. Sometimes, I want to pretend that there are other more important things to talk about (climate change sure is important, but your mental health still needs to come first!). Sometimes, I forget how hard it can be to be healing from years of traumas. Sometimes, I feel so grateful and happy it

Paid ads

Captions mentioning that it is a paid advertisement.

- Paid ad

- Winter, die Zeit der gemütlichen Abende und... leider auch trockenen Hände! Dank @shecosmetics_polska bleibt meine Haut perfekt gepflegt - die idealen Begleiter, die selbst durch die kältesten Tage Feuchtigkeit spenden. ' Genieße die Winterfreuden ohne Sorgen um trockene Hände!
#WinterSkinSavior
#SheCosmeticsMagic
#shecosmetics #shehand
#shefoot #homespa
#WinterSkinCare
#HydrationHero
#GlowingSkin
#MoistureBoost #SkinSavior
#WinterBeautyRoutine
#LoveYourSkin
#HydratedHands
#SkinCareEssentials

Self-care practices	This type of caption provides information about self-care practices and tips and tricks. The focus is on well-being.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mental health walk - Breathing exercises - Self-reflection technique (journaling) - Workout routines (mostly yoga) - Healthy cooking - Connection to physical health 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Balanciere auf deinen Füßen und finde Ruhe in Malasana. 🧘🏻 Diese tiefe Hocke fördert die Flexibilität, stärkt deine Beine und öffnet dein Herz. Spüre die Erdung und innere Stärke in dieser kraftvollen Pose. ✨ #Yoga #Flexibilität #Schmerzlinderung #Gesundheit #Fitness #YogaLiebe #Wirbelsäule #Wellness #Selbstfürsorge #Stärke #Beweglichkeit #GesundesLeben #YogaRoutine #PositiveVeränderung #Lebensfreude #Entspannung #Beweglichkeit #Gelenkigkeit #Mobilitätstraining #Flexibilität #Bewegungsfreiheit #Dehnen
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#Beweglichkeitsübungen
#MobilityWorkout
#Mobilitätsübungen #Yoga
#Yogapraxis #skoliose

Table C1 Theme book.