

The Conceptualisation of Orthorexia Nervosa on Instagram



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Summary

The last years a healthy diet has been put higher on the health agenda worldwide in response to the increasing burden of non-communicable diseases. However, in some cases this can lead to an unhealthy restrictive intake of only foods one considers healthy. Orthorexia Nervosa (ON) is a disordered eating pattern that is characterised by an obsession with healthy eating, leading to physical, psychological and social impairments. Increasing interconnectedness through social media has been found to be a potential contributor to the development of ON. Considering this link and the fact that more than 148,000 posts with #orthorexia have been shared on Instagram, it is important to know what is posted about ON on Instagram. A content analysis of #orthorexia posts was done before, but on a relatively small scale. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the nature of the conversation around ON on Instagram, by answering the research question: how is Orthorexia Nervosa conceptualised on Instagram?

A mixed method study, combining a concurrent triangulation and sequential explanatory design, was used to answer the research question at hand. A total of 3027 Instagram pictures with #orthorexia was analysed. Additionally, a questionnaire about Instagram use regarding ON was filled out by 248 participants, of which 185 met the inclusion criteria. These two quantitative data sources were statistically analysed using SPSS 23 and StataIC 15 and triangulated afterwards. Finally, nine interviews were conducted and analysed using ATLAS.ti, to investigate in more detail what is said about ON on Instagram and what the motivations for posting are.

People who self-identify as having (had) ON are more likely to post about ON on Instagram than people who do not self-identify ($p < 0.001$). ON is conceptualised as an undesirable and impairing obsession with healthy eating by people who post about ON on Instagram ($n=121$). This notion of ON is encoded in Instagram posts, using four main types of pictures: food, people, text and other. Savoury and unprocessed food is most highly represented within the food category and pictures of people were mostly pictures of the person posting the picture. Significant differences were found in pictures posted by people who self-identified versus people who did not ($p < 0.05$). These pictures are combined with informative and personal captions to raise awareness for ON, as well as to provide support for people who believe to be suffering from ON. Content about ON is also posted to help oneself through an accountability mechanism. In addition to the goal that people who post about ON on Instagram pursue, the interactive community around ON on Instagram is also a driving force in forming the intention to post about ON. Belonging to this community, consisting of like-minded people supporting each other, is found to stimulate posting about ON.

The conceptualisation of ON by people who post about it on Instagram greatly overlaps with definitions provided by scholars. The negative consequences, essential in distinguishing between healthy eating and ON, are often discussed in Instagram posts to educate the public, as well as to give hope that it can get better. The categories of pictures found were in line with previous research, however the frequencies differed which could be explained by the different methodologies used. There seems to be a duality of Instagram use, because earlier studies have reported an association between Instagram use and ON symptoms, whereas this study found only supportive and encouraging content around ON. It is also important to note that although the people who post about ON attempt to share positive messages, these might be received differently by the people who see it. In order to draw conclusions about the possible effects of Instagram posts about ON it is thus essential to know how these are interpreted by the people viewing the content.

Since the conversation around ON is supportive in nature and posting about personal experiences during recovery also helps the person who posts it, it could be beneficial to involve

Instagram use in the treatment of ON for certain people. However, more research is needed on a larger scale and involving all people who post about ON; people who self-identify and people who do not self-identify.

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