

'PARIS THIN': THE MENTAL HEALTH OF MODELS

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SUMMARY

Surprising it may seem, the mental health issues remains largely overlooked in the highly competitive and unforgiving industry of modelling and fashion. A substantial number of models experience mental health issues due to the nature of their occupation, however, most avoid speaking out due to fear of stigma and losing out on future work. Moreover, problematic eating behaviours in attempts to improve body image can have profoundly adverse effects on mental and physical health, even leading to death in extreme cases, yet these behaviours are being reinforced and rewarded with success and career progression. Indeed, the term 'Paris Thin' was used in relation to the deaths of models from starvation who were in pursuit of 'the perfect body' whilst working in France, the epicentre of the fashion world. Although improvements have been made over the past decade, conversations surrounding common mental disorders such as depression and anxiety remain minimal at best and discussions about other serious mental illnesses such as schizophrenia and bipolar affective disorder are virtually absent. Campaigns that amplify the voices of models living with a mental health condition must therefore be supported to reduce mental health related stigma in the industry and encourage those who are suffering and struggling to seek professional help. Research in this area is urgently needed to yield new insights that will help to improve the mental health of models.

Key words: models - mental health - stigma - eating disorders

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INTRODUCTION

The term 'mental health' is seldom acknowledged within the fast-paced and glamorous industry of modelling. It is as though, there is an unwritten rule that models are to perform their roles and should not engage in discourse on their thoughts, feelings, and general mental well-being. The quote 'be seen and not heard' is often thrown around in jest yet spoken with an undeniable undertone of truth. Unfortunately, author SN's whilst working as professional editorial model, observed a plethora of mental health issues that had gone unnoticed, disguised and even occasionally glorified when in relation to concerning eating behaviours.

Surprisingly, for as little as mental health matters are discussed, mention of a model's mental well-being is usually followed by a chorus of strongly held prejudicial views. A model may be deemed to be acting 'like a diva', generally proving to be difficult and challenging to work with if caught discussing how the industry may have adversely affected their well-being. This usually stems from the stigma that surrounds the mental health of models which is unfortunately displayed by the public, along with other professionals within the fashion industry. Through personal experience, SN has witnessed models failing to be booked for jobs due to developing depression, anxiety and low self-esteem as a direct result of being subjected to a torrent of criticisms

about their appearances. Conversely, SN has witnessed designers praising models for their problematic eating behaviours in their quest to attain the 'ultimate body'. SN believes this to be the first time she discovered actual glorification of behaviours that reflect poor mental and physical health.

EATING BEHAVIOURS IN THE FASHION AND MODELLING INDUSTRY

Hitherto, limited research that investigates the mental health of models within the fashion industry has been conducted. However, an article by Record and Austin published five years ago shines a disconcerting light on the life-threatening starvation experienced by models on runways throughout the world (Record & Austin 2016). In their article, Record and Austin focus on France 'the fashion epicentre of the world' and their recent ban on models that have a Body Mass Index (BMI) of under 18. This follows reports of models experiencing death by starvation whilst working on runways in Paris. The trend was even termed 'Paris Thin' and drove the drastic change to legislation in attempt to end the undeniably hazardous body image culture prevalent in the modelling world. The current international model's BMI is typically below the World Health Organisation's threshold for medically dangerous thinness for adults and many runway models have starved to death (Record &

Austin 2016). Nonetheless, the 'Paris Thin' ideal continues to be a prominent force in fashion, specifically amongst supermodels and top earners.

The relentless drive, energy and time spent towards managing weight to gain aesthetically driven validation and success could contribute towards development of mental health disorders such as depression, anxiety, disordered eating along with low self-esteem. It is estimated that up to 40% of models engage in disordered eating behaviours, with experts reporting that the actual percentage is likely far higher due to under-reporting by the models themselves (Nordqvist 2008). Eating disorders, specifically anorexia nervosa, have the highest rates of mortality out of all psychiatric diseases (Edakubo & Fushimi 2020), with the prevalence increasing significantly due to socio-cultural traditions that concern the adoration of fashion models and a thin body type (Pavlova et al. 2010). It is likely that the same phenomena can be observed for models, as constant pressures to remain thin can lead to the development of eating disorders. Additionally, along with impacting model's mental well-being, this ideal perpetuates unrealistic and in some cases destructive expectations of what both men and women should look like to achieve the desired or 'perfect body'.

The challenge to achieve the 'perfect body' may be a contributory factor to the general poor mental health exhibited within the fashion industry, however, limited research exists to support this notion. A vast body of research investigates eating disorders in various population samples, specifically in young females in Western countries (van Eeden et al. 2021). In order to tackle the problem, research is required to investigate the relationships between this ideal and the mental health of models. This may provide an insight into the reasoning behind the high rates of depression and anxiety as described by many models today.

THE STIGMA ATTACHED TO MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS IN MODELS

Whilst addressing the current stigma that surrounds models and mental health, it is important to note that there are two different dimensions. First, within the industry, including the negative perceptions of models communicating to others with regard to their own mental well-being. It is currently frowned upon for models to speak out and voice their concerns about their mental health, whether it is a direct result of being in the industry or not. Second, the public's perceptions of how a model should appear and behave. This is undoubtedly proliferated by the media and social media by pushing a certain 'Paris Thin' aesthetic through algorithmic targeting which promotes unhealthy beauty standards universally.

When considering within-industry stigma, it is crucial to acknowledge that models in the fashion industry

operate in a fiercely competitive arena. There is generally a lot to lose and the feeling of being easily replaceable is unmistakable. Furthermore, a collective belief that seeking help is a sign of weakness as it is perceived to be tantamount to confessing that one cannot cope and that one is incapable of performing one's job (Fashion 2016). The perception that a model's mental health is a weakness is one of the main contributors to the current stigma within the industry.

As with inside of the industry, outside of the industry the public's perception generally consists of normalising that models live with eating disorders such as binge eating disorder, bulimia and anorexia nervosa. Body dysmorphia is increasingly prevalent amongst models which is normalised by both the public and the fashion world. Accepting this type of behaviour as normal can be detrimental in a bi-directional sense. On the one hand, this feeds into the notion that models should be behaving this way and therefore embracing mental disorders as an asset that leads to success. On the other hand, creating an unrealistic expectation of beauty which may negatively impact the public's own general well-being. The interplay between the industry's own and public's stigma of model's mental health equates to a universally damaging culture.

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS AND CHALLENGING STIGMA

The fashion and modelling industry is hugely powerful and remains a driving force in worldwide commerce. Therefore, it is paramount that the industry is a safe environment for its employees and consumers alike. Although the modelling industry does seem to be improving in acknowledging the existence of mental health, investigating these factors further not only fills a gap in current literature, but provides models with recognition and confidence to make their voices heard in an industry that can struggle to listen. Placing emphasis on the fact that models are human beings and have human rights like everyone else can engender solidarity. If models are given their rights to discuss their mental health without judgement, along with the public becoming increasingly aware that eating disorders and poor mental well-being should not be the norm, then stigma can be eradicated. The lack of understanding about mental health in the modelling industry is typically what fuels prejudice and stigma. The first steps on the route to changing perceptions and reducing stigma is raising awareness and mental health advocacy from models and non-models alike.

Conducting research to gain a comprehensive understanding of what factors increase the risk of poor mental health and related disorders in models (and what factors confer protection against poor mental health in models) is also paramount. Research on reducing mental health related stigma in models is also urgently needed.

A systematic review and meta-analysis on challenging the public stigma of mental illness revealed that social contact with someone who lives with a mental health condition (or 'Experts by Experience') is the most effective way of reducing stigma in adults (Corrigan et al. 2012). In other words, Experts by Experience have the power to reduce mental health related stigma and should operate at the vanguard of anti-stigma campaigns. It is therefore important that the voices of people with mental health conditions, including models, are amplified. However, it can be difficult to speak up and share traumatic experiences that often lead to the development of mental illness. Therefore, the Honest, Open and Proud (HOP) manual was produced to provide guidance on answering the following question: 'Is sharing with others that living with a mental health condition right for me?' The HOP manual has been adapted for mental healthcare professionals living with a mental health condition. We hypothesise that an adaptation of this manual for models with a mental health condition would also be beneficial.

Robust research has been conducted to develop effective interventions to reduce mental-health-related stigma and discrimination in other groups. Albeit a short-term aid, speaking to others who have recovered from mental illness and raising awareness proves to facilitate the breaking down of prejudice and bias. More research is necessary to draw conclusion about long term benefits, nonetheless, readily opening up discussions about mental health is a crucial step in allowing companies to provide targeted support and allowing diagnoses to be made if necessary (Thornicroft et al. 2016).

SUPERMODELS SPEAKING OUT

With the median age of models being 23, it is quite easy to see how the need for validation, specifically pointed at the superficial, may be a factor contributing to a deterioration of mental health in this population. Superficial validation, being treated unfairly and objectification are all issues that must be addressed to tackle mental health problems in models. Along with the proliferation of social media, models have increasingly been attempting to raise awareness of the effect the modelling industry can have on their mental health in attempt to improve current public perceptions. Last year, international supermodel Ajak Deng took to Instagram to disclose her negative experiences in the modelling industry (Jennings 2019). In a post, she explained that generally, the majority of people do believe that it is easy to be a model and therefore this should outweigh any negatives that are associated with the job. In a statement that summarises SN's experiences, Deng explains that "success often comes at a great cost when models adapt to unhealthy coping mechanisms to achieve superstardom".

Additionally, supermodel Bella Hadid also disclosed her mental health struggles whilst working in the modelling industry. In a post on social media, she explained how she has had many breakdowns and burn outs and how she lived with anxiety as a teenage girl (Sky News 2021). Although the desire to share private struggles may be daunting, the power of sharing can aid in debunking myths i.e., having a mental health condition would prevent any chance of becoming a successful model. Bella Hadid received an outpouring of support from her fans when speaking out about her own struggles, therefore highlighting the positivity that can arise from doing so. Models are increasingly starting to acknowledge that raising awareness about their challenges can help to change perceptions, tackle stigma and combat self-destructive behaviours that facilitate poor mental health. Research into this area would support a positive change in public perceptions and also provide an opportunity for models to reflect upon the negative aspects of their profession and request support if required.

CONCLUSION

As an editorial model, SN has witnessed at first-hand how prominent poor mental health in the modelling and fashion industry is. Unfortunately, a culture of not talking about mental health is surprisingly common. Through personal experience, SN has observed and felt the effects of stigma, specifically on how models should behave. The minority of models that do speak up about mental health are usually promptly labelled to be 'difficult' to work with and consequentially fail to gain work. The glorification of eating disorders is also noticeable, with support of starvation in order to reach success.

Both of these issues contribute to public and industry perceptions on how a model should conduct themselves. This has therefore compelled models to speak out in hopes to raise awareness of the damaging nature of the industry. Raising awareness thus far has prompted one of the fashion capitals to change legislation to combat dilemmas such as the 'Paris Thin' ideal (Record & Austin 2016). The strive for the 'perfect body' may be one of the contributors for poor mental health of models, however, research is yet to discover this kind of relationship. Studies that examine the relationship between model's mental health and the factors that may affect it is an important step to reduce stigma in the industry.

The stigma that currently exists affects both models and public alike. As unrealistic appearances are normalised, the public are subject to unattainable and often deadly beauty standards that may contribute towards mental health issues. It is essential to change the general ignorance of disorders such as body dysmorphia, binge eating disorder, bulimia, and anorexia nervosa. Emphasis in current research is placed upon young females in Western countries (van Eeden et al. 2021) which highlights the need to investigate these relationships in diverse settings such as the modelling industry.

Another route to change is by adopting the serious nature of the matter as France has with banning hiring models who have a BMI of under 18. However, this may be deemed as challenging as some argue the accuracy of the BMI (Record & Austin 2016). Nonetheless, a step in the right direction would be to emphasise the importance of being healthy over adopting starvation techniques to achieve and maintain an unhealthy body type.

The current lack of insight and understanding of what a model's lifestyle may consist of is a strong contributor to stigma and the absence of change. Raising awareness by amplifying the voices of models living with mental health problems, advocacy and by conducting research will provide confidence and potentially new platforms for models to voice their concerns. This allows support networks and related mental health first aid organizations to offer the necessary support and improve the overall well-being of models. It is known worldwide that the industry of modelling is cut-throat, fast-paced and competitive, however, this should not lead to increased mental health morbidity and mortality.

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Contribution of individual authors:

Sorcha Newby conceived the idea for the paper, conducted the literature review and wrote the entire manuscript.

Ahmed Hankir contributed to the literature review, co-wrote the paper and carried out further revisions and also provided senior supervision.

Rashid Zaman provided senior supervision and carried out revision of the manuscript.

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