



The SAGE Encyclopedia of Trans Studies

Social Media Influencers

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With the rise of social media platforms since the mid-2000s, the social media influencer has become a central figure in digital media production. While various terms have been used to describe these figures, including content creator, guru (particularly within beauty communities), and microcelebrity, for the purposes of this entry, the term influencer will be used to encompass a diverse range of individuals who have achieved a level of mainstream celebrity based primarily on their social media output (as opposed to working in more traditional media industries, such as film and television). Platforms commonly used by influencers include but are not limited to Instagram, Tumblr, Twitter, and YouTube. This entry focuses on two subsets of social media influencers, each of which exemplifies a different aspect of social media production. Trans beauty influencers are generally more invested in educating the broader public about their experiences, showing that trans people are just like everyone else. Meanwhile, trans activist influencers take advantage of low-cost social media platforms to raise awareness about diversity and social justice issues.

Existing research on social media influencers, focusing primarily on cisgender individuals, has examined the differences between influencers and traditional celebrities. These differences include their usage of social media platforms as their primary source of visibility; their reliance on self-taught, do-it-yourself (DIY) media production; and their more direct engagement with their audiences. Additionally, they are typically compensated through alternative funding models, including corporate sponsorships, ad revenue, and direct donations from audiences through platforms such as Patreon.

While many of these features are also applicable to trans social media influencers, little research has focused specifically on trans influencers' unique circumstances. Emerging research in this area has identified, for example, the ways in which trans video bloggers (vloggers) use their platforms to educate their viewers about their experiences. The following sections focus on two major groups of trans social media influencers—beauty influencers and activist influencers—to discuss how trans influencers use social media and how they appeal to both cis and trans audiences.

Beauty Influencers

The beauty community, which is primarily active on YouTube and Instagram, remains one of the longest standing and most prominent communities of social media influencers. Beauty influencers have had a significant impact on the mainstream cosmetics and fashion industries, including collaborations with cosmetics brands and launching their own successful cosmetics companies. While many high-profile beauty influencers are cis women and queer men, trans women have also become top beauty influencers.

Prominent trans beauty influencers include Gigi Gorgeous, Nikita Dragun, and Julie Vu. These women all began their YouTube channels pretransition, presenting as male but engaging in gender-nonconforming behaviors, such as wearing makeup and feminine clothing, before announcing their intentions to transition relatively early in their respective YouTube careers. Subsequently, many of their videos have focused on documenting their gender transitions, including their experiences with hormone replacement therapy and gender-affirming surgeries. Thus, in addition to producing beauty-related content, such as makeup tutorials, their videos also serve an educational purpose, both informing cis viewers about trans experiences as well as educating trans viewers about what to expect during transition. Notably, many successful trans beauty influencers conform to cis norms of female beauty and have undergone numerous cosmetic procedures, including facial feminization surgery and breast augmentation. It is likely that their popularity can be attributed at least in part to how well they pass as cis women.

While many trans social media influencers are famous for being openly trans and publicly discussing their experiences, others choose to keep their trans identity private. Nikkie de Jager, who began her YouTube channel NikkieTutorials in 2008, did not disclose her trans identity until 2020. By the time she came out, she had already amassed 12 million subscribers, making hers one of the top beauty channels at the time. Thus, de Jager's popularity is not predicated on being trans, but rather on other factors, such as her skill with makeup.

Activist Influencers

Although political activism is certainly no new phenomenon, social media have allowed for new ways for individuals to self-produce and distribute their own activist media at relatively low cost. Unlike trans beauty influencers, who may discuss trans politics but typically do not prioritize political activism in their media productions, another subset of influencers centers politically activist messaging in their social media production. These influencers use imagery, text, video, and other media to challenge normative beliefs about trans identity and social justice.

Some activist influencers primarily produce image and text posts on platforms such as Instagram and Twitter. These influencers include figures such as Alok Vaid-Menon (formerly of the South Asian American artist-activist duo DarkMatter), Chella Man, Aaron Philip, and Vivek Shraya, all of whom are known for their Instagram selfies. Unlike trans beauty influencers, who often conform to gendered beauty norms, these influencers instead challenge these norms and use their selfies to showcase alternative ideas of gender presentation. In addition to producing selfies, these influencers also work as artists, writers, performers, and models, parlaying their social media visibility into other fields of cultural production. Furthermore, as genderqueer people, people of color, and people with disabilities, these influencers address the intersections of transness with race, class, and disability.

Other influencers with more politically oriented goals work primarily on YouTube, such as Natalie Wynn (also known by her channel name ContraPoints) and Kat Blaque. These influencers have gained attention for their long-form videos where they discuss political issues surrounding trans identity, race, gender, and sexuality. Wynn, for example, first became known for her videos arguing against alt-right ideologies before she began her transition; her videos have since shifted focus to address issues such as transphobia and gender dysphoria. Thus, these influencers appeal to more politically minded audiences who are already invested in social justice, rather than those who are simply learning about trans experiences.

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See also [Online Communities](#); [Representations in Popular Culture](#); [Social Media](#); [YouTube](#)

Further Readings

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