

LGBTQ beauty vloggers draw on queer culture to stand out

November 21 2019, by Melanie Lefkowitz

"Yo! What's up? Welcome back to my channel," Patrick Starr says in a deep voice, hair wrapped in his signature turban and face in full, elaborate makeup.

Then he returns to his usual, higher-pitched voice. "I am a man," says Starr, a queer Filipino [beauty](#) vlogger whose YouTube channel has 4.5 million subscribers. "I am a man in makeup. I love wearing makeup so much."

Starr is among the subjects of new Cornell research exploring how a racially diverse group of LGBTQ beauty vloggers navigates seemingly contradictory roles: masculine and feminine; authentic and heavily made up. The vloggers often provide unpaid content to YouTube, but have the potential to enrich themselves; they're vulnerable to harassment, but they also promote the visibility of marginalized people.

At the end of the 2016 video, Starr removes his makeup and unwraps his turban as the song "You Are So Beautiful" plays.

"Queer people have to work harder in some ways to become successful, but at the same time they have resources they can draw on from queer cultural life to stand out and make a name for themselves," said Katherine Sender, professor of communication in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and co-author of "Queer Immaterial Labor in Beauty Videos by LGBTQ-Identified YouTubers," published in October in the *International Journal of Communication*.

With co-author Ellie Homant, her former advisee at the University of Michigan, Sender studied the YouTube channels of six queer YouTube beauty vloggers, four of whom are people of color, and compared them with six heterosexual beauty vloggers. The researchers examined the vloggers' "Get Ready With Me," paid sponsorship, and personal disclosure videos, and considered 600 comments per vlogger.

They pieced together a complex story in which queer vloggers can draw on personal and cultural experiences to seem more authentic—a prized trait among [social media influencers](#), because it makes viewers more likely to trust them and buy the products they recommend.

Coming-out stories, in particular, tend to strike a chord with followers. For example, in a 2015 video Ingrid Nilsen, an Asian and Caucasian female vlogger, says, "There's something that I want you to know: I'm gay [starts to cry]. It feels so good to say that! I'm shaking right now because this moment is here, and it's real." After posting this video, Nilsen gained subscribers and sponsors.

"The coming-out narrative, which has always been part of queer culture, became a strategy that these queer beauty vloggers could use to exemplify a sense of themselves as authentic," Sender said. "Part of it is a genuine commitment to queer visibility, and part of it serves that social media demand to be authentic, credible and relatable."

But it can also be a risky move for LGBTQ vloggers, who receive comments that are often rife with homophobia and transphobia. Vanessa Martinez, a Latina and African American bisexual female vlogger, lost followers and sponsors after her own coming-out video, which was framed by her upbringing in a deeply religious family.

"These people are really putting themselves out there," Sender said, "and part of the emotional labor that they have to do is to absorb, deflect and

respond to these hostile statements."

Sender said she was particularly struck by the queer vloggers' success in what might seem like an unlikely realm.

"Beauty culture has traditionally been extremely gendered, with very normative ideas of femininity and what it means to be an attractive woman, and very racially segmented," she said. "So I was really interested to see how these six vloggers went about constructing identities as legitimate and believable beauty experts to a broad audience."

The vloggers tend to be popular across demographics but in a narrow age bracket, comprising mostly teenagers and young adults. Their incomes range widely—from Jeffree Starr, a white gender-nonbinary and sexually nonidentifying beauty vlogger who in 2018 earned an estimated \$4 million on YouTube and an additional \$14 million in related income, to Nilsen, who earned an estimated \$40,000 on YouTube in 2018.

"Some of them are managing to make a very good living, but it's a hard living," said Sender, noting that both the queer and heterosexual vloggers frequently talk about burnout. "There's an assumption that people who do this kind of work are drawn to fame, and there are judgments about narcissism, but I think some of these people got there accidentally and ambivalently. If you want to stay famous, you have to keep at it. But at the same time, people are watching what you do, and they're going to criticize it."

More information: Queer Immaterial Labor in Beauty Videos by LGBTQ-Identified YouTubers,

ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/10572

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