

Social Media Influencers: Creators, Celebrity, Content, Audiences, Brands

Elizabeth Affuso, *Pitzer College*

Recent years have seen the public meltdowns of several high profile social media influencers with lifestyle-centered brands. In one instance, Australian teen Instagram star Essena O'Neill recaptioned thousands of Instagram images to reveal the labor and payment structures of the photos. She followed the recaptioning with the release of two emotional YouTube videos providing further explanation titled "Why I Am Quitting Social Media" and "Real vs. Fake Instagrammers," which have each been viewed more than 80,000 times. Meanwhile, blogger and Instagram star Jordan Younger transitioned her brand from *The Blonde Vegan* to *The Balanced Blonde* after revealing that her veganism was masking an eating disorder. These two young women had built up successful and influential lifestyle brands through the sale of a highly aestheticized everyday life. The revelation of the labor behind these images ignited conversation in social media circles and mainstream news outlets around authenticity in social media celebrity. This discourse reveals the tension between authenticity and professionalism in social media influencer brands.

The framing of these questions of authenticity demonstrates key differences between social media influencer celebrity and more conventional forms and raises important concerns about labor in social media spaces. Social media influencer brands work because the audience believes that the people they are following are in some way real instead of performed. They function on a continuum that started with Reality TV stars, often maligned as being famous for nothing, reflecting a misunderstanding on the part of the public of the immaterial labor elements of stardom. Influencer brands thrive on the idea that they are real and thus not work, even though followers are likely aware of image filtering and manipulation on Instagram from their own practices. Stars like Essena O'Neill and Jordan Younger present their brand as being authentically real, so it becomes essential that they are authentic, even when the belief requires a leap on the part of the audience. The "realness" of this perfection by contrast with the editing of regular images is in fact what ascends these women into celebrity status in the first place. Influencers show that when stars break from the levels of performativity associated with classic forms of celebrity—self, performance of self, and performance—and move into a zone where self and performance are conflated than there is no space for ideas of performance. Revelations of problems that might be acceptable with conventional celebrities become a betrayal in this context. This feeling of betrayal is exacerbated by the mode of distribution that social media influencers are working in. Images of influencers merge with those of real friends in an Instagram feed thereby creating an impression of intimacy where intimacy does not actually exist. Instagram and its well-defined tropes of girlhood enhance this feeling, with celebrities and followers couching their posts in the same visual language. In the attainable fame environment of social media, the distinction between influencers being authentically "better" than their followers is made even more significant. The audience has to believe that these women have something on them and that they are not, in fact, just one Photoshop and high angle away from looking like them themselves.

The breakdowns of Younger and O'Neill speak to a larger trend in postfeminist culture whereby the exposé of labor does not produce a break from the labor, as it might have in previous

iterations of feminism. The revelation of the fallacy of the images does not produce a release from social media or a change in practice even. Jordan Younger did not quit an Instagram beauty culture that might have been driving her deeper and deeper into disordered eating, but rather rebranded herself in an aspirational way that doesn't look much different from her previous brand, with a focus on wellness complete with an athleisure Kohl's contract suggesting that she is seen has a valuable figure in the current wellness boom. In O'Neill's case, the images themselves were not changed just the captions, so a follower cursorily scrolling through on the Instagram app might never have realized that O'Neill was even making a political break given that she didn't post the original images. This suggests that there is no opting out in postfeminist culture. Leaving social media or ignoring beauty culture are not presented as viable options, instead influencers and their followers must find new modes of presentation that seem authentic whether real or not. The tensions described here demand that media scholars continue to define new theories of celebrity and performance in the microcelebrity-focused world that we live in to better understand how stars and spectators function in digital culture.