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THE CO-CREATION OF TRANS MICRO-CELEBRITY: A CASE STUDY OF NIKKIE DE JAGER

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Introduction

In January 2020, beauty vlogger Nikkie de Jager (better known by her username NikkieTutorials) made headlines when she publicly came out as a trans woman on her YouTube channel, after more than a decade as a successful beauty creator who was assumed to be a cisgender, heterosexual woman. While the reception for de Jager's disclosure was mostly positive, the impetus for her public coming-out was frightening: she revealed in her initial coming-out video that she was blackmailed by an anonymous source who threatened to expose her "lies" by leaking her assigned sex at birth, with the aim of ending her career.

However, de Jager's disclosure only propelled her to greater success. I argue that de Jager leveraged her coming-out to bolster her performance of microcelebrity, reaffirming and deepening her intimacy with her audience. This dialogic intimacy is central to the performance of microcelebrity. While previous studies have theorized the strategies that creators use to perform microcelebrity, little attention has been paid to the role of the audience in microcelebrity. I argue that microcelebrity is a strategy of performance that is co-constructed with the audience, making it distinct from parasocial relationships. This study explores the intersection of performing trans and queer identities online, the strategy of microcelebrity, and the role of the audience in microcelebrity performance.

Literature review

The digital turn at the end of the twentieth century brought about new methods of self-representation online, notably microcelebrity, "a style of online performance that involves people 'amping up' their popularity" (Senft, 2008, p. 25). While legacy celebrity texts have always existed in dialogue with the audience (Dyer, 1999; Gamson, 1995; Marshall, 1997/2014), microcelebrity makes this dialogue literal. Fans are able to interact directly with content creators in the comments sections; through livestreams on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitch; and through the 24/7 access that social media provides. This direct engagement is a necessity for achieving

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microcelebrity, which relies on “strategies of connectedness, accessibility, and intimacy” (Jerslev, 2016, p. 5246).

LGBTQ+¹ creators have a unique cultural resource available for building intimacy with their audiences: the coming-out narrative. Many LGBTQ+ people have leveraged their marginalized identity as part of microcelebrity (see, for example, Duguay, 2019; Homant and Sender, 2019; Lovelock, 2017; Raun 2015, 2018a, 2018b). Importantly, as Clare O’Gara (2024) points out, queer identity does not make a creator “more popular or better at self-commodification than other creators. Rather, queer disclosure is a device that, when wielded deliberately by LGBTQ+ microcelebrities, can potentially enhance their perceived authenticity and, consequently, their branded identity” (p. 198).

However, it is important to remember that the audience is central in creating an authentic performance. For creators, “authenticity is not established in a monadic relationship but a dialogic relationship with the fan base of the creator [...] Any and all claims to authenticity are tested continuously in a call-and-response rhetorical field” (Cunningham and Craig, 2017, p. 74). Scholars studying microcelebrity have focused almost exclusively on the techniques that content creators implement in order to achieve this style of performance, such as self-disclosure, emotional appeals, and other methods that aim to establish intimacy and immediacy with audiences (Abidin, 2017; Duffy, 2015; Jerslev, 2016; Khamis et al., 2017; Marwick, 2015; Marwick and boyd, 2011; Senft, 2008; West, 2024). While creators may “view friends or followers as fans,” it is the audience who ultimately decides whether a creator succeeds at microcelebrity through their attention and engagement.

Method

This study utilizes a two-pronged approach to data collection and analysis: (1) a thematic analysis of trans-themed videos on Nikkie de Jager’s channel; and (2) a discursive analysis of a sample of 200 YouTube comments from each video in the sample. The video sample includes 13 videos posted between January 2020 and March 2022 that specifically address de Jager’s trans identity, evidenced through title, thumbnail image, or video description. In addition, I scraped the comments sections from each of the 13 videos using YouTube’s API, allowing me to obtain full transcripts of each comments section. Once I obtained these transcripts, I utilized a random number generator to select 200 comments from each video for analysis, resulting in a corpus of more than 2,600 comments for analysis.

I thematically analyzed the video and comment samples with a progressively specific coding scheme. As I reviewed the data from both samples, I made note of specific mentions of de Jager’s trans identity, assertions of authenticity, dialogue between de Jager and her audience, and audience responses to de Jager’s disclosure (both supportive and critical). I iteratively revised the coding categories to be increasingly specific as more instances of similar comments emerged.

Findings

¹ Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other diverse sexual and gender identities.

The data presents three primary contexts in which de Jager and her audience engage in dialogic intimacy:

1. **General support:** When de Jager appears vulnerable in her videos, her viewers support her enthusiastically in the comment sections. De Jager's trans identity is received with just as much love and support as other elements of her videos, with one commenter remarking, "These days I can see Nikki smiling brighter and laughing harder. She is her authentic self and nobody can take that away. Nobody is braver than somebody who shares their truth to the world for everybody." Far from alienating her from her audience—the goal of her blackmailer—coming out sustained and perhaps bolstered de Jager's viewer support.
2. **Reciprocal self-disclosure:** When de Jager shares a personal, emotional story, viewers respond in the comments with reciprocal self-disclosures. Many comments share very personal details about financial struggles, difficulties with friends and family, and fears about coming out or accessing gender affirming care, among many other topics. The range of experiences that commenters share with de Jager, and vice versa, is evidence of a close, intimate relationship.
3. **Defending against transphobia:** Viewer support extends to defending de Jager from transphobic haters in the comments section. While there are some one-off transphobic comments in the sample, many of them have long reply threads in which viewers engage with the original commenter to correct misgendering or weigh in on debates about religion and politics as they relate to transgender identity. The depth and frequency of comments defending de Jager, educating about trans identity, and correcting misgendering indicate a remarkable level of support for de Jager.

This robust dialogue with her audience is key to de Jager's successful deployment of microcelebrity, and her continued success online. Building trust and intimacy must occur in dialogue, and de Jager and her audience create a safe and affirming space for each other via self-disclosure and audience moderation of comments sections. The sustained, robust viewer engagement with her videos allows de Jager to continue to perform microcelebrity, both by giving de Jager content with which to engage (e.g., viewer comments or requests); and also by boosting key performance indicators such as subscribers and likes, allowing her to successfully court large corporate sponsors to financially sustain her career.

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