

Gen Z influencers cast ‘wider net of what beauty can be’

Social media influencers embrace spectrum of gender identities and build communities that celebrate a ‘more democratic’ definition of beauty.

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English teacher and theater director Andrew Harris applies their makeup while at home in Highland Heights, Kentucky, in this Nov. 20, 2020 photo. (Photo provided by Harris)

Written By Katie Lauer

Andrew Harris started anxiously browsing beauty product aisles five years ago, around the same time they came out as nonbinary in Highland Heights, Kentucky, a small-town just outside Cincinnati. Dragging along a friend or sister made excursions easier. But after seeing others use makeup to express themselves on social media, Harris found permission to explore their own interests more freely. Last year, the ninth-grade English teacher, theater director, and self-described gender deconstructionist said their personal idea of beauty isn't flaunting androgynous or genderqueer looks; it's about having the option to dabble or not.

"I don't have to conform or assimilate into any sort of image," Harris said. "I can just do what I want, and be happy with who I am."

The 31-year-old posted online about their journey of self-discovery to elevate exposure and conversations about gender, especially as 15 to 20 students across four of their classes identify as not straight or cis – a more accepting cohort than Harris' own growing up.

"The definition of beauty is becoming much more democratic. (Social media) gives us greater control over what beauty is and a wider net of what beauty can be," Harris said. "I think we owe so much of this to Gen Z because they feel so much freer to be who they are, and they do it with such abandon. If I had seen someone like me when I was 14 or 15 years old, I could have been me so much sooner."

A wake-up call for beauty brands

As a generation left to its own devices – literally and figuratively – Gen Z has turned to social media to craft a reality separate from traditional beauty standards and norms. Nearly a third of 18- to 29-year-olds in the U.S. personally knew someone who used neutral pronouns by 2018, [reports](#) the Pew Research Center, while [Fusion's Massive Millennial Poll](#) revealed 50% of millennials recognize gender as a spectrum.

Some – but certainly not all – in the beauty industry have strived to keep up, as tastemakers build expansive communities on TikTok, YouTube and Instagram. After James Charles attracted nearly 500,000 followers to his [beauty vlogs](#) in less than a year, CoverGirl chose him as its first CoverBoy in 2016. Rihanna's Fenty Beauty raised the bar the following year with "shades designed for all," and, by 2018, Sephora had started hosting makeup classes for trans and nonbinary folks.

Gen Z's purchasing power reached \$143 billion ahead of the pandemic, driving makeup brands to accommodate representation across products beyond those traditionally marketed solely for cis women. Trans-masculine looks include filled brows, stippled-on facial hair, and chiseled jawlines; feminine-presenting looks often highlight cheekbones, bold lips, and wide eyes; nonbinary people often choose to accentuate different combinations of features day-to-day.

While “genderless” and “for men” packaging has emerged to avoid excluding or alienating any gender identities of makeup consumers, Harris sees this as slightly unnecessary, since glitzy and natural eyeliners, lipsticks, and concealers can be tools to improve anyone’s appearance.

“Pigments and powders don’t care what kind of body you have, so why do we need to brand this genderless?” Harris asked. “But on the other hand, I like that companies are saying, ‘We recognize that it’s not just (cis) women buying these products. The fact that we’re moving in that direction, I think, is a really positive thing.’”



Dahlia Belle puts on her makeup at home in Portland, Oregon, in this Nov. 21, 2020 photo. (Courtesy of Belle)

Expressing true self not without risks

Gen Z may be shifting acceptable styles, trends and fashions of genderless makeup but Dahlia Belle said society’s tolerance of who can safely challenge beauty standards remains mostly unchanged. As a Black trans woman, the hour she spends each morning painting a portrait of herself with makeup is a centering, meditative process.

The 39-year-old provides a contrast to Portland, Oregon’s overcast days, pursuing glamorous, colorful looks using Rihanna’s Fenty Beauty moisturizer, sunscreen, primer, concealer, bronzer, foundation, eyebrow pomade, eyeshadow, blush, highlighter, eyeliner, powder and lashes – layers that vary, depending on each day’s level of dysphoria.

But you won't see her in full-face makeup at all times. Belle said she embodies an ever-evolving defiance of restrictive definitions of femininity, joining the struggle many women have to be "feminine enough."

"It's not so much me trying to model myself after what I see in Vogue magazine, but finding what is most comfortable and true to myself and what I choose to present," she said. "I have plenty of pictures where I have no makeup at all, and there are some days that I even think my beard shade is cute, even though I'm trying to eradicate it. Now, I almost feel it's more performative when I appear without makeup; then I'm making a statement."

Those statements and freedom of fluid gender expression aren't without risk for Belle, as fears of violence are always on her mind. As of November, 37 transgender and gender non-conforming people had been killed in 2020. Of the 37 killed, 22 were Black and seven were Latinx and 25 were Black or Latinx women setting a new annual record, reports the [Human Rights Campaign](#).

Belle, in part, sees makeup as a tool to pass, even as "passing" remains at a stage of exceptionalism for trans women of color, often allowing for only glamorous and eloquent women to excel. Belle also enjoys what beauty means for her each morning: what feels right looking in the mirror.

"I do like being pretty. I am a princess, so sometimes I just enjoy doing makeup," Belle said. "There are certain fundamental lines of the Western beauty standard that I feel are held as sacred, and I don't necessarily know how to get past that ... A large part of how I present myself and come across to the world is rooted in the fact that I just don't care anymore. If I have nothing to gain, I also have nothing to lose."

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