

According to Forbes, the beauty industry was estimated to be worth \$532 billion in 2020. This unimaginable number keeps growing as cosmetics and technology grow even closer together. The role of an influencer is still very much a part of recent history, but the idea that there is a difference between macro influencing and micro influencing is even more recent. Website after website is claiming that among the pivotal trends set to take over marketing in 2021, micro influencing is one of them. Lexie Carbone is a marketing expert at Later Media. Recently she said that a focus on micro influencing is in the top 8 trends forecasted for this year in influencing. Just a couple bullet points above that, Carbone remarks that another trend set to impact influencing and marketing in 2021 is quote “A Focus on Diversity and Inclusion” end quote.

I’m Ashton Clopton and in this miniseries we’ll be discussing The combination of micro influencing and diversity. This really piqued my interest, so I wanted to explore how the two relate, especially at a time when conversations of black lives matter, white privilege, and racism make up the majority of our social media feed, or at least mine.

I took the time to interview 5 different micro influencers and their experience with the occupation, the beauty industry, and their backgrounds as it relates to this topic. These women provided a good mix of racial and ethnic perspectives that were obviously specific to them, but continuously brought up similar themes within each interview. I am going to share those themes with you while we try to get to the bottom of understanding micro influencing and its relationship to race.

Ashley Brown is a black fashion influencer and content creator. She has been seriously creating content since last July, but has always been into social media and fashion as two entities.

When speaking to Brown, she touched on how this trend of diversity and inclusion that Carbone was talking about has popularized more recently.

Brown: “I think you know with the recent events of black lives matter protest and all those things that happened kind of like last summer, I think it definitely made brands think about being more inclusive.”

Sarita is a white-hispanic influencer more on the lifestyle side. She started taking content creation seriously at the start of her college career about 3 years ago. Sarita agrees with Brown that the Black lives matter movement sparked this wave of conscious diversity, but also acknowledges the learning curve that comes with that.

Sarita: “Honestly I was so ignorant until the blm movement and I think it was because I grew up, went to high school in such a predominantly white-hispanic community. I didn't really think there was more to my bubble”

The bubble that Sarita is referring to expands beyond your hometown. Today, we see that bubble within our social media feeds and we create that bubble within the people we chose to follow. However, issues are quick to arise with platforms like instagram. The first being exposure and the second being advertising.

Amanda Nava is a caucasian fashion and style influencer on instagram with a blog of her own called “The Creative Brief.” She began blogging in 2016 after she attended college as a media and advertising major. She can speak to the digital bubble not only because of her background in advertising, but her first hand accounts of it as an influencer.

Nava: “I think with social media there is this illusion of a bubble and with algorithms that are similar to instagram, it shows you content that it thinks you'll like. So, if everyone that you're following is white and a fashion blogger its gonna recommend more white fashion blogger and brands that you shop you know its a marketing tool, so they want to create money and you know revenue from things you're viewing and liking and everything like that, so if that's all that you're seeing its creating back to that bubble idea, if you're stuck in that bubble you're not seeing anything else, you're not exposed to other things that are happening outside of that bubble. Whether that be racism or you know other social justice issues that people just aren't hearing or seeing because they are just stuck in that.”

With the ability to change the reality that we subscribe to on instagram, we lose necessary exposure like Nava said. It is almost like tunnel vision while driving, and as we know, that could lead to dangerous situations. In terms of advertising, instagram and applications alike use algorithms to promote and sell companies, accounts, and products specifically tailored to what they believe you like. This corporate reinforcement of the bubble stems from longtime traditions in the marketing space, like appealing to a targeted audiences, but when mixed in with social media, the lines become quite blurred between propaganda and reality.

Nava does commend the efforts of the black lives matter movement for using social media as a mode of transportation for their messaging. The ideas and conversations around the movement seem to have made their way into the instagram posts and stories of the mass market, and can stand alone in their own right.

Nava: “With the last year and a half of this push around social justice in black lives matter, and really people coming into their own with their voice, there's also a lot of group of people who look like me, as a white woman, who are now seeing a lot of this more often and I think that

comes into play for you know people who weren't seeing that before because it's kinda like "wow, what, where have I been," and I think people know about it this has always been happening it just social media becomes a place where you can turn that off which is definitely problematic."

JaLee Pelkington is a white beauty and style influencer on Instagram and TikTok, and also has a blog called "It's Jalee Jane.com." She has only been an influencer for about a year now, but Jaylee always knew she wanted to do something in social media. Speaking more towards the branding side of things, she touches on how the use of diversity in marketing campaigns took until this push in the BLM movement to break away from reinforcing Eurocentric beauty standards.

Pelkington: "I think until 2020 came, uh, companies didn't really focus on featuring as many POC influencers I think on their pages because I think they were trying, they had this perfect aesthetic of this perfect girl being blonde and skinny. And it's like, no everybody's different."

Ashley Brown, touches on what diversifying marketing campaigns means for her as a Black entrepreneur.

Brown: "I've probably not gotten brands because of you know they've either reached a quota or you know I have gotten brand deals they haven't reached that."

While the trend of better representation in advertising and brand collaboration is on the rise, Brown touches on the fact that some of that may be performative.

Brown: "You know when it comes to tokenizing people, I wonder, "am I being accepted with this brand because they need more POC influencers or do they just want me you know for who I am" and my Instagram."

Chazlynn Stensin is an African-American content creator and has been doing micro influencing seriously for about a year. She focuses on fashion and lifestyle content geared towards college students while attending school herself at FIDM in Los Angeles. Stensin acknowledges the shift in diversity in branding, but can pinpoint at least one unique area in social media that still experiences issues with conveying only whiteness.

Stensin: "I feel like Black women aren't really represented well in certain aesthetics, right. Like right now you see on Instagram cottage-core aesthetics and like girly pink. That type of thing is just not seen and so hard to come by."

Like Brown, Stensin does not care to be tokenized, but respected for the content she puts out. Especially as a black woman in a space or aesthetic that does not idealize or view women of color as fit for that aesthetic, micro influencers like Stensin are breaking down those eurocentric standards.

Stensin: “What I value in my content is showing that like yes we can be light and feminine and delicate and like have this like fairy tail kind of vibe, and it’s not something that’s reserved for a certain race. And I feel like that’s not seen a lot in certain brands, you know you’ll go to a brand and you’ll go on their page and see all the models or all the people that they’re working with are all the same race, and you’re like “wow, I am really not represented.” That can be super discouraging, or you can be like me you could just be like ok well I’m going to make it like a priority that I am able to work with those brands.”

Overall, there are positives to this shift to showcasing more Black and POC influencers in advertising, but negatives when the corporations following these trends do not actually hold those core values. It creates a conflict or whether or not POC influencers are actually being valued as content creators, or if they are simply there to help a brand’s image.

In the next episode we'll dive into how white privilege, access, and inequality all play into the experience of a POC influencer.

I’m Ashton Clopton, and thank you for tuning into the first episode of the miniseries, Influencing Race. Have a great one.