

Self-Presentation and Identity Negotiation among Disabled Social Media Influencers: A Review

Bingqian Liu

School of Language Science and Art, Jiangsu Normal University, Xuzhou 221009, Jiangsu, China

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Abstract

Disabled social media influencers are redefining disability in the digital age by challenging stereotypes and fostering vibrant communities. By leveraging platforms like Instagram and TikTok, these influencers move beyond the traditional, often pity-driven portrayals of disability in mainstream media. Instead, they craft authentic self-presentations and negotiate their identities, employing strategies such as curated transparency and visual rhetoric. This review explores how they navigate online harassment, commercialization, and public perception, ultimately pushing for a more inclusive societal understanding of disability.

Keywords

disabled influencers
self-presentation
identity negotiation
social media
disability studies

Online publication: June 26, 2025

1. Introduction

Disabled social media influencers are reshaping how disability is perceived in society^[1]. In traditional media, disabled individuals were often portrayed as either objects of pity or sources of inspiration. However, the digital realm, with its vast reach and creative freedom, provides a platform for these individuals to control their own narratives^[2]. On platforms like Instagram and TikTok, they have unprecedented agency to curate their self-images, directly engage with their audiences, and craft an online identity that challenges conventional stereotypes. This review explores how these influencers strategically manage perceptions of their disability while addressing online harassment, commercialization, and public attitudes toward disability.

2. Theoretical Foundations

Understanding the intricate dynamics of self-presentation and identity negotiation among disabled social media influencers necessitates a grounding in established theoretical frameworks. This section delves into the foundational theories that illuminate how individuals construct and manage their identities in social interactions, particularly within the mediated environments of social media.

2.1. Self-Presentation Theories in Online Environments

Self-presentation, the conscious way individuals manage how others see them, is key in social interaction, especially online. Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory

helps understand this, viewing social interaction as a performance. Online, influencers act as “performers,” carefully choosing photos, words, and interaction styles to present a desired public image or “front”^[3]. The digital world allows for editing, leading to a more polished “front stage” display, while private moments or “back stage” remain hidden or selectively shared^[4]. This careful selection of what to show helps disabled influencers manage how authentic and relatable their digital self appears to their audience. Furthermore, Social Identity Theory (SIT) states that people get part of their self-concept from the groups they belong to^[5]. For disabled influencers, social media is a vital place to confirm and show their disability identity within a community of others with disabilities and allies. By publicly connecting with the disabled community, influencers not only feel better about themselves but also help change negative ideas society has about disability^[6]. This often means highlighting positive aspects of their community^[7]. The online community then becomes a crucial source of support, shared experiences, and combined efforts for change, which strengthens a positive and empowered disability identity.

2.2. Identity Negotiation: Concepts and Frameworks

Identity is not fixed; it constantly changes through interactions with others and the world^[8]. Online identity is particularly flexible and performative. Unlike real-world interactions where identity might seem more set, the digital world allows for trying out and showing different parts of oneself. Disabled influencers are always negotiating their identity as they respond to comments, talk with people, and change their content based on audience feedback and their own evolving self-perceptions^[9]. This active process means balancing the wish to be authentic with the need to manage their public image, especially when facing negative attitudes or unwanted advice, shaping both how they are seen and how they understand their own disability. How disability is understood deeply affects how disabled individuals see themselves and how society treats them. The medical model sees disability as an individual problem or illness that needs a cure, which can lead to feelings of shame. In contrast, the social model of disability suggests that

disability mainly comes from societal barriers and attitudes, not from a person’s impairment. Disabled influencers often use their platforms to promote the social model, reframing disability as a form of diversity and a source of strength. This shift in thinking empowers them to challenge self-stigma and external biases, pushing for changes in systems rather than just individual “fixes.” Using and talking about different disability models is a key part of how they negotiate their identity online.

2.3. The Digital Landscape for Disabled Individuals

The digital environment is not equally available to everyone. While social media offers great possibilities, many disabled individuals face significant barriers to access. These can include websites that are not designed for accessibility, or content that lacks captions or audio descriptions. The digital divide, made worse by economic factors and access to special technologies, further limits participation. Influencers often find ways around these technical issues, sometimes by advocating for better accessibility or by creating their own solutions. Their ability to successfully present themselves and negotiate their identity is directly linked to how inclusive and well-designed the platforms they use are. Beyond just personal expression, social media acts as a powerful tool for advocacy and building communities within the disability rights movement. Disabled influencers often move from sharing personal stories to wider activism. They raise awareness about big problems affecting disabled people, challenge unfair rules, and gather their followers to support social change. These platforms help create online communities where disabled individuals and their allies can connect, share helpful information, support each other, and work together. This community aspect is very important for feeling a sense of belonging and collective power, which in turn strengthens each individual’s identity negotiation process.

3. Strategies of Self-Presentation among Disabled Influencers

3.1. Curating Authenticity: Disclosure and Transparency

A primary strategy involves cultivating an image of

authenticity, which paradoxically often requires careful curation. Influencers decide what aspects of their disability and daily life to disclose, and to what extent. Some opt for radical transparency, sharing intimate details of their medical conditions, personal care routines, or emotional struggles, aiming to normalize disability and foster deeper connections^[10]. Others may choose more selective disclosure, focusing on specific aspects that align with their advocacy goals or content niche. The balance between sharing enough to be relatable and maintaining personal boundaries is a constant negotiation, as audiences often demand a high degree of “realness” while influencers strive to protect their privacy and well-being. This strategic disclosure challenges the traditional veil of silence often imposed upon disability.

3.2. Visual Rhetoric and Image Management

Visual content forms the backbone of many social media platforms. Disabled influencers strategically utilize visual rhetoric to shape perceptions of their bodies and abilities^[11]. This can involve showcasing adaptive equipment as tools of empowerment rather than symbols of limitation, or highlighting fashion choices that defy conventional beauty standards. Many influencers actively engage in “disability pride” aesthetics, presenting themselves in ways that celebrate their bodies and identities, often contrasting sharply with media’s historically desexualized or medicalized portrayals^[12]. They meticulously manage lighting, angles, and poses to convey confidence, strength, and joy, subverting the gaze that often reduces disabled bodies to objects of pity or medical scrutiny.

3.3. Narrative Construction: Storytelling and Lived Experience

Storytelling is a potent tool for human connection, and disabled influencers excel at constructing narratives that resonate with their audiences^[13]. They share personal anecdotes, daily challenges, triumphs, and reflections, often framing their experiences in ways that demystify disability and emphasize shared humanity. These narratives are not merely informational; they are emotionally engaging, challenging ableist assumptions by presenting disability as a multifaceted and valuable part of human experience. Through carefully crafted captions,

video scripts, and long-form blog posts, influencers transform individual experiences into relatable stories that educate, inspire, and foster empathy. They leverage the power of personal voice to counter dominant, often able-bodied, narratives about life with a disability.

3.4. Engaging Audiences: Interaction and Co-creation

Beyond broadcasting content, disabled influencers actively engage in dialogue with their audiences, fostering a sense of community and co-creating meaning. This involves responding to comments, participating in Q&A sessions, and inviting followers to share their own experiences. This interactive approach blurs the lines between content creator and consumer, transforming followers into active participants in the identity negotiation process. Through these interactions, influencers can directly address misconceptions, provide support, and build a loyal following that feels personally invested in their journey. This constant feedback loop also informs their future content strategies, ensuring relevance and responsiveness to community needs and interests.

4. Identity Negotiation Processes and Outcomes

4.1. Challenging Stereotypes and Stigma

A core outcome of disabled influencers’ online presence is the active challenging of entrenched stereotypes and the reduction of stigma associated with disability. By showcasing diverse lives, capabilities, and aspirations, they directly counter media’s historical tendency to portray disabled individuals as monolithic or tragic figures. Each post, each story, and each interaction serves as a micro-intervention against ableism, slowly dismantling preconceived notions^[14]. They demonstrate that disability is not a singular experience but a spectrum, encompassing varied identities, joys, and struggles. This constant counter-narrative chips away at societal biases, fostering a more nuanced and accepting understanding of disability.

4.2. Fostering Positive Disability Identity

For many disabled influencers and their audiences, social media becomes a powerful site for fostering and

affirming a positive disability identity. In a society that often pathologizes or marginalizes disability, finding a space where one's identity is celebrated and understood is profoundly empowering^[15]. Influencers articulate messages of disability pride, self-acceptance, and resilience, which can significantly impact the self-esteem and mental well-being of their followers. This digital environment provides validation, allowing individuals to move beyond internalizing negative societal views and instead embrace disability as a valuable and integral part of their identity. The shared experience of navigating a world not always designed for them transforms into a source of collective strength and cultural identity.

4.3. Managing Public Perceptions and Misunderstandings

The open nature of social media also means that influencers must constantly manage public perceptions, which often include misunderstandings, unsolicited advice, or even outright prejudice. Disabled influencers develop strategies to educate their audience, correct misinformation, and respond to ableist comments with grace or firm boundaries. This negotiation is delicate, as they seek to inform and advocate without alienating potential allies^[16]. They often act as cultural translators, bridging the gap between able-bodied and disabled experiences. The ability to directly address these issues in real-time allows for a more dynamic and responsive form of advocacy than traditional media often permits, fostering a more informed public dialogue around disability.

4.4. The Role of Community and Support Networks

Online communities formed around disabled influencers play a crucial role in reinforcing identity negotiation. These networks provide a safe space for shared experiences, mutual support, and validation that may be lacking in offline environments. Followers often interact with each other, forming bonds based on shared identities and challenges. This communal aspect strengthens the individual's ability to navigate external pressures and internal doubts, offering a sense of solidarity and collective agency. Influencers often actively cultivate these communities, seeing them not just as an audience

but as a vital support system for themselves and their followers, enabling a resilient and empowered collective disability identity.

5. Challenges and Ethical Considerations

5.1. Online Harassment and Discrimination (Ableism)

The very platforms that offer liberation also expose disabled influencers to heightened risks of online harassment, hate speech, and discrimination, often manifesting as ableism. This can range from offensive comments and unsolicited advice about their bodies or conditions to outright bullying and threats. Managing such negativity can be emotionally draining and requires robust coping mechanisms or community support. The public nature of their identity negotiation means they are constantly under scrutiny, making them vulnerable to both overt and subtle forms of prejudice. The persistent battle against online ableism underscores the ongoing need for platform moderation and user education.

5.2. Emotional Labor and Mental Health Impacts

The constant demand for self-presentation, emotional disclosure, and engagement with a large audience constitutes significant emotional labor. Influencers are often expected to be perpetually “on,” accessible, and inspiring, which can lead to burnout, stress, and adverse mental health impacts. The pressure to always be a positive role model or “inspiration porn” can be particularly taxing, denying them the space for vulnerability or simply existing without a narrative. Managing personal well-being while maintaining a public persona that often involves sharing deeply personal experiences is a delicate balancing act that is not without its psychological costs.

5.3. Commercialization and Authenticity Dilemmas

As influencers gain popularity, opportunities for commercialization through sponsorships, brand partnerships, and advertising often arise. While this can provide financial independence, it also introduces ethical dilemmas concerning authenticity. The line

between genuine advocacy and commercial gain can become blurred, raising questions about the motivations behind content and the potential for perceived sell-out. Maintaining credibility and trust with an audience that values authenticity becomes a critical challenge when balancing personal values with commercial pressures. Influencers must navigate these tensions carefully to avoid undermining their message or alienating their community.

5.4. Privacy Concerns and Data Security

Sharing personal narratives and images inevitably raises privacy concerns. Disabled influencers, often sharing intimate details of their health, bodies, and daily lives, are particularly vulnerable to breaches of privacy or the misuse of their data. The public nature of their content means that personal information can be easily accessed, archived, and potentially weaponized. Ensuring data security and understanding the privacy policies of various platforms are critical, yet often complex, responsibilities. The perpetual negotiation of privacy boundaries – what to share, with whom, and under what conditions – remains a constant ethical challenge in their digital lives.

6. Conclusion and Future Research Directions

This review has systematically explored the multifaceted landscape of self-presentation and identity negotiation among disabled social media influencers. We have delved into the theoretical underpinnings, examined the diverse strategies employed, elucidated the profound outcomes, and highlighted the significant challenges inherent in their digital existence. The rise of these influencers represents a pivotal moment in disability representation, transitioning from passive reception of stereotypes to active, agentic construction of identity. Their engagement challenges ableist norms, fosters positive disability identity, and builds vital support networks, while simultaneously navigating the complexities of online harassment, emotional labor, and commercialization.

6.1. Key Insights and Contributions

The primary contribution of this review lies in synthesizing disparate research strands to offer a

holistic understanding of disabled influencers' roles in contemporary digital culture. We underscore that their self-presentation is not merely superficial but a deeply strategic and theoretically informed process of identity work. Their actions contribute significantly to the social model of disability, transforming public discourse from deficit-based views to an appreciation of diversity and lived experience. The review also highlights the intricate interplay between individual agency, technological affordances, and societal structures in shaping online disability identity.

6.2. Methodological Approaches for Future Studies

Future research would benefit from employing a diverse range of methodological approaches to further deepen our understanding. Longitudinal studies could track the evolution of influencers' self-presentation strategies and identity negotiation over time, revealing how these processes adapt to platform changes and personal development. Mixed-methods research, combining quantitative analysis of content trends (e.g., sentiment analysis, network analysis) with in-depth qualitative interviews or ethnographic studies of influencers and their communities, would offer a richer, more nuanced picture. Experimental designs could also explore audience perception shifts in response to different types of disability representation.

6.3. Unexplored Sub-groups and Contexts

While this review provides a broad overview, there is a pressing need for research that focuses on specific, currently underexplored sub-groups within the disabled community. This includes examining influencers with intellectual disabilities, chronic illnesses, or those from diverse intersectional identities (e.g., disabled LGBTQ+ individuals, disabled people of color). Additionally, comparative studies across different cultural contexts and political systems are crucial to understand how varying societal norms, legal frameworks, and media landscapes impact self-presentation and identity negotiation. Further exploration of platform-specific affordances (e.g., TikTok's short-form video vs. Instagram's image focus) and their differential impact on disability representation would also yield valuable insights.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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