The Social Question

ASK INSTAGRAM:

Discussing Sex & Gender Identity by Crowdsourcing Social Sentiments

STUDY HIGHLIGHTS

RESEARCH CONSIDERATIONS:

- Non-traditional target audience
- Potentially sensitive topic
- Required a trusted moderator
- Simple feedback needed

METHODOLOGY HIGH POINTS:

- Partnered with social media influencers and their primed audiences
- Kept the research in Instagram to maintain trust and comfort with their followers
- Short fieldwork window with high-quality responses captured in 24-hours

Influencers

- SK is an Instagram Digital Creator
- 27.3k followers
- Preferred pronouns are she/they
- Audience is 73% women, mostly US
- 69% of audience is 18-34 years old
- Identifies as non-binary and has had top surgery
- Author of children's book "They Love, We Love"

- Rachel is an Instagram Digital Creator
- 14.9k followers
- Preferred pronouns are she/her/hers
- Audience is 52% women, mostly US
- 87% of audience is 18-34 years old
- Student at Howard University (HBCU)
- Member of Gen Z and regularly discusses racial issues

Client

"This new research design is exactly what our team needed for real perspective on gender identity. The results were information-rich and added depth to our assignment."

CINDY NEUMANN

Insights Association

PROJECT CONTEXT:

With a client request to understand how people feel about questions regarding their sex and gender identification on surveys, The Social Question teamed up with the Insights Association to hear directly from an affected community.

Instagram has more than 6.5 million posts related to #nonbinary content, which we referenced in our search for Influencer collaborations to serve as question hosts and pose our research questions to their followers.

RESEARCH DESIGN:

To ensure a robust response to our questions, we partnered with two Influencers: (1) **SK**, an engaging personality with a substantial following in the non-binary community, and (2) **Rachel**, a Gen Z college student whose followers would provide a more general population point of view.

Each hosted 1-2 questions via Instagram Stories, using a 24-hour Q&A Sticker enabling followers to provide written responses to an open-end question prompt. In this capacity, the Influencer is *moderating* our research question for us.

BENEFITS:

Qualitative Research at Scale in a Short Time Frame

By using Instagram Stories as our medium, we captured a combined 139 open-end responses from more than 120 unique Instagram users who follow the Influencers - all within 24 hours. (And there was no audience overlap between the Influencers.)

Quality Feedback

Unlike comments on public social media posts, bots are uncommon in Instagram Stories. All responses are from real users who want to participate in the conversation. As a result, we did not need to discard any of the resulting responses.

Trusted Confidants

We partnered with Influencers who lead a highly-engaged community and have established relationships with their followers on the topic we were researching. Minimal priming was needed to establish the context for our social question, allowing us to dive in simply and effectively.

INSTAGRAM AS A RESOURCE

The rise of Influencers and Content Creators has transformed Instagram into a hotspot for businesses and marketers. These collaborations have led to the development of niche markets and communities that researchers are able to leverage for rich insights through authentic engagement. While #paidpartnerships must legally be disclosed, Instagram's tools and features make this easy to do.
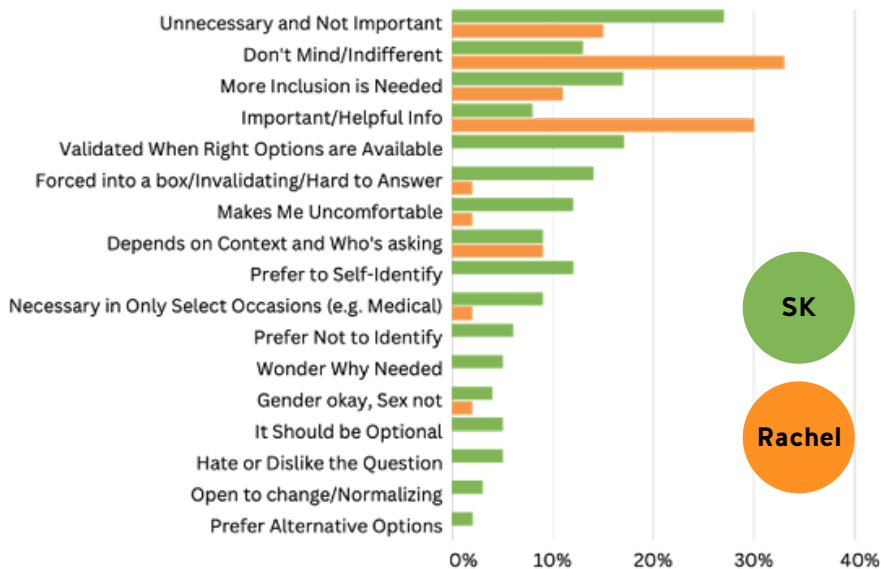
Both **SK** and **Rachel** hosted the same question to their followers: *"What is your opinion for identifying your sex or gender on surveys and forms?"*

The Social Question then transcribed, blinded, and coded the 139 unique responses to uncover the research themes (shown in the chart below) and craft a research story.

At first glance, we can identified three main takeaways:
- The question is largely viewed as "*unnecessary*" most of the time, although it can be important in certain instances. Plus, gender and sex are two different questions. Sex (your anatomy) is considered more private than gender and not appropriate to ask about.
- While most "*don't mind*" answering this question, there are often caveats, including feelings of being forced to participate, as well as limited answer options that can make it difficult to respond.
- Both audiences feel the standard two answer choices for this question are not nearly inclusive enough.

"Hulu asked my gender. The options were male, female, and "prefer not to say." I DO want to say!" **- SK Follower**
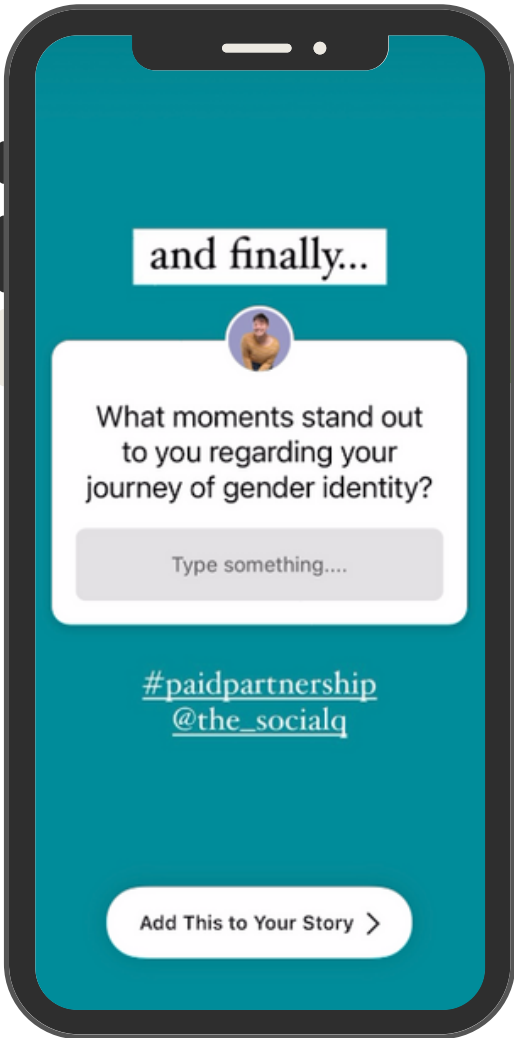
WHY INSTAGRAM?

- **High Engagement and Activity**
  - Nearly 2 billion daily Instagram users
  - 37% of all Instagram users engage with an Influencer on a regular basis
  - 500+ Million Instagram users engage with Instagram's 24h Stories
  - Instagram users spend an average of 30 minutes on the platform every day
- **Niche Communities & Content Strategy**
  - More than 500,000 active Instagram Influencers leading conversations on micro and macro topics and sensitivity
  - In 2018 Instagram released new engagement tools ideal for our MR community
  - Instagram offers page Insights that can be used for follower demographic references
  - There's an audience for almost anything (with a little sleuthing!)

THE NON-BINARY STORY

- When inclusive answer options are available, people feel validated and even "*euphoria*" when they can safely and accurate describe themselves.
- But most of the time, people feel like they are being "*put in a box*" or find these questions "*hard to answer*" because of the limited and limiting choices typically provided.
- The resulting experience can be "*uncomfortable*", especially if it isn't clear who is asking and how they will use the data. Can they be *trusted*?
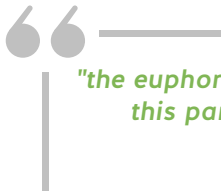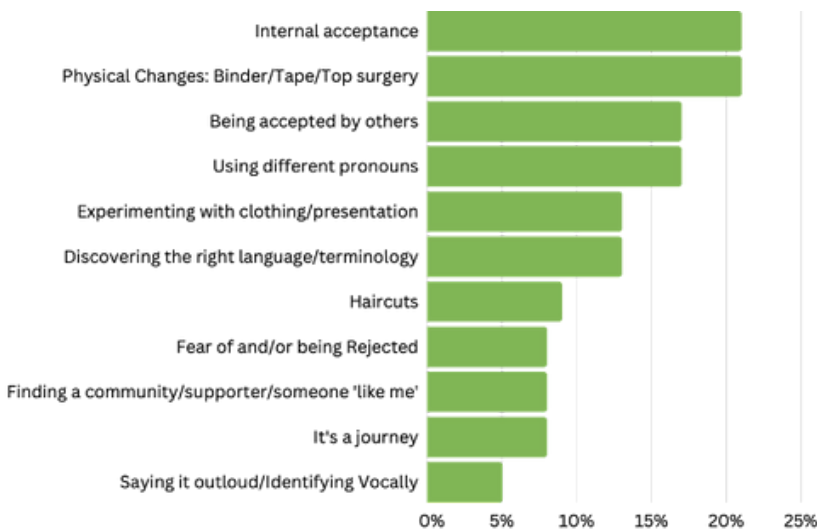
"As a person closeted for their own safety, I find it really hard to answer and misgender myself."
- SK Follower

and finally...

What moments stand out to you regarding your journey of gender identity?

Type something....

#paidpartnership
@the_socialq

Add This to Your Story >

MEMBERS OF THE NON-BINARY COMMUNITY HAVE MORE EMOTIONAL RESPONSES TO THE GENDER QUESTION.

A JOURNEY TOWARD ACCEPTANCE

SK helped us craft a follow-up question based on their expertise on the topic and conversations with followers. These passionate responses to our second prompt helped us tell a more complete story regarding non-binary perspectives with gender identity and the conflicts that occur on surveys and forms.

- **Acceptance**: Achieving internal (self) acceptance and gaining acceptance from others are significant milestones for those on a gender identity journey. Having friends and family who respect their identity is a core source of support for many, and allows them to live a more authentic life.
- **Physical Changes**: Undertaking efforts to alter their physical appearance is one of the first steps to gaining gender acceptance. Similarly, haircuts or clothing experimentation are also key moments.
- **Terminology:** Identifying new language to describe who they are is a powerful experience. Some say doing research or discovering new labels helped them make sense of their own identify. Selecting and using new pronouns that better reflect their identity can also be highly empowering.

Internal acceptance
Physical Changes: Binder/Tape/Top surgery
Being accepted by others
Using different pronouns
Experimenting with clothing/presentation
Discovering the right language/terminology
Haircuts
Fear of and/or being Rejected
Finding a community/supporter/someone 'like me'
It's a journey
Saying it outloud/Identifying Vocally

0%   5%   10%   15%   20%   25%

"the euphoria of finally realizing this part of my identity"

"I broke down because my nails were pretty, and it meant so much to me to feel pretty"

"When I began to embrace my gender and an art teacher I just met told me I seemed confident"

"40 years of obvious signals to myself that I ignored. Ignore no more!"

Outcome:

While this project revealed that many people who represent traditional gender identities do not need major adjustments in our standard demographic question, it also enlightened us that small accommodations can have a genuine, positive effect on someone's gender journey. Survey questions that don't give respondents the space to self-identify or misconstrue sex with gender can create unsafe and inauthentic experiences. What we consider a minor question in surveys and screeners can trigger a much larger life reflection for individuals who are not cisgender.