
EMPIRE OF SELF: LIFE WRITING AND THE PROFESSIONAL PERSONA OF THE LIFESTYLE BLOGGER

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how lifestyle blogs use life writing to establish a professional persona and an aura of authenticity that is necessary for maintaining a community of readers. Utilizing close readings of lifestyle blogs across a spectrum of personas, I argue that these two purposes often come into conflict, creating a precarious dynamic for lifestyle bloggers that they attempt to manage through their use of the diary, which is deployed in two key ways. The first is through the use of the diaristic mode, a reflexive and revelatory discourse that disrupts the façade of the self-brand and underscores the blogger's authenticity. The diary is also used as a prescriptive disciplinary practice in order to create didactic and formulaic narratives that can be readily consumed and replicated but that often result in a sense of inauthenticity.

KEY WORDS

Lifestyle Blogging; Professional Persona; Diary; Authenticity

INTRODUCTION

In an interview with *The New York Times*, lifestyle maven Rachel Hollis describes her approach to giving advice: "I'm telling you something that happened with me...I'm telling you about my own loss or my own trauma or something that I did that helped, and then trying to use that to give you some guidelines" (Jones 2019). Hollis's style of no-nonsense advice is rooted in the autobiographical; her personal brand is that of an experienced friend who is confessional in order to be instructional. Hollis began as a lifestyle blogger and has since grown her media enterprise to include multiple self-help books, lifestyle workshops, a wellness app, and a range of products designed to help her followers achieve a version of the good life that she portrays herself as possessing. In essence, she has used life writing to establish a persona as a professional of everyday life.

Hollis's claim of expertise correlates with her start as a lifestyle blogger. A lifestyle blog is, in its most conventional iteration, a website comprised of digital content that represents its author's everyday life and interests. The blog is typically divided into specific content categories, and many women's lifestyle blogs focus on relationships, fashion, travel, wellness, design, and parenting, the gendered dimensions of everyday life. These areas are often tailored to the author's location, life stage, and experience, resulting in a clearly identifiable personalized brand that helps shore up the author's claims to authenticity. Combining a highly visual experience with an autobiographical narrative organized into chronological posts, lifestyle blogs

are the cultural descendent of both women's magazines and individual diaries. The opportunities for engagement through the interactive affordances of the medium also create the additional sense of a community based around a shared lifestyle—whether that lifestyle be actual or aspirational—and opportunities for monetizing the site through affiliate links or promotions.¹ Lifestyle bloggers utilize life writing, a term that serves as a big-tent description for a range of autobiographical acts and practices (Smith & Watson 2010, p. 4; Couser 2012, p. 24), as a tactic of persona management. But they also frame life writing as a disciplinary function to create a professional persona that allows them to transform their own life experience into a form of knowledge that they can market to others. This tactic transforms both the private, reflective role of the diary and the intimate space and practices of the domestic sphere into the basis of a professional identity.

Describing professional personas, Marshall, Moore & Barbour explain that within their selected fields, professionals “have constructed systems or relative monopolies of knowledge, an elaborate filtering system where the public identity of their work is generally understood with great consistency across its occupation and in the wider notion of the general public” (2020, p. 185). For lifestyle bloggers, there is no such recognised system that functions as a filter. Instead, individuals must gain a following through a combination of relatability and expertise, the two uneasily paired domains of the lifestyle profession. Scholars have noted how figures such as Martha Stewart have established proficiency and discipline in the domestic sphere as an aspirational ethos for professional women through traditional media (Smith 2016; Lewis 2010; McNaughton 2016). But lifestyle bloggers are microcelebrities, figures with a more limited audience developed through practices such as direct interaction with followers and the sharing of personal information (Marwick and boyd 2010, p. 121). As media scholar Teresa Senft argues, this engagement decreases the sense of distance that characterizes typical celebrity and leads to a differentiation between the celebrity's *audience* and the microcelebrity's *community* (2013, p. 350). For lifestyle blogger microcelebrities then, the aspirational ethos of figures like Martha Stewart is paired with an accessibility established through life writing and the interactive engagement afforded by the technics of blogging.

Another way that lifestyle bloggers establish their expertise is by asserting that a lifestyle is a valid professional realm. Their blogs make it clear that achieving your best life requires knowledge and effort. Whether it is the emotional and affective labour required by the roles of mother, partner, or daughter, or the creative energy of dressing yourself and outfitting your home, or the physical effort of maintaining your skin, your hair, and your body, being your best self is *work*. What the lifestyle blog offers is a blueprint and a marketplace for the strategies and products any individual might need to accomplish this work. The use of life writing further allows lifestyle bloggers to reintermediate the practice of private consultation, meaning that they create economic sites of expertise for themselves through the instructional space of the blog. While this innovative professional persona transforms a sphere that has typically been gendered and thus undervalued into a significant site of meaning in the Web 2.0 era, it is also a precarious position because lifestyle expertise is tied to the individual's own autobiographical narrative. Challenges to a blogger's personal authenticity are thus also challenges to their professional persona, creating a demand for continual self-revelation and persona management.

Faced with these demands, lifestyle bloggers use life writing to balance the demands of their personal and professional personas by deploying the diary genre in two ways: as a rhetorical mode that signals revelatory and confessional moments, a utilization of what I am calling the diaristic mode, and as a reflexive disciplinary practice. A comparative close reading of posts on the topics of blogging as a career and the use of the diary illustrates how life writing allows the lifestyle blogger to anchor her professional persona in a discourse of authentic

selfhood while offering the lifestyle as a product that can be consumed and then reproduced by the reader. The result is a professional persona that is relatable yet highly precarious.

The Complicated Authenticity of Blogging

In her memoir/self-help manual, *Girl, Wash Your Face*, Rachel Hollis describes her desire to show others how to live a life that allows them to grow into better versions of themselves as the motivation for her blog:

That's why I do what I do. That's why I run a website and talk about how to make a centerpiece, or parent with kindness, or strengthen a marriage. It's why I researched thirty different ways to clean out your front-load washer before I taught my tribe how to do it. It's why I know the perfect ratio of balsamic to make your pot roast amazing. Sure, I cover a whole host of topics using my online platform, but ultimately, they boil down to one thing: these are the elements of my life and I want to do them well. (2018, p. xii)

Hollis here establishes her “distinction and expertise” as a lifestyle professional by detailing her research, her specific knowledge, and their rootedness in her own daily life (Marshall, Moore & Barbour 2020, p.181). Marshall, Moore & Barbour illustrate how the category of “professional” is in a state of flux precisely because of presentational media, and Hollis’s comment about teaching “her tribe” or the audience for her microcelebrity, allows her to establish a professional persona because of her ability to utilise presentational media effectively. This correlation points to the co-construction of the lifestyle blogger as a professional and the blog as a specific medium of life writing.

It is important to attend to the materiality of blogs to understand how the specific affordances of a blog, similar to the specificities of the genre of life writing, shape the persona building that happens there. In the early years of the Web 2.0 era, feminist scholars of life writing explored how the emerging medium of blogging was a textual practice with roots in the diary, accounting for its appeal to authors and readers (Karlsson 2007; McNeill 2003; Sorapure 2003; Van Dijck 2004). More recent work by scholars pushes at the boundaries of definitions of life writing and blogging in recognition of their co-construction. Jessalyn Keller (2016, p. 6) frames blogging as a multimodal and cross-platform practice, and anthropologist Julian Hopkins defines blogs as “socio-technical assemblages” highlighting the attention that must be paid not only to the textual and aesthetic practices of blogging, but how these are formed in relation to the specific material demands through which these texts are formed (2019, pp. 12-15). Extending Julie Rak’s work on “automediality,” Emma Maguire argues for use of the term, over “life writing” or “life narrative” because as a conceptual tool it works to identify more precisely “what it means to represent life and the self in increasingly social, networked, multi-media ways” (2018, p. 21). Along similar lines, literary scholar Anna Poletti illustrates the political and ethical dimension of such specificity, arguing that ignoring the materiality of life writing, is to “underestimate the role of media forms in shaping the veracity of the claims that underpin autobiography as a cultural and social practice that purports to speak a truth about lived experience and foster the forms of recognition we require for a more just politics and social field” (2020, p. 6). Blogging, then, is not a medium through which one just communicates her life, but which acts to constitute it as well.

This scholarly conversation makes clear that while blogs maintain strong ties to their textual, diaristic beginnings, as a contemporary practice, blogs differ from other forms of life writing in their temporality, structure, and interactivity. All these elements can be put to good use in conveying the authenticity of a blogger, but they require a high degree of attentiveness, a

practice akin to curation. While other textual forms of autobiography, such as the memoir, offer a kind of narrative fixity because of their boundedness on the page, the blog, like the diary form it evolved from, creates an in-the-moment, accretive form of life writing that builds as it goes. The author as a self emerges post by post, forgoing the kind of literary shaping afforded by more demarcated forms of autobiographical writing. This creates an uneven line of development rather than a narrative arc.

The temporality of a blog's narrative opens up the author to claims of inconsistency or even transformation from their reader. These claims must be managed in order to maintain the author's aura of authenticity. The idea of the self as both performative and fragmented corresponds with philosopher Charles Guignon's argument that "we are a telling," meaning that while selfhood is experienced as "a disjointed, fragmented collection of semi-selves living out episodic, stuttering, and other-directed lives" (2004, p. 126), narrative as a form always inclines toward structural coherence. The tension between the lived experience of selfhood and its expression in narrative actually allows for more fluid persona management because "a persona connects together and meshes all the various characteristics that are staged and presented in the everyday and intended to interact with others" (Moore, Barbour, & Lee 2017, p. 4). The blog, then, as a medium of life writing, affords both senses of the self: the coherent, clearly narrativized self, and the fragmented, self-in-progress of the diary form, the self that emerges entry by entry. Because the professional persona is grounded in everyday practice and an awareness of context and audience, the performative dimension this persona lends to life writing in a blog merges with the specific temporal affordances of the blog as a medium.

The significance of medium and social context is also resonant with theories of authenticity. Philosopher Charles Taylor argues that "in the culture of authenticity, relationships are seen as the key loci of self-discovery and self-confirmation... [and because] identities are formed in open dialogue, unshaped by a predefined social script...the politics of equal recognition are more central and stressful" (1991, p. 49). To recognize the self as authentic is merely one part of the equation; to be *recognized* as authentic is, in fact, a personal and political imperative around which an entire culture has emerged. This culture, Taylor notes, lacks the scripts of class or bloodline that provided structure in previous historical moments and cultural regimes. Instead, contemporary authenticity is an open dialogue fraught with the potential for failure, which is why it must be negotiated through modes of communication that mark the individual as both unique and recognizable within perceived standards of identity.

Building on Taylor's notion of the "social horizon" of authenticity, Guignon argues that authenticity is a social value correlated with our faith in democratic ideals of individualism, and authenticity "brings with it a sense of belongingness and indebtedness to the wider social context that makes it possible" (2004, p. 163). Authenticity, then, is an expression of a mutual social relation, one which precipitates the formation of the self. Indeed, this social dimension, as Judith Butler has argued, is the foundation of social ethics, whereby the narrating "I," in attempting to gain recognition from the other, is bound by the historical and cultural conditions of that narration and must, in response, craft an account that will be recognized within these conditions of emergence (2005, pp. 38-40). In the life writing taking place on blogs, the engagement of this social horizon is given narrative form in the comments and responses that readers leave for bloggers. But it is also a paratextual discourse, in which the economic and social functions of blogs, the lifestyles they represent, and the embodied norms of their authors, all form the basis of a negotiation of professional authority and personal authenticity. It is this very visible negotiation that makes lifestyle blogs an important site of self-production.

The expectation of a recognizable persona points to one of the problematic dimensions of the discourse of selfhood expressed in lifestyle blogs: while on the one hand lifestyle blogs offer women a space of personal expression and social connection, in many other ways they reify a very narrow definition of female identity, one defined by upper middle-class consumption and white, cis-gendered, thin, heteronormativity. In the MediaKix (2022) list of the “6 Top Lifestyle Bloggers,” all of the women depicted in artful photos are white, thin, married mothers. It’s clear from the aesthetics of these images that control over one’s body and how it presents in the world, as well as what one consumes in terms of food, and goods for the home and self, is a critical component of the professional persona and stands in for the kind of certification or education that other professions might require. This projection of control also falls within what communications scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser identifies as a “neoliberal moral framework,” that includes the tenets of postfeminism and networked sociality, where women are expected to produce “a self-brand” (2012, p. 60), meaning that the authority of the profession rests in a form of personal regulation that is in alignment with the ideology of personal responsibility at the core of neoliberalism. If the blogger wants to offer life advice, it must be clear that she herself is a product of such advice and adheres to the established norms of an aspirational lifestyle. This is clear in Rachel Hollis’s work when she asserts, “You, and only you, are ultimately responsible for who you become and how happy you are” (2018, p. vii).

But while the dominant identity position of lifestyle bloggers remains alarmingly narrow, there are bloggers such as Luvvie Ajayi Jones, Sydnei Jarman, and Courtney Quinn who are redefining the racialized norms of the lifestyle blogger persona. As Luvvie Jones explains in a May 14, 2020, blog post, “I was afraid because I didn’t see the example of a writer like me, but I became that example for myself. I am a writer.” Even after blogging successfully for nine years, Jones hesitated to claim the professional title of writer until finishing the draft of her second book. Her reflection highlights the complex media ecology of blogging, where the prestige of a book grants a higher degree of legitimacy to the blogger as an author, despite the difference in medium and genre. But Jones also points to the ways that asserting the authority of a professional persona is even more challenging when the dominant paradigm isn’t a reflection of an individual’s identity, and points to the racial inequities that persist in lifestyle blogging.

Jones’s quote also highlights the vexed claims to professionalism that arise from a form of writing that has long been associated with the private, domestic sphere. While the diaristic structure of the blog is effective for expressing the authenticity of the individual, those same qualities are challenging for a professional persona. The blogger must be able to translate personal authenticity into a valuable form of expertise using the same tools. Because the diary is the interface through which the aspirational dimension of a blogger’s life becomes adaptable into the everyday life of the reader, bloggers signal awareness of this demand by highlighting their own role as readers. For instance, in the FAQ section of her lifestyle blog, *Love Taza*, author Naomi Davis explains:

at the end of my day, if I’m lucky, I’ll have ten or twenty minutes left to browse my favorite blogs or online sites. I want to be uplifted and edified and encouraged in those ten or twenty minutes of browsing and I hope this space can do something life that for you, too. I hope when you read this blog, over anything else, you’ll take away a message of finding the joy in what is around you. (2022)

The motivation for Davis as an author is rooted in her practice as a reader. Blogs, for her, are a way of realizing the joy in “life, marriage, motherhood, and all those little tasks that fill your day,” or the components of everyday life. Lifestyle blogging turns the mundane into an

aesthetically pleasing tableaux, accompanied by bite-sized autobiographical stories that transform the ten to twenty minutes of available reading time into an affirming and accessible practice. Davis uses this brief autobiographical narrative to craft a very reflexive persona: she is relatable to her readers because she is blog reader herself, and so understands what makes a blog uplifting and edifying, shaping the kind of blog she will create. Her framing also highlights how a cycle of textual consumption and production is centred as a core practice of selfhood and wellness in lifestyle blogging. As literary scholar Kylie Cardell argues, “the diary is a generic and rhetorical choice...that reveals a social and cultural context,” signalling both the role of authorial agency in choosing the mode of expression and an understanding of the situatedness of the genre (2014, p. 7). By embracing the specificities of the blog as a medium of networked sociality, lifestyle bloggers demonstrate their professionalism as both authors and consumers of lifestyle content, while expanding the boundaries of the diary as a genre of life writing.

By expressing her desire to reproduce the dimensions she finds valuable in other blogs, Naomi Davis makes explicit the paradoxical demand for individuation through replication that is core to the professional persona of a lifestyle blogger. Lifestyle blogs are didactic discursive spaces as well as expressive ones, and for this reason the question of authenticity is particularly fraught. Readers must be able to reproduce the lifestyle expressed through the genre of life writing, and so it isn't just the persona that is branded, it is the lifestyle itself, which must be presented in a way that makes its individual components available accessible to readers. The entire enterprise is based on the idea that the reader will be able to become their best and truest self by following the methods or buying the products that have allowed another to find her authentic self. So, while a blog like *A Girl in Progress* promotes “a space where you can strive to become the best version of yourself, while simultaneously accepting yourself exactly as you are,” (Norris 2021) this ideal state of selfhood is facilitated by coaching, a formatted journal, and an e-book of writing prompts all sold on the blog site. In his critique of post-Fordist capitalism, philosopher Paolo Virno notes that the rise of “communicative capitalism” results in a form of expertise that requires the witness of others and never settles into an end product, creating a fluctuating and technically demanding performance that collapses the boundary between personal and professional: “it is precisely this ability to maneuver among abstract and interchangeable opportunities which constitutes *professional quality*” (author's emphasis, 2003, 86). In order to establish a professional persona, the lifestyle blogger must be adept at the technical and communicative demands of the blog as a medium, but she must also deploy the blog as medium for her professional performance. This is a performance that must be continually reiterated, witnessed, and validated, an ongoing demand that creates an inescapable condition of precarity. Engaging with this precarity is thus a personal and professional imperative for lifestyle bloggers, emanating not only from their readers, but from the economic realities that give rise to the possibility of their professional personas.

The Diaristic Mode

Lifestyle bloggers present a self that is accessible, even intimate; the invitation to look inside the private, domestic sphere of the home and to open up the practices of daily life through their use of life writing (and here I am including autobiographical images and videos as elements of life writing on blogs), creates a sense that these individuals are transparent. And yet the notion of authenticity is a highly debated one in both life writing and lifestyle blogging. As scholar Sarah McRae (2017) has noted in her analysis of the *Get Off My Internets (GOMI)* blog, a crowd-sourced blog which critiques the performance of other bloggers, authenticity is produced within a complicated power dynamic between the producer of lifestyle blogs and their consumers/readers, and this negotiation emerges narratively in how authors manage the issue of control. As McRae argues, lifestyle bloggers are beholden to complicated questions about

“*what* authenticity looks like, and *who* has the authority to decide,” highlighting an undercurrent of tension between bloggers and their readers (2017, p. 25). In contemporary life writing this tension endures as well. Autobiographical scholarship acknowledges the multiplicity and performativity of selves that emerge in the life writing process². The self of life writing is a negotiated identity that bears witness to the emotional truth of an individual’s past without the possibility of absolute felicity to the objective truth of the historical past. The autobiographical act is thus a negotiation of this difference, with the written or textual self emerging as a production of the culturally and historically situated self as well as the remembered and writing selves. This complicated notion of the self highlights the importance of the “autobiographical pact,” what literary scholar Phillipe Lejeune has defined as the shared understanding between author and reader that the text is not fictional and represents a truthful account of the author’s life (2009, p. 203). The negotiation of authenticity, then, occurs within the author and between and amongst her readers as well. As a result, a professional persona that is read as authentic is one that recognizes these complex demands and routinely cedes narrative control. Decentering the locus of authorial control occurs primarily in two ways in lifestyle blogs; first by utilizing a confessional mode of metadiscourse, a move that reinvigorates Lejeune’s autobiographical pact for the medium of the blog, and secondly by actively calling-in readers as collaborators of the narrative developed in the lifestyle blog.

Blogs are structured so that the readers can respond to the textual production of the authors and other readers, creating an interactive loop that doesn’t exactly mirror conversation, but that does afford a greater degree of interactivity than other textual forms of life writing. Incorporating and responding to this engagement requires a significant investment of time and attention. And because the lifestyle blog incorporates different genres of life writing, the diaristic mode is used to emphasize the intimate register of the persona and signal moments of authenticity in the performance of self, which is one way of managing this engagement. One good example of this use of the diaristic mode occurs in *Cup of Jo*, the blog founded by Joanna Goddard. *Cup of Jo* receives over 5 million monthly page views thanks in part to what journalist Amelia Diamond describes as Goddard’s “whimsical yet approachable tone” (2017). Goddard began her career as a magazine journalist, eventually reaching the position of Editor in Chief of *Bene*, a quarterly lifestyle magazine, a background reflected in the clean and subtle aesthetic design of the blog. Everything about the visual layout of the site communicates balance, control, and a class-marked style. But a subtle visual cue on the original design of the home page disrupts this perfectly polished surface: the first letter of the word “of” in the site’s title looks as if it has been carefully cut from a piece of paper and then peeled back to reveal a surprise image underneath. This visual trope suggests that Goddard will pull back the surface layer of her life to reveal another layer of reality, one that doesn’t always match what is presented on the surface. This impression is reinforced by Goddard’s cosy and confessional narrative style. Her particular quirk is the use of parenthetical asides, which create metadiscursive interruptions that that make Goddard seem transparent and accessible and give readers a sense of being in the moment with her.

In the August 12, 2012, post “Blogging as a Career,” for instance, Goddard recounts how she ‘found herself’ as a blogger, highlighting both the successes and dead ends that led her to her current career. Reflecting on her professional path, she writes, “Five years ago, I broke up with that same boyfriend and needed a distraction from feeling sad (read: eating potato chips and watching TV). (Funny that now that I’m writing this bio, breakups seem to be at the crux of all my positive life decisions! When a door closes, a window opens, right?)” Goddard here is not painting her past as an inevitable trajectory to her successful present; she instead uses the diaristic mode to reveal different and less controlled aspects of her life. That one word, “read,” offers herself up as a text available to readers and multiplies the potential meaning of that

moment. The self she reveals in the parentheses is breaching the gendered norms of controlled female eating and idleness. This additional information is humorous and confessional, potentially reworking or deepening the meaning of Goddard's narrative. These parenthetical asides also provide a real-time record of reflexivity. The two run-on parenthetical phrases are stacked together with the second commenting on the first. The first phrase is much more self-directed; Goddard presents a snapshot of herself in the moment and then uses the second parenthetical phrase to zoom out to a pattern that it seems she is just noticing in the moment. Finally, she uses the third sentence to switch to a more reader-focused framing of the situation, ending with a rhetorical question that actively solicits the reader's opinion. While these brief sentences may seem disordered and even silly, they are a masterful evocation of authenticity. As Goddard demonstrates, being honest about oneself, even confessional, is not nearly enough in the age of interactive media. She narratively mirrors the interactivity of the blog medium to create a more layered and nuanced identity that also has the sense of real-time composition. But it is also important to note that Goddard offers this confessional vignette in a post about her role as a blogging professional, illustrating her understanding of the co-construction of her personal and professional personas.

Courtney Quinn from *Color Me Courtney* has a slightly different approach to these metatextual moments that reflect her own professional persona. Quinn started her blog as a side hustle in 2017 as her way to break into the fashion business. Quinn has an MBA, and the blog reflects her marketing savvy. It is vibrant and visually compelling, with the bright colours and whimsical aesthetic that reject many of the earlier standards of lifestyle blogging that Goddard embraces. Quinn also relies heavily on Instagram, meaning that much of her content is visual—photos and videos—but through this medium she also provides a revealing metadiscourse about the creation of these seemingly effortless images on her website. In a May 15, 2021, Instagram video embedded in her blog, Quinn highlights the hours of labour that it takes to produce a single image. Her playful caption, “Always directing,” with the hand to forehead emoji, reveals the tension between the freewheeling and seemingly spontaneous image she projects and the tightly controlled aesthetic vision that makes it possible. But like Goddard, she skilfully uses the confessional, revelatory video to underscore her professionalism and her claims to expertise.

Both Quinn and Goddard also actively emphasize the social dimension of authenticity by foregrounding their readers/followers not just as passive consumers, but as collaborators. In her post about blogging as a career, Goddard explains that her decision to include discussions of motherhood on the blog was a result of “having a close relationship with my beloved readers. Starting the Motherhood Mondays column took the relationship to a new level (do you agree? :)” (2012). Here she directly addresses her reader as “you,” suggesting that their approbation of such a move enhances the authority of the community she is only part of creating. And Quinn explains in an interview with *Google for Creators*, that it is her community of readers and followers that not only motivate her, but also help her shape her content (July, 2020). In her post, “Why Failure Isn't a Bad Thing” (2021), Quinn explains that the genesis for the post was the community response to an earlier post: “after talking publicly about how I failed I got an influx of messages saying I was being too hard on myself because I used the F word,” before going on to explain why failure is so important for her career. Goddard and Quinn both understand that the blog is not a broadcast, but an interaction. They identify their readers as members of a shared community of authors and address them directly, particularly in ways that reveal their own vulnerability. In doing so, they reinforce their personal authenticity while also subtly emphasizing their professional expertise.

Diary as Disciplinary Practice

While authenticity is an important component of the lifestyle blogger's persona, they must also convey authority. Because lifestyle bloggers offer their practices of everyday life as a template for others to follow, they must also make clear that their expertise is founded in a dimension that requires productivity and thus has recognizable value. This is an extension of what theorist Michel Foucault identified as "an entire practice of the self" that emerges at the height of the Roman era of the culture of the self (2001, p. 86). Selfhood is a state of doing rather than a state of being, he details, one that demands ongoing disciplinary and often corrective work during the adult years (2001, pp. 87-90). And for the lifestyle blogger to proclaim herself as a professional, she must be able to establish this disciplinary work of selfhood as within her legitimate realm of knowledge. Life writing serves a valuable function in this process, specifically the way that journaling or diary writing is framed as a keystone practice of an aspirational lifestyle. As Kylie Cardell explains, the idea of "the authentic self as available through a process of excavation and redemption, as a mundane but central project of the modern individual, underpin[s] the position of the diary as a unique disciplinary technology for self-analysis and authentic self-discovery" (2014, p. 30). The diary is how the lifestyle blogger produces her autobiographical account—creating content for her site—and establishes such discourse as a practice of both selfhood and mastery. And by modelling its effectiveness, she positions herself as a professional of selfhood, creating a field of knowledge over which she proclaims authority. Set against the backdrop of the culture of the self and the demands of an identifiable profession, the lifestyle blogger's expertise emerges in her ability to use life writing in order to help others build their best life, using practices like life writing.

One example of this paradigm can be found in Rachel Hollis's blog, *MsRachelHollis*. While the site has many of the same elements as both Goddard and Quinn, Hollis has a less confessional and more formulaic discursive style that feels infinitely reproducible, a sense underscored by the heavy rotation of self-branded products and workshops that feature in every post. One such example is a post titled "The Decisions I Make Daily to be my Best Self" (2020), a list of seven actions that Rachel Hollis offers to the reader as a formula so they can be their best selves:

1. Make my bed
2. Drink water. Lots and lots of it.
3. Write down my gratitude
4. Eat the stupid salad
5. Move my body
6. Quality time with my family
7. Push myself

In each step a kind of disciplinary action is required—eating a salad not for pleasure but for benefit, movement and water consumption in order to keep the body within a socially prescribed range of acceptability. Even the idea of spending time with one's family is framed as "work I love to do, but it is not without effort," signalling that caring for the self is an act of control and regulation at every stage (2020). None of Hollis's proposed rules are ground-breaking and most, in fact, repackage the tenets of twenty-first-century wellness culture, but she is positioning these practices as rooted in her own lifestyle, endorsing their validity as a

practice. Within this framework, identity becomes a reproducible formula that disciplines the body and the mind in order to achieve an ideal yet abstract “best self.”

Crucial to this discipline of the mind is the habit of daily gratitude writing, the act of journaling that Hollis is, in effect, modelling for the reader. But rather than revealing herself through this practice, as Quinn and Goddard do, Hollis positions journaling as regulatory: “The act of writing down your gratitude every day has power...Whatever you do, turn this into a habit you do without fail, every day” (2020). Like her directives to eat salad, exercise, and drink water, daily gratitude journaling emerges as a habit of subjective control. It is a source of power rather than reflection. This corresponds to the deep gendered history of diary keeping as a “discipline of self-reflection that leads to self-control,” producing a subject who is not self-sufficient, but one “forever at work, caught in a cycle of eternal vigilance and the need for constant reinvention” (Cardell 2014, p. 43). Journal writing, then, like Hollis’s other prescribed steps to the good life, is a practice of individual control and a process of self-discovery that can be mastered only through its repetition.

The endless work of self-control through the discipline of self-writing points to both the impossibility of conclusion—or narrative end as other forms of autobiography promise—and an implicit sense that the self is inherently unruly. Hollis argues that the dailiness of her documentary and disciplinary practices bring the self into focus. But her recognition that these activities constitute a state of ongoing maintenance rather than a state of actualization signals a discourse of a control society. In his extension of Foucault’s formulation of the disciplinary society Gilles Deleuze argues that the control society has succeeded the disciplinary society in late capitalism, and this society is characterized by different forms of “modulation” that require an individual to perpetually delay fulfillment of expertise, and to instead submit to “perpetual training” (1992, pp. 4-5). Such training requires a model and produces demand for tools and practices of training. Hollis steps into this gap by offering clear practices of perpetual modulation, producing small changes that require reproduction in order to be sustained. Her recommendations bring her expertise into alignment with larger contemporary ideological norms of selfhood. This alignment illustrates her mastery of such norms and reinforces her status as a professional of selfhood.

In her professional persona, Hollis employs a much more one-way mode of communication that bloggers Goddard or Quinn, underscoring that her authority is central. Hollis notes in her “The Decisions I Make Daily to be my Best Self” post (2020) that she uses her own brand of journal, the *Start Today* journal for her gratitude work. The absence of description in the post about her own practice becomes an invitation to learn more by purchasing the journal. In this incredibly recursive move, Hollis journals about journaling in the journal that she has created in order to entice others to journal as she does. Such a practice speaks to the development of the “dividual” in the control society, a subject position that replaces the individual in Deleuze’s formulation and is defined by anthropologist Karl Smith as a fractal, atomistic, socially embedded, “heteronomous actor performing a culturally written script” (2012, p. 53). Smith’s use of the term script correlates with the journal templates Hollis is offering as scripts of selfhood, and points to the ways that selfhood professionals are co-constructed with the demands for such scripts. Political theorist Jodi Dean similarly posits that blogs as a medium are cultural affective scripts that allow an individual to adopt different identities without having to also endure the political realities—both in terms of community and vulnerability—that accompany a more permanent form of identification, disrupting the opportunity for a politics of allegiance that can emerge from the shared recognition of difference (2010, pp. 63-73). What Hollis offers, then, through her seven-step formula for selfhood, is an experience of selfhood absent the identity or political risk that a social

negotiation of authenticity might create. The formulaic good life she peddles is an echo chamber, a repetition of disciplinary behaviours that creates copies rather than individuals. This is not the model of shared authorship and sociality that Goddard and Quinn model. Hollis presents authenticity as a consumptive simulacrum of selfhood whose effectiveness derives from its unfulfillability, a requirement of her professional persona. Because it never completely satisfies, it must be continually iterated, creating a sense of value for her authority.

CONCLUSION

One final complication for the professional persona of lifestyle blogger is that of navigating a personal change in a public, revelatory forum. How a blogger manages such a change impacts an audience's perception of her authenticity and authority. The possibility of replicability that is the source of authority for lifestyle bloggers also creates the profession's precarity because such a premise relies on a static notion of authenticity while the diaristic nature of the blog medium exposes an ever-changing self. The long-form multimodal structure of blogs offers a sense that readers "know" bloggers because the duration of engagement with their life story is both daily and ongoing. Psychologist Anita Blanchard studies virtual communities and describes her individual attachment to lifestyle blogger Heather Armstrong of *Dooce.com* as part of a shared social discourse: "Dooce was stored in the 'friend' parts of our brain because people really got involved with her experiences...we would be standing around at parties talking about her like we knew her" (Lieber 2019). But this knowledge also leads to an expectation of consistency—commentators on *GOMI* regularly point to instances of identity or messaging inconsistency by lifestyle bloggers—a demand that can be regulated by the intimacy and archive of the blogger's life writing. Communicating personal changes can thus be a fraught endeavour that undermines the professional persona. Many lifestyle bloggers have faced backlash and very public accusations of inauthenticity when their life writing revealed elements that altered the personal and professional personas they had created. Rachel Hollis faced backlash after announcing her divorce in 2020, with fans suggesting that the marriage advice that she offered was based on a lie. Heather Armstrong of *Dooce.com* and Glennon Doyle of *Momastery* have also had to navigate this tension between changes in their personal lives and their blogging personas. As Heather Armstrong described in an interview, "People were just awful to me, calling me a fraud, a liar, saying how my kids weren't safe with me. It was all broadcast across the web, and I was reading about it every day, and it was hell" (Lieber 2019). While the diaristic mode worked to establish these women in their personal and professional personas, the turn in their professional fortunes because of changes in their personal lives illustrates the difficult alliance of these two realms and the inherent tension of the lifestyle blogger as a professional persona.

Another tension is how lifestyle blogging relies on an assumption of relatability; as microcelebrities, bloggers are more accessible and 'real' than celebrities. But their very success as bloggers makes them exceptional. Managing this tension through life writing can be done successfully, as Goddard and Quinn have shown, but when the blogger over indexes on her professional persona, which is based on her difference from her readers, she is disrupting a delicate balance central to her status as a lifestyle professional. It is perhaps not surprising that Rachel Hollis has faced this dilemma, given her reliance on the prescriptive function of her life writing. In an April 1, 2021, TikTok video in which she responded to outrage about her comments about the "sweet woman who cleans her toilets," which made her "unrelatable," she underscores her individuality by asserting, "What is it about me that made you think I want to be relatable? No, sis. Literally everything I do in my life is to live a life that most people can't relate to" (Treasure 2021). Citing the amount of "hard work" that she put into establishing her career, Hollis privileges her professional persona, despite the ways that it further distances her

from her audience. This directive was also delivered as a close-framed, self-shot video, and the misalignment of the intimacy of her chosen medium from the intended distancing of her message creates a further sense of schism in which Hollis seems to lose sight of the balance between the prescriptive and the personal that originally allowed her to originally establish herself as a lifestyle professional.

In using the diary to establish a persona as authentic, the lifestyle blogger acknowledges that the personal life they are presenting correlates with growth, development, change, and social negotiation, as Joanna Goddard and Courtney Quinn illustrate. At the same time, the persona of lifestyle professional demands that the presentation of authority is grounded in stable, reproducible, and consumable dimensions of lifestyle. If a blogger offers marriage advice and then reveals that she is going through a divorce, there are claims of personal inauthenticity when, in fact, the underlying breach is in the professional persona. While the rhetoric may be personal, the presumed fault is professional. This places lifestyle bloggers in a precarious position and calls attention to their highly negotiated claims to the professional persona and the ways in which life writing plays a vital role in the balance of their two public personas.

END NOTES

1. A September 29, 2021, article on the blogging platform Wix notes that advertising, merchandise sales, sponsored content, and affiliate links are some of the top methods for blogs to become profitable.
2. Feminist scholars of autobiography such as Susan Friedman (1998), Shari Benstock (1991), and Hertha D. Sweet Wong (1996) in particular have engaged with the complicated notion of selfhood in life writing.

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