

GET OFF MY INTERNETS: HOW ANTI-FANS DECONSTRUCT LIFESTYLE BLOGGERS' AUTHENTICITY WORK

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the nature of authenticity labour in personal lifestyle blogging through a case study of travel bloggers. Specifically, it looks at how participants in the blogging anti-fan community Get Off My Internets (GOMI) identify and deconstruct lifestyle bloggers' efforts to perform an 'authentic' persona. Within the broader context of online micro-celebrity, self-branding, and persona, I examine authenticity as a kind of labour that is necessary for lifestyle blogging 'success,' where success is measured by metrics like heavy website traffic and brand sponsorships. Lifestyle bloggers perform authenticity partly by narrating the process of cultivating personal authenticity through the ongoing process of self-improvement towards an idealized goal. This personal authenticity is based on existentialist notions of 'being true' to one's essential nature and personal commitments. In the GOMI community, bloggers' representations of the inner life are frequently viewed with suspicion, and interpreted as 'staged,' and therefore inauthentic, performances of authenticity. Bloggers are also expected to demonstrate a commitment to ethical authenticity, and, subsequently, attempts to monetize their content through sponsorships and affiliate links are viewed with suspicion. Lastly, authenticity work in lifestyle blogging involves emphasizing one's ordinariness alongside one's extraordinariness, resulting in what I call 'aspirational extra/ordinariness.' By observing trends in how travel bloggers perform authenticity and how anti-fans deconstruct these performances, it becomes apparent that critical publics identify inauthenticity in moments where the constructedness or performedness of authenticity is most apparent, indicating that while micro-celebrities rely on authenticity labour for their popularity, this very labour can detract from a persona's perceived authenticity when it becomes obvious to publics.

KEY WORDS

Authenticity, Persona, Micro-celebrity, Blog, Anti-fan

This paper examines the authenticity discourses surrounding personal lifestyle blogs, which I define as autobiographical blogs focused on aspects of 'living well,' usually dedicated to 'niche' genres like travel, parenting, fitness, etc. Specifically, it looks at how participants in the blogging anti-fan forum *Get Off My Internets* (GOMI) identify and deconstruct lifestyle bloggers' efforts to perform an 'authentic' persona. Within the context of online micro-celebrity, I examine authenticity as a kind of labour that is necessary for lifestyle blogging success. 'Success' in this case is defined as social and monetary capital acquired through heavy website traffic and brand sponsorships. I include a case study of GOMI's 'Travel Blogging' subforum in order to give an

example of how lifestyle blogger ‘anti-fandoms’ draw on genre expertise to negotiate what makes bloggers appear inauthentic within the context of their blogging niche. From observing how the participants within the ‘Travel Bloggers’ subforum talk about authenticity, I observe, first, that bloggers’ narratives of ongoing self-improvement and self-fulfilment in the pursuit of existential authenticity (conceived of as being true to oneself and one’s personal commitments) are frequently viewed with suspicion, and interpreted as ‘staged’ (and therefore inauthentic) performances of authenticity. Secondly, I note that bloggers are criticized for not adhering to a discernible, consistent personal ethic, such as when they promote products for sponsors in a seemingly forced or inauthentic manner. Lastly, it is apparent that, across lifestyle genres, authenticity work involves curating a persona that is aspirational, but *ordinary*, attracting followers with the narrative that the extraordinary lifestyle being presented can be achieved by the average person, if they follow the blogger’s example.

Because anti-fans are especially attentive to evidence of the constructedness of micro-celebrity persona, GOMI discourse gives us insight into the numerous ways in which artifice is registered: the trends mentioned above suggest that doubts about micro-celebrity authenticity can be distilled to concerns about the inauthenticity of authenticity labour. Once bloggers are perceived to be actively working to present an authentic persona, the success of this work is jeopardized. One way in which authenticity labour becomes obvious to publics is through the use of unoriginal or generic strategies. As emerging genres develop enough to have their own norms, tropes, and dedicated followers who become ‘genre experts,’ some kinds of posts become so familiar that they appear unoriginal or inauthentic. As Joshua Gamson observes in his study of contemporary American celebrity culture, “yesterday’s markers of sincerity and authenticity are today’s signs of hype and artifice” (1994, p. 144). Further, if a blogger shares content that does not fully align with previous representations of who she is and what she claims to value, this might be taken as evidence that there is no substance or ‘authentic self’ behind her persona, and that the blogger simply adapts her identity to fit the exigencies of the moment, whether that means sharing the right intimate disclosure at the right time, or accommodating the demands of sponsors. When publics perceive evidence of unoriginality and inconsistency in bloggers’ personas, they are less likely to accept personas as authentic, recognizing instead that personas are constructed. Through an exploration of trends in how GOMI participants identify inauthenticity in lifestyle bloggers’ persona work, it becomes clear that online micro-celebrities’ ability to perform authenticity is most jeopardized when the fact of persona as something that is *performed* is most discernible.

WHY STUDY GET OFF MY INTERNETS?

The front page of the website *Get Off My Internets* features news-style updates on content posted by popular lifestyle bloggers, highlighting the ridiculous or obviously insincere aspects of bloggers’ updates, with writers and commenters delighting in picking apart bloggers’ lapses in judgment. What is particularly fascinating about this website, however, is the forum attached to it. The GOMI discussion forum is divided into subforums based on different lifestyle blogging genres, where participants criticize individual bloggers, picking out and tearing apart examples of all things staged, insincere, unethical, exaggerated — in short, all things *inauthentic*.

How should we define an online community that appears to exist for the sole purpose of expressing dislike for online micro-celebrities? Henry Jenkins’ term “participatory culture” (1992; 2006) provides a starting point. This term refers to the influence of networked media in the movement from a one-to-many culture of passive audiences/consumers, to a many-to-many culture where consumers of digital products and users of digital services can actively respond and disseminate their own ideas and creations using the same sites. However, Jenkins’ framing of participatory culture tends to focus on the potential for civic and creative engagement from participants in online culture, avoiding less friendly forms of participation like parody and trolling.

I propose that we can think of GOMI as peculiar subset of participatory culture called the 'anti-fandom.' Anti-fan communities are similar to regular fandoms, in that they provide "a semistructured space where competing interpretations and evaluations of texts are proposed, debated, and negotiated and where readers speculate about the nature of mass media and their own relationship to it" (Jenkins 1992, p. 88). In his work on anti-fans, Jonathan Gray looks at what he calls "sarcastic criticism" or "snark" in the form of acerbic commentary and summaries of tv shows and episodes considered bad (2005, p. 846). He observes that anti-fans form their own communities or "hijack" existing fan communities (2005, p. 847). Liz Giuffre describes anti-fandom as "a system of community and identity formation based on an agreed upon disapproval of a particular artist, genre, movement, or piece" (2014, p. 50). She differentiates it from the term "hater," arguing that "unlike hate, which is arguably a destructive process, anti-fandom can be a constructive form of engagement" (2014, p. 53). For example, anti-fan critique influences future directions in production of content, and still generates traffic for the person being discussed.

Performing a case study of a sub-community of GOMI's anti-fan forum gives insight into publics' expectations for how micro-celebrities should perform authentic personas. The 'Travel Bloggers' subforum of GOMI is relatively new, and was created in response to user demand in 2015. Compared to the more popular 'Healthy Living' and 'DIY' forums, where some discussion threads for the most popular blogs are thousands of pages long and updated by the minute, the 'Travel Bloggers' forum has a smaller community of genre experts, with only a handful of bloggers inspiring multi-thread pages. Although it is less active than other subforums, the travel blogger forum provides us with examples of the kinds of authenticity discourses that occur in discussions of other blogging genres, but on a smaller scale that makes it possible to give an overview of trends and topics specific to a particular genre. I would argue that in order to understand how GOMI works as an anti-fan discourse community, it is essential to recognize how this community breaks down into several smaller discourse communities (subforums). In order to effectively participate in a particular subforum, participants demonstrate knowledge of the bloggers beings discussed, as well as the broader context of the blogging niche in which they write.

My observation of activity in the "Travel Bloggers" forum reveals some recurring trends in how authenticity is evaluated within the travel blog genre. Travel bloggers are judged based on moments of 'staged' existential authenticity, questions of ethical authenticity, and their failure to provide a convincing presentation of 'aspirational extra/ordinariness.' I propose that, while each of these components are also relevant to other lifestyle blogging genres, it is important to recognize that the specifics of how these elements manifest vary according to genre. This case study is meant to give an example of how participants within GOMI subforums negotiate casual metrics for evaluating authenticity with specific reference to the norms of a blogger's niche genre, which lends crucial insight into how lifestyle bloggers must manage their personas according to genre-specific codes of authenticity. Looking at how the GOMI community pinpoints inauthenticity along genre lines helps us understand the inherently fluid, negotiated nature of authenticity work within online micro-celebrity persona construction and performance, and contextualizes the need for precision in carving out such personas successfully.

In order to understand the labour that goes into micro-celebrities' performances of authenticity, it is helpful to have an idea of what publics expect from these performances. Early writing in the emerging field of persona studies has articulated a commitment to studying individual agency in persona work: in their introduction to the first issue of *Persona Studies*, Marshall and Barbour differentiate the objective of persona studies from other work in cultural studies that focuses on audience agency by proposing that, rather than focusing on "collective configurations of meaning" within communities and subcultures, persona studies should look at "how the individual gains or articulates agency" as a response to "the complexity of

reconfigured structures of power in this differently constituted era of personalization” in online social life (2015, p. 8-9). I agree that contemporary online social life makes it essential that we focus on the work behind individual personas, but I propose that we can add productive nuance to considerations of the decisions that go into persona work by looking at feedback from publics, feedback that introduces some the recurring discourses and criticism that influence lifestyle bloggers’ authenticity work.

GOMI participants’ critiques might appear trivial or, perhaps, be received as yet another example of the insidious vacuity of internet comment culture (e.g. Lovink 2011), but if we look closely, these acts of irreverence reveal extensive genre knowledge within distinct lifestyle blog niches, advanced understanding of the rhetorical exigencies of performing a persona across different social media platforms (each with distinct norms and affordances), and a high level of investment in the idea that digital micro-celebrities should be, above all else, authentic. Publics’ expectations for how authenticity will be performed shift according to platform and genre, and, importantly, evolve with time as common tropes and strategies for persona cultivation become familiar. These evolving expectations give us insight into the rhetorical exigencies of authenticity work in online persona, and the extent to which individuals must carefully manage and continually adapt strategies for presenting a ‘natural,’ ‘real,’ ‘relatable,’ authentic self. Whether or not they are aware of GOMI, skilled lifestyle bloggers understand that publics are consuming their content in relation to other bloggers’ content in the same genre, and critiquing their work with an eye for authenticity.

LIFESTYLE BLOGGERS AS MICRO-CELEBRITIES

Micro-celebrities (and social media users in general) construct ‘authentic’ online personas using practices similar to those employed by ‘traditional’ celebrities. P. David Marshall’s 2014 introduction to *Celebrity and Power* acknowledges the fact that networked digital practice has led to the increased relevance of celebrity practice for ‘normal’ individuals. He writes that, “through technology, the socially networked individual has become more prevalent in the creation of contemporary culture and a linchpin in the organization and flow of cultural forms and practices” (p. xxiv). New networking technologies introduce “new metrics of fame” including measurements of followers, likes, and views across different sites. As a result, more people are “engaged in processes of an attention economy that used to be the province of celebrities” (p. xxiv). Theresa Senft defines micro-celebrity as “the commitment to deploying and maintaining one’s online identity as if it were a branded good” (2013, p. 346). Alice Marwick defines micro-celebrity as “a state of being famous to a niche group of people” as well as “a behaviour: the presentation of oneself as a celebrity regardless of who is paying attention” (2013, p. 114). boyd and Marwick view celebrity as a “an organic and ever-changing performative practice” (2011, p. 140) and “a continuum that can be practiced across the spectrum of fame” (2011, p. 141). We might then think of celebrity and micro-celebrity as forming parts of the same continuum, and sharing a common set of practices that include “ongoing maintenance of a fan base, performed intimacy, authenticity and access, and construction of a consumable persona” (boyd and Marwick 2011, p. 140).

Although lifestyle bloggers employ similar tactics to mainstream celebrities in managing their online presence, looking at GOMI’s lifestyle blogger anti-fandom elucidates how online micro-celebrity is accompanied by publics’ expectation that these personas, unlike ‘traditional’ celebrity personas, are held to a higher— or at least a different — standard of authenticity. This is partly because micro-celebrities are presumed to be ‘normal’ people and therefore are expected to have more in common with their readers in terms of lifestyle, shared experiences, and inner life. When we think about how online micro-celebrities manage their personas, ‘authenticity’ emerges as a site of value and a form of labour: it is thus appropriate when Richard A. Peterson uses the term “authenticity work” (1997, p. 223) to describe the effort that goes into presenting oneself as authentic. Because ‘authentic’ performances of subjectivity are

an important self-branding strategy for building and maintaining an online audience, we might think of authenticity as a form of labour (Hearn 2008, Genz 2015, Marwick 2013) aimed at accumulating socio-cultural capital, which, for bloggers, can sometimes be exchanged for monetary gain in the form of sponsored posts, ad revenue, and even book deals. In the production and marketing of goods, conveying an aura of 'authenticity' in a product increases its value, and marketing literature suggests that strategies for 'rendering authenticity' in a product are important part of any business model (Gilmore & Pine 2007). This marketing logic also extends to the commodification of authenticity in online micro-celebrity.

Micro-celebrity online practice has some similarities to how celebrities manage their media accounts: for example, in their examination of celebrity Twitter practice, boyd and Marwick (2011) observe that, for both celebrities and micro-celebrities, online practice requires managing multiple audiences, encouraging a sense of connection with fans through the use of shared codes, fostering intimacy with one's audience by revealing personal details, and performing authenticity and sincerity. However, expectations for micro-celebrities differ in some key respects. One notable difference is the fact that micro-celebrities do not have the same reputation-management resources as traditional celebrities. There are no teams of people working to maintain the micro-celebrity's online brand. In her study of Youtube personality Jenna Marbles, Emma Maguire observes that, "In contrast to print media autobiographies that rely on publishing houses and agents to market an authorial self, the self-brand of a YouTuber relies on the absence (or at least the appearance of the absence) of commercial or corporate interference" (2015, p. 78). For this reason, according to Marwick, micro-celebrities are expected to be more authentic, "presumably because they are not subject to the processes of the same star-making system" (Marwick 2013, p. 119). Senft highlights another way in which micro-celebrity is different from traditional celebrity, when she suggests that audiences' interest in online micro-celebrities "takes an ethical turn" when, "rather than speculating on who a Web personality 'really is,' viewers tend to debate the personality's obligations to those who made her *what* she is. This is because on the Web, popularity depends upon a connection to one's audience rather than an enforced separation from them" (2008, p. 25-26). What becomes apparent when we think about how 'authenticity' in online micro-celebrity is distinct from traditional celebrity authenticity, is that micro-celebrities must avoid acting as though they *think* they are real celebrities, no matter how much their experiences and practices might resemble those of traditional celebrities.

READING GOMI: 'LURKING' AS METHOD

This case study of GOMI's 'Travel Bloggers' subforum uses an "academic lurker" methodology (Gray 2005, p. 847), contextualizing the authenticity work of micro-celebrity personas in lifestyle blogging genres through a close look at how audience expectations for micro-celebrity authenticity are negotiated within the publics surrounding different blogging genres. In order to collect material, I read through all the active (one page of posts or more) threads in the 'Travel Bloggers' subforum, and familiarized myself with the travel blogging genre by reading several of the most popular travel blogs (as determined by mentions on GOMI, as well as top search results on Google, and mentions on 'best of' travel blog lists). As an academic lurker, rather than an interviewer or a surveyor, I focus on what forum participants make publicly available through their forum contributions, which primarily take the form of text commentary with occasional accompanying images (emojis, reaction gifs, etc).

I propose that analysing feedback requires a degree of familiarity with the norms or 'rules' of posting on different sites and in different communities. In many cases, understanding audience feedback requires taking the time to read extensively within the discourse communities (Swales 1990) formed by publics. These kinds of discourse communities tend to materialize in forums or the comments sections of different posts on the same website, so that often a casual reader who is not familiar with the posting culture will feel confused or irritated

by seemingly nonsensical posts. An example of this kind of confusion would be when Geert Lovink appears to be disturbed by what he perceives as YouTube commenters' "hostile anxiety to engage with other neighbouring voices" which results in "an avalanche of random and repetitive comments" (2011, p. 58).

I would like to emphasize instead that it takes extensive reading and observation within an online genre and the audience networks connected to it, to comprehend how meaning is negotiated within those networks. In the GOMI forums, posts often reference ongoing or 'insider' jokes when responding to new content. These jokes are specific to the community, and the nuances of what is being said can only be understood after reading through much of the earlier posts and comments. For example, a norm within this community is for posters' usernames to contain references to earlier jokes or discussions from the forums. As a result, usernames like 'Tiger Anus Selfie' appear nonsensical and troll-ish, but are often references to particularly memorable forum discussions. In the above example, the apparently random username is a reference to a discussion in the 'Travel Bloggers' forum where users critiqued the 'About Me' page of *Living in Another Language*, which at the time (June 2014) featured a photo of the blogger reclining against the rear side of a sedated tiger (a popular tourist activity in South East Asia, which GOMI participants critique as inhumane).

BLOGGING INTIMATELY: EXISTENTIAL 'BACKSTAGES'

Until the twentieth century, the word "authenticity" most often referred to whether something (usually a text) could be trusted as true, verifiable, or genuine, or to whether something (an artwork, for example) constituted an "accurate reflection of real life" ('authenticity' *OED*). Over the last hundred years, authenticity has come to be associated with the inner life, and how habits of inwardness and introspection manifest in outward performance. The concept of authenticity as applied to human beings emerged alongside the rise of individualism, inwardness, and the related literary genre of autobiography, and relies on the assumption of a distinction between inward and outward, private and public individual. As a philosophical and ethical concept, it involves "putting one's behaviour under reflexive scrutiny" and is associated with reflections on "the good life" (Varga 2013, p. 3). Authenticity is sometimes used interchangeably with sincerity, or "the quality of truthful correspondence between inner feelings and their outward expression" (*OED*). Lionel Trilling argues that authenticity and sincerity, though related, are nevertheless distinct (1972): while sincerity is a matter of saying what one means, authenticity refers to being true to whom one is. Whether or not GOMI participants are aware of the philosophical heritage of this conception of authenticity, they nevertheless are frequently interested both in whether bloggers are sincerely expressing their inner feelings, and in the degree to which bloggers are true to personal commitments despite external pressures.

Within the anti-fan community GOMI, 'authenticity' is seldom invoked explicitly. However, reading through the forums quickly reveals that participants' dislike of certain bloggers is intimately related to conceptions of personal authenticity, which means that, in their own way, the irreverent anti-fans of this forum are participating in a centuries-old discussion about what it means to live authentically. In the twenty-first century, however, questions of what it means to live authentically are inseparable from questions of what it means to manage one's online persona authentically. Posters are often concerned with whether a blogger's intimate disclosures about personal victories and dilemmas are sincere or fabricated for effect. They are also suspicious of whether a blogger appears to be acting in a way that is true to her personal commitments despite external factors (i.e. economic incentive or the constraints imposed by a blogging genre or site). A common critique used when casting a blogger's authenticity into doubt is to question whether that person 'stands' for anything or whether they simply adapt depictions of who they 'really are' in order to meet audience demands.

These publics do not seem to expect micro-celebrity bloggers to demonstrate perfect satisfaction with the degree of existential authenticity they have achieved — on the contrary, it is potentially more ‘authentic’ to represent the journey toward personal authenticity as a struggle. Sarah Banet-Weiser suggests that self-disclosure is an important online branding strategy for communicating authenticity, writing that “Digitally-aided disclosure [...] relies on traditional discourses of the authentic self as one that is transparent, without artifice, open to others” (2012, p. 60). The travel bloggers I look at in this study frequently use these kinds of disclosures to foster intimacy with their audience and invite spectators into their inner quest for personal fulfilment (a tactic that GOMI participants view with scepticism).

Popular personal bloggers like to invite readers ‘behind the scenes’ of their personal life as part of their authenticity work. Critical publics are sensitive to the ways that such invitations could be staged. Authenticity and authenticity discourse has been an ongoing debate in Tourism Studies for decades. Within that field, the concept of ‘staged authenticity’ in tourism is well-known. Dean MacCannell uses Goffman’s dramaturgical model (1959), which argues that people perform for others as though on a stage, giving ‘backstage’ access to only some. He adapts this model to the tourism industry’s production of ‘authentic’ attractions aimed at tourists, arguing that tourists’ demands for authentic experiences are met by the tourism industry with false backstages, or ‘staged authenticity.’ These fake backstages are designed to reveal the “inner workings of the place,” yet there is a “staged quality to the proceedings that lends to them an aura of superficiality, albeit a superficiality not always perceived as such by the tourist” (1999, p. 98). Borrowing this concept of authenticity as something that is staged for others in a way that is meant to give the appearance of an ‘insider’s’ look, I propose that lifestyle blogs can be thought of as stages where bloggers perform authenticity in ways designed to be easily consumable for their target audience.

One strategy travel bloggers use to perform authenticity is creating content that invites the public ‘behind the scenes’ of the travel blogging lifestyle, a lifestyle that, according to bloggers, consists of much hard work, doubt, and loneliness. Whether this authenticity is a real window into the actual and existential labour that makes up the blogger’s life, or into a staged backstage, is up for debate. As is usually the case, GOMI participants are not convinced that these performances are sincere, due to what they perceive as the constructedness of ‘behind the scenes’ moments in travel blogs. It is obvious to commenters in the ‘Travel Bloggers’ subforum that bloggers try to appear authentic by talking about the hardships of their lifestyle and by fostering intimacy through personal disclosures. These performances appear staged to GOMI participants, whether because the blogger is using tropes common to their subgenre, or because the performance in question is inconsistent with the blogger’s previous expressions of identity. GOMI participants’ scepticism towards obviously constructed performances indicates that micro-celebrities are perhaps not viewed as performers in the same way as traditional celebrities, in the sense that any evidence of strategy or pre-meditation in their self-disclosures takes away from the authenticity of these personas.

Within the travel blogging genre, there is a subgenre of posts where bloggers ‘confess’ that (no matter how glamorous it may look to others), they do not always like their job because of the uncertain nature of the work and accompanying lifestyle. Efforts to convey the travel blogger life as difficult work seems to grate on participants who do not find bloggers’ descriptions to be convincingly onerous (that the GOMI community in general does not consider travel blogging to be a legitimate occupation is clear in the subforum’s sarcastic subheading: ‘Because Vacations are a Full Time Job’). One of the most frequently discussed blogs in the ‘Travel Bloggers’ subforum is *Adventurous Kate* by Kate McCulley. GOMI participants balk at a post titled ‘On Living in Perpetual Motion,’ which is a reflection on missing the conveniences of ‘settled’ life, and includes the example of “spilling red wine on a white cashmere sweater and pouring the white wine and vinegar on it, as they’re both stocked in your pantry” as an everyday

thing that Kate used to take for granted. Anti-fans describe the posts as full of “humble brags” and “first world problems.”

Amanda of *Living in Another Language* attracts negative attention from GOMI participants when she writes about the hardships of travel blogging in ‘Travel Blogging isn’t for the Faint of Heart.’ Her points include the fact that travel blogging is harder to monetize than other genres of lifestyle blogging, that it is hard to find good Wi-Fi while travelling, and that “some readers have a certain disdain for travel bloggers” because they believe bloggers have acquired the wealth needed to travel through luck. In response to this accusation, Amanda maintains that travel bloggers work hard to fund their travel, whether their funds are acquired through travel blogging itself, or through previous employment. GOMI participants are unimpressed with the travel blogging backstage Amanda presents: one poster snarks that they cannot accept what they call the “poor pitiful me” attitude, and stipulates that “Either you love travel and travel writing enough to write a travel blog or you’re so desperate for handouts that you can start another shitty lifestyle blog instead and get all of the free mason jars you can glitterglue” (“Travel Bloggers”). Another poster adds that “There’s a difference between lifting the veil on the struggles and challenge[s] faced by professional travel bloggers and being a whiny spoiled entitled brat” (“Travel Bloggers”). In response to similar posts by Liz Carlson of *The Young Adventuress*, one participant writes

You can try all you want but you can’t make your life sound hard. Oh no- you tell people you are going on a trip so then you are committed to writing about it? Yes, that’s how jobs work, we have to commit to stuff. You only get a few hours sleep because you are off on wonderful tours all day? Oh no- poor you! (“Travel Bloggers”)

Another poster adds, “Girlfriend, you seriously have no idea what it’s like to travel for real work as part of a real job” (“Travel Bloggers”)

Intimate disclosures about travel bloggers’ existential ‘backstage’ are not always focused on the hardships of freelance writing. In the ‘Adventurous Kate’ thread, there is much discussion of Kate’s romantic entanglements. GOMI participants appear to have conflicting expectations with regards to how bloggers should share the intimate details of their personal life. At times, participants are annoyed by Kate’s reticence, and indicate that she could make herself appear more authentic if she was more forthcoming about the events of her private life. After Kate makes a vague post about having left her fiancé, one participant writes that she “would LOVE to know details but I guess she is too #headtravelblogger to share those kind of details. Which is a shame, because readers do love to see different sides to the bloggers they follow.” When Kate finally shares the desired details about her break-up, it is in a Facebook comment on her fan page (which a forum user promptly screenshots for dissection in the thread). In their discussion of Kate’s representation of her break-up, forum posters go back to Kate’s initial gushing engagement post and point out inconsistencies. Kate expressed satisfaction in the initial blog post about how the engagement happened, but in a later Instagram post, she recalls how mortified she was that the proposal happened in a public place. Posters interpret this contrast in tone in the two descriptions of the same event as a sign of inconsistency, which is taken as evidence that the blogger is first and foremost a performer that caters her intimate disclosures to the demands of the moment. The indication here is that publics want intimate expressions of emotions emerging out of the blogger’s personal life, but expect that those expressions should be consistent over time, similar to how a blogger’s general content is supposed to adhere to a distinguishable and consistent self-brand.

BLOGGING ETHICALLY: AUTHENTIC BRANDING

In order to perform existential authenticity, travel bloggers should appear to have a personal ethic that must be followed despite external pressures (these pressures often coming from the demands of the blogging industry itself). Lifestyle bloggers acquire income through advertisements, sponsorships, free products, paid speaking invitations, and book deals. Bloggers are allowed, even expected, to show some uncertainty with regards to their personal life. But the expectation appears to be that bloggers should know their personal brand, only promote products that seem consistent with this brand, and talk about these products and the fact of being sponsored with transparency and apparent sincerity. Indeed, among GOMI's anti-fans, monetization and authenticity are seldom allowed to co-exist. A problem bloggers face in their authenticity work is that, blogging success (built largely on a self-branding strategy that incorporates the performance of authenticity) weakens the blogger's ability to present the appearance of authenticity. Banet-Weiser gestures towards this paradox when she observes that "within contemporary consumer culture we take it for granted that authenticity, like anything else, can be branded" (2012, p. 13) while also maintaining that "what is understood (and experienced) as authentic is considered such precisely it is perceived as not commercial" (2012, p. 10). This is particularly true for travel bloggers, who perform authenticity partly by narrating their cultivation of existential authenticity through the ongoing process of self-improvement towards an idealized goal (making an income through continuous travel) that paradoxically harmonizes an anti-capitalist desire to forgo material comforts in favour of a nomadic lifestyle with the conspicuously capitalist ideal of the expertly-branded entrepreneurial subject capable of supporting herself independently.

Common to all lifestyle genres is the difficulty of generating income from one's content while still presenting oneself as authentic. Acquiring sponsorships (usually, getting free stuff in return for reviews — for travel bloggers, this means free hotel stays, guided tours, and travel gadgets) is a coveted sign of success for many bloggers, but it is a challenge to incorporate sponsored posts into one's content seamlessly and transparently. Liz of *Young Adventuress* in particular seems to struggle to accept sponsorships in a manner that satisfies her followers. In response to a post where Liz talks about "facing fears" in travel (Carlson 2017), one poster doubts that Liz's travel is authentically fraught with risk, asking

How can you have fears when pretty much all of your trips are now sponsored?
When someone's looking out for you and making sure you're safe and having a good time so you'll write about it positively, you're not having the same experience/fears as someone who genuinely goes there as a solo female traveller. ('Young Adventuress')

Liz's partnership with Starbucks VIA instant coffee is cited as a particularly egregious example of clumsy affiliate posts. Participants are particularly annoyed with the posts, because Liz has elsewhere talked about the importance of "being in the moment" and using social media authentically. In response to a viral parody Instagram account, *Sociality Barbie*, that features a Barbie doll staged in some of the most trope-ish settings common to lifestyle-themed social media accounts, Liz writes that

What *Sociality Barbie* so cleverly draws attention [to] are people who are using the wildly popular #LiveAuthentic hashtag on Instagram, who are, well, anything but authentic because they all take the exact same photos. It all blurs together into one giant feed of dark green hues and beards. (Carlson 2014)

Liz goes on to remark of such posts, "Is that truly authentic living or did you just stage everything in your Instagram feed to seem authentic?" In response to Liz's meditation on social media authenticity, a GOMI poster writes, "Were Liz's sponsored Starbucks Via Instagram shots

and placements in her blog [...] truly authentic and ‘living in the moment?’” (“Travel Bloggers’)

Another poster complains that affiliate posts in travel blogs generally appear desperate, with bloggers accepting any kind of sponsorship they are offered in an attempt to monetize their blogs, with the result that “most of the content is so bat shit obvious you want to slap them” (“Travel Bloggers’).

Another tactic bloggers employ for performing authenticity is to call attention to the inauthentic performances of other people — usually travel bloggers, or, in the case of the heavily-criticized *Young Adventuress* post mentioned above, social media users in general. Participants are quick to point out Liz’s hypocrisy, arguing that she is guilty of the very ‘poses’ she criticizes, and frequently posts pictures of herself ‘looking out into the distance,’ an Instagram trope that is supposed to make the subject of the photo appear adventurous. One poster writes: “She moans about people not being in the moment- she has a selfie of herself swimming next to a turtle! Talk about not being in the moment!” (“Travel Bloggers’)

Another poster draws attention to the constructedness of Liz’s photos of herself — “Who is taking your photo Liz and how is that being in the moment if you’re posing for your own photos?” (“Young Adventuress’). By pointing out Liz’s hypocrisy and drawing attention to how her Instagram resembles the social media accounts of other bloggers, GOMI participants make an argument for Liz’s inauthenticity based on her lack of originality as a travel blogger, suggesting that the persona she presents through the images on her Instagram account is nothing more than a patchwork of borrowed tropes. Monetizing persona work is a particularly difficult terrain for micro-celebrities to navigate, with authenticity factoring so heavily into the likeability of their persona, and any evidence of sponsored posts rendering publics immediately sceptical of the blogger’s authenticity due to the association of sponsorship with money, money with work, and work with the labour behind persona construction.

BLOGGING THE [NOT *TOO*] GOOD LIFE: ASPIRATIONAL EXTRA/ORDINARINESS

Lifestyle blogs are, by nature, supposed to be aspirational — that is, to some degree readers are meant to long for the lifestyle being represented, whether that lifestyle is a life of perpetual wanderlust (travel blogs), maternal accomplishment (mommy blogs), or visible abdominal muscles (fitness blogs). But ideally, lifestyle bloggers strike a balance between presenting a lifestyle that is aspirational and yet *ordinary*. Like other lifestyle blogging genres, travel blogging relies on representations of ‘aspirational extra/ordinariness’ for much of its appeal. Usually, travel bloggers present the persona of someone who, despite having once led a perfectly average middle-class life chasing wealth through a typical 9-5 office job, has shifted her priorities in order to lead a life of frequent-to-constant travel funded by travel blogging and other freelance work. The content should be aspirational — desirable for readers, and the object of longing ‘what if’s — but still authentic and accessible. Not surprisingly, achieving a convincing balance of aspirational and ordinary is difficult, and GOMI participants frequently criticize bloggers for being either too average or not average enough (or both simultaneously). Anti-fan critiques indicate how bloggers’ attempts to appear ‘average’ are so common that they have become tropes within the travel blog genre, and how attempts to be aspirational rely on making the unoriginal appear original.

In the ‘Travel Bloggers’ thread, one poster summarizes all of her disappointments with travel bloggers in general. Her post reflects several of the most common reasons participants cite for finding travel bloggers annoying to read, and often these annoying qualities of travel blogs can be linked back to a perceived lack of aspirational authenticity (formatting my own):

Things Travel bloggers do that annoy me:

-Quit their jobs to travel forever and ever because they are so unique and will never go back to a regular life like the rest of you sheep. [...]

[...]

-Think they travel 'off the beaten path' when they go to all the same places everyone else does.

-Claim they are not lucky, they just worked really hard for this. I'm sure they did but there is a whole lot of luck involved in even having the chance to travel and blog (not being born into severe poverty in Asia, for example).

-Presume everyone else hates their job/life and everyone wants to be like them. I can understand a dissatisfaction with life/job/society (it especially seems common with American travel bloggers who are perhaps frustrated with lack of vacation days, expensive healthcare) but still, not everyone in the US is dissatisfied with their job or life!

These points all target what seems to be travel bloggers' *attempts* to perform aspirational extra/ordinariness. Travel bloggers should portray a unique or aspirational lifestyle, but evidently this GOMI participant gets irritated when bloggers spend too much time *telling* readers that the lifestyle is extraordinary and should be desired.

As indicated by the post quoted above, one way that travel bloggers are critiqued for being too average has to do with their unoriginal travel itineraries. Participants' grievances focus less on the decision to visit and write about frequently toured destinations and more on the 'adventurous' persona bloggers attempt to project when they are, in fact, travelling on well-trodden tourist paths. One poster targets Liz of *Young Adventuress*, complaining that "This blogger considers herself a 'travel writer,' and an 'adventuress,' because she writes about her basic b***h travels to places like Spain and New Zealand" ("Travel Bloggers"). Another participant writes of Liz that

What irks me about her is that I just don't think she is an 'adventuress'. She's travelled to some amazing places but she is actually quite often on an organised tour! It's not like she's backpacking alone through a remote area. ("Travel Bloggers")

In the 'Adventurous Kate' thread, a few participants make sure to put the 'adventurous' part of the blog's title in quotations, with one user making sure that 'adventurous' is always followed by 'lol' in parenthesis, in order to indicate that she cannot use the two words together without breaking into laughter. Both *Adventurous Kate* and *The Young Adventuress* are micro-celebrity brands that rely on the category of the 'adventurer,' drawing on the image of solo female traveller as one that is automatically remarkable because it is less common to travel alone, and even less common to travel alone as a woman. Anti-fans easily recognize that these bloggers are trying to market their personas as 'adventurous,' and deconstruct their performances of the lone female adventurer persona, suggesting instead that these bloggers are unoriginal and unremarkable, or 'basic.'

Conversely, travel bloggers are often accused of not being ordinary enough, most often because the ability to travel long-term in the first place is perceived as the result of uncommon privilege. Failure to address the privileged circumstances that allowed them to make the decision to travel long-term in the first place interferes with bloggers' ability to represent their

lifestyle as aspirational for readers. The issue seems to be that, the more bloggers try to preemptively deflect criticism based on privilege by insisting on their ordinariness, echoing each other with similar narratives of achieving an extraordinary lifestyle through hard work and clever strategy, the more obvious the labour of appearing simultaneously aspirational and ordinary becomes to publics, so that such performances are registered as unoriginal, insincere, and inauthentic.

Some of the most commonly recurring posts in travel blogs are variations of ‘how I afford to travel’ or ‘how you can afford to travel’ post. These kinds of posts are often targets of criticism, with participants frequently objecting to bloggers’ suggestion that anyone can afford long-term travel if they simply alter their priorities and spending habits. Many participants feel that bloggers’ attempts to pass off their lifestyle as achievable are dishonest, and harmfully downplay factors like class, education, nationality, racialized background, and [dis]ability.

Bloggers sometimes provide lists of ideas for how to cut expenses and re-channel money into a travel savings account. GOMI posters discuss a post on a blog called *True Colours*, which (according to the forum discussion) gives a list of suggestions that includes calling internet and cable providers to try to get a better deal on these services, and doing freelance work on the side (neither the blog nor the original post appears to be online currently). A participant in the GOMI ‘Travel Bloggers’ thread responds, “What if you don’t already pay for luxuries like cable and you work more than 40 hours a week in a job that doesn’t really allow you to save and all savings you do have to go towards making sure your car can get you to work?” Another poster gripes that “A lot of travel bloggers seem to magically forget that they’re white first-worlders with a degree and parents to fall back on.” By presuming that travel is a decision that anyone can make with just a few changes, travel bloggers isolate large swaths of readers who do not have the same ability to save large sums of money by making ‘a few simple sacrifices.’

By insisting they are ‘just like everybody else,’ travel bloggers fall into tropes common to their subgenre and direct attention to the authenticity labour that goes into distracting from privilege, inadvertently detracting from their ability to present authentic personas. GOMI participants in turn suggest that the unique privilege bloggers attempt to hide renders other claims of uniqueness unconvincing, and bloggers’ efforts to represent themselves as having unique insight into the art of living well are undermined by critics’ perception that it is easy to live well when you are born into circumstances that allow for the decision to drop everything and travel.

CONCLUSION: EVOLVING AUTHENTICITY

Lifestyle genres capitalize on ‘authentic’ personas that perform existential, ethical, and extra/ordinary authenticity in ways specific to genre, platform, and moment. Expectations evolve as publics notice and become dissatisfied with patterns and tropes, so that bloggers must adapt to the shifting demands of their genre, or risk being perceived as inauthentic. One way that bloggers can adapt their strategies for authenticity work is by being aware of how online persona is partly articulated through an individual’s deployment of the technological affordances and cultural scripts available to them, and partly through the feedback provided by the networked publics that surround online persona — from likes, shares, and comments on the individual’s platform[s] of choice, to feedback located ‘off-site,’ as in the case of GOMI. Whether they like it or not, ‘hate’ comments like those posted on GOMI become a part of the blogger’s brand that the blogger does not intend, but cannot escape. Liz of *Young Adventuress* embraces the hate, and includes a reference to GOMI in the 2014 edition of her annual ‘Best Hate Comments’ post, with the succinct response, “Don’t you love it when people summarize your own life and tell it back to you?” (Carlson 2014). Instead of trying to defend herself, Liz incorporates hate-comments about her inauthenticity into her authenticity work — by

demonstrating how her content gets her in trouble with certain audiences, Liz indicates that, compared to other bloggers, she does not hold back. GOMI participants critique, among other things, Liz's lack of sensitivity, but Liz implies that this lack of sensitivity that attracts hate-comments is actually evidence of her authenticity. Her personal brand *emphasizes* the fact that she has anti-fans, and declares that it is *Liz*, not her readers, who gets to decide what 'authentic' looks like. This example not only shows us how authenticity work evolves in response to shifting expectations from publics, but gives an example of how it is negotiated and contested between bloggers and their followers in a continuous process that suggests that questions of *what* authenticity looks like, and *who* has the authority to decide, cannot be fully resolved.

It is clear, however, that it is partly the conspicuousness of authenticity as constructed or performed — as something that is strategized with a desired outcome in mind, or pieced together out of existing genre tropes — that causes anti-fans to deconstruct micro-celebrity personas as inauthentic. When authenticity labour becomes too *laboured*, the 'authentic' persona is perceived instead as a performer's mask. I've used the example of travel blogs to show how strategies for performing authenticity emerge within lifestyle genres as bloggers adapt their performances in response to criticism (such as the 'how I afford to travel' posts that responds to accusations of privilege) and in response to what other bloggers in the same genre are doing. I've used the example of an anti-fan community to help conceptualize the evolutions by which signs of authenticity become signals of *constructed* authenticity, which get translated by critical publics into markers of inauthenticity. While not all readers are anti-fans and, perhaps, general publics are slower to note evidence of authenticity labour in persona, I would argue that the trends observed in this study have relevance to persona construction (and deconstruction) at all levels of the celebrity scale. To some extent, we all craft personas with a real or imagined critical audience in mind (even if most of us do not have a dedicated anti-fan following). When parody accounts like 'Sociality Barbie' surface, for example, micro-celebrities and casual users alike are made to reconsider whether their content has become too trope-ish or derivative. At all levels of publicness, the labour of 'authenticity' in persona construction is key to what makes us 'likeable' — at the same time, when this same labour becomes too conspicuous, as in the cases of the bloggers discussed above, 'like' turns to snark.

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