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## **The Belle Gibson scandal:**

### **the rise of lifestyle gurus as native experts in low trust societies**

#### **Abstract**

The Belle Gibson scandal that broke in 2015 is a testament to the growing phenomenon of lifestyle gurus in the twenty-first century. In this article, our aim is not to explain the psychology behind Gibson's lies. Rather, we focus on the social, cultural and technological conditions that enabled Gibson's persona to flourish and their impact on contemporary understandings of the self. Lifestyle gurus embody the para-social, trading off the appeal of intimacy, authenticity and integrity. We demonstrate how social media technologies have increased the levels of emotional investment, trust and attention capital in para-social relationships by providing ubiquitous access to native experts and creating the platform for such relationships to develop. Finally, we contend that the growing number of lifestyle gurus providing the public with health advice and scientific knowledge, points to the need to examine critically the social and cultural landscape that enables these micro-celebrities to emerge.

#### **Keywords**

authenticity, expertise, influencer, knowledge, micro-celebrity, social media, trust

## Introduction: the scandal

In June 2009 Belle Gibson caught public attention after claiming she was diagnosed with an incurable form of brain cancer, leaving her with only months left to live. Having defied all odds by surviving the terminal brain tumour, the self-described 'wellness guru' explained how she cured herself of cancer by rejecting conventional medicine in favour of a healthy lifestyle, encouraging other cancer sufferers to do the same. Gibson's story was documented on a blog, and visually curated on social media, which became the basis for a successful app – *The Whole Pantry* – that she later developed into a book for Penguin: a 'wellness bible' featuring lifestyle advice and healthy recipes. In the book, Gibson recounted how, having tried chemotherapy and radiotherapy for two months, which left her 'knee deep in nausea and other side effects', she decided to heal herself through nutrition and holistic medicine:

I pulled myself out of chemo and radiotherapy – my doctors freaked out, but they couldn't stop me ... I was empowering myself to save my own life, through nutrition, patience, determination and love – as well as salt, vitamins and Ayurvedic treatments, craniosacral therapy, oxygen therapy, colonics and a whole lot of other treatments (Gibson, 2015: 2).

With hundreds and thousands of followers on Instagram, a book published by Penguin and a successful app available on Apple, Gibson's message had influence, legitimacy and global reach. Testifying to her growing online popularity, in 2014 Gibson received *Cosmopolitan* magazine's 'Fun Fearless Female' award in the social

media category for her social media presence, which she used to encourage 'users toward a back-to-basics approach to nutrition, wellness and lifestyle' (*Cosmopolitan*, 2014), her lifestyle guru status traversing the mainstream press and social media.

In 2015 a scandal broke. It was revealed that Gibson never had cancer. After being exposed by journalists as a cancer fraud, she admitted:

No. None of it's true. I am still jumping between what I think I know and what is reality. I have lived it out and I'm not really there yet. I don't want forgiveness. I just think it [speaking out] was the responsible thing to do. Above anything, I would like people to say, 'Okay, she's human' (Sullivan, 2015: n.p).

Gibson maintained that she is passionate about avoiding gluten, dairy and coffee, but does not really understand how cancer works. In hindsight, there were numerous indications that Gibson's persona was a façade. The selfies she displayed on Instagram portrayed a remarkably healthy woman for someone said to have survived terminal cancer. Moreover, her medical knowledge of her condition was questionable, with cancer specialists reporting no known record of anyone surviving such a tumour for five years without medical treatment. Gibson's biography was, likewise, dubious. When a friend asked how she received her diagnosis, she replied, 'Dr Phil' (Donnelly and Toscano, 2017: 109). Adding to the severity of the scandal, it was revealed that the proceeds from Gibson's app, which she had promised to donate to charity, were never received. In the aftermath of the scandal, there have been

various attempts to explain the motivation behind Gibson's actions: money, attention, reputation, and even a personality disorder – Munchausen's disease – that thrives on sympathy and manipulation (Montague, 2015). In this article, our aim is not to explain the psychology behind Gibson's lies. Rather, we employ a sociological approach, focusing on the social, cultural and technological conditions that enabled Gibson's persona as a lifestyle guru to flourish.

### **The rise of lifestyle gurus in the 21st century**

Although Gibson's biography is unique, the narrative upon which it was scripted is common to the growing cultural phenomenon of lifestyle gurus in the 21st century. Lifestyle gurus define themselves in opposition to professional cultures. Selectively and instrumentally, they mix elements from positive thinking, esoteric systems of knowledge and mediate them through folk culture. The advice given, that often comes at a commercial premium, makes its immediate and final appeal to the court of plain speaking and common sense. Echoing the archetypal myth of the hero's journey, the stories that lifestyle gurus present online typically document a journey of self-discovery from illness to recovery, triumph in the face of adversity. An individual overhauls their lifestyle and diet, so the story goes, after experiencing illness or disease. Disillusioned with mainstream science and medicine, they begin to experiment with alternative medicine and take their health into their own hands. They then document their journey publicly, blogging about their new lifestyle and sharing attractive images on social media that testify to its perceived benefits, accumulating a huge online following in the process of people eager to learn more about how to emulate the lifestyle of their guru. This attention capital then translates

into revenue streams in the form of cookbooks, diet programmes and advertising. Ella Mills (née Woodward), Anna Jones, Sarah Britton, and Jasmine and Melissa Hemsely represent just a few of what the *Observer Food Monthly* termed in May 2015, 'The New Queens of Green'.<sup>1</sup> In an age of lifestyle gurus, these individuals are heralded not only for their personal journey of recovery, but for inspiring the public to live like them. It should be added that the life crises, revelations and personal transformations documented on these sites rest mostly on anecdotal evidence, curated images and self-narration. There is no commitment to testing procedures and results by objective, scientific methods. Instead, what these sites invariably commend is that to be 'real' and to 'heal', communicants must suspend critical defences. After all, these defences are implicitly presented as what has held communicants back in life or contributed to their crisis. Lifestyle gurus give their followers a reason to believe. As emulatable sources of inspiration, they offer communicants the possibility of self-improvement, social integration or reintegration.

In a saturated market of aspiring lifestyle gurus competing for visibility and attention on social media, success rests on presenting an inspirational and compelling persona and narrative. Gibson was an inspiration to those who followed her. She inspired not only those cancer sufferers for whom conventional treatments had been ineffective, but also those who sought to improve their general health and well-being. The public repeatedly expressed their admiration for Gibson, using social media to convey their sympathy and reverence in light of her heroic battle with cancer. After revealing on Instagram in July 2014 that she had cancer in her blood, spleen, brain, uterus and liver,

one follower posted: 'Without doubt you are THE most inspirational person I have ever encountered. I have never met you but I 'know' you. I have never heard you speak but I 'hear' you. I have never seen you in person but I 'look' at you in awe, in wonder and in the greatest admiration I have ever felt for anyone' (Donnelly and Toscano, 2017: 28). The December 2014 issue of *Elle* Australia named Gibson 'The Most Inspiring Woman You've Met This Year'. *Cosmopolitan* magazine echoed this sentiment, praising Gibson's heroic determination: 'She was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer, but instead of giving in, it became her impetus for her dedication to health and wellbeing' (*Cosmopolitan*, 2014).

Gibson rose to fame in a culture that continues to associate heroism with overcoming pain and suffering. However, in contrast to Aristotle's archetypal hero – a 'great man' – this new mode of influence favours the 'Everyman' (and woman), those perceived to be just like us, whose story acts as a source of inspiration. Lifestyle gurus appeal to the ordinary by presenting themselves as 'friends' and equals. Framed through the vernacular of health and illness, people take solace from identifying with these role models because they provide hope and reveal that those who suffer are not alone in their struggle. The recognition of common vulnerability is the first mark of social integration. But this is supplemented by lifestyle gurus and communicants acknowledging shared complicity. Their strategies of self-improvement are situated and pursued 'outside of the system'. Even for those who are not clinically ill, this new breed of hero has cultural resonance, offering lifestyle advice on how to live a 'good life' that everyone, in principle, can implement.



The proliferation of lifestyle gurus in the 21st century resonates with contemporary understandings of self-identity. One of the defining features of contemporary liberal democracies is the cultural emphasis on self-actualization. The current cultural and political landscape views the self as 'a project' (Giddens, 1991), in which individuals are perceived to have the autonomy to take control reflexively of their identity. Rising to fame in a democratic arena, the heroes of the *demos* (public) reflect the meritocratic idea of achievement: the notion that success is the result of hard work and merit, and that we create our own reality. In contrast to traditional and essentialist discourses of the self, the democratic imperative of self-actualization values choice and reflexivity:

We are not what we are, but what we make ourselves ... what the individual becomes is dependent on the reconstructive endeavours in which he or she engages (Giddens, 1991: 75).

This emphasis on self-mastery and critical reflection extends to the domain of health and the body. The reflexivity of the embodied self is grounded in continuous self-observation (Giddens, 1991: 99). As access to medical information is increasingly democratized, people have the capacity to investigate their own health issues. The Socratic maxim, 'know thyself' has evolved into the cultural trend to 'diagnose thyself', an imperative made possible by the ubiquity of digital devices and mobile broadband – as encapsulated by the term, 'Dr Google'. Facilitated by the proliferation of the digital in the 21st century, this discourse of self-diagnosis is manifest in the range of health apps and wearable technologies readily available to the general public. These digital technologies enable users to track data relating to lifestyle

indicators including sleep, diet and physical activity with the promise to deliver self-mastery and personalized medicine. Accessible and affordable to the general public, these devices are not just for the terminally ill, but for those who seek to optimize their well-being. They form part of a profound cultural change in the way health care is conceptualized and delivered, viewing health as a matter of optimization rather than the absence of disease and an individual choice and responsibility (Baker and Rojek, forthcoming).

Although lifestyle gurus promote the quest for health and wellness positively in terms of freedom and empowerment, critics conceive of the intrusion of politics over ostensibly individual concerns of diet and lifestyle as a governmental mechanism designed to govern the citizen consumer (Mayes, 2015). In prescribing new techniques and rules for living, lifestyle gurus promote and validate certain models of the 'good citizen' (Lewis, 2008). These techniques for self-improvement are exemplified on lifestyle guru sites and reality television programmes, such as *The Biggest Loser*, which offer instructive templates on how to live. Drawing on Foucault's (1977) conception of governance as 'techniques' for directing human behaviour exercised through the 'choices' and 'freedoms' associated with liberal selfhood, critics contend that the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s has shaped modern understandings of the self-governing citizen (Rose, 1989, 1996). This conflation of individual choice and moral responsibility is regularly conveyed by lifestyle gurus on social media with diet-related posts on Instagram, for example, curating clean eating as an individual obligation as evidenced through users' inclusion of the hashtags #determination, #motivation, #no excuses and #healthy choices to describe their

lifestyle practices (Baker and Walsh, 2018). Robert Crawford (1980) coined the term 'healthism' to refer to this 'new form of health consciousness'. The term is used to describe the political ideology, which emerged in the US during the 1970s that situated 'the problem of health and disease at the level of the individual'. Ideas of healthism predicate that the health solution resides with the individual's determination to 'resist culture, advertising, institutional and environmental constraints, disease agents', reducing illness to laziness or a lack of discipline (Crawford, 1980: 378). From this standpoint, discourse around self-management and self-mastery is largely a result of the privatization of the health care system in late modern societies; a move away from a traditional welfarist model of health, in which responsibility rests with society to provide the conditions that promote well-being (Raisborough, 2011), towards the promotion of the responsible, neoliberal citizen.

Modern liberal democracies present a unique standpoint on risk and responsibility. Each society has a particular relation to risk and danger. What is perceived to be a risk, and how these risks are regulated, is strongly influenced by cultural beliefs and values (Douglas and Wildavsky, 1983). Modern attitudes towards risk are entrenched in the Enlightenment's rational outlook, which sets these cultures apart from pre-modern societies. Whereas pre-modern societies found meaning in fate and religion, modern individuals tend to reason deductively from effects to material causes (Douglas, 1966). In modernity, fate was transformed into risk becoming the object of analysis, assessment and regulation. While the complexity of these systems encourages greater reliance on experts for knowledge and understanding of risks (Beck, 1992: 1; Giddens, 1991), the increased awareness of risk in modernity is part of

what Ulrich Beck terms 'reflexive modernisation' where, in contrast to Industrial society's belief in progress, society is more critical of and uncertain about science and technology (Beck, 1994: 5–6). This scepticism is extended to 'the foundations and hazards of scientific work' (including experts themselves), and as a result science is both '*generalised and demystified*' (Beck, 1992: 14, emphasis in original). The source of this demystification is not only the inability of experts to calculate and control risk, but the failure of key institutions of modernity (e.g. science, business and politics) to take responsibility for them. The corollary of this cultural transformation is a growing distrust of professional expertise in favour of what are perceived to be more 'authentic' forms of influence.

It is striking that in under two decades, lifestyle gurus have achieved influence online which in many cases surpasses scientific and medical expertise. Critical questions arise as to how lifestyle gurus have achieved such a degree of authority and influence online in the 21st century. These can be partly answered by elucidating the culture of celebrity that enabled lifestyle gurus like Belle Gibson to achieve global fame and celebrity status. While there is nothing new about the media advertising moral messages to consumers, important cultural and technological developments have allowed lifestyle gurus to flourish. For inherent in this culture, is the assumption that the ordinary people online who share their experiences with us and impart advice, do so in probity. We trust that they are 'authentic', honest and good.

### **Transformations in celebrity culture: the rise of the micro-celebrity**

In everyday life, it is common to treat celebrity culture as homogeneous. In fact, important distinctions need to be drawn and applied. Broadly speaking, there are four types of celebrity (Rojek, 2001). *Ascribed celebrity* refers to fame that derives from privileged genealogy or holding a sanctioned office that historically commands respect. Examples include kings, queens and emperors, to name a few. This type of celebrity is prominent in traditional societies where industry and democracy have no significant part to play in reproducing social and economic order.

Conversely, in societies where industry and democracy have gained a hold, achieved celebrity is the dominant form. *Achieved celebrity* describes the acquisition of fame by virtue of an acknowledged talent, accomplishment or skill. The common man makes good through the display of recognized extraordinary gifts and/or exceptional industry. Leading figures who hail from ordinary backgrounds in the fields of sport, entertainment, politics, literature and business are examples. The acknowledgement of extraordinary qualities sometimes supports a relationship of quasi-charisma between the celebrity and an audience. That is, a relationship in which ordinary people develop intense respect or admiration for a noteworthy figure that results in the latter receiving the rank of cultural distinction.

While this rank is familiar in relationships of ascribed celebrity, in cases of achieved celebrity the tone and texture of respect and admiration is different. Crucially, achieved celebrity involves popular tributes directed towards public figures who have usually emerged from unremarkable origins. However, the common denominator in tribute is the recognition of remarkable or extraordinary personal qualities in the individual. Achieved celebrity becomes prominent with the development of a civil

culture organized around democracy and social inclusion. It can hardly be said to supplant ascribed celebrity. The customary respect and honour attached to the latter rank is extraordinarily tenacious. Generally speaking, the power of ascribed celebrity wanes in democracy since the privilege of genealogy is out-distanced by the power of the plebiscite.

The rise of democratic society relies partly on the growth of mass communications, the expansion of education and the disembedding of cultural literacy from local conditions to the global. The same preconditions allow the third type of celebrity to flourish: the *celetoid*. The celetoid is an individual who acquires fame via the ministrations of the mass media. Typically, the individual is noteworthy by virtue of media investment. That is to say, talent, skill and accomplishment have no significant part to play in generating attention capital. Van Krieken (2012) employs the term 'attention capital' to refer to this phenomenon. The term refers to the accumulation, circulation and distribution of personal qualities that generate appreciable social impact. Within this type of celebrity, two sub-types must be distinguished. Long-life celebrities possess cultural duration, whereas short-life celebrities are transitory – here today and gone tomorrow. The common denominator is the pivotal role of the media in the construction and distribution of the celebrity agent.

The ubiquity of digital communication technologies and online participation in the 21st century have fundamentally changed the dynamics of celebrity. In addition to enabling celebrities to form *direct* relationships with fans and followers, social media create the conditions for micro-celebrity. Coined by Theresa Senft in her study of *Camgirls* (2008), the term refers to 'a new style of online performance that involves

people “amping up” their popularity over the Web using technologies like video, blogs and social networking sites’ (Senft, 2008: 25). Micro-celebrities use these technologies to engage in publicity, self-branding – the idea of the self as a product to be consumed by others – and emotional labour (Senft, 2008: 8, 116). In contrast to conventional celebrities, whose fame is heavily dependent on the media, micro-celebrities achieve visibility and status on social media through self-broadcasting about niche topics to a small community of followers. Whereas the concept of celebrity traditionally denoted distance between the celebrity and their fans, micro-celebrities strategically attempt to bridge this gap with their following largely dependent on perceived feelings of connection, and the impression of accessibility and responsiveness. In this regard, authenticity is a fundamental component of micro-celebrity as it denotes being honest and ‘real’ with those followers upon whom their fame depends. One of the primary ways that micro-celebrity is *achieved* online is through selective practices of self-disclosure (Marwick, 2013). Those lifestyle gurus who have achieved micro-celebrity status may have a relatively small following compared to mainstream celebrities, but they typically achieve fame through revealing personal information about themselves online. This emphasis on self-disclosure, as well as the capacity for direct communication with their followers, facilitates the perception of intimacy among those who follow them.

Belle Gibson is a both a micro-celebrity and a celetoid. Although her fame was established on social media, her blog only became globally significant when the commercial media covered it. Nevertheless, while the mainstream media accentuated Gibson’s celebrity status, social media were crucial to her capacity to

generate attention capital. Blogs and social media have had a significant impact on the rise of lifestyle gurus and their capacity to disseminate knowledge and advice. In contrast to traditional media, which are characterized by top down one-to-many broadcast models of communication, social media are characterized by participatory, many-to-many models of communication. The proliferation of usable, open-access sites and the rise of user-generated content have lowered the barriers to entry in the digital age by enabling ordinary users to access public audiences. Native knowledge, which was often scorned by professional experts, has a new platform of articulation and exchange with blogs and social media enabling public users to create and share content on the internet (Baker and Rojek, forthcoming). Self-documentation existed prior to the internet (e.g. diaries, journals, photo albums). The qualitative difference is that social media enable users to share these texts (including photos and videos) instantly with a broad social network at an unprecedented speed and scale. In most cases, the self is documented not merely for self-reflection, but to be *shared* with others.

The concept of sharing is inscribed in social media platforms (van Dijck, 2013). By virtue of the fact that social media are, in principle, accessible to everyone with access to the internet, ordinary people have the capacity to create a large public following (although this possibility will not be realized by everyone, despite their efforts). In this regard, micro-celebrity is part of what Graham Turner (2004) refers to as the 'demotic turn', in which fame is conferred upon ordinary people. Rather than achieving fame through extraordinary skills or achievements, it is the 'lived experience' of 'the ordinary', which is celebrated. In the case of lifestyle gurus, professional authority is



supplanted by native expertise about a particular lifestyle issue or experience, for example, motherhood, fashion and fitness. Although symbolically bound to Web 2.0 discourses of democracy, equality and participation, the seemingly egalitarian dimensions of micro-celebrity precede the internet with reality television, talk shows, game shows, docu-soaps and DIY programmes celebrating the transformation of 'ordinary' people into celebrities (Couldry, 2002; Turner, 2006). Micro-celebrities achieve their fame not despite their ordinary persona, but because of it (Khamis et al., 2017), with their claims to authenticity resting largely on documenting 'real issues' (Senft, 2008: 116), and their 'ordinary' and 'everyday' appeal, which distinguishes them from the airbrushed and polished images produced on television and in newspapers and magazines (Baker and Rojek, forthcoming). Claims of authenticity are strategically articulated and reinforced through self-disclosure (e.g. staged confessions, emotional breakdowns, bloopers) – what Laura Grindstaff (2008) calls 'the money shot' – sharing 'backstage' moments and intimate details about their personal lives online, all of which are designed to foster trust and intimacy.

### **Establishing para-social relationships online**

Gibson was not a discovery of the institutional media. Her initial social impact was the result of self-promotion. In this she belongs to an extensive, growing list of ordinary people who have exploited and developed social media as an escalator of fame. Ella Mills, Madeleine Shaw and Vani Hari, the self-described 'Food Babe', are other leading examples of micro-celebrities who have accumulated influence and micro-celebrity status on social media. Blogging is explicitly and self-consciously positioned *outside* of the system. It represents an extension of 'para-social

relationships'. The term was coined by Horton and Wohl (1956) at the dawn of the television age. It refers to what were at the time new social relationships of intimacy and trust between viewers and television broadcasters such as news readers, weather men, travel alert presenters and continuity announcers. While audiences had previously formed relations of intimacy and trust with movie stars, radio celebrities and crooners, now they consumed a daily diet of televised contact with media figures.

Horton and Wohl (1956) argued that for some isolated and vulnerable viewers, para-social relationships with screen figures were replacing primary kith and kin relationships. Since this time, audience research into celebrity culture has established the up-scaling of para-social relationships between fans and celebrities. This reflects the inflation of celebrity in contemporary culture. Para-social access to celebrities has multiplied and is now, through celebrity news channels, print publications and websites, effectively ubiquitous. Social media are especially potent in establishing para-social relationships of trust and intimacy because these sites are structured and communicated as a direct exchange between equals (despite the fact that many of these relationships remain non-dialogical and one-sided). They dispense with the paraphernalia of hierarchy that separates the attention capital of the star from the fan. Instead, they stress egalitarianism and social inclusion, while being subject to corporate and commercial hierarchies.

When Gibson was exposed as a fraud, she resorted to what Barry King (2008) calls a 'para-confession' in an attempt to repair broken trust and emotional damage. This communication device in celebrity culture was pioneered by cultural intermediaries as a means of restoring devalued attention capital. Michael Jackson, Mel Gibson,

Gary Oldman and Princess Diana all made use of para-confessions via television as a means of controlled repentance for a public misdemeanour. The para-confessional uses raw emotion to repair or boost attention capital. Gibson's plea to be seen by ordinary people as 'only human', and her *60 Minutes* broadcast, exemplify the celebrity para-social confessional. While they give the appearance of a sincere and direct exchange, they always involve cultural intermediaries who advise on issues of tasteful self-promotion and exposure management. In the *60 Minutes* interview with Tara Brown, Gibson tried to present herself both as an innocent, who had been wrongly diagnosed with cancer by a German alternative medicine practitioner, and a victim, whose wellness empire forced her to live up to the expectations of her audience. She endeavoured to show that her misdiagnosis had left her traumatized and unable to come to terms with the fact that she had been lied to. In this confused state, the mother and businesswoman, who allegedly believed that she had been living with brain cancer, chose to continue the role. In the process, she accumulated more attention capital and financial wealth. Despite this, Gibson's defence in the para-confession was that she had been well intentioned and was coerced by the expectations of the media to keep her *manqué* status secret.

The reliance of online para-confessionals on precedents devised and implemented in organized celebrity culture is not accidental. The growing popularity of lifestyle bloggers, and the case of Belle Gibson, bolster the argument made by an increasing number of communication theorists that everyday life is becoming more subject to mediatization (Hepp, 2012; Livingstone, 2009). The process of mediatization implies that ordinary social, cultural and political discourse is increasingly adopting the

conventions and presumptions of the institutional media. The example of Gibson's para-social confession is a case in point. Gibson's role as a lifestyle guru combines a rhetoric of equal exchange relationships (between her and her followers) with prime-time media conventions that position her as an admirable, noteworthy figure. The key to her social impact, however, was not technical proficiency, but the appearance of vulnerability and raw emotion. We are at our most intimate when we are vulnerable. Gibson's decision to portray herself as a terminal cancer victim who triumphed over a deadly disease with determination, wisdom and courage, was calculated to check scepticism and a spirit of investigative inquiry. By portraying herself as someone who had 'beaten' a terminal disease, Gibson gained sympathy and admiration. She was a plucky young mother and businesswoman, who refused to succumb to her condition. Rather, she was empowered to 'heal herself', which conventional medicine had been unable to achieve. This achievement and fortitude was the foundation of her status as a lifestyle guru – the Sanskrit term guru denoting a master or teacher, one who literally leads their disciples from darkness (*gu*) to light (*ru*). It was because she had metaphorically, experienced the fire and come out on the other side that so many real cancer sufferers admired her and gave credence to her advice.

Gibson's criticism of trained medical professionals also contributed to her public appeal. Social media provide the means for ordinary men and women to invert the widely perceived condescension of professional cultures that trained, expert staff know better than them by giving them a platform. This occurs in a context in which disquiet about the role of professionals, especially in medicine, is at a high point. For

example, Barbara Ehrenreich's (2009) attack on the aridity of 'positive thinking' in medical counselling and diagnosis exposes the disquiet and hostility felt by patients to administered, salaried empathy. Similarly, David Healy's (2012) study of the over-reliance of medicine on the prescription of pharmaceuticals, and the role of pharmaceutical companies in lobbying and, in some cases, bribing medical practitioners to prescribe their products, reinforces self-healing doctrines and practices. Belle Gibson's lifestyle blog emerged from, and exploited, unrest regarding organized medical practice already present in the *Zeitgeist*. Snake oil merchants and charlatans have existed for centuries. However, prior to the internet, their reach was limited (mostly by physical proximity). Social media afford lifestyle gurus with new ways to share knowledge online, primarily increased 'visibility', 'searchability' and 'spreadability' (boyd, 2014). By affording users the capacity to be seen and share information with a broad social network of followers, social media dramatically increase the speed and scale with which information can go viral.

### **Trusting familiar strangers**

The internet has increased the level of trust and emotional investment in para-social relationships. One under-used tool from the social sciences that illuminates this phenomenon is Stanley Milgram's (1992: 67–9) concept of the 'familiar stranger'. Milgram employed the term to refer to the people who populate our social landscape, with whom we never interact beyond, at most, glancing recognition. The concept occurred to him as a commuter on the subway system into Manhattan. He realized that most days he saw familiar passengers waiting for the same train at his station. His relationship with them was one of principled non-communication. Interaction

between him and these strangers whom he routinely encountered was minimal. All the same, they were part of his familiar social landscape. For Milgram (1974: 71), the familiar stranger relationship is not based on the absence of a relationship, 'but a special kind of frozen relationship'. It rests upon a system of non-negotiated, mutually accepted, restraining conventions that turn out to be rather odd upon closer inspection. For example, you may do nothing but exchange a glance or at most, a nod, with a familiar stranger for years or even decades. Yet if that person were to experience trouble, for example, by falling down or being mugged, you are likely immediately to offer help and support. This frozen relationship does not exclude intimacy. Rather, it produces a dormant form of intimacy that can be instantly activated when circumstances of risk, danger or vulnerability came into play. The concept also suggests that there are background expectancies in social relationships with persons who are manifest to us as strangers in everyday life. There are unwritten normative rules that govern our moral involvement with men and women whom we do not directly know.

Milgram failed to connect the concept of familiar strangers with Horton and Wohl's (1956) concept of para-social relationships. The two concepts, however, fit together like a dovetail joint. Blogs and social media sites provide ubiquitous access to media figures and create the platform for such friendships to flourish. Exchanges mostly occur on the basis of trust. The principles of probity that may be tested in face-to-face relations are often unexamined in web relations. In online dating, for example, the self is apprehended as a set of attributes, a logic that prioritizes the cognitive presentation of self at a distance over embodied, face-to-face communication with

another (Illouz, 2007). Online relationships have a considerable impact on human communication, characterized more by the expressions users intentionally seek to 'give' over those that they unintentionally 'give off' (e.g. blushing, stuttering) in standard face-to-face encounters (Goffman, 1959). The disembedding mechanisms of mediated communication, and the façade of Gibson's medical condition, enabled her to avoid awkward questions relating to the proof of her condition. Online exchange is subject to surveillance and policing. However, in practice, the overwhelming majority of exchanges are unregulated.

Lifestyle bloggers, in their apparent ordinariness, appear to be more authentic and trustworthy than those highly manufactured figures presented in the mainstream media. User-generated content is a means to establish trust and intimacy online because communication appears to be direct and unmediated by corporate and commercial interests (despite generally being highly edited and rehearsed). Social media are not only promoted as exchanges between equals, even high-status users and celebrities appear to be more authentic on social media than when depicted in the mainstream media by virtue of the impression of 'backstage' access to their personal lives (e.g. photographs captioned with #nofilter and #nomakeup hashtags operating as signifiers of authentic exchange). 'Be authentic' was one of Belle Gibson's most common bromides, uttered whenever she was interviewed about her success. In her book she attributed her success to her 'authenticity' and 'integrity':

It really is that simple. Too many people over-edit themselves. There's not enough honesty out there. It's human to feel sick, to ask questions,

to search for answers ... Never refine yourself in a way which takes away your heart, message and truest self (Gibson, 2015).

Gibson maintained that many people in her social media community of more than 200,000 were attracted by her 'authenticity' and 'integrity'. Authenticity is one of the primary self-presentation techniques that lifestyle gurus use to increase their online following. Claims to authenticity are particularly important when micro-celebrities become social media influencers, those who practise micro-celebrity as a vocation for profit. Social media sites encourage a preoccupation with self-presentation and performance by providing users with a platform to construct a public persona. Given that visibility and attention can result in social and economic gain, this capacity for identity-construction is susceptible to a high degree of rehearsal, editing and management. In a space associated with strategic self-promotion, filters and fakery, authenticity is valued as a rare commodity. In this context, authenticity is a self-branding technique designed to build trust and meaningful relationships with fans and followers by distancing themselves from those highly managed celebrities and personalities in the mainstream media.

Gibson's persona emerged from a broader social context in which the culture, practices and ethics of the media have been brought into question. The Levenson Inquiry into phone hacking in the UK has made the public increasingly suspicious of media corporations and those who control the means of production. The growing concern with manufacturers of news (e.g. editors, producers and photographers) – and the news media's relation to power and knowledge (e.g. PR consultants, lobbyists and the producers who set the agenda) – raise serious questions about the



reliability of the media commentators that inform our moral view of the world and their capacity to speak the truth (Baker, 2014). It is in this context of public distrust of institutional media, experts and elites that lifestyle gurus have flourished. As representatives of the public, they voice a common concern suggesting that the food industry and mainstream medicine is not to be trusted. Examples include Van Hari, the self-described 'Food Babe', who campaigns against GMOs (genetically modified organisms) and is a proponent of the anti-vaccine movement; Pete Evans, an advocate of the Paleo diet; and proponents of alternative medicine, Belle Gibson and Jess Ainscough, to name just a few. In challenging Big Food corporations, these lifestyle gurus take on the mantle of a modern-day Robin Hood. They align themselves with 'the people' and position themselves against Big Food corporations and the pharmaceutical industry exploiting the idea that the establishment is not to be trusted.

Upon reflection, there appear to be valid reasons for these critiques. History reveals multiple examples of food corporations and governments acting unethically. The Beech-Nut fake apple juice scandal (1979), the emergence of mad cow disease in the 1980s, the melamine milk scandal in China (2008) and the horsemeat scandal in Britain (2013) are just some of the scandals that have caused public outrage. Public distrust of food corporations is particularly high in the USA where lobbyists exercise the power to influence government and research. The downfall of British nutritionist John Yudkin, after he attempted to reveal the health risks of a diet high in sugar, is another case in point. In this cultural climate of distrust and betrayal, lifestyle gurus not only embody a personal journey of salvation, they are also represented as heroes

of the *demos*. Consequently, criticism of lifestyle gurus in this article is not aimed at those individuals who expose food corporations and governments. Rather, we critique the growing tendency towards uncritical acceptance of the views of uneducated bloggers as reliable and trustworthy alternatives.

### **The exoticism of the familiar stranger**

Belle Gibson's social impact rested heavily upon the part she played online, as a familiar stranger who was living with a life-threatening medical condition. In defining herself as a businesswoman and mother, she exhibited the trade-off between work and family life that is often an emotionally charged issue in women's lives. Overlying her feminine appeal was her purported medical condition. What reasonable person could not admire Belle for successfully performing so many roles while continuously staring death in the face? This appeal of lifestyle bloggers is not just a matter of the adroit use of emotional labour. The exoticism of 'the stranger', no matter how 'familiar' they become, is also a factor in the accumulation, circulation and distribution of attention capital.

In his classic essay on 'The Stranger', Georg Simmel (1971 [1908]: 144) argues that the original example of the stranger in history is the economic trader. As soon as the economic wants of the group extend beyond the capacity of the group to fulfil them, the trader enters to fill the gap with examples and intimations, of the lives, practices, habits and possessions of others, situated elsewhere. The stranger introduces goods (and comparative experiences) that are surplus (usually, attractively surplus), to the productive capacities of the group. In exchange relationships that develop beyond

the boundaries of self-sufficiency, the trader is an alluring and meaningful source of attention capital. They supply (and introduce) wants that cannot be fulfilled by the group. By virtue of this, the stranger is valuable, but not integral, to the group. Their status, so to speak, is that of a mobile resident. Emotionally, they are close to the group because they cater to urgent and deeply felt social and economic wants. At the same time, they remain remote. Their group value lies partly in their mobility, that is, their capacity to roam, experience, appropriate and supply. Above and beyond this is the quality of exoticism that the stranger exemplifies. Since the stranger is not limited by ties of kinship, locality, habit or custom, they are free of the 'partisan dispositions' that define relationships of closeness and hierarchy appertaining to the group and others. Free of entanglements of this sort, the attention capital of the stranger lies in reflecting images of identity, practices and association that the group cannot, or do not want, to accumulate for themselves (Simmel, 1908: 145-7).

Today's lifestyle gurus fill a gap that ordinary life often leaves yawning. Not to care about the lives of others or the health of the planet is to risk being stigmatized as selfish, irresponsible and heartless. Our lives are assailed with disturbing statistics about suffering in the lives of others: 2 billion live on less than a US\$1 a day; there are over 300,000 new cases of cancer diagnosed in the UK every year; 795 million people do not have enough food to lead a healthy life, the list goes on. In news bulletins, the media presents the world to us as an endless series of crises, episodes and emergencies. We are conscious of the urgent needs of others, but the scale of such problems paralyzes individual action. It is difficult for anyone to imagine what 795 million people suffering from malnutrition looks like. Set against the enormity and

urgency of human suffering, most of us feel helpless. One common response, is what Stanley Cohen (2001) termed, the 'bystander mentality'. Faced with the huge problems facing others in the world, we respond by denying personal responsibility, withholding and trusting that someone else, usually a corporate agent of charity or the government, will respond. The bystander mentality is widespread and prolific. Its significance in contemporary civic culture should not be underestimated.

Another common response to the world's problems helps to explain the social impact achieved by Belle Gibson. Where the needs of others are separated from our immediate life conditions by a gap that we are powerless to bridge, conditions are ripe for the emergence and development of what may be called a gestural economy; that is, a market in emotions that operates on displays of empathy and humanity. In cultures where acceptance and approval are strongly demanded, the gestural economy affords an outlet to dramatically enact presumed intimacy with suffering in the lives of others. The performative element of public display is crucial. At humanitarian concerts like Live Aid (1985) and Live 8 (2005), it is not enough to attend or make a donation. It is necessary to produce a selfie of the donor and donation and send it to others. The central component of the gestural economy is votive behaviour. That is, a statement of intentionality to help that may never be realized. The purpose of making a pledge to relieve suffering in the lives of others that will never be delivered is to accumulate social approval. Most of the para-social followers of Gibson's lifestyle blog emoted care and humanity merely by following the site. In a world in which we are rationally conscious of our powerlessness to solve humanity's urgent problems, connecting on a daily basis with someone real, who is experiencing

risk and danger, gives the illusion of 'doing something'. For the hundreds and thousands who bought her app, read her blog and believed that her story could be their story, Belle provided the service of the stranger – a diviner for emotions that cannot be distributed in the group, and require someone, separated from the group socially and spatially, to tap them.

This alone does not account for the rise of lifestyle gurus. Rather, it demonstrates how media culture can add to social malaise. There are many aspects to this: misinformation, the distribution and exchange of unsubstantiated medical advice – for example, the simplistic notion that organic is 'good', chemicals are 'bad', and so on. Lifestyle bloggers, most of whom have no medical or scientific qualifications, are viewed by end-users as authorities. Ignoring expert advice in favour of pseudoscience, Gibson claimed she survived for years having rejected chemotherapy and other cancer treatments in favour of healing herself with nutrition and holistic medicine. For those suffering with cancer, her story provided an emotional lifeline. Gibson was a survivor, an inspiration and a teacher. 'I believe that people are here to be teachers', she said in 2014. 'And I know that I defied so many universal and life rules for a reason.' The growing number of lifestyle gurus providing the public with health advice and leading campaigns against the scientific community (e.g. the anti-vaccine and anti-GMO movements) points to the pressing need to critically examine their claims and the cultural and political landscape that enables these advice-givers to flourish.

**Conclusion: on living in low-trust societies**

In this article we have sought to examine the social, cultural and technological conditions that enabled Belle Gibson to achieve credibility and status as a lifestyle guru. Gibson's fame as a lifestyle guru was grounded in her democratic appeal. One of the defining features of contemporary liberal democracies is the cultural emphasis on self-actualization. When applied to the context of the body, health is conceived as an individual choice and responsibility; something that can – and ought to – be mastered through reflexive self-monitoring. Gibson not only subscribed to this moral imperative as a seeker of self-knowledge, she also became a role model for hundreds and thousands of fans and followers who similarly sought to improve their health and well-being.

While lifestyle gurus are not a new phenomenon, we have argued that the proliferation of blogs and social media, together with the ubiquity of mobile digital devices, have contributed to their global reach and popularity. For those fame-seekers for whom the traditional media channels to achieve celebrity are remote, these technologies provide new opportunities to achieve fame and influence. Not surprisingly, these forms of creation and participation tend to be viewed positively by many commentators as part of the 'democratization' of information. Nonetheless, it would be rash to hypothesize that global society is on the brink of cyber-utopia in which all voices will be equally heard and respected (Fuchs, 2014: 201). Fame only attaches itself to those lifestyle gurus with the ability to captivate an audience. In most cases, this endeavour requires technical and marketing skills; a compelling persona and narrative are crucial. It is no surprise to find that the low barriers to entry provided by digital technologies create conditions for deceit, hoodwinking and

exploitation, as well as cooperation, interrogation and partnership. What is surprising is the relatively short period of time it has taken for lifestyle gurus to eclipse experts in building relations of deep trust and intimacy with consumers. The number of people ready to believe that Gibson knew more about how to treat her stated condition than trained, qualified medical experts is indicative of the potential for micro-celebrities to exercise authority and influence in health messaging.

Gibson is a micro-celebrity, who achieved fame and celebrity on the internet by appearing to be inspiring and authentic. Online communication permits greater control for the user. The temporal and spatial affordances enabled by communicating at distance mean that online communication tends to be highly edited, managed and rehearsed in textual and visual form. Gibson was able to manufacture a desirable image online through carefully curated photographs and blog posts. Free from the critical gaze of a television interviewer or magazine editor, these technologies gave Gibson control of her image and the capacity to form direct (albeit one-sided) relationships with her followers. Indeed, it is precisely because social media are associated in the popular imagination with democratic participation – compared to the commercial and corporate hierarchies associated with traditional media – that Gibson was able to enhance her para-social appeal as ordinary, 'authentic', trustworthy and 'real'.

In addition to the increased levels of trust afforded to para-social relationships online, part of the appeal of lifestyle gurus as native experts on health and well-being can be explained by the widespread public distrust of experts and elites, particularly pharmaceutical companies, medical professionals and the food industry. The rise of

'Big Pharma', together with a series of scandals involving 'Big Food' corporations, has contributed to public scepticism towards the scientific and medical community. This distrust of medical professionals, together with the growing scepticism of experts and elites in the mainstream media, is the low-trust climate in which Belle Gibson and other lifestyle gurus have emerged. The popularity of these lifestyle gurus reflects a new stage in the development of para-social relationships. In it, intimacy is achieved through the perception of trust and relatability with ordinary people. Familiar strangers are no longer just well-loved television presenters. They are people who affect and purport online to experience the same struggles and vulnerabilities that structure our daily lives. Their growing online prominence testifies to the popular demand for acceptance and approval and the retreat from trained, qualified authorities who are widely seen as offering nothing more than panoptical intimacy.



## Notes

1. There is a strong gendered dimension to the phenomenon of lifestyle gurus. Magazines have long targeted vulnerable women. Supported by an advertising culture that refuses to acknowledge sickness and ageing, the lifestyle gurus that dominate the new media ecology advertise youth and beauty, their beauty a signifier for health and vitality. Men also achieve lifestyle guru status, yet these figures mostly appeal to metric-driven goals and 'bio-hacks' supported by wearable technologies and the quantified self movement; the US entrepreneurs, Tim Ferriss and Dave Asprey, a case in point.

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