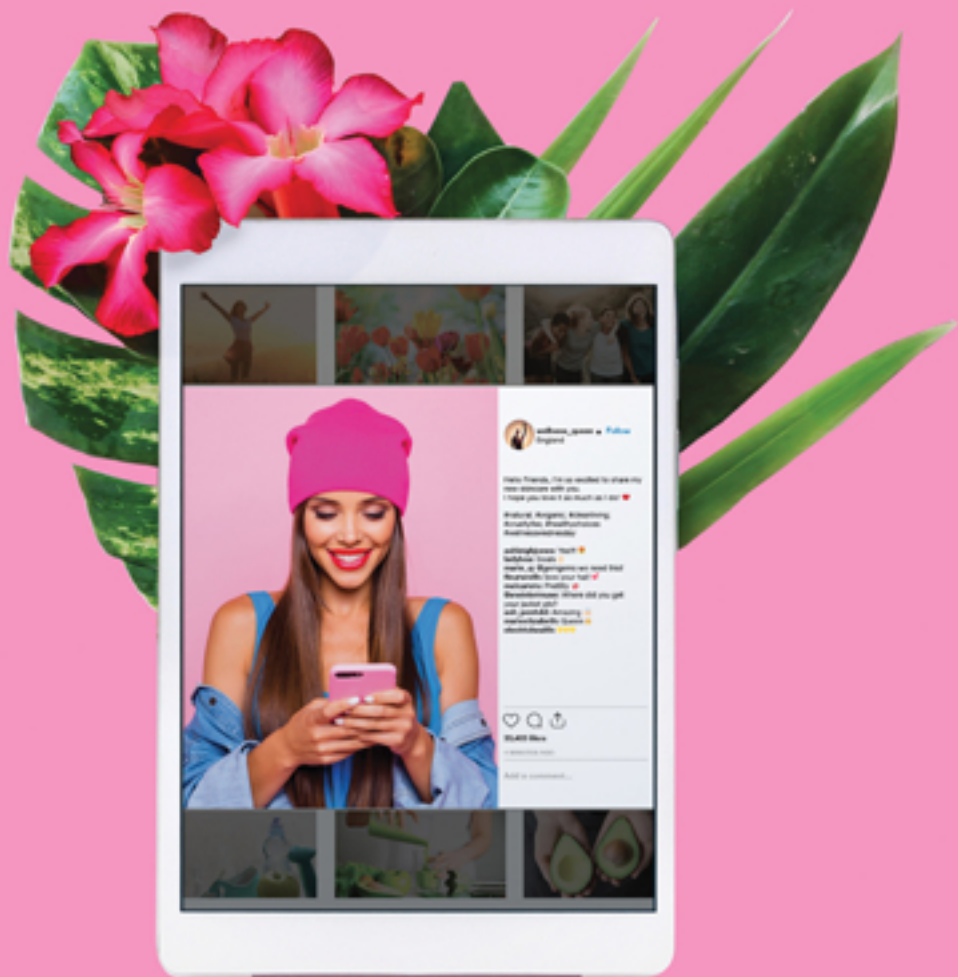# Lifestyle Gurus

STEPHANIE A. BAKER • CHRIS ROJEK

Lifestyle Gurus

Lifestyle Gurus

Constructing Authority and Influence Online

STEPHANIE A. BAKER AND CHRIS ROJEK

polity

Contents

Acknowledgements

Introduction

Our study of lifestyle gurus began in 2015 with the case of Belle Gibson. Gibson presented herself online as a cancer survivor. She claimed that she healed herself from terminal brain cancer by adhering to a healthy diet and lifestyle, rejecting conventional cancer treatments in favour of natural remedies. Using her blog and social media to document her experience, she created an online persona based around inspirational quotes, attractive selfies, healthy recipes and a general air of presumed intimacy. Gibson used these technologies to build an online community of over 200,000 followers. Her claims of self-recovery formed the basis of her online persona and successful global brand, with a bestselling app available on Apple, an international book deal with Penguin and series of public accolades built around her narrative of survival. Gibson's association with Apple and Penguin gave her story a sense of legitimacy and extended her global reach. Comprised of a collection of recipes, her book and app were about more than food; they were framed more broadly under the rubric of lifestyle philosophy as guides on 'how we should live, combating stress, achieving wellness and a healthy, wholesome lifestyle'. In short, Gibson's products were marketed to consumers as manuals filled with 'good advice on promoting better living' (Barker 2014).

The moral payload of Gibson's message was the unexamined assumption that most people do not live well and do not know how to acquire good advice to remedy the problem. Part of the appeal of Gibson's story was that she provided many of those suffering from cancer with hope. If Gibson was able to cure herself from cancer through nutrition and adopting a healthy lifestyle, perhaps others could do the same. Her audience was comprised of those who were ill, as well as health-conscious individuals seeking to optimise their well-being. Gibson, referred to on Instagram as @healing_belle, presented herself as a 'wellness guru' and an advocate of clean eating. She not only claimed to adhere to clean eating principles by restricting her consumption of coffee, gluten and dairy, she also rejected conventional cancer treatments, such as chemotherapy and radiotherapy.

In this respect she was distrustful of elite-professional interventions. She advocated alternative therapies, inspiring her followers to do the same.

In 2015, Gibson was exposed as a fraud. It was revealed that she never had cancer and failed to donate the $300,000.00AUD in proceeds from her book and app, *The Whole Pantry*, to charity, as promised. The scandal caused public outrage and prompted a series of questions: How was Gibson able to pull the wool over the eyes of so many people, including her followers and many branches of popular media? Why did the companies who promoted her products fail to verify whether she had cancer by fact-checking her claims? Why were people so willing to believe the advice of someone they followed online over established medical expertise? Our interest in exploring these questions was the impetus for writing this book. The more we considered this topic, the more we realised that the scandal spoke to a larger cultural phenomenon at play: the rise of lifestyle gurus in the digital age and, by extension, the crisis of confidence in the interventions of experts and professionals.

People go online to make sense of the world around them. Most of us use Google on a daily basis to search for mundane information: directions, transport times and weather updates. We also routinely use social media to connect with friends and social networks online. However, more than ever before, the internet is where we turn when we are lonely, concerned or afraid. Protected with the anonymity afforded by most forms of digital communication, the internet provides us with the capacity to explore many of life's most pressing questions in secret with those whom we perceive to be just like ourselves. Without doubt, this shared experience can be extremely rewarding, providing rich emotional connections in the form of online chat rooms, support groups and forums. The inter-actions enabled by these technologies can also foster meaning, identity and a sense of belonging. This is especially the case when individuals feel excluded and misunderstood by their immediate community, family and friends. Whereas in former times, one might have turned to a novel or film in times of need, the internet now provides a plethora of advice and solutions to life's eternal problems. What these media share in common is their capacity to facilitate a sense of 'mimetic vertigo', the recognition that the object represented also represents you (Taussig 1992). Their significance lies in the fact that they speak to the subject directly, while enabling them to reflect on their concerns at a safe aesthetic distance; achieving emotional pertinence through fusing the subject and object into a common narrative (Baker 2014). One of the key differences between novels, films and the stories documented online, is that the protagonist

we read about online can speak back. The direct forms of communication afforded by social media enable users to engage in dialogic exchange with the protagonists they read about online. They can also communicate in visual form via images and videos, enhancing the feeling of proximity and intimate exchange.

Digital communication has changed the way in which people seek advice. In the twenty-first century, we are subject to more information than ever before as a result of the internet: 24-hour news channels, blogs, vlogs, forums, social network sites and a series of other online sources. One of the problems that users encounter when searching online is how to sift through the plethora of information. Much of the advice found online is conflicting and scientifically inaccurate, particularly in relation to health and well-being. Take coffee, for example. A quick Google search 'does coffee cause …' provides the following results: cancer, bloating, constipation, acne and anxiety. Conversely, the search 'does coffee cure' provides the results: headaches, hangover, constipation, cancer and cold. The same is true of chocolate and wine, which are said to be both the cause and remedy for various ailments. With such contradictory advice found online, it is no surprise that people are confused about what health advice to follow. The average person is not an expert on these topics. Most of us have neither the time nor skills to explore these claims in detail. Moreover, much of the health and wellness marketing behind this content is deliberately designed to mislead and beguile. In light of these issues, the lifestyle dilemma becomes – who to believe?

In the saturated health and wellness market, celebrity advice reigns supreme. Celebrities exercise significant influence over our lives, how we view ourselves and who we aspire to be. This is particularly the case in relation to our ideas about our health and well-being due to their associations with beauty, dieting and fitness. The detox and cleanse market, for example, has been driven by celebrity endorsements. The same holds with respect to the lucrative wellness and beauty industries. Celebrities shape the concerns of consumers and feed on their insecurities by endorsing the products and services of weight-loss and anti-ageing industries. They promote products that are not only expensive but, in some cases, useless and harmful. Much has been written on this topic about celebrity culture as a source of pseudoscience and misinformation (Goldacre 2009; Caulfield 2015; Nichols 2017; Warner 2017). Books of this kind examine and debunk the claims and promises made by celebrities and pseudoscientists in relation to health, nutrition and beauty. In the book, *Is Gwyneth Paltrow Wrong about Everything?* (2015), Timothy Caulfield suggests that celebrity culture is

'one of our society's most pernicious forces', contributing to poor health decisions, wasted investments in useless products and services, a decreased understanding of how science works and dissatisfaction with our own lives and appearance (Caulfield 2015: xii). Tom Nichols (2017: 190) echoes this sentiment, highlighting the capacity for celebrity advocates of the anti-vaccine movement, such as the actress, Jenny McCarthy, a self-professed graduate of the 'University of Google', to influence people to avoid vaccinating their children, exposing them and others to serious illnesses and disease. Less has been written about health literacy and social media, specifically in relation to the dissemination of lifestyle advice by ordinary users who achieve influence online. Our study is a contribution to this topic. We explore the rise of lifestyle gurus in the digital age, examining the conditions that enable them to flourish and the methods they use to appear trustworthy, authentic and credible.

We situate our study in an historical framework. We make no claim to present a systematic historical perspective. Our discussion of nineteenth and twentieth-century contributions to lifestyle advice is intended as a corrective to the tacit assumption in much current writing that lifestyle gurus are a product of the digital age. The historical material also reveals that lifestyle advice today is generally shorn of the heavy emphasis upon Christianity that is redolent in nineteenth-century works. Our account of contemporary lifestyle gurus maintains that they offer consumers a version of 'salvation', but one that is mostly secularised and folk-based. More generally, our approach adopts an historical-comparative methodology. That is, we proceed on the basis that an historical understanding of context and social change is a prerequisite for understanding lifestyle gurus today, and we seek to cultivate an appreciation that the form and content of the advice that they impart is conditioned by national and cultural specificities.

A brief note on terminology. The term 'guru' traditionally referred to a spiritual master. This adjective is used more liberally now to refer to those with native experience, knowledge and skills associated with the domestic sphere and everyday life. The teacher–student relationship persists, but lifestyle gurus are presented as more accessible, collegial and less obviously religious, than in the past. The old distinction of hierarchy between the master and the follower, which was reproduced in most guru relationships, has been replaced by a more approachable and sustainable alternative. Despite the obvious fame and glamour enjoyed by successful lifestyle gurus, it is as if their lives are lived in co-partnership with their followers. Today's lifestyle gurus are mostly lifestyle bloggers, who share content on blogs and social media. In this book, we use the term 'lifestyle

guru' to describe those lifestyle bloggers who have achieved authority and influence in the public domain. While much research has examined the role of the mass media (e.g. print, radio, television) on society and culture, today's lifestyle gurus mostly communicate using social media. As such, we often speak of social media (including blogs) in contrast to 'the media' (also referred to as traditional, conventional and the mass media) to signify the new forms of interactive media accessible to ordinary members of the public. We use the term 'native' to describe those lifestyle gurus who possess limited, or no certified qualifications, and hence, have no professional standing for claiming expertise in health and emotional management. Their skills and knowledge are those associated with ordinary people and everyday life; their perceived ordinariness itself part of their popular appeal. This description is not intended to be pejorative. Instead, it is used to highlight the forms of authority and influence based upon experience and folk wisdom rather than formal, certified training, which has given rise to an industry of lifestyle gurus increasingly placed in the same discursive category as trained doctors, psychologists and dieticians (Lewis 2008).

Although lifestyle gurus have emerged cross culturally, the examples in this book focus on the rise of lifestyle gurus in the modern Western world. There are several reasons for this. First, lifestyle gurus are ubiquitous in contemporary Western societies. This study is an attempt to examine the reasons for this, to demonstrate how the problems addressed in self-improvement literature (e.g. that on health, wealth, relationships and well-being) are enabled by living in certain economic and social conditions. Second, we contend that the rise of lifestyle gurus in the West is indebted to a specific understanding of the individual made possible by modernity, the Enlightenment and our Judeo-Christian heritage. While there are signs that the globalising effects of technology are bridging these differences, frameworks for understanding the self in the West are often a poor conceptual fit for developing and non-Western countries. Micki McGee (2012) cites an example from the feminist self-help classic, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* to demonstrate the point. Latin American editors of the volume critiqued the North American 'Anglo' notion of self-help for its emphasis on the individual, pointing out that this conceptual framework ignored the role of family, friends, and other community members in a woman's life. As a result, the editors replaced the term *auto ayuda* (self-help) with the term *ayuda mutal*, meaning mutual aid (Davis 2007: 180–1). Given that this book examines the rise of lifestyle gurus in modern Western societies, we build upon a body of literature concerned with the development of the self

in the West. For this reason, there is specific emphasis on Anglo-American popular media and those social media sites most popular in English-speaking countries, such as North America, the United Kingdom and Australia (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat). With Instagram currently lifestyle gurus' preferred medium of choice, this book pays specific attention to the platform by noting how it affords specific forms of communication in comparison to other social media sites.

Blogs and social media have confounded issues around trust and credibility through altering how we seek advice and how we decide who we believe. The internet has not created lifestyle gurus, but it affords them a public platform on which to give advice and share their views. Most have a blog, an Instagram account and a YouTube channel on which to document their lives and lifestyles. People have shared lifestyle advice for centuries with their immediate families and friends. Claims about how to heal illness through diet and alternative therapies are far from novel. The established history of self-help literature points to the general need for obtaining comfort and wisdom from strangers with whom we associate a degree of success and achievement (McGee 2005). What is new is that these technologies enable lifestyle advice to be disseminated at an unprecedented speed and scale. These affordances make lifestyle blogging fundamentally different from previous forms of mediated exchange. Snake-oil merchants and charlatans have existed for centuries, taking advantage of the vulnerable. However, prior to the internet they had neither a global audience, nor the potential to go viral. Social media sites are infused with commercial interests, making it possible to profit from sharing advice. Affiliate marketing programmes have enabled bloggers to monetise their posts through advertising, with many turning blogging into a career.

While some lifestyle gurus claim to be personal trainers, yoga teachers or nutritionists, few have the certified credentials required to give health advice. Instead, they rely on narratives of self-transformation, providing anecdotal evidence, folklore and testimonies about how they have healed themselves and others during difficult times. These stories are supported by highly curated social media profiles featuring inspirational quotes, food imagery and before and after shots documenting their transformation into attractive, ostensibly happier and healthier subjects. The lifestyles presented online are designed to be inspiring, but they also serve as evidence of the possibilities of self-transformation – who you too could be – if you were to adhere to their lifestyle advice, purchase their books, products or services. Lifestyle gurus place the ultimate responsibility of

problem solving upon the shoulders of the individual. Their advice is intended to be facilitative.

Personal solutions, however, are understood to be a matter of resetting your life by taking the guided, decisive act to change negative, sub-optimal behaviour, and renewing your new direction by online, top-up consultation. Social media has altered how we are influenced. Social media sites offer clear rewards for behaving in a certain way. Engineered around the quest for metric-driven status, influence is measured on social media by the number of followers one has, media recognition and the amount of comments, shares and 'likes' a post receives. An expert may have credentials and years of experience, but they are unlikely to be as compelling as a lifestyle guru who is 'Instafamous', with an attractive body and glowing skin to verify their lifestyle advice, together with a highly curated Instagram feed that conveys how widely admired and deeply approved of they are. The issue here is not merely about misinformation, but the methods we use to know what information to trust and who to believe.

In this book we aim to explore the phenomenon of lifestyle gurus in the twenty-first century. We move beyond examining the pseudoscientific claims of lifestyle gurus, to focus on the conditions that enable their emergence and the techniques they use to achieve authority and influence online. In Chapter 1 we outline the concept of a lifestyle guru. We provide a brief history of lifestyle gurus and discuss the cultural, economic and technological conditions that have enabled them to flourish. In Chapter 2 we examine the rise of lifestyle gurus in the digital age and how emergent technologies afford new forms of intimate online exchange. Chapter 3 focuses on the specific self-presentation techniques lifestyle gurus employ to achieve influence online. We examine how trust is fostered among different populations and how credibility is formed. We also reveal the emotional costs associated with lifestyle blogging. Chapter 4 explores the economic and technological conditions that have transformed lifestyle blogging into a commercial industry. We discuss the rise of influencers as global brands, how the self is commodified in the process of self-branding and how the path to purchase has changed in the digital age with specific emphasis on the creation of the wellness industry. Chapter 5 examines the rise of lifestyle gurus as unregulated advisers online. We focus specifically on the burgeoning public interest in diet and nutrition, contextualising our discussion in the current political climate of distrust towards governments and corporations. Chapter 6 introduces two cults of lifestyle perfectionism: 'assured perfectionism' and 'affirmative perfectionism'. The former is an historically significant iteration of lifestyle advice that was

ascendant between the 1850s and 1970s. It often relied upon the authority of the Bible to offer followers 'the true way' in leading fulfilling, healthy, productive and rewarding lives. These historical precedents of lifestyle management and planning persist. But the internet has ushered in the age of 'affirmative perfectionism'. Under it, allure, acceptance, approval and success are not dependent upon following the Bible or some other, secular, doctrine for the good life. Rather, speaking precisely, they spring from the construction of a self that possesses the social capital of being instantly admired, automatically approved. The final chapter concludes by situating the rise of lifestyle gurus in low-trust societies. Rather than reducing the contemporary fascination with lifestyle gurus to secularism or a culture of narcissism (Lasch 1979), we argue that the turn to lifestyle gurus for advice is symptomatic of new conceptions of selfhood and the growing distrust of experts and elites. Having dedicated most of the book to exploring the conditions that have enabled lifestyle gurus to flourish and the methods lifestyle gurus use to achieve authority and influence online, we conclude by reflecting on the implications of living in a 'low-trust society'.

While we approach the phenomenon of lifestyle gurus from a critical standpoint, this book is not a rejection of the internet. Like all new technologies, there are many cultural anxieties around the internet, especially regarding its use and impact on younger generations. The role of the internet in how we navigate lifestyle advice is more complex and nuanced than reductionist critiques about causes and necessities. The ubiquity of mobile broadband and digital devices offers incomparable benefits, providing new opportunities to share health information and experiences with others. But despite discourse about the democratic potential for social media to give everyone a voice, and the opportunity to access health advice and share knowledge at an unprecedented scale, these relations are not without their risks, not least because of the potential for information to mislead. While some internet sites are credible and well moderated, many are not. There are concerns over the quality of information found online, how to differentiate credible from bogus advice and how to recognise when advice is compromised by commercial interests. This is not because people are stupid, but because it has become increasingly difficult to know what lifestyle advice to trust online. These concerns become more pressing as scientific and medical issues become incorporated into the wellness industry. The internet is a growing source of health information and lifestyle advice that aligns with broader goals of self-improvement and personal life management. As more of us turn to the internet for answers, there is a need to become more informed about the sources we use online.

Most would agree that you cannot believe everything you read online, yet it is not always clear what and whom to believe. There is a tendency to overestimate our capacity to discern quality information online, assuming that only others are fooled by pseudoscience and quackery. The Belle Gibson scandal encourages us to rethink this proposition. Gibson had over 200,000 followers on Instagram, 200,000 downloads of her app in the first two weeks of its release, and sold thousands of copies of her book. Her following enabled her to make close to half a million dollars from sales of the app and book in just eighteen months. Gibson's rise to fame and the success of her global brand indicates how compelling her narrative was to the general public. Those duped were not confined to cancer patients in search of a miracle cure, they were health-conscious individuals, informed consumers, media pundits, nutritionists and dieticians bound by a common interest in health and well-being. It is only by understanding how lifestyle gurus like Gibson achieve authority and influence online that we are able to be better informed as consumers.

1

What is a Lifestyle Guru?

How to be *among*, and what to expect from, and rely upon, Others? These questions occur to every child, and are repeated, over and over again, in countless different settings, by every adult, for a lifetime. In part, the rise of today's lifestyle gurus may be conceived as a response to these imperatives in the digital age. In this book, we use the term 'lifestyle guru' to refer to unlicensed native agents of awareness, positioned in conventional and social media, to offer emotional support, an identity matrix and pedagogy for self-discovery and well-being. By the term 'unlicensed native' we aim to highlight that lifestyle gurus are ordinary members of society, who possess limited, or no certified qualifications, and hence, no professional standing to claim expertise in emotional management, health, constitutional law and licensing matters. Lifestyle gurus employ a mixture of selective scientific knowledge, folk tradition and personal experience to offer alternative advice and guidance on medical, psychological and social problems afflicting others. The stance that they adopt is often dismissive of professional, elite knowledge and practice on the grounds that it under-values lay traditions and ordinary experience. While lifestyle gurus typically present themselves as anti-establishment, it would be an overstatement to propose that they are part of an anti-scientific movement. A sounder way of looking at things would be to describe them as generally adopting a *selective, instrumental approach* to science. Given that much scientific knowledge about lifestyle issues is conflicted, and often turns out on inspection to be tainted, lifestyle gurus cherry pick information to advance the profile and appeal of their own views. The media often collude in making these views newsworthy in an attempt to capture public attention. Lifestyle gurus embrace a broad range of editorial newsroom concerns from health to beauty, fitness, fashion, food, wealth, relationships and travel. They provide practical advice that people can apply in order to function more optimally and effectively under the guise of well-being. Against the implied remoteness of scientific and professional authority, with its lofty jargon that bespeaks insinuated superiority, and the uncomfortable rituals

of privilege that distinguish it from habitual, mundane experience, lifestyle gurus propagate knowledge and applications that are a mixture of science, ordinary life experience, plain speaking and marginalised, discarded, or forgotten, ways and means of coping and wellness.

Lifestyle gurus typically portray themselves as offering practical, no-nonsense advice on life issues. Using psychological concepts, they propagate a cult of perfectionism that mostly celebrates and affirms middle-class values. Although there are manifold inflections of this cult, at its core are four life goals:

1. Acceptance
   The attainment of recognition and access in social groups and society at large.
2. Approval
   The achievement of positive reactions from individuals, groups and society that reinforce a sense of self worth.
3. Social impact
   The acknowledgement by individuals, groups and society of bearing markers of elevated status associated with achievement, significance and attention value.
4. Self-validation
   The affirmation by individuals and groups of valued personal characteristics of the self that contribute to a sense of positive self-worth.

The cult of perfection is part of the wider culture of achievement and high-status differentiation. It treats the goals of acceptance, approval, social impact and self-validation as universally desirable. This is manifest in the exceptionally high number of lifestyle platforms dedicated to techniques of self-improvement and self-transformation, covering the topics of beauty, fitness, fashion, relationships, wellness, wealth and business success. It might be thought that questions of improving lifestyle immediately raise related social and economic questions of inclusion, equality, justice and social engineering. Be that as it may, the vast majority of lifestyle guru sites pass over these questions in seraphic silence. Instead, their typical approach is determinedly person-centred. They address an audience for whom the complexities of life have proved challenging with practical, plain speaking, oracular, non-hierarchical remedies. Gaining practical, positive self-knowledge is the bugle call rallying audiences to lifestyle communicators. Although most lifestyle gurus regularly participate in conferences,

symposia and teach-ins, digital communication is the overwhelming and decisive point of exchange.

Despite the strong ethos of non-hierarchy, and the deliberate emphasis upon empathy (co-partnership), accessibility (friendship) and complicity (against 'the system') between *Communicators* (gurus) and *Communicants* (audiences), the latent power dynamics typically privilege the former over the latter. The paradox of these lifestyle sites is that they generally claim to solve various challenges of complexity in life with *simplicity*. This is communicated to followers in three main ways:

1. Lifestyle gurus present themselves as having faced, and vanquished, the same or analogous life traumas that their audience encounters. Among the most common traumas are serious physical illness, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, career disappointment, relationship troubles and chronic self-dislike. Emotional disturbance may derive from continuing concrete health issues and their consequences, or more general anxieties about not possessing desired levels of acceptance, attraction and approval, or just not 'fitting in' with others. The persuasive power of lifestyle gurus is directly related to their apparent ordinariness and receptivity. The first rule of effective on-site contact is to create a culture of exchange in which audiences trust that communicators genuinely understand, and feel, their pain. A compelling narrative of self-transformation, articulated by those who have already successfully made the journey, is key.

2. They advance a step-by-step programme to enable people to improve themselves and, in doing so, to extract themselves from the negative thinking that prevents them from optimal conduct and reaching their full potential. This programme is typically supported by products and services of commercial benefit to the lifestyle guru in question. From a psychological standpoint, positive thinking, celebrating inner strength and the need to love oneself are the most common remedies.

3. Programmes of intervention may draw on selected strands of scientific knowledge to appear credible and true. However, although lifestyle gurus commonly appeal to scientific knowledge, they are generally defined in antithesis to professional expertise and elite diagnosis and treatment. While lacking any objectively adequate certification of probity, and with surprisingly low responsibilities to subject themselves to independent regulatory discipline, the