



CONTEMPORARY PORTRAYALS OF WOMEN AND FEMININITY. A CASE STUDY OF LIFESTYLE BLOGS IN THE U.S

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ABSTRACT. This article explores contemporary portrayals of women and femininity in lifestyle blogs written and edited by millennial women in the United States. Based on a sample of three of the most popular lifestyle blogs currently in the U.S. this article attempts to identify and describe current portrayals of women to determine if they support a progressive or a conservative approach to femininity. The study we present in this paper is based on a dual methodology: content analysis and discourse analysis. Content analysis allows us to identify topics covered by the selected lifestyle blogs and their categorizations (sections in which they are published) whereas the discourse analysis helps determine the presence or absence of women stereotypes and how gender is represented. Results show some affinity between lifestyle blogs and women magazines with regards to topics covered although the editorial tone is more progressive in lifestyle blogs, leaning towards feminism and discarding conservative representations of femininity.

Keywords: journalism; stereotypes; Internet; blogs; women's magazines; media

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Introduction

The Internet has changed our lives. Technology has transformed the global media environment from one organized around passive media consumption to a far more complex environment – mobile, multitasking, on-demand – where consumers have more control over where, when and how they interact with media. Today, consumers produce their own forms of content and are capable of producing, distributing and consuming information bits and bytes, no matter where he or she is, as long as Internet access is provided. As a result of the Internet's structure and distributed architecture, access to information has progressively relocated into the users' hands. Audiences have evolved and adopted a more active role; Internet users read, listen and watch, they also express themselves and create their own content (Jenkins, 2006). The consumer, who used to be at the receiving end of the communication chain, has been placed at the center of the process. This change has mainly been possible thanks to social apps, a corpus of tools, services and technical devices that enable the user to produce (edit, copy, distribute) content accessible to others (Gluck & Roca, 2008).

Multiplication of media and audience fragmentation are other factors that should be taken into account. Blogs targeting young millennials coexist in a highly competitive scenario, by and large more competitive than that which was characteristic of the preexisting communicative ecosystem; public access to media is no longer limited to a reduced number of newspapers, radios and television channels. In such conditions, where media and audiences are diversified, specialized and fragmented, it is not surprising that the content and focus of the blogs analyzed for this study target the interests and, above all, to the *weltanschauung* of a more limited and more specific audience. In this context, mediatization theory, as Bennett & Iyengar (2008) point out, would be applied less forcefully to the current communicative ecosystem, and in particular to digital media, given the context of competition and the breadth of supply. There would be an ambivalent scenario, in which content produced by media channels match the tastes of the audience while the audience seeks media aligned with their taste. In this complex scenario configuration of social reality, especially in the long run, would continue to be powerfully determined by media consumption.

The structure of the Internet stimulates that the way of producing and consuming information by the users, now called prosumers (Bowman & Willis, 2003), is more in line with increasingly specific interests, and less determined by the mass media agenda (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). In fact, users not only have a much greater capacity than before to determine which specific contents are interesting to them, and how to consume them. But the same network has also the ability to learn from the user's preferences and, in the

same way that advertisements customize the search history, navigation, and purchases of each user, so does content, or the first results presented by search engines (Morozov, 2014). The content that users access online is increasingly predetermined by their preferences as well as by the other users with whom they interact on social networks. The “filter bubble” described by Pariser (2011) is proven to be well established.

Blogs have been very popular since the early days of the World Wide Web. The first blogs appeared in the late 1990s with the creation of Open Diary (1998) and SlashDot (1997), both considered to be the first “blog tools.” Ten years later, in 2007, Technorati’s *State of the Live Web* gave an estimate figure of 70 million blogs worldwide (120,000 new blogs were created each day). In just two years (from 2004 to 2006) the blogosphere doubled its size (total blogs tracked) every five to seven months. The success of free and open-source content management systems (CMSes) like WordPress (released 2003) also contributed to the popularity of blogs, without users needing to know how to code or write HTML. By 2004, blogs were so popular that the word “blog” was declared word of the year by the Merriam-Webster, much as “selfie” was named word of the year by Oxford Dictionaries in 2013 (Rettberg, 2017). But, what is the current scenario? In 2011 there was an estimated 173 million blogs online¹ and according to WordPress official statistics²; users generated about 59.3 million new posts and 48.4 million new comments each month as of June 2016.

It is often sustained that both personal websites and social networking sites provide a significant environment for identity exploration, self-presentation (particularly of teenagers and young adults) and social expression of idealized characteristics of what one is or would like to be (Tortajada et al., 2013). This paper analyzes a sample of three lifestyle blogs edited by young women and targeting women in order to identify contemporary portrayals of femininity on the Web. In terms of social influence, these blogs do not work differently than traditional media: the media ecosystem establishes what topics or issues are under discussion and what the best approach to cover them is.

The media has a tremendous influence on audiences (consumers). Not only does it dictate the topics of interest but also suggests how best to deal with the topics. Scholarly research suggests that in the long run, mass media plays a significant role in molding attitudes and behaviors, and in promoting certain viewpoints. Two of the most cited approaches are the agenda-setting theory (McCombs and Shaw, 1972), which analyzes the influence of the media on the focus of public attention, and the framing theory (Entman, 2004), focused on when media chooses some factors about an issue or event to emphasize over other factors. The agenda setting helped prove the importance of mass media in public perceptions of the present: what is important and what is not. The framing theory analyzed how media (and also institu-

tions, NGO's, political parties, etc.) try to deliver news to general audiences using the frame that suits their needs the most. All in all, audiences' perception of the world surrounding them is heavily related to the news they get and the stories they read (Zaller, 1992). More recently, the mediatization theory (Schulz, 2004; Couldry & Hepp, 2013) emphasized the notion that "media logic" increasingly determines the actions of different social institutions and groups, depicting a scenario in which the form and content of messages are conditioned by their transmission through mass media. To put it simply, people talk about topics that mass media consider relevant, although such topics are narrated from a certain point of view that tends to benefit the storyteller (editorial tone, headlines, format, etc.) Mediatization means that the content is treated like merchandise whose goal is to reach an audience, the bigger the better, and we have encountered several examples of this in our sample. Catchy headlines, for instance, whose main purpose is to attract attention and encourage visitors to click on a link even though the content does not meet expectations (clickbait).

Post-Feminist Representations of Women

The Internet has enabled the rise of a new form of socialized communication: mass self-communication. The emergence of mass self-communication offers an extraordinary medium for rebellious individuals and social movements to build autonomy and confront the institutions of society in their own terms and around their own projects (Castells, 2007). Research suggests that emerging adulthood (roughly from eighteen throughout the twenties) represents a critical period for identity development; emerging adults are in a stage characterized by instability and self-focus, exploring a variety of possibilities in work, relationships, and beliefs before committing to adult roles (Manago et al., 2008). At the same time research also indicates that individuals develop a sense of self by creating an impression they wish to give to others (Goffman, 1959). When emerging adults act within social computer-mediated interactions (blogs, websites, social networking sites, etc.) they share experiences and reflect on values. In a way, they are helping one another consolidate identities as they transition to adulthood (Nurmi, 2004). That is the reason why we believe it is so important to understand the way millennial women write about femininity and women representation. Their perception of how contemporary women look like, behave or love is contributing to reformulate certain gender portrayals that have been anchored in the past for decades, losing the power of representation and corrupting a reality that is no longer accurate. The human brain needs stereotypes, references that help us understand the world in which we live; the problem is when those representations remain oblivious to change.

Women's magazines have always been a well-established medium to reproduce and promote discriminatory portrayals of femininity while observing the social imperatives of a given time. How to love, live or work are just three examples of critical components in everybody's life upon which these magazines have traditionally had heavily biased editorial opinions, perpetuating certain biased and non-egalitarian roles (Gallego, 1990). In this section, we present an approach to the current debate about contemporary portrayals of women and femininity in the media, which will later be used to determine the kind of gender representation promoted by our sample of lifestyle blogs.

Research on the development of different forms of femininity sheds light on the complex remaking of femininity that we are currently facing (Budgeon, 2014). This contemporary "landscape" of gender relations has been described as a contradictory field in which discourses of female empowerment currently circulates alongside the reinvigoration of inequalities and the emergence of new forms and modalities of power (Gill & Scharff, 2011). Blogshops, online sites in which young women model and sell apparel via social media, are a good example of these contradictions as models are caught in a paradoxical intersection between "feminine objectification" and "feminine empowerment" as they trade on their femininity in relation to other women rather than in relation to male judges (e.g. beauty contest) or clients (Abidin & Thompson, 2012).

Equalitarian and progressive portrayals of women are critical for a healthy media environment as it is a key component in the social construction of gender. Portraying women and men as equals, female depictions in professional settings with promising careers, love scenarios other than heterosexual marriages, couples who choose not to have children, or bodies that defy the traditional beauty canons are just some examples easy to find in the new digital media scenario since the early days (Dobson, 2016). In this paper, we attempt to identify how women are represented in lifestyle blogs and whether such representations are more progressive and equalitarian than the rigid stereotypes used by women's magazines.

Women have traditionally been depicted in women's magazines according to three well-defined stereotypes that have survived to our days: wife-mother-housewife (devoted to her husband, children and home), superwoman (wife, mother and ambitious professional who also has time to work out and look beautiful) and woman as object of desire (mostly devoted to her body) (Roca, 2006). Even though female stereotyping is currently more subtle and indirect, it aligns with the notion of benevolent sexism, a subjectively positive attitude toward women who are seen as warmer but less competent than men (Zotos & Tsihla, 2014). Research suggests that women's magazines are found to exhibit a steady bias towards female decorative roles whereas magazines targeting men are found to frequently display sexist female portrayals in

their advertising content. However, it is worth mentioning that they include a higher fraction of female non-traditional roles compared to women's magazines while general audience magazines tend to advance in "neutral" female portrayals, seldom displaying sexualized images (Zotos & Tsihla, 2014).

There is an ongoing debate concerning the conflict between two ways of analyzing women's magazines (Gill, 2007), which can also be applied to lifestyle blogs. On the one hand, they are considered a vehicle for pleasure and distraction (feminine texts that present a seductive address to women) while on the other hand they can also be seen as suppliers of oppressive and outdated ideology (deeply problematic representations of sexuality, race, class, etc.) Even though contemporary women's magazines and lifestyle blogs embody feminist values such as equal rights and pay, career and motherhood, contraception and access to education, the distinction between *public* and *private sphere* (see next section) remains tangible in most publications and blogs.

Digital media such as blogs and social networking sites have significantly contributed to the inclusion of *equality* and *non-conventional* portrayals of women in the rigid repertoire mentioned earlier, leaving behind domestic settings and traditional occupations and focusing on topics other than physical attractiveness or sexualized images. As documented by many scholars, a post-feminist heroine has appeared in the past decade who is empowered and autonomous while also playful and youthful (Gerodetti, 2017). Feminist theorists have documented the construction of a variety of "new femininities" (Gill and Scharff, 2013; Harris, 2004; McRobbie, 2007), based on the idea that we are living in a neoliberal era where young women can be considered the successors of social and political change in the widespread discourse of "girl power" and the representation of women as "future girls" (Harris, 2004) and "top girls" (McRobbie, 2007), among other references (Gerodetti, 2017). However, despite a proliferation of new femininities, a privileged construction taking the form of a white, western heterosexual femininity prevails in the majority of mainstream media (Budgeon, 2014).

Last but not least, we would like to make a mention to the *love your body* (LYB) discourses, which have emerged over the last decade as a result of multiple causes, such as the growth of social media and attempts by traditional media to respond to feminist critiques of what have been characterized as "unrealistic" and "harmful" body image ideals and stereotypes (Gill & Elias, 2014). This topic will not be addressed in this article but we wanted to include a reference as research highlights the importance of these discourses in encouraging women to accept themselves the way they are, in all shapes, ages and colors. New media such as blogs and social networking sites (e.g. Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook) have given voice to a vast number of women that have been underrepresented for a long time in traditional media,

especially in advertising (women often appear as an object of desire drawn by the beauty canons of each time) and in women's magazines, where traditionally the "ideal woman" or "perfect lady" is portrayed as beautiful, submissive and devoted to her husband and children. The blogs studied in this paper contain several references to LYB discourses but they have not been analyzed given the complexity of this topic, which would deserve a separate analysis.

Lifestyle Blogs and Women's Magazines

Lifestyle blogs and women's magazines show some structural and content consistencies that enable us to refer to them as a genre *per se*. On the one hand, they are addressed specifically to female readers; on the other hand, their content primarily revolves around the *private sphere*, as opposed to the *public sphere*, the foundation of legacy newspapers, which traditionally targeted male audiences. The notion of separate spheres has been a key component in studies about gender roles for over two centuries. This concept is based on the division of gender roles into separate spheres, where women's place is in the private sphere (family life, home) and men's place is the public sphere (politics, work) (Pateman & Grosz, 2013; Mies, 2014).

Women's magazines (and lifestyle blogs) share a number of important features: they tend to address readers as equals and friends by adopting an intimate editorial tone; they are organized around the shared "pleasures and labors of femininity"; they are invariably constructed in opposition to masculinity and are also structured by implicit exclusions relating mainly to age, race, sexuality and class (Gill, 2007). They also contain a high number of advertisements, some magazines account for 50% of the content, although rather than being perceived by the reader as something disruptive, ads are considered by the audience as part of the flow, in a way, they are "recommendations" offered by the publication on how to dress or what perfume to use.

Structure: Name and Content

Name: short, usually a female first name (*Marie Claire, Catalina, Eliza*) or a reference to the kind of woman the publication targets (*Cosmopolitan, Travelgirl, Born with Style, Good Housekeeping, Working Mother*). The lifestyle blogs that we have analyzed also respond to this parameter (*Her Campus. A Collegiette's Guide to Life, 20-nothings, Hello Giggles*).

Content: structured around the axis *beauty–love–home* (Gallego, 1990). The editorial tone and style is direct but at the same time intimate, the magazine is above all a "friend" that the reader can trust. The audience is not perceived

as a whole but as individuals, so articles try to imitate the conversations one would have with girlfriends while having a drink (private sphere). Beauty is understood as an aspiration and a ritual, attached to secondary concepts such as youth and fashion. But, beauty without romance and relationships is irrelevant: women’s magazines see love as a step towards happiness. They not only show how women can find true love but also how to retain it through articles on the importance of family, relationships and sexual health. Only if you have beauty you will find love, which will eventually lead you to a happiness that will fully bloom at home; this could be the *leitmotiv* of women’s magazines. But, balance may be hard to keep due to jealousy or loss of sexual appetite, for instance, and that is why sections containing advice are also very popular in this type of publications, with special emphasis on sex. Through so-called *experts’ accounts* from journalists to self-established as experts, highly trained professionals (sexologists, psychologists, etc.) or through “profanes” (mainly testimonials from readers), the promise made to the reader is a gain in sexual knowledge and skills that will improve sexual life (Raynaud, 2014). Quizzes to self-evaluate are also common, after all the magazine is a dear friend. The following covers of Cosmopolitan and Good Housekeeping (exhibit 1) show examples of the *beauty–love–home* content axis.

Exhibit 1 Covers of Cosmopolitan magazine
(US Edition, June 2016; US Edition, May 2016)



Lifestyle blogs do not have a fixed block of content, or even a recurring table of contents. Posts appear to be somehow random and the reader has the perception that they depend on the writer's mood or interest on a given day or week. But this does not mean that blogs are chaotic or disorganized. On the contrary, posts are extremely well organized thanks to categories. Entries are categorized by keywords which are a useful resource; not only for readers who access the website on a regular basis but also for those who monitor the site using an RSS feed tool or an aggregator. Taking a look at some of the common categories of the three blogs analyzed, it can be easily noted that the focus of interest aligns with that of women's magazines described earlier: career, love, style & beauty, family, friends and sex. In addition, as we will see later on, the editorial tone and writing style of lifestyle blogs also resembles that of women's magazines as the reader is always treated as a friend.

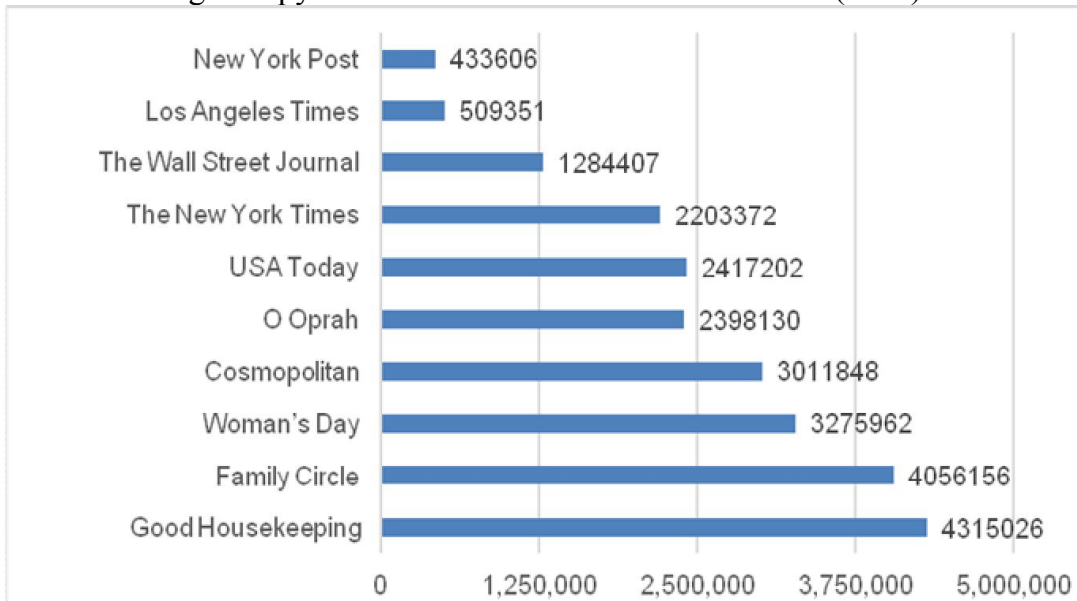
Genres

A broadly accepted classification of magazines is that based on the type of content they focus on (McCracken, 1992). Women's magazines can be classified into three major groups: general information (structured around the *beauty–love–home* axis), specialized (focused on one particular aspect of women's everyday lives such as maternity, travel, DIY) and service magazines (highly specialized, the target group is very specific, such as furniture lovers, crochet, or indoor décor). The blogs we have studied align with the first group (general information).

Circulation (U.S.)

Women's magazines play a critical role on disseminating (and promoting) portrayals of women and femininity. Their high circulation figures are critical to understand why the study of gender representation in the media is so important, especially because they have tremendous influence on readers' perception of the roles that men and women should play in society. Exhibit 2 compares circulation figures³ of women's magazines with daily newspapers; exhibit 3 shows audience data for the blogs analyzed.

Exhibit 2 Women’s Monthly Magazines and Daily Newspapers
Single-Copy Sales in the US. Total Paid & Verified (2016)



Audience indicators for the three blogs analyzed come from Alexa, Facebook and Twitter. Alexa offers data from the Internet as a whole although the data collected comes only from users that use this toolbar, meaning that it is strongly biased. Nonetheless, we believe that the data shows, at least, a trend. Alexa shows the position of a given site compared to the rest of sites that this application tracks. It does not offer specific data but a ranking (a low number means that a site is well positioned and it has a large group of readers). The following exhibit also includes the number of followers that the blogs have on Facebook and Twitter to showcase popularity on social media.

Exhibit 3 Audience Indexes for *Her Campus*, *20-Nothings* and *Hello*:
Position in Alexa Rank; Facebook and Twitter followers (3/1/2017)

	Alexa (global rank)	Facebook	Twitter
Her Campus	22,825	37,6137	40,200
20-Nothings	4,227,768	380	2,548
Hello Giggles	6,842	1,883,199	176,000

As it can easily be seen, two of the three blogs (*Her Campus* and *Hello Giggles*) have a prominent number of followers on social media, and a significant position in the Alexa global rank. *20-Nothings*, on the contrary, has a roughly 2,500 followers on Twitter and only 380 on Facebook. The reason for this might be that *20-Nothings* works as a personal blog of a single

writer, who publishes sporadically, while *Her Campus* and *Hello Giggles* are both collective blogs that publish several articles on a daily basis.

Audience

Although we have already discussed the kind of readers that women's magazines target when we talked about genres, a sub-classification is possible if we focus on reader profiles. We distinguish between high-end magazines, practical magazines, and youth/juvenile magazines. High-end women's magazines target well-established professionals, are printed on high quality paper, and the contents focus on style, fashion, travel and glamorous celebrities. Practical magazines are slightly less expensive and their articles focus on useful information rather than expensive getaways or beauty treatments; interviewees usually are popular celebrities and fashion picks may include cheaper versions (Zara, H&M, Forever 21, etc.) of *Prêt-à-Porter* designs seen in Paris or New York. Finally, youth/juvenile magazines target young women and late teens. Advice sections, as well as testimonials from readers, have a significant presence in these magazines.

The reader's profile of the lifestyle blogs that we have analyzed is hard to determine, as we do not have access to traffic data and statistics. However, by taking a look at the descriptions offered by the editors we can attempt to identify the audience they target: women in their late-twenties or early-thirties interested in female empowerment through showcasing of personal experiences that offer practical development tips and guidance.

Research Design

In 2013, Forbes Magazine published *The 10 best websites for millennial women*⁴ list. The sample we use in this study is based on Forbes' compilation, as we believe it is important to focus on websites edited and managed by millennial women. One of our hypotheses is that women representation (and stereotyping) in such sites, given that they are run by young women, is less conservative and may reflect the actual dynamics of 21st century women (independent, educated, emancipated, among other traits). Thus, femininity portrayals and women representations should include questions such as overlapping of the private and public spheres, emancipation (women who live on their own is because they choose to) or even expressing their willingness to not have children (maternity is usually a must within women's magazines spectrum). Our sample contains only three blogs from the above-mentioned Forbes' list mostly because the rest of sites were either inactive or closed when we collected the data (July 2016) or they were not considered lifestyle blogs.

Methodology

Exhibit 4 Sample of Lifestyle Blogs Analyzed

Blog name	Year established	Website	Founder	Posts analyzed
<i>Her Campus</i> . “A Collegiette’s Guide to Life”	2009	www.hercampus.com	Stephanie Kaplan Lewis, Windsor Hanger Western, Annie Wang	90
<i>20-Nothings</i>	2007	www.20-nothings.com	Jessie Rosen	18
<i>Hello Giggles</i>	2011	www.hellogiggles.com	Zoey Deschanel, Molly McAleer, and Sophia Rossi	120

Data was collected between January 1 and June 30, 2016. A total of 228 posts were compiled; the distribution by publication is as it follows: *Hello Giggles* (120), *Her Campus* (90), and *20-Nothings* (18). We are well aware that the sample for the latest is fairly small compared to the other two blogs but the reason is that content is not published on a daily basis. *20-Nothings* published about one article per week, compared to an average of 50 to 60 articles per week published by *Hello Giggles* and *Her Campus*. For this reason, we decided to significantly increase the data range of *20-Nothings* until we collected a representative sample of articles. We also carried out a pretest (8% of the sample) to establish the reliability coefficient. Results showed overall consensus among authors (0.81 for thematic classification), and we considered that the reliability of this case study was guaranteed (Neuendorf, 2002). In addition, we also conducted a discourse analysis to better determine the characteristics and specificities of these publications and, in particular, how women were depicted.

Results and Discussion

This section begins with a note about format and categories. The second part focuses on the content analysis, which distinguishes between topics covered and portrayals of women and femininity, making a distinction between conservative and progressive approaches.

Format

Use of images and videos. Pictures are omnipresent. 92.7% of *Her Campus* articles and 100% of *20-Nothings* and *Hello Giggles* incorporate at least one image to illustrate the content. In contrast, the presence of videos is much less common. Only 9% of *Her Campus* articles and 16.7% of *Hello Giggles* include some video. *20-Nothings* incorporates none.

Authorship. All posts are signed; and all of them are authored by women, whether it is the editor of the publication (*20-Nothings*) or a number (relatively small) of collaborators, like in *Her Campus* and *Hello Giggles*.

Advertising. The purpose was not to identify ads but to find posts containing promotional content (seldom identified as such, but the nature of which could be clearly derived). We found 27 promotional articles (5 in *Her Campus*, 2 in *20-Nothings*, and 20 in *Hello Giggles*). An amount not to be underestimated (12% of the total sample, 16.6% if we consider only *Hello Giggles*), given the implications that this has from an editorial point.

Categories

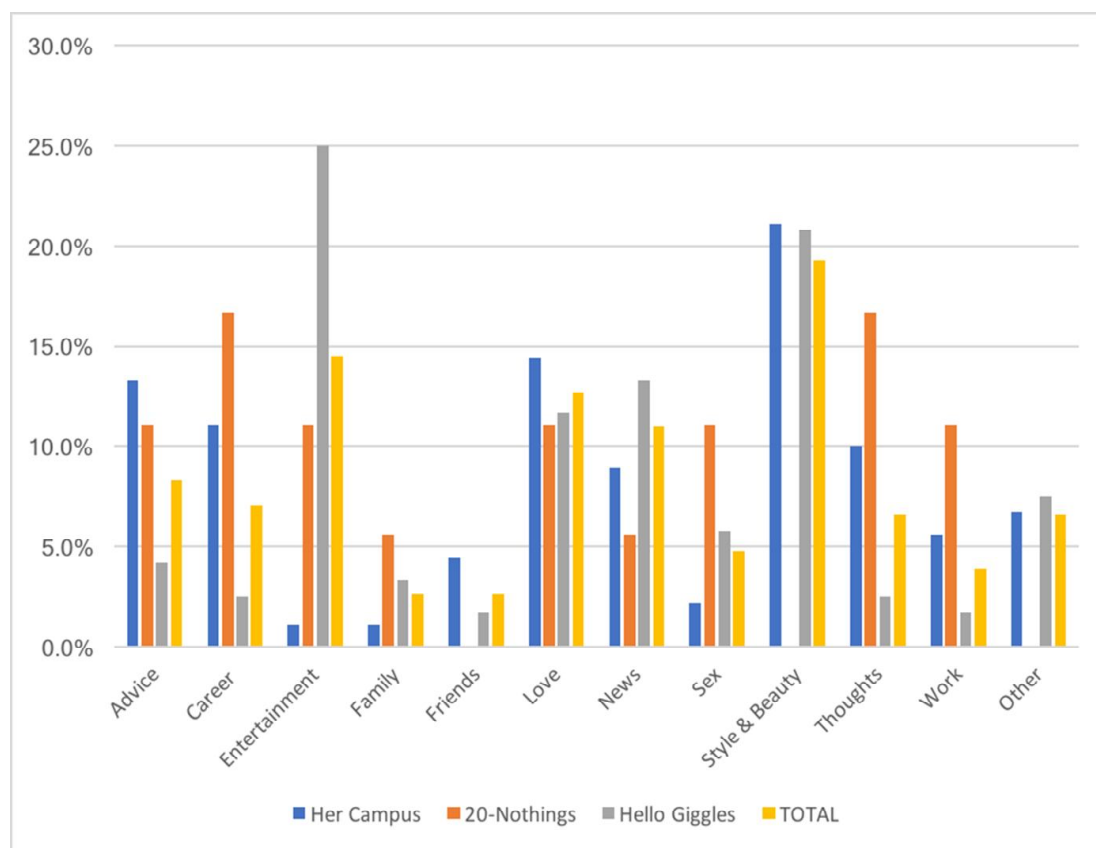
We classified our sample of 228 articles into 14 categories:

1. Career
2. Work
3. Love (Relationships, Dating)
4. Style & Beauty
5. Family
6. Friends
7. Sex
8. News
9. Advice
10. Quizzes
11. Travel
12. Entertainment (TV, Cinema, Theater, etc.)
13. Opinions / Thoughts
14. Other

Note that we distinguished between primary and secondary topic, as most of the articles contain a second topic of interest. These were the results for the primary topic:

Exhibit 5 Frequency of Categories Covered by
Her Campus, 20-Nothings and Hello Giggles

Topic	<i>Her Campus</i>	<i>20-Nothings</i>	<i>Hello Giggles</i>	TOTAL
Advice	12 13,3%	2 11,1%	5 4,2%	19 8,3%
Career	10 11,1%	3 16,7%	3 2,5%	16 7%
Entertainment	1 1,1%	2 11,1%	30 25%	33 14,5%
Family	1 1,1%	1 5,6%	4 3,3%	6 2,6%
Friends	4 4,4%	0 0%	2 1,7%	6 2,6%
Love	13 14,4%	2 11,1%	14 11,7%	29 12,7%
News	8 8,9%	1 1,6%	16 13,3%	25 11%
Sex	2 2,2%	2 11,1%	7 5,8%	11 4,8%
Style & Beauty	19 21,1%	0 0%	25 20,8%	44 19,3%
Thoughts	9 10%	3 16,7%	3 2,5%	15 6,6%
Work	5 5,6%	2 11,1%	2 1,7%	9 3,9%
Other	6 6,7%	0 0%	9 7,5%	15 6,6%
TOTAL	90	18	120	228



The top three categories (or topics) are Style & Beauty (19.3%), Entertainment (14.5%) and Love (12.7%). Except for Love, which is consistent, the percentages vary in each publication. In almost half of the sample (107) we have identified a secondary topic. The two most common secondary topics are Style & Beauty (22.4%), followed by Advice (18.7%). Content related to style and beauty, traditionally related to women’s magazines (and associated with certain conservative femininity portrayals), emerges as the most relevant category in our sample, although concentrated in two of the three publications. *20-Nothings* does not include articles that fall into this category; our hypothesis is that this is a personal diary targeting more mature audiences and the posts are based on personal experiences and anecdotes rather than on beauty tips or the fashion week.

Discourse Analysis

Given the similarities between women’s magazines and lifestyle blogs in terms of structure, genres, content and editorial tone we propose a discourse analysis based on the *beauty–love–home* content axis described earlier. We have grouped “home” and “beauty” whereas “love” is presented separately.

Home and Beauty

Posts addressing topics related to home and beauty are the most popular in our sample. However, they can have a dramatically different approach depending on who writes the article or the specificities of the topic covered. Thus, we have encountered posts that support a progressive portrayal of women while others are based on a traditional and conservative approach. In *Hello Giggles*, for example, we found an article which explains that Miss Teen USA beauty pageant will replace the bikini pass for one in sportswear, as an explicit measure to support feminist values:

The stated purpose of the swimsuit competition has always been to show off the athleticism of the contestants. In that vein, it is now being replaced with an athletic wear competition. So instead of bikinis, we'll be seeing the Miss Teen USA contestants hitting the stage in Lululemon and the like, which we fully support. I mean, the only thing we love more than yoga pants are inspiring messages of strength and empowerment for girls and women.

Another article by the same publication⁵ echoes that miss Alabama published a picture of herself wearing a bikini only a few months after giving birth that clearly showed she had gained weight. She even posted a comment defying stereotypes about the need to hide overweight while chasing the perfect body:

Posing in a red, white, and blue bikini, Webb-McCarron snapped the pic while in a dressing room. "Shopping for bikini season!" she wrote in the caption. "Shameless selfie...but seeing progress just from breastfeeding. Pretty awesome how the body works!" Webb-McCarron also made sure to point out that she gained 44 pounds while pregnant and that the pic wasn't meant to be humble. "Say what you want, but I feel great about myself even with the extra cellulite on my butt and stretch marks so shoot me if I felt banging for once in this bikini," she added.

Nonetheless posts under the Style & Beauty section can also appear under a conservative focus, as mentioned earlier and as the following examples depict. In *Her Campus*, for instance, one can frequently find articles implying the predominant space that women have is in the kitchen, and then giving them DIY ideas: how to turn a shirt into an apron or how to make a recipe notebook.⁶ Another example could be an article with DIY tips for Cancer girls (zodiac), also published by *Her Campus*⁷:

A Cancer loves to spend her free time in the kitchen, whether that involves baking or cooking dinner for her family. A cute and creative apron that reflects her individual personality will make a great gift! (...) a Cancer is super sweet and loves to eat sweets.

These tiny cupcakes are adorable, and because they are so small she will be able to eat more!

This specific quote also emphasizes the fact that Cancer girls besides cooking also like eating, and they recommend bite size cupcakes so that they can eat more, which implies that they care about their size and weight.

In addition to these examples, which establish a relationship between women and the private sphere (kitchen) we have also identified others⁸ that highlight the importance of femininity and looking and pretty. As an example, find below an excerpt from a list of basic objects that women should carry in their handbags (hair tools, nail polish, flats):

15 Essentials That Should Always Be in Your Work Bag:

#2: Hair tools – A beauty disaster is totally not professional.

#11: Nail polish – Every polish lover knows that toenail polish can last through an apocalypse while fingernail polish is likely to fall off if you even look at it the wrong way. If you carry a bottle of your current nail polish color in your bag, you'll never get caught looking unpolished.

#13: Flats – No matter how much you love heels, even the most comfortable ones have the potential to turn into weapons of mass destruction.

However, the same publication (*Her Campus*) celebrates that singer Alicia Keys has stopped using make up⁹:

Going off of the trend of power and #slaying in all ways, Alicia Keys went completely bare faced and it's safe to say that she was just as gorgeous as ever.

Although this may seem a contradiction, we have found out that within these blogs it dominates a progressive portrayal of femininity, especially regarding Style & Beauty. In addition, we found ten articles published by *Her Campus* under this category which relate specifically to role model issues. The majority (8) either defend progressive values (5) or are neutral (3) whereas only two promote conservative values. In *Hello Giggles* the trend is even clearer: eight out of eleven articles contain a role model discourse which defends progressive values, only one is conservative, and two remain neutral. In addition, *Hello Giggles* often publishes posts promoting *body positive* approaches, that is to say, defending the idea that women are pretty regardless of their size. All of the blogs analyzed have a preference for slim women (based on the pictures illustrating their articles), although it is also frequent to find articles in which authors defend the idea that beauty can also be found in bigger sizes and even in women whose looks defy traditional standards of beauty. An example can be found in *Her Campus* where they published and celebrated a

summary of the findings from a research about female self-esteem sponsored by the soap brand Dove¹⁰:

Media seems to be a large concern for women and girls as well, with 71% of women and 67% of girls telling Dove that they want the media to portray a more realistic body image. With the prevalence of social media and the constant pressure to look, feel and live up to unrealistic expectations, it's hard to find confidence, but with so many women and girls pushing for change, hopefully we can learn to truly love ourselves.

Love

Most of the articles portraying love and relationships are written from a progressive perspective. Relationships (hetero and homo) are presented as a space in which individuals should be able to keep their freedom and circles of friends. The following quote from *Her Campus* supports the idea that having a partner does not mean giving up on one's interests¹¹:

The reason why he likes me is not because I'm his, but because of the person that I am. We're not one of those couples attached to the hip, because we are two separate people with two different lives to take care of... Remember who you are and to love yourself, because it's easy to forget that when pledging commitment to loving someone else. It's easy to forget that, as a person, you have the right to your dreams and interests and chasing after them, even if they're different.

This same publication has also published posts defending the idea that not being in a relationship is a legit option and something not to be ashamed of¹²:

So maybe you've looked at the signs and realized a relationship just isn't for you. That's totally fine! And don't think this means you have to go around hooking up with every coed you see. You should feel equally empowered if you make the decision to be happily single and just do your own thing if that's what you want to do.

It is also possible to find articles containing a dual approach. The following example from *20 Nothings*¹³ is written by someone who admits being married and whose husband is her number one career advocate. But this is just an anecdote used as an excuse to write the post and the text ends up having a progressive approach:

My husband is my #1 career advocate. He believes in all my goals and wants to do whatever he can to make them a reality. I know

this because he tells me, and that is meaningful to me because I trust him and his opinions... But let me be very, very clear: I am not saying that you need to have a loving and supportive husband in order to have a career. GOD no. I am saying that if you choose to go through life with a partner, that partner could be the most important career choice you will make.

Conservative portrayals of love and relationships are always related to marriage. Even though most of the posts do not mention or promote marriage, we identified a small number of articles in which this option is presented as a goal – a necessary step towards happiness which no women should renounce. Sometimes the approach is subtle, such as the following article from *Hello Giggles*¹⁴ explaining the origin of the word “Honeymoon” or another post by *Her Campus* about the importance of being a good bridesmaid¹⁵:

When one of your best friends or relatives gets engaged, you can't help but wonder if you'll get to be a part of her big day. Getting asked to be a bridesmaid is very special... Shopping for bridesmaid dresses is almost as exciting as shopping for your own bridal gown.

We have also found other articles that highlight the importance of having a boyfriend. The following quote from *Her Campus*¹⁶ starts arguing that it is okay to be single in summer but concludes joking that if this is the case let's hope summer goes by quickly so that classes resume, as in college it is easy to find single cute guys:

19 Thoughts Every Girl Has During a Loveless Summer

#1: I don't need a guy. I'm totally fine being single and free this summer!

#2: Just kidding, I need a guy – ANY GUY – to come cure my summer boredom.

#14: Since Mr. Prince Charming clearly isn't planning on making an appearance this summer, my new motto is: Lower your expectations

#19: Is summer almost over? Can I go back to school where there are actual parties and lots of cute guys?

Summary of Findings

Since the early days of blogging, online diaries have been considered one of the most influential digital media, ranking high with consumers for trust, popularity and influence. Even though they don't get a large portion of brands' digital spend, blogs rank high with consumers for trust, popularity and influence.¹⁷ Consumers believe that blogs are more influential in shaping opinion

than Twitter and when it comes to affecting purchase decisions more important than Facebook. Actually, blogs are considered the third most influential digital resource (31%) when making overall purchases, only behind retail sites (56%) and brand sites (34%). All in all, blogs are the fifth most trustworthy source for information on the Internet.

Our study confirms that there is a correlation of topics covered by lifestyle blogs and women's magazines. Categories such as "style & beauty," "entertainment" and "love" are the most popular in the sample of blogs we have studied, something which is consistent with the *beauty–love–home* axis upon which women's magazines are structured. One of the main differences between women's magazines and the blogs we studied is advertising. Most of the posts we have analyzed had no advertising (85.9%). This is critical to guarantee a "neutral" approach, something that does not happen in printed press as women's magazines rely on advertising (mostly cosmetics and fashion) to be profitable. It is our belief that due to advertising independence authors can adopt a progressive mindset when it comes to femininity portrayals. However, we have not taken into consideration the advertising deals that the writers may have (very popular among the so-called *influencers*) which can also have an impact on the kind of gender representation they promote.

Sex and health related articles are two critical components in women's magazines, especially when it comes to giving advice. Surprisingly, sex is not a hot topic in our sample and only 4.8% of the posts talk about it. The tone is mostly informative and does not have a frivolous approach, which is very common in print magazines; nonetheless articles are usually written very informally and seek complicity with the reader. After concluding this study, we asked ourselves what do editors and writers from the analyzed blogs understand by "health." We have found under that category articles with recipes, nutritional tips, work out routines to have a bikini body and even drug reviews (anxiolytics, morning-after pill, etc.) There is a clear confusion on what kind of articles a health section should include, which is usually clearly delimited in women's magazines and often includes a vertical from a doctor or nurse practitioner.

In terms of structure, we have found that a high percentage of the articles analyzed (97%) contain a picture whereas videos are very scarce (12%). It is almost impossible to find a blog (or website) with no photos as images are used as bait to attract readers (traffic) and in those cases in particular memes are a frequent resource. It is our belief that this is related to the publications' editorial tone, trying to be a friend, a confidant, someone with whom the reader would share a coffee and a joke (actually memes are jokes). The fact that there are no videos can be explained: we have analyzed blogs, not vlogblogs. The cost is lower (it is easier and faster to write a text than to

produce a video) and these blogs post on a daily basis. The only videos we have found are embedded links to third-party websites.

Conclusions

The present study aimed to understand if women's magazines and lifestyle blogs edited by millennial women shared a repository of femininity portrayals and up to what extent those were progressive or conservative. This is of particular interest given that women's magazines and lifestyle blogs share a number of structural characteristics (e.g. editorial tone, targeted audience, name, content, etc.) and play a critical role in gender representation and construction of feminine identities. Based on a sample of 228 posts from three lifestyle blogs edited by millennial women based in the U.S. we have confirmed that content mostly revolves around "style & beauty" issues, followed by entertainment and love, which is consistent with women's magazines main interest. In addition, this sample allows us to draw some conclusions on how the axis *beauty–home–love*, pivotal on women's magazines, is approached by lifestyle blogs. Based on our research, the notions of beauty and love have a multifocal approach when addressed by bloggers and there is room for progressive portrayals and representations, which are difficult to find in women's magazines. Even though some stereotypes persist on lifestyle blogs (especially those related to marriage and an idealized notion of love) it is common to encounter posts that have a feminist approach. Something similar happens with portrayals of beauty, whereas women's magazines mostly rely on a stereotypical representation of a white, western and heterosexual female (Budgeon, 2014) the blogs analyzed show there is appetite for a different representation, particularly when it comes to beauty and physical appearance. But, why portrayals of women and femininity are more progressive on lifestyle blogs than on women's magazines even if they share some structural characteristics and target the same audience? Based on our analysis we have come to the conclusion that the age of editors (and contributors) is critical as they are millennials and they have a progressive approach to family life, compared to Generation Xers and Baby Boomers. Moreover, the blogs analyzed are not subject to the tyranny of advertising. As we mentioned previously, women's magazines contain a high number of advertisements (up to 50% of the content in some cases) which means that their approach has to be consistent with the portrayals of femininity found in the ads if they want to secure investment and remain profitable.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no relevant or material financial interests that relate to the research described in this paper.

NOTES

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