

# REFLEC TIONS

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All Style / No Life:  
The Hollow  
Truth Of  
Most  
Lifestyle  
Brands





# Shouldn't lifestyle branding, at its core, be about life? The clue is in the title after all.

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A lifestyle brand is meant to connect with how people actually live; their hopes, their values, their daily rituals. It's supposed to carry some truth about the way we move through the world.

But here's the problem: most so-called lifestyle brands today don't seem to know the first thing about life. What they do know, in obsessive detail, is style. They know how to nail the color palette that looks good in your Instagram feed. They know which retro font evokes "vintage authenticity." They know how to dress up their website like an aspirational mood board. And that's about it.

Style without life is just decoration. And decoration without depth is empty. Which is why so many lifestyle brands end up feeling hollow, all aesthetic, no heartbeat.

It's as if they've mistaken a fantasy for a lifestyle. Instead of meeting people where they actually are, they sell us an airbrushed, sanded-down, fully sanitised version of existence that no one really lives. They aren't about living; they're about looking like you're living.

**Scroll through the ad campaigns of most lifestyle brands and you'll notice something strange: nobody seems to be working, sweating, worrying, or doing anything remotely ordinary.**

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Their “lives” exist in a permanent golden hour. Everyone’s just back from a surf trip, or heading off to a secluded cabin, or just lounging barefoot on a linen couch, with a dog that neither shits or sheds .

It’s all tastefully lit, emotionally hollow escapism. And it’s escapism of the safest kind; carefully curated so as not to disturb the fantasy. No dirt. No stress. No contradictions. The real texture of living, the kind that gives a story meaning, is nowhere to be seen.

Of course, a brand doesn’t have to be documentary-realistic. We get it, advertising heightens things. But when a brand builds its whole world out of scenes no one’s actually living, it starts to feel less like inspiration and more like gaslighting.

They tell you they’re “about your lifestyle,” but in reality they’re about an imaginary lifestyle you will never have. Which isn’t a connection; it’s a disconnect dressed up in good lighting.

**The tragedy is that these brands could be so much more. They could still be aspirational while staying tethered to something recognizably human. They could still be beautiful while acknowledging that life isn't always neat.**

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Instead, too many go for the easy route: vapid escapism. Selling sunsets instead of substance. Selling the idea of “getting away” instead of showing us how to live better where we are. It's easy to shoot a drone video of a coastal cliff; it's harder to say something true about the messiness of people's daily choices.

Vapid escapism might generate a short-term hit of longing, but it rarely builds a lasting bond. People eventually notice that your brand's version of “life” never overlaps with their own. The mood board begins to feel like a wall between you and them. And when a new brand comes along with a fresher fantasy, they'll walk right through it.

In other words, style-only branding is cheap currency. It spends fast and runs out quickly.

# Every so often, though, you see a brand that does it differently.

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One that actually speaks to life (yes, real life) and still manages to inspire. These are rare, and that rarity is what makes them powerful.

The difference? They don't flinch from the truth of people's experiences. They're not afraid to admit that life is flawed, chaotic, unpredictable, and often hard. They understand that the point of a lifestyle brand isn't to erase reality, but to help people navigate it.

Look at the best outdoor brands. The ones that show you drenched hikers, muddy boots, hands scraped on rock. They're still aspirational, they make you want to go outside and push yourself, but they don't pretend the outdoors is a candlelit dinner by the sea. They celebrate the grit as much as the view.

Look at certain streetwear brands that are deeply embedded in the communities they draw from. They don't just sell a look; they reflect the actual music, slang, humour, and politics of the people wearing their clothes. They aren't borrowing culture for aesthetic effect, they're living in it.

These brands earn their place in people's lives because they speak to both sides of the human equation: the reality we're in, and the possibility we're reaching for. They make aspiration feel within reach, because it's rooted in something recognizable.

# **The best lifestyle branding is not an escape from reality; it's an elevation of it. It's finding the poetry in the real, not just importing the pretty from somewhere else.**

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When you show people something that feels real, they don't just admire it, they see themselves in it. And when they see themselves in it, they're far more likely to believe your brand belongs in their life.

A campaign about a sweaty run through the city, where the light is beautiful but the traffic is loud, will connect more deeply than yet another yacht-at-sunset shot. Because most people will never be on the yacht, but they might run through that city tomorrow morning.

It's not that brands should show nothing but realism. It's that the best inspiration starts from reality and builds up from there. The fantasy feels richer when it's attached to something we know to be true.

# **The reason most lifestyle brands don't operate this way is simple: it's harder. It's harder to build a brand around something you can't fully control.**

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Real life is messy. Real life has contradiction. Real life means opening yourself to criticism if you get it wrong.

But it's also where the energy is. The brands that dare to weave the messy truth of people's lives into their stories end up building a deeper, more loyal following. Because they've proven they can handle the truth without airbrushing it away.

And when you can handle the truth, people trust you more. They start to believe you're not just selling them a mood board; you're selling them something that can stand up in the real world.

Here's the irony: in a market full of fantasy, reality becomes the rarest luxury. If everyone else is doing beach-at-golden-hour, then showing the rainstorm becomes the most compelling thing you can do.

**Being all style and no life is not just hollow, it's predictable. The real art is being able to speak to people's actual lives and still make it look and feel amazing.**

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That's what turns a brand from background noise into a part of someone's identity.

Because at the end of the day, life isn't a photoshoot. It's not always edited for perfection. It's lived in the in-between moments; the ones most brands are too afraid to touch. And the brands that are brave enough to live there with us? Those are the ones that will still matter long after the trend-chasers have moved on to the next borrowed aesthetic.

So yes, keep your style. Keep your lighting, your typefaces, your gorgeous art direction. But if you want to matter, you'd better bring some life into it. Not the life you wish your audience had, the life they actually live. And then show them what's possible from there.

Because in a world of lifestyle brands that are all style, the one with actual life will always win.





## Gordon Gerard McLean

So I'm the one behind the mystery moniker. Here's a bit about me. Originally from Dublin, I've spent 25+ years as a brand strategist in a variety of creative companies; from Sheffield to London, Istanbul, New York, and Cupertino, CA.

I'm fortunate to have helped launch, build and reinvent some of the world's best brands; including Apple, Bacardi, Bank of Scotland, Bing, Bombay Sapphire, EA Games, GE, Gillette, Grey Goose, Guinness, Halifax, Hilton, Holiday Inn Express, HSBC, Perfect Day, Radisson, Sandy Hook Promise, SAP, ServiceNow, Vodafone, Wells Fargo, and Yerba Madre.

I've also been lucky enough to lead a body of work that's been recognized for its commercial impact by the IPA and Effies, for its strategic thinking by the Jay Chiats and ARF, for its cultural impact by the MoMA, Emmys and TED, and for its creative excellence by The Clios, One Show, Cannes Lions, D&AD, and others.

Now based in LA, I fly solo under my nom de strat, Fear No Truth, helping agency, start-up, and marketing leaders, wherever they are, to find, tell and manage their brands' true stories.

Let's LinkedIn.





FEAR  
NO  
TRUTH

Fear No Truth is an independent strategy practice, based in LA, that helps agency, start-up, and marketing leaders everywhere to find, tell and manage their brands' true stories.

