

WELLNESS CULTURE

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WELLNESS CULTURE

How the Wellness Movement
has Been Used to Empower,
Profit and Misinform

BY

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Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2022

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-80262-468-7 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-80262-465-6 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-80262-467-0 (Epub)



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

For Viola, Juliette and Clara.

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PREFACE

It has been over six decades since Halbert L. Dunn wrote the book *High-Level Wellness*, which inspired the wellness movement in the United States in the 1970s. While many of the philosophies and practices associated with wellness culture today have a much longer history, it was in the mid-twentieth century that the idea of wellness as a concept and a lifestyle began to assume cultural significance in America before transferring to other parts of the world. Wellness culture coalesced around several core principles that were seized upon by marketers in the late twentieth century to advertise wellness as a consumer product. Today, the wellness industry is comprised of a series of products and services that bear little resemblance to the vision endorsed by the pioneers of the wellness movement in the 1970s. The top internet search results for wellness in early 2022 include a wellness journal, a wellness hamper and wellness dog food!

At the dawn of the COVID-19 pandemic, wellness transmuted again. In 2020 and throughout much of 2021, wellness became a gateway to misinformation. An aspirational term once associated with health and vitality came to signify deception, conspiracy and political extremism. For some, wellness has always been conflated with misinformation; alternative medicine perceived to be a synonym for pseudo-science and quackery. The modern lifestyle brand, Goop, for

example, is routinely criticised for peddling pseudoscience, selling a range of controversial products under the rubric of wellness including Jade (Yoni) Eggs ‘to harness the power of energy work’ and Psychic Vampire Repellent, an essential oil designed to ‘spray around the aura to protect from psychic attack and emotional harm’. Goop’s celebrity founder, the Hollywood actress turned wellness guru, Gwyneth Paltrow, reveals the impact of celebrity culture on ideas about health, wellness, beauty and happiness. Many of the questionable healing modalities associated with wellness culture today were popularised in the 1800s: mesmerism (hypnosis), homeopathy, hydrotherapy, magnet therapy and chiropractic. While these alternative medical treatments emerged in response to people’s disillusionment with medicine at the time, the treatment paradigm within which they operated is fundamentally different to the vision of wellness proposed by the pioneers of the wellness movement in the 1960s and 1970s. This book seeks to disentangle these vast, and often contradictory, conceptions of wellness by tracing the historical emergence of wellness from a fringe countercultural pursuit to a mainstream cultural phenomenon and consumer product.

While many of the practices associated with wellness culture today have their origins in the Global South, the conception of wellness as a lifestyle and a commodity is inexorably bound to the Global North, in particular the United States. As a result, much of the analysis of wellness culture in this book will focus on the United States, demonstrating how particular social, economic, political and technological conditions in North America have contributed to the cultural preoccupation with wellness today. The proliferation of digital devices and social media have transformed the ways in which knowledge about wellness is produced, disseminated and consumed, rendering wellness more accessible to internet users and giving rise to a series of self-appointed wellness

gurus, who use these technologies for social, economic and political gain. At the same time as extending the global reach of wellness culture, digital technologies introduce new hierarchies and inequalities structured around commercial and corporate interests. The relatively unregulated nature of the internet also makes wellness information online, and the global audiences who consume it, more susceptible to misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy. Today, the wellness market is a global industry that combines eastern mysticism and modern psychological ideas about the self with digitisation to shape physical bodies across time and space. However, despite drawing on traditional eastern medicine and philosophy, the growth of the wellness industry in late capitalism is an American phenomenon. Hence, the focus of this book is on America, exploring the foundations of the wellness movement in post-war America to the present day, while acknowledging that the movement draws on historical events, philosophies and ideas from various cultural contexts and has transnational significance as a global industry.

Wellness practices have been subject to cultural appropriation, often bearing little resemblance to their traditional cultural origins. Take yoga, for example. Given the popularity of yoga in America, and around much of the western world, one might assume that the practice is central to Indian culture. As a postdoctoral researcher residing in India in 2009–2010, I was struck by the relative absence of yoga studios in Mumbai at the time. When I eventually found an ashram offering yoga, the practice bore little similarity to the physical asanas (postures) that have come to define the practice of yoga in the West. This was in stark contrast to Dharamsala, a Himalayan region in the north of India, which catered to many westerners in pursuit of wellness and eastern spirituality, and where I completed my yoga teacher training in 2010. This personal experience illuminated that while the global wellness industry

draws on ancient philosophies and practices, these have been appropriated and repackaged as products and services in western contexts to meet a specific consumer demand. The same critiques have been made towards the incorporation of Buddhist practices in the workplace, which tend to frame mindfulness and meditation instrumentally as productivity tools designed to optimise work performance, using scientific language and statistics to prove their efficacy and give these ‘philosophies’ legitimacy among secular audiences, but in the process stripping these religious practices of much of their cultural and ethical significance. These observations highlight the need to refrain from presenting wellness culture as a direct continuation of ancient traditions. The ways in which traditional Buddhist and Hindu practices, such as yoga, mindfulness and meditation, are used as contemporary wellness tools and therapeutic interventions to help individuals actualise their potential speaks more of the cultures in which they have been appropriated than the context in which they originated. This is especially the case with New Age spirituality, which is characterised by an eclectic mix of eastern and western beliefs and practices.

A brief note on tone. I approach the topic of wellness as both a practitioner and as a scholar. I have tried to avoid providing either an apology for wellness or presenting a one dimensional critique of all that is wrong with the term. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted many of the problems associated with wellness culture today, including its individualist ethos and the proliferation of wellness practitioners who exploit technological affordances and consumer anxieties for commercial gain. The plethora of wellness influencers advertising questionable products on social media renders wellness culture an easy target to mock and deride. There is a rich body of literature on wellness that focuses on debunking pseudoscience and misinformation. In analysing wellness as a cultural

phenomenon, the focus of this book is on the meanings, discourses and practices ascribed to wellness in western societies, and how these have emerged and evolved over time. Many scholars have critiqued wellness culture's emphasis on personal responsibility for obscuring the social determinants of health. Critiques of this kind have been paramount during the pandemic given the collective response required to limit the spread of the virus. Rather than provide another critique of wellness as a neoliberal pursuit, I approach the topic of wellness culture comprehensively, examining how wellness can operate as both a form of inclusion and oppression. Wellness culture can be moralistic, exclusionary and even harmful, but it can also be enriching and empowering, as its countercultural roots reveal. This book is an attempt to explore these contradictions. Wellness has become a trillion-dollar industry and the concept appears here to stay. While critics are understandably sceptical about some of the products and practices associated with wellness, I hope this book provides a more nuanced understanding of the history of wellness and the reasons for its enduring cultural appeal.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book has been a labour of love. I have enjoyed exploring the history of wellness culture and writing this manuscript, which in many ways is a culmination of my work on the topic of wellness culture, influencers and medical misinformation over the past seven years.

I am grateful to have been mentored by Chris Rojek with whom I wrote *Lifestyle Gurus* and began researching many of these issues following the Belle Gibson scandal in 2015. Our collaboration has informed the material included in the chapter on wellness gurus.

Collaborations with several other colleagues feature in this manuscript including Alexia Maddox, Matthew Wade and Michael James Walsh, who is not only a colleague, but an ongoing collaborator and dear friend. Michael also read parts of the final manuscript and provided insightful feedback.

My sincere thanks to Dr Brad McKay for sharing his direct experience of wellness culture as a medical practitioner, and to the three anonymous reviewers of the proposal before the book was commissioned.

I am grateful to work with supportive colleagues at City, University of London, including, but not limited to, Chris Rojek, Eugene McLaughlin, Elinor Carmi, Jo Littler, Ros Gill, Simon Susen and Katrin Hohl.

Many thanks to the Editorial team at Emerald Publishing, including Kimberley Chadwick and Pavithra Muthu, who supported the production of this book. I would also like to thank Kirtsty Woods, who enabled me to experiment with several different cover options, and Becky Chilcott for the final cover design and bringing these ideas into being.

Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends for their ongoing support during the writing of this book and for allowing me to indulge in discussions about wellness gurus, conspiracism and conspirituality.