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Pursuing “Wellness”: Considerations for Media Studies

Television and New Media

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Abstract

In this short piece, I discuss the necessity of employing more-than-textual methods to understand more-than-textual phenomena. My case study is the feminized world of wellness, where stylish young entrepreneurs sell strategies of health-enhancement. While existing commentary typically frames wellness as the exclusive and somewhat risible preserve of wealthy white women—a framing enabled by the prominence of figures such as Gwyneth Paltrow—this narrative risks obscuring a more complicated story about the desire for health and well-being in an era of heightened precarity. Against this backdrop, I argue that the rise of wellness as a novel cultural formation and new commercial development must be situated within the broader social, economic, and political terrain of contemporary Britain. Methodologically, this means grappling with the glamorous trappings of wellness media and excavating the psychic investments and embodied experiences that animate this movement-market.

Keywords

wellness, whiteness, health, precarity, ethnography, conjunctural analysis

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Over the last few years, the lexicon of “wellness” has become increasingly prominent in the United Kingdom, particularly in relation to food and nutrition. Billed as a more intuitive approach to health and well-being, trends such as “clean eating” have migrated from the more familiar environs of sun-soaked California to take up residence in the concrete enclaves of urban Britain. The seeds of this burgeoning movement-market were sown on social media, most especially the photo-sharing platform Instagram, where a homegrown cohort of glamorous yet wholesome entrepreneurs gained traction sharing recipes and dietary advice. The publishing industry was quick to capitalize on their influence with a raft of “plant based” and “healthy eating” cookbooks, while magazines like *Women’s Health* leveraged their popularity to attract new readers. The food industry too adapted, with ever more elaborate preparations of vegetables—from sweet potato “noodles” to cauliflower “rice”—appearing on supermarket shelves, and high-street sandwich shops selling green smoothies, turmeric lattes, and charcoal shots.

The most brightly illuminated wellness entrepreneurs in the United Kingdom—those who not only command large followings online and top best-seller lists, but whose activities are spotlighted by lifestyle features and TV appearances—adhere to a particular profile. They are young, slim, class-privileged, able-bodied, and almost uniformly white. Their luminosity at once perpetuates and reanimates what Richard Dyer (1997) terms the “glow of white women,” as they are lit up and illuminated—literally and symbolically—as embodiments of idealized femininity. The healthful radiance they emit—while no doubt achieved using many of the same camera and lighting techniques Dyer details, as well as a suite of photo-editing apps—functions as testament to their virtuous lifestyles. Presenting themselves not just as influencers but as entrepreneurs, these women emphasize their capacity for hard work and their willingness to take up space in male-dominated domains of business and commerce. Amid a raft of exhortations to “lean in” and “do what you love,” their presence on the cultural stage compounds discourses of female success organized by and oriented toward whiteness (Wilkes 2015).

The sheer visibility of these figures is such that it would be easy to assume wellness is the exclusive preserve of wealthy white women. Media commentary often suggests as much, with casual asides and gentle jibes about the whiteness of this space. A journalist attending the 2019 London edition of In Goop Health —Gwyneth Paltrow’s wellness convention—quipped, “Everything is white (majority of the audience included)” (Commons 2019). And yet to conflate wellness with whiteness—to assume this cultural and commercial formation is somehow inherently or necessarily white—would be to reify whiteness “as if it were a property of persons, cultures and places” (Ahmed 2007, 154). Such assumptions further involve a failure to consider how such representational patterns partake in and reproduce the “white supremacist construction of whiteness as universal and unmarked, not particular or exclusive” (Dosekun, 2020: 10). While the industry’s most prominent proponents are overwhelmingly white and upper-class, this is not to say that the appeal of and desire for wellness—understood as a kind of luminous good health and preternatural vitality—is limited to this cohort. Indeed, given the popularity of trends emerging under its auspices, it seems evident that the promise of wellness has widespread appeal.

In this short piece, I interrogate the presumed subject of wellness and the story she is made to tell about this cultural milieu. My intention is not to disprove any suggestion that the U.K. wellness industry is dominated by white women who are by-and-large economically privileged—this is generally true—but rather to ask questions about why wellness is compelling to a much broader range of women. Drawing on fieldwork and interview material from a larger ethnographic project, I discuss my

encounters with a young woman of color attempting to forge a career in this arena. Using wellness as an example, I consider the uses of media studies in tumultuous times, highlighting its affordances in grappling with the ideological operations of luminosity as well as the psychic investments and embodied experiences that animate spaces of cultural attention. I underscore the importance of taking more-than-textual approaches to more-than-textual phenomenon, recognizing that dominant representational patterns do not neatly align with and indeed can actively obscure more complicated workings out “on the ground.”

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I met Asmaa in 2018 at a large wellness festival in central London. Entering the business convention center—temporarily transformed into an emporium of healthenhancement—I was greeted by pony-tailed attendants in hot pink t-shirts. After getting a seat at the main stage, where the supremely popular food writer and entrepreneur Deliciously Ella (Ella Mills) was due to speak, I browsed the line-up. A panel titled “Diversity and Inclusion in Wellness” caught my eye, and I noted this in my schedule. I had difficulty finding the session a few hours later, eventually locating it toward the back of the venue, not far from the service alley. Unlike the event I had just come from, there was no stage; instead, a high-seated stool had been placed in front of three long white benches. Taking up the microphone, Asmaa introduced herself and welcomed the dozen or so attendees. By way of opening the session, she explained that she herself had only been invited to speak after contacting the festival’s organizers to point out that their promotional materials exclusively featured white women.

A few weeks later, I went to meet with Asmaa in the basement studio she shares with a number of other freelancers. Born and raised in London to North African parents, she completed an undergraduate degree in a STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) subject before deciding to pursue a career in wellness, specializing as a personal trainer. Our discussion quickly turned to the themes of her talk, as she described the whiteness of the industry and the difficulties women of color face here. Discussing the importance of building an Instagram following to gaining a foothold in wellness, she explained, “White influencers get more opportunities to work with brands, have more exposure, and therefore have more followers, and target more people that are the same as them. That’s what happens.” This same dynamic plays out in print, as Asmaa went on to explain, “We don’t have much exposure. Like *Women’s Health* magazine is mostly—it’s just white women.” Her frustration illuminates a terrain in which women of color are systematically marginalized in the British mass-media (Sobande et al. 2019), as algorithmic and editorial forces conspire to produce a regime of “segregated visibility” (Hall 1992) that limits audiences and restricts opportunities for women of color entrepreneurs.

For Asmaa, it is self-evident that the whiteness of wellness is not something that just is, but rather something that is cultivated through more or less willful exclusions. Discussing the lack of interest powerful industry players have in including and promoting women of color, she explained,

They just feel like they don’t have to talk about it, because they’re too comfortable in their own . . . I mean they’re doing great, they, you know, they, they have enough privilege to, you know, get whatever they . . . you know, to be successful.

These comments attest to the fact that “white bodies do not have to face their whiteness” (Ahmed 2007, 156) and further delineate how spaces become “oriented ‘around’ whiteness, insofar as whiteness is not seen” (Ahmed 2007, 157). Wellness

has become a white space because white bodies take up the space it makes available; what is more, these bodies are extended by the space, making it difficult for women such as Asmaa to even gain entry. To this extent, it functions as an ancillary to prevailing formations of white feminism, where expanded opportunities for women so often entail restrictions for people of color (Daniels 2016).

Asmaa is concerted in her efforts to change the shape of this space. I had occasion to witness these efforts first-hand when, during the Q&A at another event we both attended, she asked the panelists to comment on the all-white makeup of the panel. Looking around the large room—filled with some two hundred attendees—I saw a range of reactions: incredulous expressions and hostile looks, furtive smiles and scarcely stifled laughter. Speaking with Asmaa about this later, she rolled her eyes and said, “When I spoke up I saw all the women of color look at me, and they’re like ‘Yeah, thank you!’” Drawing attention to racialized exclusions, Asmaa not only performs the uncompensated labor of “diversity work,” but risks an already insecure career precisely because this work so often entails “becoming the location of a problem” (Ahmed 2017).

Asmaa is determined to not only forge a path for herself in wellness but also to create space for other women of color to participate in this arena. Explaining why this is such an important undertaking, Asmaa described the pernicious cycle the industry perpetuates:

Because the industry is so white, it means that it’s targeting only white, mostly white people. And that basically means that other people that are not white—which is basically everyone else—they don’t get to learn more, to be more health aware. So they won’t get to . . . they don’t really pick up health magazines and read about nutrition facts, learn about nutrition and learn about exercise and how it’s good for them. So they tend to . . . this is why our culture is not 100 percent, you know, health and that. Because I mean we’re not being educated.

For Asmaa, the whiteness of wellness entrenches racialized health inequalities. Rather than direct her attentions elsewhere—for example, on addressing the economic inequalities that structure health outcomes—she has taken up the mantle of wellness in an effort to improve the conditions of her community. While her attempts to engineer a lifestyle solution to structural injustice may well prove to be a kind of “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2011), the problems she enumerates—of ill health and early death in contemporary Britain—are all too real. That her horizons of possibility reside within the logics of consumer culture further suggests a political outlook forged in the vernacular of “capitalist realism” (Fisher 2009).

Marking the journal’s 20th anniversary, this special issue asks how best to mobilize the tools of media studies in turbulent times. The glossy world of wellness may not seem like an obvious topic of concern amid mounting political polarization, sharpening social divisions and ensuing ecological collapse. Indeed, on more than one occasion I have been told by inquiring colleagues that it seems a rather frivolous subject. For many, the story is simple: wellness exemplifies nothing more and nothing less than the predictable excesses of consumer capitalism and an unfortunate female susceptibility to faddism. For some among these many, the whole business is deeply irritating, and licenses pronouncements about wealthy white women whose vanity and vapidness can be readily assumed and freely remarked upon. Faced with this kind of self-assured derision and all-knowing annoyance—an attitude reflected in much media commentary on wellness—I try to complicate what has become a simple story about a Hollywood actress-turned-healing-guru shilling crystals, and social media-addled millennials spending too much money on avocado toast. Drawing on

my fieldwork encounters, I attempt to dislodge the stereotypical subject of wellness—cast in the image of the industry’s most luminous exemplars—to say something about the more “ordinary” women who find something of value in this movement-market.

By engaging with Asmaa and other women, I have come to understand how wellness functions as a vector for a range of ills. For Asmaa, it is the most obvious means—perhaps the only available means—to address the “slow deaths” (Berlant 2007) unfolding around her. Other women I spoke to shared similar troubles: eating disorders and anxiety conditions left unchecked by inadequate service provision, worrisome symptoms ignored or dismissed by patronizing doctors in understaffed surgeries, the stress of unrelenting workloads in jobs with uncertain futures, and the deep ennui of work that lacks meaning. For many if not most of the women drawn to participate in this sphere, wellness is not about optimization but is instead about *fortification*. Engaging mass-market versions of rarefied health-enhancement regimes, they attempt to buttress themselves and others against the strains of contemporary life. From this perspective, the rise of wellness is unexpectedly yet inextricably linked to the generalized precarity that has come to overshadow so many lives in the United Kingdom, the result of a deleterious political project four decades in the making and further accelerated by a decade of austerity. At the same time, the pleasure its adherents take in inhabiting spaces claimed and curated by women cannot be divorced from the continuing aftermath of feminism (McRobbie 2009), where expressions of female solidarity have long been curtailed.

What does this example offer when thinking about the uses of media studies now? To begin with, it demonstrates the discipline’s unique purchase in puncturing easy dismissals of complex cultural phenomena, refusing to allow superficial readings to preside in place of detailed explorations. One of the great strengths of media studies — particularly a journal like *Television & New Media* — lies in its attention to glossy surfaces and the distorted images they reflect. Recognizing wellness not as an Instagram fad but as a “cultural field” (Athique 2008) populated with diverse inhabitants, it becomes possible to make sense of the complicated attachments it generates. Without wanting to make too much of a virtue of research “offline” (Bishop 2018), for me this has meant pursuing wellness in the spaces where it “trickles down,” from repurposed convention centers to church basements, bookstores, and health food shops. By going to these places, I have met a much wider range of people than I might have found in wellness’s digital realms, organized by algorithms set to reproduce dominant categories (Noble 2018) and constrained by the “filter bubble” the researcher herself inhabits. Perhaps more than anything else, this example is testament to the signal importance of “conjunctural thinking”: attending to “the fusion of the economic and the social and the political and the ideological and the cultural” (Hay et al. 2013, 16), so as to locate mediated phenomena within the wider historical conditions in which they arise.

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