Summary Article: **Well-Being**
From *Encyclopedia of Consumer Culture*

Even if the pursuit of well-being can be traced to the dawn of mankind—or maybe beyond, if one considers, for example, the pleasure that apes seem to derive from rubbing each other's backs—its commodification is a relatively recent phenomenon. Its meaning is nebulous, often being equated with happiness, health, or prosperity, as well as the term *welfare*. The latter sense of the word implies a policy-oriented interpretation that well-being can be assessed, quantified, and maybe even improved on by investing various resources in key domains such as nutrition, hygiene, or education. And yet senses of well-being are highly subjective and a matter of personal experience, the markers of which may remain imperceptible to even the most intimate onlooker. In this respect, well-being is a subjectively perceived feeling of harmony that may be experienced through the congruence of several factors, from health to lifestyle, to philosophical and even spiritual aspects.

**The Emerging Popularity of “Well-Being”**

With respect to consumption, however, the concept of *well-being* has been instrumentalized early on in industrialized societies. It has been used implicitly and explicitly to market almost anything: from cars to washing machines, chocolate, face creams, fitness appliances, and kitchens—as can be witnessed, for example, in 1950s' advertisements portraying sashaying housewives celebrating the liberation brought about by the automated modern kitchen. The emphasis here is not on holism, even if it is sometimes suggested that a synergy of consumer goods will produce even more well-being. Rather, in this context, consumer goods represent a trigger supposed to catapult users into a state of material bliss.

It is only comparatively recently that well-being has become commodified as such through its paradoxical relocation in the subjectivity of the body. A messy convergence of sociohistorical developments and eclectic intellectual contributions has enabled this shift: from the phenomenological insights of Maurice Merleau-Ponty to the emergence of psychophysiology or the cognitive neurosciences; from increasingly hegemonic globalization and technologization trends to the parallel rise of individualization, uncertainty, and risk (as analyzed by, e.g., Anthony Giddens or Ulrich Beck); from Foucauldian technologies of the self to the increasing popularity of Eastern health practices; from the loss of traditional religiosity to the appropriation of more embodied forms of spirituality; from the marketing of things to the marketing of senses and feelings. The demise of many traditional certainties paired with ever accelerating environmental changes has led many individuals in Western(ized) societies to seek an ontological refuge in the body's well-being, transforming an instrumental relationship to corporeality into a "body project." The most visible offshoots of this reanchoring of well-being in bodily subjectivity are the fitness and wellness ideologies, together with the lifestyle health commodities that they have spawned.

First fitness then wellness were popularized in the aftermath of World War II—initially in the United States—as strategies to combat sedentary ills, to emphasize the benefits of preventive versus curative medicine, and to focus on environmental factors influencing health as well as to shift

[https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/well_being](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/well_being)
responsibility from the institution (be it the state, the hospital or the company) to the individual. While fitness has tended to emphasize outer bodily control and performance, wellness seems to advocate a more subjectively steered and even hedonistic approach to lifestyle regulation. At this point, a geographical differentiation should be emphasized. Whereas in the United States both ideologies soon enjoyed strong policy backing on both the public and corporate health fronts—before fitness and wellness products began to invade the market, in Europe, it was the commercial aspect of these currents that sealed their popularity, and there was a distinct lag until public health institutions and human resources departments began to show interest. A number of historically shaped factors shed light on the reasons for these contrasting trajectories. For instance, in Europe, strongly socialized health care systems—providing basic physiological monitoring while leaving little scope for individualized options or initiative—have only recently been threatened with partial dismantlement and privatization. Moreover, the shadow cast by fascist regimes’ infamous hijacking of many holistic health ideologies of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (such as the so-called Lebensreform movement or various nudist cultures) also slowed the institutional reappropriation and dissemination of many otherwise sensible tenets pertaining to healthy lifestyle management.

Therefore, even if Europe is slowly catching up with this development, it is initially in the North American context that these well-being ideologies were gradually transformed into a new “voluntary” commercial eugenics. Governmental agencies and corporations soon realized that a minimal investment in health prevention and well-being promotion coupled with individual incentives represented the most potent antidote to absenteeism. To parody Jeremy Rifkin discussing biotechnology and “designer babies,” this new eugenics appears unthreatening: it “is friendly. It’s banal. It’s commercial. It’s market-driven” (2001, 17). As Brian Pronger puts it, the success of this type of “soft fascism” lies in its perceived positive nature, that is, productive rather than repressive. In essence, it suggests that workers and consumers cannot remain unconcerned with their well-being, that they are indeed more than willing to invest in it, be it in terms of energy, time, or money. In turn, this readiness spells high returns on investment for both state and private sectors since well individuals work better and consume more, thus actively contributing to the otherwise teetering sustainability of service economies.

The Commodification of Well-Being

Concretely, on the policy level, appropriate diet and exercise, work-life balance, and risk and stress prevention as well as emotional and even spiritual harmony have been and are still intensively promoted as the pillars of a new consumer health care awareness. They are mediated by a host of institutions and individuals including governmental public health institutes, health insurances, consumer associations, general practitioners, health forums, various popular health “gurus,” and so on. On the commercial level, these concerns are mirrored in at least four specific domains: nutrition, cosmetics, hybrid movement cultures, and alternative health practices. The evolution and range of well-being products and services in these domains continue to increase: every week, new functional and/or convenience foods, food supplements, and naturally or “emotionally” oriented cosmetics appear on the market. There are workouts—mainly popularized through gyms or fitness studios—that are tailored to every fitness level, age group, social class, musical taste, or ideological persuasion (e.g., water aerobics, Pilates, Zumba, or Tae-Bo). This development is coupled with the renaissance or the popularization of other, mostly Asian, disciplines (e.g., yoga, qigong, karate, viet vo dao, etc.). Furthermore, these trends cannot be dissociated from a variety of often hybridized therapies (e.g., Feldenkrais, reiki, Bach flowers,
reflexology) offered in various holistic centers and private practices. Thus, in terms of investigating well-being, the commercial realm is perhaps even more interesting than the policy realm since, beyond the sophisticated mediation channels and techniques used to market these goods and services, it is consumers who ultimately have the say about what is or feels good for them through their decision to purchase and/or use, their refusal to do so, or even through their subversive use (cf. Michel de Certeau).

Beginning with the body as a privileged inroad into lifestyle and maybe even into emotional and spiritual harmony, what is it that has encouraged so many consumers in postindustrial economies to invest in well-being? Large-scale historical or sociological investigation into individual motivations for buying into well-being is difficult due to several factors. Two prominent challenges are the confidentiality of corporations' proprietary information and the high cost of marketing reports compiled by private companies. Another barrier is the ambivalence surrounding body or holistic care in general. The general public is often discreet about both its purchasing rationales and its uses of well-being commodities. This may be due to a culturally conditioned modesty or to taboos surrounding body or, more broadly, health care issues. It could also be the consequence of a certain naturalization of care that has become so routine as to become quasi invisible or unworthy of particular attention.

Nevertheless, statistics show that, starting in the late 1980s, the size of the health and beauty markets have continued to increase, although there may be discrepancies among estimates of fitness and wellness market share and growth potential because of the various definitions of health products and beauty products. These estimates are often a reflection of the institutional interests of the various state or marketing agencies and professional associations publishing them. For instance, the estimated market size of the German wellness market in 1999 to 2000 was reported by numerous market research companies as ranging from 33 billion to 62 billion DM, depending on the sectors included. Nevertheless, beyond the difficulty of obtaining a precise assessment of the well-being market, even an overview of industrial and service sectors engaged in marketing healthier living reveals that well-being spending has impacted a variety of Western consumer markets: from the consumption of natural cosmetics to whole foods, mineral water, fitness club memberships, over-the-counter health products as well as travel— to name but a few. Additionally, many of these products and services have been explicitly labeled and marketed as fitness or wellness offerings.

These commodities did not just happen; they were *made* in the merging between what producers or mediators thought was the appropriate worth of a product or service and what consumers were prepared to pay for a product or service. Since commodification entails a relatively arbitrary agreement about value ascription—resting on notions such as scarcity, need, want, luxury, and so on—the arbitrariness of value ascription appears even more blatant in the case of well-being commodification. Certainly, if in a given society, relatively stable exchange values can be negotiated and decided on for a pound of rice, a plot of land, or a computer, then who can claim to lastingly define the relative worth of good health, a harmonious lifestyle, or serene emotions, since their value oscillates between "cultural" and "natural" assumptions while remaining at the mercy of individual validation? Indeed, the trick with the commodification of well-being is that it requires the subjective consent and collaboration of consumers even more than "purely" material goods do. While a washing machine may remain a commodity even when stocked unsold in a warehouse, well-being can only access commodity status when consumers are willing to ascribe a relative value to it by metaphorically and literally buying (into) it. In other words, well-being (as well as any immaterial aptitude, emotion, or experience) is sellable only if consumers think

https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/well_being
it is worth paying for. With the outsourcing of “Western” industrial production to transition and emerging economies, this particular form of commodification has been eagerly embraced by increasingly service-oriented economies. Because the cost of manufacturing in the West has increased, Western(ized) economies have been forced to shift “value-making” toward services and the marketing of subjective “consumer” experiences.

Thus, the historical emergence and seemingly successful appropriation of the fitness and wellness ideologies as emblems of the quest for well-being is linked to a “new” perception of the body—a body-subject, which is no longer a given but a perfectible entity. This perfectibility is driven by both increased technological feasibility and the commodification processes described above. In parallel, though, late modernity has also fostered the recognition that the status of the body is essentially ambivalent and fragile: whether it is object or subject, natural or cultural/technological, flesh or sign/text, pure biology or holistic entity, machine/mechanics or consciousness, resource or ecosystem cannot be satisfactorily or definitively ascertained. This means that the pursuit of commodified well-being—be it under the guise of fitness or wellness—remains ambiguous.

Well-Being, Happiness, and Progress

A number of economic and psychological surveys that seek to objectively measure subjective senses of well-being highlight the elusiveness of commodified well-being, and many suggest that modern economies have failed to deliver it. Since well-being remains an essentially subjective value, any measure of subjectivity is likely to preside over the selection of indicators: some studies will distinguish between personal or social well-being whereas others will correlate subjective findings with economic factors, such as gross domestic product, or include environmental factors, such as ecological or political dimensions. However, most studies—regardless of chosen indicators—appear to come to similar conclusions: that more goods, more comfort or convenience, more affluence, or more ecological sustainability or political stability do not necessarily spell more happiness or well-being. Instead, it appears that medium values for these factors and a balance between them hold the greatest potential for existential satisfaction. Furthermore, once survival concerns have diminished or disappeared, two central factors in the evolution of subjective well-being in recent years are free choice (most likely to occur in democratic societies) and self-expression opportunities.

Correspondingly, the Happy Planet Index for 2010, for instance, which correlates life expectancy, life satisfaction, and ecological footprint, showcases Central America as the most promisingly serene region in the world whereas the United States seems to share the unsatisfactory perspectives of a majority of sub-Saharan African countries, with Canada and most European countries trailing not far behind. In a similar vein but over a much longer period of time, the World Values Survey project has produced a series of longitudinal studies measuring, among other aspects, happiness or well-being as correlated with a number of development factors. Covering the period 1981 to 2007, the World Values Survey reports Denmark and Iceland to be two of the countries with the best balance between subjective well-being and high gross domestic product (GDP) and equal with Puerto Rico and Columbia in terms of subjective well-being. Similarly, on a reduced European scale (with many countries missing), the 2010 National Accounts of Well-Being study, which takes stock of subjective perceptions of personal, social, and professional well-being, highlights those countries with the greatest economic power, such as Switzerland or Austria. But it also shows that Scandinavia and Ireland are close competitors, whereas other economic heavyweights such as Germany, France, or Spain are comparatively lagging. Finally, despite the difficulties entailed in assessing the comparative well-being
of nations, not least because the perception of well-being is molded by divergent cultural perspectives and values, these studies demonstrate that material accumulation is certainly not the sole guarantor of existential satisfaction.

See also:
Alternative Medicine, Body, The, Happiness, Health Care, Materialism and Postmaterialism, Measuring Satisfaction, Measuring Standards of Living

Further Readings


Websites


APA

[https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/well_being](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/well_being)