

RETHINKING WELLNESS

From product category
to cultural belief system

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THE RISE OF WELLNESS CULTURE AND DECLINING TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS

Have you heard of sungazing? Although it has roots in many ancient cultures, it recently gained popularity on social media, where influencers claim staring directly at the sun can promote healing and realignment. Despite obvious safety concerns, it is often presented as secret knowledge that powerful institutions don't want you to know about.

While sungazing itself is not new, its resurgence highlights a feature of contemporary wellness culture: a growing willingness to seek alternatives to traditional expertise. Historically, periods of institutional strain have often given rise to practices that promise direct, personal access to truth, bypassing established authorities. Today, sungazing is just one example of a wider ecosystem of wellness trends circulating online.

We recently carried out research – drawing on social media analysis, ethnography and expert interviews – to get a deeper understanding of what is happening in this space. We found a recurring theme: wellness is increasingly linked to scepticism towards institutions and a desire for greater personal control.



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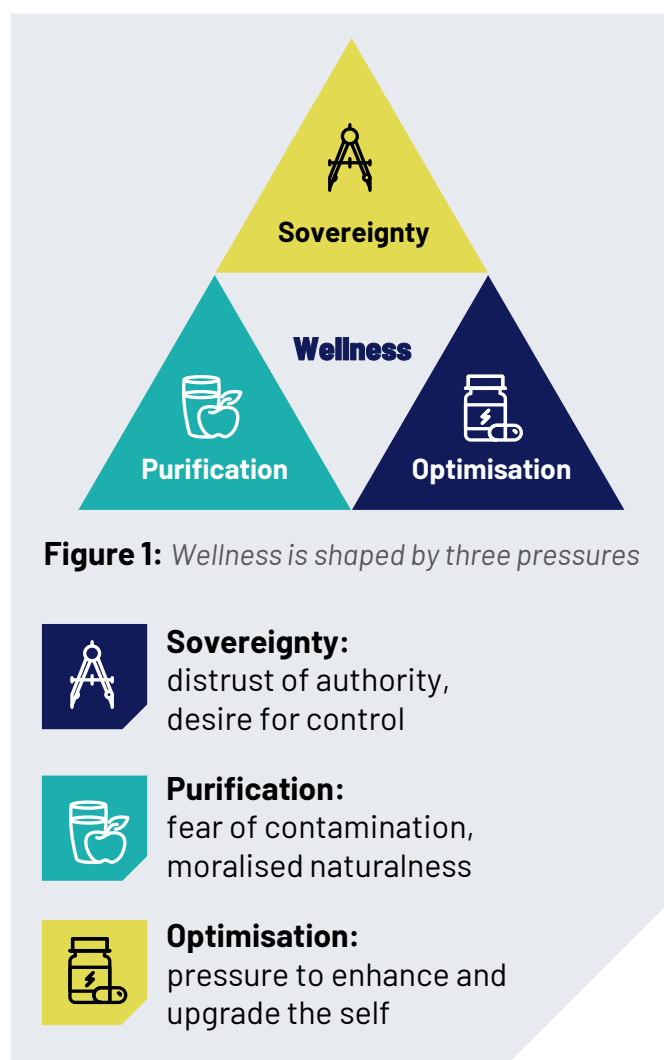
How wellness evolved from a product category to a belief system

Traditionally, wellness referred to practices outside formal healthcare systems. Today, however, its influence extends much further, serving as a social and moral framework that shapes how people eat, sleep, exercise, consume information and evaluate expertise.

The [wellness industry is valued globally at US\\$6.3 trillion](#), yet its significance cannot be measured by market value alone. Wellness increasingly centres on the idea that individuals should actively manage and optimise their health, often in response to healthcare systems perceived as slow or difficult to navigate.

For many, wellness offers a sense of agency. At the same time, however, it places responsibility for health on individuals while leaving them to navigate a largely unregulated market filled with competing claims and varying levels of evidence.

The wellness operating system today is shaped by three pressures: sovereignty (control of body and knowledge), purification (keeping harm out), and optimisation (enhancement of self).





Why consumers are taking greater control of their health

The appeal of wellness culture is understandable. As healthcare systems face long waiting times and growing pressures, many people look elsewhere for information, support and reassurance. For example, a recent [Ipsos Health Services report](#) shows that 67% globally agree that waiting times are too long to get an appointment to see a doctor in their country. Similarly, our [Ipsos Global Trends \(IGT\) report](#) finds that 78% of people globally want greater control over decisions about their health, while more than two-thirds actively seek health information themselves rather than relying solely on medical professionals.

While the pattern is global, it is not uniform. Our IGT data shows that Conscientious Health is rapidly expanding in emerging markets, where growing middle classes are investing in health choices, while in markets such as China, France and the US the balance between physical and mental wellbeing is evolving in different ways. This suggests that wellness is not simply a lifestyle trend; it is shaped by local experiences of access, trust, aspiration and the perceived limits of formal healthcare.

This is also where the promise of agency becomes more ambiguous. The same conditions that push people to seek information and reassurance outside formal healthcare can also expose them to poor advice, commercialised solutions and misinformation.

During the pandemic, we saw not only individual influencers but also networks of influencers who were disseminating false and misleading advice. And increasingly this is motivated by a variety of incentives: political gain, social gain, clout and fame as well as commercial gain.”



Stephanie Baker
Sociologist and
Wellness Culture Author

The hidden costs of self-optimisation and personal responsibility

A central tension within wellness culture is its emphasis on personal responsibility. For example, notions of wellness can encourage people to interpret tiredness, anxiety, or illness as evidence of personal failings rather than strain from issues such as precarious employment, racism, sexism, or poor housing.

There are echoes here of the [manosphere](#): both take real experiences of distress or lost control and reframe them as problems of personal optimisation. The answer becomes discipline, self-mastery and mindset change, which can feel empowering but risks turning structural strain into personal insufficiency.

The pressure to continually improve is reinforced by messaging that promotes constant vigilance over diet, ingredients, supplements and lifestyle choices. Health becomes a personal project that demands ongoing effort and self-monitoring. The result is a cycle in which being "well" remains perpetually out of reach, with every achievement revealing new areas for improvement and creating fresh anxieties about whether enough is being done to maintain health and wellbeing.

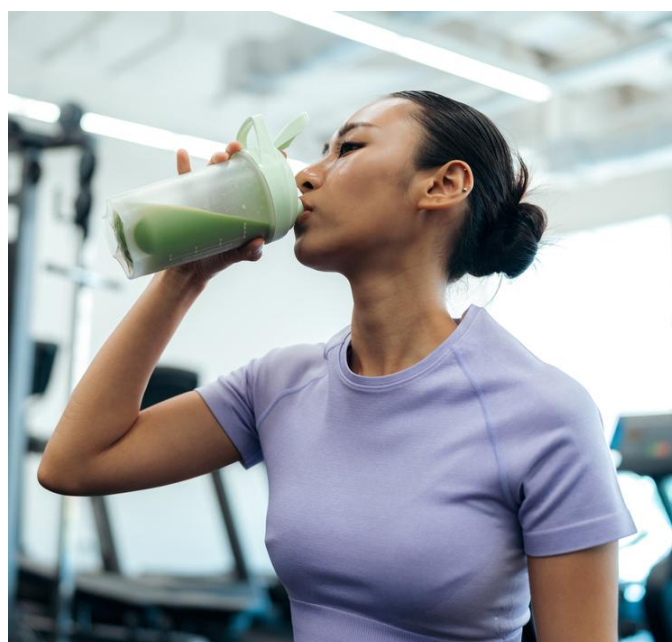
The consequences can be significant. One participant told us that after a member of her "mum" WhatsApp group shared positive experiences with a high dose of vitamin D, another person in the group was hospitalised after taking the same amount. Another participant experienced severe dehydration after following a gym friend's recommendation to drink Himalayan salt water, initially mistaking the resulting headaches for a brain tumour. While a properly formulated oral rehydration solution can help restore fluids and electrolytes, an improvised salt drink, copied from a friend, can do something quite different.

Beyond physical risks, constant exposure to wellness messaging can create confusion about whom to trust and where evidence ends and opinion begins. Richard Simcock, Chief Medical Officer of Macmillan Cancer Support, believes it may even mean that *people "don't seek appropriate medical care, or decline evidence-based high-quality medical care"*.



Social media has begun new concerns in me that I never had before, like having low cortisol levels or that I have to take this supplement every day otherwise I'm not healthy."

US research participant, early 20s





HEALTH MISINFORMATION, SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE TRUST GAP

The growth of wellness culture reflects not just changes in health behaviour but also changes in where people place trust. Increasingly, health information is acquired through social media, influencers and online communities. Data from our [Ipsos Health Service report](#) reveals that 48% of people heard about GLP-1 drugs from social media, compared with 20% hearing about them through medical professionals.

This shift can have positive aspects: peer-to-peer knowledge sharing can reduce stigma and bring to the surface lived experiences that traditional healthcare systems sometimes overlook. For many people, these communities provide validation, empathy and practical advice.

Yet these same environments can also amplify misinformation. Research by Stephanie Baker on the [top 50 videos surfaced in cancer-related searches](#) found that a large majority of highly viewed social media content relating to cancer treatments contained false or misleading claims, often linked to products being marketed

directly to viewers.

This matters not only because the information is incorrect, but because influencers and content creators can easily profit from disseminating health advice at scale without clinical oversight, regulatory scrutiny, or accountability, while still appearing relatable and trustworthy to audiences seeking guidance.

Political analyst Catherine Fieschi argues that perceived government and scientific overreach, combined with a rising cost of living and overloaded healthcare systems, has encouraged people to take health matters into their own hands. When social institutions such as education, housing, and healthcare fail to provide stability, Fieschi suggests that the resulting disaffection often reconfigures as anti-elite sentiment. Within this environment, wellness becomes a means of expressing distrust and can be seen as a form of “underdog politics”: turning to “natural” remedies or community-based advice is not only an act of care but an assertion of independence.

Clean eating, natural living and the pursuit of purity

Central to wellness culture are the ideas of purity and naturalness. In one widely shared Instagram video, a popular influencer takes us around a UK supermarket, inspecting different products, questioning provenance, and pointing out the impurity of different ingredients. Eating becomes more than nourishment; it becomes a reflection of personal values and identity. [A recent study](#) found that 50% of Gen Z report pressure to eat in ways that showcase their health.

For many consumers, wellness narratives create uncertainty. Participants in our research described confusion about ingredients, food safety and health claims, often struggling to know whom to trust. One participant, for example, worried about reports of lead in chocolate and how to ensure her food was "pure". These ideas carry moral and cultural undertones, linking "good" choices with discipline and responsibility.

This notion of purity also has a gendered element, a move towards what journalist Sian Norris refers to as the "mythical gender roles of the past" when women stayed at home and were close to nature and men went out and fought. Despite this era not actually existing, wellness culture can at times seem to be doubling down on this notion.

For men in particular, says Mike Nicholson, ex-teacher and Director of Progressive Masculinities, the pressure is to do with optimisation and endurance, privileging strength, resilience, and sovereignty over the body as a site of performance and control.

How wellness culture is reshaping consumer behaviour

Wellness increasingly operates as a form of "soft power", shaping what we see as credible, desirable and aspirational. Its impact extends beyond health into categories including technology, beauty and finance where products are often positioned around ideas of optimisation, self-care and wellbeing.

This creates opportunities for brands but also risks. The slipperiness of the term *wellness* means it can be applied to almost any product or service, which means brands can reframe many products and services as "self-care".

Yet wellness persists because it does meet some genuine social and psychological needs in an increasingly complex world. Practices such as exercise, mindfulness and supplementation offer people accessible ways to create often much needed order, meaning and agency in their daily lives.



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WHAT WELLNESS MEANS

for brands, policymakers and healthcare

The rise of wellness reflects consumer needs that cannot simply be dismissed. For policymakers, it highlights opportunities to strengthen trust and accessibility within healthcare systems. For brands, it presents an opportunity to support informed decision-making rather than amplifying anxiety or unrealistic expectations.

Consumers increasingly expect organisations to play an active role in making healthier choices easier and more accessible. For example, the [Tetra Pak Index 2023](#) found that 51% of consumers believe providing healthy food is the responsibility of manufacturers and brands, ahead of farmers, producers and government. This suggests a role for brands that goes beyond selling products towards providing clarity, transparency and practical support.

The challenge is ensuring that wellness complements, rather than replaces, collective systems of care. Brands can support this by moving beyond wellness as a product category and treating it as a belief system shaping consumer behaviour far beyond traditional

wellness products. It affects how consumers evaluate medicines, nutrition, beauty, diagnostics, and even everyday lifestyle products.

How brands can respond to changing wellness beliefs

- 1. Map the belief system**
Understand how consumers interpret wellness concepts such as naturalness, optimisation, toxicity, balance and control, and how these beliefs influence behaviour more than clinical or technical claims.
- 2. Assess portfolio exposure**
Identify where wellness narratives are already affecting consumer decisions across categories, not just in explicitly wellness-branded products.
- 3. Develop strategic responses**
Design products, communications and engagement strategies that recognise wellness as a cultural worldview rather than a niche trend.

IN SUMMARY

Wellness is no longer just a market category. It has become a powerful cultural framework that shapes how people understand health, expertise and personal responsibility. Brands that recognise this shift will be better equipped to navigate the opportunities and risks that lie ahead.

Key takeaways

Wellness has evolved from a category to a belief system

Consumers increasingly use wellness as a lens through which they understand health, expertise and the body.



Health authority is becoming more decentralised

Trust is shifting away from traditional institutions towards influencers, peer networks and lived experience.



Wellness influences behaviour across categories

Its impact extends well beyond supplements and fitness into food, beauty, healthcare and consumer goods.



Wellness emphasises personal responsibility

Individuals are increasingly encouraged to monitor, optimise and manage their own wellbeing.



Brands need a broader understanding of wellness

Treating wellness purely as a marketing category carries the risk of missing profound shifts in consumer behaviour.



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