



A better body?

***Towards a sociology
of wellness***

An online symposium
17th February 2022

Supported by



Session	Schedule
<p>Session 1 10:00am – 12:10pm</p>	<p>10:00am – 10:10am: Naomi Smith (Federation University): <i>Symposium Welcome</i></p> <p>10:10am – 10:30am: Dr Shakira Hussein (UniMelb) and Dr Tresa LeClerc (UniMelb): <i>The Far Right and the Ritualisation of Food</i></p> <p>10:30am – 10:50am: Anna Halafoff (Deakin) and Emily Marriott (Deakin): <i>(Con)spirituality, wellness and COVID-19</i></p> <p>10:50am – 11:10am: Ashleigh Haw (Deakin University), Jay Daniel Thompson (RMIT), and Rob Cover (RMIT): <i>COVID-related disinformation and conspiracy theories in online wellness communities: Dominant discourses, implications, and sites of resistance</i></p> <p>11:10am – 11:30am: Clare Davies (USyd): <i>Navigating health and food-related decisions online: A study in a sample of women in Australia</i></p> <p>11:30am – 11:50am: Connie Allen (Griffith University): <i>A new theory of high level wellness, based on interviews with happy, healthy Australians</i></p> <p>11:50am – 12:10pm: Alexandra Smith (UQ), Rebecca Olson (UQ), Maddison Cuerton (UQ), Morgan Dudley (UQ), Philip Good (UQ), Janet Hardy (St. Vincent's Private Hospital Brisbane): <i>"I felt more like myself": Wellness, wellbeing, and the use of medicinal cannabis in the advanced cancer context.</i></p>
<p>LUNCH 12:10pm – 1:10pm</p>	<p>We'll be leaving the Zoom open so feel free to stay on and chat but also feel free to get away from the screen!</p>
<p>Session 2 1:10pm – 3:00pm</p>	<p>1:10pm – 1:30pm: Cassandra Loeser (UniSA): <i>Towards an embodied ethical practice in sociological inquiry as means of performing research</i></p> <p>1:30pm – 1:50pm: Justine Tophman (Federation University) <i>Relaxed Restriction: The Transformation of Diet Culture</i></p> <p>1:50pm – 2:10pm: Edith Hill (Flinders University) <i>Combatting wellness misinformation on YouTube: The case study of Abbey Sharp</i></p> <p>2:10pm – 2:30pm: Tarmia Klass (University of Adelaide), <i>'Diet-culture dropout': Wellness culture, anti-diet-rhetoric, and body positivity on Instagram</i></p> <p>2:30pm – 2:50pm: Julia Coffey (University of Newcastle) <i>'Having it all': Wellness culture, Instagram bodies, and 'perfect lives'</i></p> <p>2:50pm – 3:00pm: Marianne Clark (UNSW) and Clare Southerton (UNSW): <i>Wrap up</i></p>

Abstracts

The Far Right and the Ritualisation of Food

Dr Shakira Hussein (The University of Melbourne) and Dr Tresa LeClerc (The University of Melbourne)

Diet, or what people choose to eat and the constraints they place on consumption, can be deeply ideological. The Paleo diet, in which dieters eat 'only those foods available prior to the agricultural revolution' (Gressier 2021, p.3) is framed as a more 'authentic' diet due to its focus on 'real foods' (Ramachandran et al. 2018). Hindu nationalists similarly claim that beef consumption in India was unknown prior to the coming of Islam to the subcontinent, despite historical evidence to the contrary (Jha 2002; Shepherd 2020). Though discourses of food may seem innocuous, they may serve as a vehicle for ideological messaging. This is an important area to explore as there has been growing concern about far-right discourse entering the online wellness space (Aubry 2020; Chang 2021; Delany 2021; Guerin 2021). Of particular interest is the overlap between more extreme dieters that deem foods as 'impure' or unpalatable and the racist discourse of the 'purity of whiteness', and how this may be a target for far-right recruitment. In infiltrating diet, racism may be masked as simply a matter of 'taste' (Hussein, Bloul & LeClerc 2021). Through an exploration of the Hindu nationalist and Paleo diets, this paper examines the ways in which far-right ideology may assert an idea of supremacy through food influencing.

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(Con)spirituality, wellness and COVID-19

Anna Halafoff (Deakin University) and Emily Marriott (Deakin University)

Charlotte Ward and David Voas first used the term conspirituality in a scholarly article in 2011, to describe the merger of conspiracy theories and New Age spirituality at the turn of the twentieth century. This paper presents the findings of an International Research Network for Science and Belief in Society Small Grant Project on (Con)spirituality, Science and the COVID-19 Pandemic in Australia. We bracket the 'con' in (con)spirituality to problematise the term, and to highlight the internal diversities and complexities within spiritual and wellness communities regarding attitudes to COVID-19 and vaccination. We identify twelve (con)spiritual convictions and discuss the processes of radicalisation occurring within these movements. We argue that a deeper understanding of (con)spirituality, may assist with developing more effective strategies for countering the spread of disinformation and vaccine refusal in and beyond Australia.

COVID-related disinformation and conspiracy theories in online wellness communities: Dominant discourses, implications, and sites of resistance

Ashleigh Haw (Deakin University), Jay Daniel Thompson (RMIT), and Rob Cover (RMIT)

Widespread media coverage and social media commentary has given prominence to COVID-19 as an unparalleled threat to health and mortality, intensifying panic and insecurity worldwide. This reflects what the *World Health Organization* labelled as an 'infodemic': where an overabundance of information - including disinformation - infiltrates the public sphere during a crisis. In response to growing anxieties and mistrust of formal institutions, we are increasingly seeing such disinformation endorsed and amplified within online wellness communities, in many cases, by public figures with substantial support bases and thus, considerable power to influence broader societal attitudes.

In this presentation, we interrogate observed connections between online wellness communities and disinformation campaigns surrounding COVID-19, including anti-vaccination attitudes and COVID-disbelief conspiracies. We discuss the bourgeois liberal-individualist discourse that increasingly underpins much of this communication, illustrated through examples such as 'my body, my choice' rhetoric and the co-option of terminology associated with justice for marginalised peoples (e.g. likening vaccination mandates to 'apartheid' and 'segregation' – terms discursively connected to 1970s US civil rights discourse and racial justice movements).

We also recognise the growing number of wellness influencers openly resisting COVID-disbelief and anti-vaccination discourses, noting key strategies deployed within this resistance and the forms of anti-individualist, mutual care these demonstrate. Here, we see interesting practices of networked collaboration enacted, alongside a discursive 'distancing' from the kind of individualist and conspiratorial thinking that lays the groundwork for a fertile marriage between wellness discourse and the far-right. We conclude by highlighting important social, political and health implications and remaining scholarly questions for the digital communication, cultural studies, and sociology fields.

Navigating health and food-related decisions online: A study in a sample of women in Australia

Clare Davies (University of Sydney)

Dietary and fitness trends continue to attract attention and conflict with evidence-based advice endorsed by government-led initiatives. These trends are amplified through social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok that promote an ideal state of being healthy that the layperson can achieve through rigorous commitment and investment. My research project aims to explore the role of digital technologies among women aged 18-35 living in Australia to uncover the factors that influence health and food-related decisions. I integrate a traditional public health model with a sociomaterialism framework to analyse contemporary health and food-related domains as they present the affective forces that support and reproduce normative ideals of embodiment, self-responsibility and food consumption.

While this presentation will focus on early findings from the field, qualitative fieldwork with 70 women between March to August 2021 points to the micro-political encounters and affective forces that surface for women when making health and food-related decisions. The changing nature of our lives primarily impacts these patterns of behaviour through an increased reliance on online activity such as streaming services, online shopping, and home offices becoming a permanent part of the labour market. Most notably, the growing dependence on these technologies raises questions on the ability to promote nutritional science that supports human health and disease prevention.

A new theory of high level wellness, based on interviews with happy, healthy Australians

Connie Allen (Griffith University)

Everyone has the right to high level wellness, but few seem to achieve it. This constructivist grounded theory study sought to learn from people who were flourishing, to provide a new understanding of what high level wellness is, and how people attain and maintain it. Twenty five participants were recruited through traditional and social media, then interviewed. These people were over the age of 18, lived in South East Queensland (Australia), and reported a high (or very high) level of 'wellness', 'health' and 'happiness'. Participants described what high level wellness meant to them, their wellness journeys, what helped, what made it harder, typical wellness/non-wellness days, and their advice for others. Data analysis led to the development of a new high level wellness theory, comprising a definition, process and enablers. According to this theory, high level wellness is the sense of peace (wellbeing) that comes from knowing, liking and being who you are. Self understanding, acceptance and actualisation is achieved through successive, self-initiated experiential learning cycles (tune in, try and

integrate). This life-long learn/try process requires commitment, presence, reflection and ability (which may require support). This self-empowerment theory could underpin coaching and community development initiatives, prompting people to design, implement and evaluate their own learn/try experiences. This might help to swing wellness endeavours towards honouring our unique strengths, values, energisers, needs and joys, rather than striving to achieve mainstream perspectives of perfection. Like other initiatives, the learn/try approach would work best within equitable societies that actively address socioecological determinants of health.

“I felt more like myself”: Wellness, wellbeing, and the use of medicinal cannabis in the advanced cancer context

Alexandra Smith (UQ), Rebecca Olson (UQ), Maddison Cuerton (UQ), Morgan Dudley (UQ), Philip Good (UQ), Janet Hardy (St. Vincent's Private Hospital Brisbane)

Individuals who are navigating experiences of cancer, palliative care, and symptom control present sociologists with a significant question: How might we comprehend the highly contextualised and at times contested nature of ‘wellness’ and well-being, in relation to advanced disease states?

In this presentation we discuss findings from a sociological sub-study, embedded within a randomised control trial examining the use of medicinal cannabis for symptom control in advanced cancer (Good et al., 2019). This sub-study explores the perspectives of palliative care patients, focusing on perceptions, beliefs and experiences of medicinal cannabis within and outside the clinical trial context.

We draw together research regarding perceptions of medicinal cannabis (e.g. Pedersen and Sandberg, 2013; Zarhin et al., 2019), and patients’ experiences of alternative and complementary medicine (e.g. Broom, 2009), to examine the ways in which medicinal cannabis is situated at a complex intersection: understood as a natural, organic option for achieving wellbeing, preferable to pharmaceutical symptom control; and also seen as necessarily existing in a space of medico-legal regulation. The latter context is often further characterised by clinical measures of efficacy and ‘quality of life’ (e.g. Hui & Bruera 2016), with less room for considering corporeal, lived and felt dimensions of wellbeing as these are experienced by patients themselves.

We therefore interrogate how measures used within a clinical trial may reduce the complexity of wellness as this is experienced and articulated by patients, and discuss the implications for understanding wellness relative to dis-ease states and the use of medically and morally contested approaches.

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Towards an embodied ethical practice in sociological inquiry as means of performing research

Cassandra Loeser (University of South Australia)

This paper suggests an embodied ethical practice in sociological inquiry where stories told of and about bodies signal biography and intersubjectivity as critical means of performing research in the contexts of 'wellness', 'health', 'illness' and '(dis)ability'. It will argue that the significance of stories lie in their capacity to reacquaint research with identity, labour, creativity, discrepancy and provisionality – matters crucial to facilitating a capacity to see and hear those stories that are told with and through bodies in the intersubjective lived everyday. At the same time, attention is drawn to the ways that stories of and about bodies require a pragmatic approach that is reflexive, dialogical and contingent. The paper is methodologically premised on the argument that there is a need to attend to stories, not as proof of 'absolute authenticity', but rather as nuanced dialectical moments of embodied exchange that are so often obscured in essentialist and essentialising theoretical and methodological framings like that of traditional medical and clinical approaches to researching bodies, 'wellness', 'health', 'illness' and '(dis)ability'. The paper thus forms part of a broader critique and analysis of the isolated, trans-historical and self-same subject

assumed in those medical and clinical approaches to research that are based on Cartesian logics of representation. Such approaches construct an abstracted, unified image of the 'normal', 'healthy' body invoked through binary notions of a 'well' self and the medically 'ill' or '(dis)abled' other, drawn over further binary assumptions about gender, sexuality, class, age, 'race' and ethnicity.

Relaxed Restriction: The Transformation of Diet Culture

Justine Tophman (Federation University)

My presentation will focus on the key findings of my Honours thesis, which investigates the ways in which discourses on diet and wellness circulate in online spaces. This is examined through a discourse analysis of 'What I Eat In A Day' (WIEIAD) videos on YouTube. Discourse analysis is employed to illuminate how diet and wellness discourses have evolved to offer a seemingly less restrictive approach to health. However, this thesis argues it is still ultimately an extension of 'traditional' diet culture. This thesis also adds an empirical contribution to the emerging field of digital food cultures. The results of this study demonstrate how diet culture continues to construct narrow ideals of health and beauty, but now disguises itself under a new holistic wellness discourse, or what I identify as 'relaxed restriction.' This is influenced by a broader cultural context of neoliberalism, which constructs health as a matter of individual responsibility, and postfeminism, which constructs health as a source of empowerment and self-care. I argue that this discourse problematically obligates individuals into a constant, ultimately unattainable performance of wellness.

Combatting wellness misinformation on YouTube: the case study of Abbey Sharp

Edith Hill (Flinders University)

Since its creation in 2005, YouTube has become a site for significant community building, as the platform and its affordances encourage active audiences. The nature of YouTube means online content can circulate to unfathomably large audiences, while YouTube Community Guidelines provide limited guidance for acceptable behaviour. Before the World Health Organisation declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic in March 2020, YouTube's Community Guidelines did not include health or wellness misinformation. Since then, they have added policies about COVID-19 specifically, as well as warning against 'promoting dangerous remedies or cures.' One creator in the YouTube wellness space is

Abbey Sharp, a registered dietitian who reviews ‘What I Eat in a Day’ videos of popular YouTube creators. Sharp’s videos follow the traditional “reaction video” format; she’s positioned as viewer and consumer, providing commentary on dietary choices and wellness claims. I investigate Sharp’s role in the spread of wellness misinformation through a life narrative lens, as she participates in the wellness community while actively combatting misinformation. Sharp utilises trends and platform affordances to act against health and wellness misinformation. Sharp’s reaction video format creates a collaborative space, where the original creator is taken out of the context of their video and edited into a space where they are critiqued through the lens of a “professional” other. I argue that Sharp’s health professional status (and reach of over 467,000 subscribers) provides legitimacy to her critique, and consequently alters how wellness narratives on YouTube are consumed.

‘Diet-culture dropout’: Wellness culture, anti-diet-rhetoric, and body positivity on Instagram

Tarmia Klass (University of Adelaide)

The relationship between diet-culture and wellness culture is an intimately fraught one. In my digital ethnographic study of fat liberation and body positive content creators on Instagram, the relationship between anti/diet discourse and wellness culture frequently surfaces.

Fat liberationists advocate for systemic changes in the treatment of fat people, the abolishment of anti-fat policies, and the acceptance of all bodies but especially those of the fattest people. Body positive creators are guided by a philosophy of bodily acceptance, but often take an a-political approach to this advocacy. In the majority, creators that fall into both categories are ‘anti-diet culture’ some fall into the neo-liberalist trap of advocating ‘wellness,’ another catch-all phrase for sometimes used in place of diet culture. Diet-culture is the pervasive, and oft invisible, societal expectation and valuation of thinness and attractiveness. Wellness culture claims to prize overall health and wellbeing over thinness and appearance, but its neo-liberal emphasis on individual responsibility blurs this distinction.

My paper looks at the entanglement of wellness and anti-/diet-culture discourse through the Instagram content of my research participants. It examines whether there are marked differences between how content creators and advocates talk about and discuss these two narratives. Through the exploration of how these discourses are presented online by people who are ‘anti-diet,’ I question the relationship between these cultures and neoliberalism, and how an online ethnographic exploration of these spaces interrogates the entanglements of these discourses.

‘Having it all’: Wellness culture, Instagram bodies, and ‘perfect lives’

Julia Coffey (University of Newcastle)

This presentation situates role and significance of ‘wellness’ as an idealised image, mode of being and subjecthood connected to ‘a perfect life’ in neoliberal Western contexts which is made particularly visible through social media platforms such as Instagram. I discuss how ‘wellness’ is attached to particular bodily styles of presentation and appearance such as the ‘Instagram influencer’, and draw on a qualitative study which used interview and digital photo-voice methods to explore how young people make sense of and encounter ‘perfect social media bodies’. I draw on feminist new materialist understandings of the body as socially and materially co-produced, and theorise the body as assembled through the socio-material conditions of everyday life to develop an understanding of ‘wellness’ as an important contemporary mode through which the body is felt and lived. Importantly, the gendered bodily appearances which are coded as representing an ‘ideal life’ and ‘perfect body’ which align with comportments of ‘wellness’ are central for understanding the ways in which aesthetic capital and bodily value is attributed in a Western neo-liberal context. This analysis aims to contribute to feminist analyses of the affective and socio-material dynamics through which bodies and images ‘become’ through each other, and situates the affective pull of ‘wellness’ as offering an aspirational appeal towards the possibility of living an ‘ideal life’ against the backdrop of late capitalism and impending climate collapse.

Symposium Organisers:

Naomi Smith (Federation University), Clare Southerton (UNSW) and Marianne Clark (UNSW)
