

THE DARK SIDE OF THE WELLNESS INDUSTRY

Words by Emma Nuttall



When the trillion-dollar industry that evolved to improve our health starts to negatively impact our wellbeing, it might be time to shift the narrative.

It's no secret the wellness industry has experienced a surge in popularity over the last decade, with many people seeking to improve their physical and emotional wellbeing. But beneath the surface of this beneficial movement, there is a darker side. Misinformation, unregulated practices and unhealthy narratives prey on consumer vulnerability. Quick-fix solutions and miracle products are often promoted as the primary means to achieving wellness-related goals. This narrow focus on external solutions overlooks the complex and multifaceted nature of health. So, how do we navigate the wellness market with greater confidence and find genuine ways to support our wellbeing?

Defining wellness

The Global Wellness Institute (GWI) defines wellness as, "The active pursuit of activities, choices and lifestyles that lead to a state of holistic health." The GWI definition is also based on the notion that wellness is multidimensional and holistic, encompassing physical, emotional, social and spiritual wellbeing, and one's interrelationship with their environment. A disconnect will often take place when the pursuit of lifestyle choices is not aligned with, or in the best interests of, an individual.

Unhealthy trends and narratives

With the global wellness economy estimated at \$5.6 trillion, it's not surprising the wellness narrative has evolved towards an aspirational lifestyle, one that requires expensive products and designer accessories, promising that if only we adopt the latest diet, detox or fitness trend, we will become the person we desire to be. Consumers with the financial means spend hundreds of dollars on products with unsubstantiated claims in the hopes of changing their health or appearance, often with disappointing outcomes.

The pressure to live a healthier life while looking as good as possible is pervasive. Wellness narratives tend to reflect societal pressures, focusing on the superficial aspects of body size and appearance. However, with most wellness influencers being able-bodied, young, thin and cisgender, for many people, the narrative is neither realistic nor inclusive.

The influence of social media

Social media influencers and their carefully curated feeds sell the idea of an idealised and unattainable lifestyle. Often the lifestyle they are portraying is manufactured, but we compare ourselves, nonetheless. Wellness influencers frequently share personal anecdotes about their health journey, framing certain products as essential to their success. These narratives can be persuasive, tapping into the emotional vulnerabilities of their audience, but the stories often lack scientific validity and the products endorsed may be nothing more than placebos.

Most influencers rely on a marketing concept called the "know, like and trust factor". Psychologist Carly Dober describes this as the "influencer parasocial relationship". "Social research tells us that if we hear an endorsement from someone we follow and trust, we are likely to engage in that wellness practice or to purchase the product," says Dober. Social media accounts we engage with regularly have the power to be quite influential. "They consistently and persistently sprinkle a lifestyle or practice to us and this message seeps in," Dober explains.

Unfortunately, there are many examples of influencers in the Australian wellness industry with significant follower counts, drawing on pseudoscience and fictitious claims to sell their products. There have also been instances where influencers have completely fabricated their personal journeys to wellness.

When the narrative becomes dangerous

The pursuit of societal beauty standards can drive some individuals to embrace harmful practices in the name of wellness. False claims about curing diseases, promoting extreme diets or advocating for untested alternative therapies can have severe consequences for consumers. Individuals may forego conventional medical treatments in favour of these unproven methods, leading to worsening health conditions and, in some cases, irreversible harm.

Social media offers an effective channel for the spread of misinformation. An example of this is how conspiracy theory infiltrated the wellness

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industry during COVID-19 lockdowns and fuelled the escalation of anti-vaccine beliefs. The industry has long attracted people with alternate views, some of whom have a hard stance against the pharmaceutical industry. Certain influencers took this as an opportunity to peddle their products when hysteria was high with false claims of products that cured COVID-19 or provided immunity against infection.

Why do we fall for misinformation?

“All of us are susceptible to misinformation, but different demographics are more likely to fall for certain types,” explains Melanie Trecek-King, associate professor of biology and director of education at the Mental Immunity Project. Trecek-King’s teachings focus on the importance of critical thinking and information literacy. “When misinformation confirms our biases and fits in with how we see the world, we generally assume it’s true,” she says.

When we don’t rely on analytical thinking, we are more likely to be influenced by a subjective feeling of familiarity or persuaded to adopt the point of view of a person we trust. According to Trecek-King, we tie our beliefs to our identity, especially our social identity. “We protect our beliefs, even if they’re false, to protect our sense of self. The stronger the beliefs we hold, the more motivated we are to defend them,” explains Trecek-King.

Who is most vulnerable?

Women are often targeted by wellness influencers and are more likely to fall for pseudoscience, according to Trecek-King. This is due to several factors including the constant pressure on women to look young, thin and attractive and a long history of the medical system overlooking or minimising women’s health concerns. “The wellness industry fills this gap and it’s easy to understand why. Women are believed, listened to and seen. They’re given a sense of hope and empowerment, however false,” explains Trecek-King.

Vulnerability may stem from a desire for quick fixes or a lack of critical health literacy. Individuals living with chronic illness, mental health conditions or body-image concerns may be more susceptible to the promises of miracle products or services. People with chronic pain or health conditions, who aren’t getting the relief they need from mainstream medicine, naturally start looking for answers elsewhere. When desperate for answers, even critical thinkers can fall for dubious wellness narratives. “Essentially, science isn’t providing easy answers and those peddling misinformation pretend to,” explains Trecek-King. In addition, emotions such as fear or anger reduce our ability to think critically.

Media literacy is required to navigate online content and discern credible information from misinformation. Adolescents can be particularly vulnerable to misinformation if they are not familiar with practices such as verifying the author’s identity, evaluating source credibility or considering the influence of sponsorships on the content they engage with. Education in media literacy and critical thinking can be extremely beneficial.

How self-image factors in

Some of us have the desire to change our external appearance to feel good about ourselves. Psychologist Carly Dober explains that this can be due to societal messaging around beauty standards. “It is incredibly difficult to ignore years and sometimes decades of insidious and pervasive messaging about how your body or face do not meet the standards expected of you,” explains Dober. “The average human’s brain is not much of a match to the billion-dollar beauty and wellness industry.”

According to Dober, our desire for control may also have a part to play. Many things in our lives are not within our control, but focusing our energy on changing our appearance can provide a sense of agency. “We may feel great in the short-term for getting that new haircut or facial, however these are band-aid distractions that often have no real impact in the big areas of our lives that influence our health and wellbeing.”

If self-esteem is something we cultivate from within, what are some steps we can take to improve our confidence instead of looking to fad diets or beauty products to fill the gap? “Self-esteem is based on our beliefs and opinions of ourselves,” explains Dober. Start to be curious and explore some of the beliefs you hold and where they originate from. Evaluate how helpful they are at this stage of your life and how you would like to feel about yourself.

It can also be helpful to distance yourself from the idea that your worth lies in your appearance. Focus instead on your internal qualities and capabilities. “Be kind to yourself and try to stop comparing yourself to other people,” adds Dober. “Humans often engage in upward comparisons where we only look at other people who we perceive to be doing better than us. This often leaves us feeling worse off.”

Cutting through the noise

Among the misinformation and empty promises within the wellness industry, there are also legitimate products and qualified practitioners offering educated advice.

When faced with conflicting information, how do you determine what is genuine health advice and what is merely a sales gimmick? How do you find a practitioner with the knowledge and education required to make a positive impact on your health journey?

Look for evidence-based approaches and employ critical thinking. Quick fixes and claims that appear too good to be true, generally are. “Often, it’s a kaleidoscope of emotional, social and environmental influences that impacts our physical and mental health, so to have one key sell as a ‘cure-all’ is often a dead giveaway,” advises Dober.

Choose products and supplements that have undergone testing and ask to see the clinical trials behind the products. If you’re receiving a service, enquire as to the education and training of the practitioner. Seek support from qualified practitioners who are registered with a regulating body. Verify the legitimacy of wellness claims through reputable sources including scientific journals and regulatory bodies.

Towards genuine wellbeing

Wellness can mean different things to different people and it’s important to reflect on what it means to you. Many of us fall prey to trends and fads if we don’t make decisions that are led by our values. For me, personally, wellness is about listening to my body and exploring ways to regulate my nervous system and bring a sense of calm to my sometimes-anxious mind.

Wellness narratives tend to emphasise external solutions as the sole path to wellbeing, neglecting the importance of emotional health, self-acceptance and holistic approaches. As a natural health practitioner, I can say with conviction that engaging in practices such as meditative self-enquiry and self-compassion will achieve far greater results than an overpriced cream or unregulated potion.

Quick fixes are popular because healing takes time and change causes discomfort. Real change requires persistence and a commitment to new habits. Quick-fix solutions also overshadow the significance of “treating the root cause” through professional support from registered mental health and natural health practitioners. Dietary advice, medication and supplementation should be holistic and individualised.

Wellness practices don’t need to be exclusive or expensive to be effective. Consider going back to basics. Research consistently shows that positive social connection, good-quality sleep, regular movement, stress-relief practices and a nutrient-dense

diet are the foundational pillars for a long and healthy life. These factors are interconnected and synergistic, working together to promote overall wellbeing.

By conducting research, seeking evidence-based information and consulting registered professionals, you can navigate the wellness market with greater confidence. Empower yourself as a consumer by making informed decisions and only consider genuine products and services that are backed by science, transparency and ethical practices. Most importantly, understand that confidence comes from within. The next time you find yourself considering buying a wellness guru’s \$200 new moon ritual for manifesting your ideal body, call a friend instead. Arrange to meet for a walk (or other type of movement suitable to your needs). Wellness doesn’t need to come with a price tag. 🌱



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