DIGITAL WELLBEING TREND

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Abstract

In response to growing concerns about the impact of digital technologies on consumers' wellbeing, the emerging trend of digital wellbeing has attracted the interest and attention of consumers, marketers, health professionals and policymakers. This paper explores the market trend of digital wellbeing, as a collection of products and services that consumers revolve to achieve hedonic and eudemonic wellbeing-related objectives in the course of their regular interactions with digital technology. Through a critical analysis of 371 digital wellbeing products, including apps, gadgets, information products, and services, the study identifies a range of strategies that the market of digital wellbeing advances in support of consumers' pursuit of coping with negative influence of technology on their quality of life. This study underscores how the market's framing of digital wellbeing emphasizes individual responsibility, potentially leading to consumer vulnerabilities rather than empowerment. The paper calls for a more nuanced understanding of digital wellbeing, highlighting the importance of balancing responsibilisation of consumers through market resources with systemic interventions.

Keywords: digital wellbeing, technology consumption, consumer empowerment, consumer vulnerabilities.

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Introduction

In increasing dissolution of digital technology in all of the realms of social and market realities (Burr et al., 2020; Roy et al., 2023; Thyroff et al., 2023), the emerging phenomenon of digital wellbeing has been surrounded by the growing interest from consumers, marketers, health professionals and policymakers. Digital wellbeing addresses the potential for people and society as a whole to strike a fulfilling equilibrium between their usage and non-usage of digital technologies (Vanden Abeele, 2021). On a more practical level, it also refers to a collection of methods and instruments that consumers utilize to achieve wellbeing-related objectives in the course of their regular interactions with digital technology (Eichner, 2020; Jorge et al., 2022; Lyngs et al., 2019; Monge Roffarello & De Russis, 2019, 2021; Valasek, 2022; Van Bruyssel et al., 2023). Tech giants like Apple, Google and Meta, invested in tools and educational programs aimed at helping consumers form "healthy technology habits" (Android 2022; Google 2022), followed by multiple smaller players that offer “digital self-control tools” to help monitor, understand and limit technology use (Lyngs, 2019; Lyngs et al., 2019, 2024; Monge Roffarello & De Russis, 2019, 2021, 2023). Besides apps and browser extensions aimed at self-tracking or removing distracting or potentially harmful functionalities or content, the digital wellbeing trend also includes gadgets (such as faraday cages or dumbphones), information products (such as coaching sessions or self-help books), and services (such as technology-free vacations, camps and retreats) (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020; Van Bruyssel et al., 2023).

This paper examines the market trend of digital wellbeing, driven by a research question: How does the newly emerging market frame “digital wellbeing”? To this end, the paper first traces the origins of the trend in the growing preoccupation with the negative consequences of technology consumption on consumer wellbeing. Second, it systematically maps the market of digital wellbeing and examines the range of value propositions and discourses advanced by digital wellbeing products and services. It finally reflects on the digital wellbeing trend more critically and calls for a more nuanced understanding of the consumer responsibility within the consequences of market’s framing of digital wellbeing in terms of.

Origins of digital wellbeing trend

Digital wellbeing trend is the product of the intersection of digital consumption and consumer’s ever-growing preoccupation with wellbeing, on individual, interactional, and social levels (Benvenuti et al., 2023). Despite diverse effects of technology on consumer wellbeing (see Table 1 for a general overview), it’s arguably the growing body of knowledge on the negative effects of technology on consumer wellbeing that has alimented the digital wellbeing trend.

Table 1. Digital technology as a mediator of consumer wellbeing.

	Technology-enabled improvement of consumer wellbeing	**Technology-enabled subtraction from consumer wellbeing**
Individual level of wellbeing	Enhanced self-determination & self-efficacy empowering individuals to look after themselves via self-tracking (Roy et al., 2023) Enhanced emotional wellbeing via participation in online communities due to edgework, cultivation of self-determination (Burr et al., 2020), self-representation and self-affirmation (Belk, 2013, 2014; Ellison et al., 2022; Jensen Schau & Gilly, 2003) Self-improvement, increased enjoyment and decreased fatigue via automation and personalisation (Puntoni et al., 2021) Enhanced hedonic wellbeing due to pleasure and self-expression, amplification of desire and passion in tech consumption (Kozinets et al., 2017; Kozinets, 2008) Enhanced eudaimonic wellbeing due to increased self-efficacy (Puntoni et al., 2021), autonomy and sense of agency (Vanden Abeele, 2021)	Perceived loss of personal autonomy, diminishment of the sense of accomplishment and intelligence resulting from overreliance on technology (Mick & Fournier, 1998; Puntoni et al., 2021) Cognitive overload, loss of attention, exhaustion, stress, experience of guilt/shame (Aagaard, 2021; Almourad et al., 2021; Vanden Abeele, 2021) due to excessive digital consumption, in some conditions transformed into binge behaviours and addiction disorders (Raghubir et al., 2021; Reimann & Jain, 2021) Undermined sense of agency and self-control (Monge Roffarello & De Russis, 2023) due to exploitation of consumer attention and consumer data, leading to erosion of trust in digital technology, and increasingly negative worldview (Anderson & Rainie, 2018b, 2018a; Cloarec, 2020)
Interactional level of wellbeing	Connectivity (via gadgets, social media etc.): improved social relatedness and social actualisation (Hoffman & Novak, 2012), possibility to perform social roles & manage social networks anywhere/anytime (Vanden Abeele, 2021), possibility to engage in activism and prosocial behaviours (Handelman, 2022; Parigi & Gong, 2014)	Excessive social media participation leads to personal identity distress, social approval anxiety, loss of self-confidence and loneliness, decreased satisfaction with social experiences (Aagaard, 2020; Almourad et al., 2021; Kozinets et al., 2017; Kozinets, 2019; Vanden Abeele, 2021)
Societal level of wellbeing	Improved public safety, social inclusion, reduced social inequality, lowered environmental footprint (Burr et al., 2020; Ganju et al., 2016; Roy et al., 2023)	Concern with privacy and surveillance (Zuboff, 2019), choicelessness (Dholakia et al., 2021), manipulation (Bhargava & Velasquez, 2021), and discrimination (Puntoni et al., 2021)

Source: Own elaboration based on literature review

As opposed to the optimistic techno-utopian view on digital technology (Kozinets, 2008), the past decade of academic and public discourse has focused on how digital consumption subtracts from, rather than enhances, consumers' quality of life. More specifically, excessive involvement into technology consumption and its consequences on consumer wellbeing have become a subject of growing scrutiny.

For instance, a growing body of psychological and health-focused research on consumer behavior shows how excessive use of digital services negatively impacts consumers by causing cognitive overload, attention deficits, exhaustion, stress, and reduced satisfaction in social experiences (Aagaard, 2021; Almourad et al., 2021; Vanden Abeele, 2021), as well as dangerous binge behaviours and addiction disorders (Bhargava & Velasquez, 2021; Raghubir et al., 2021; Reimann & Jain, 2021). Overuse

or misuse of social media may further exacerbate identity distress, social approval anxiety, unhappiness, self-confidence issues, loneliness, reduced task performance and other mental health challenges (Aagaard, 2020; Brooks, 2015; Huston et al., 2023), especially in case of adolescents and young adults (Haidt, 2024). These problems are increasingly common due to the rise of attention economy designs and deceptive patterns in technology (Brignull et al., 2023), increasing concerns about surveillance (Ball, 2017; Wood & Ball, 2013; Zuboff, 2019) and algorithmic manipulation and discrimination (Airoldi & Rokka, 2022; Bhargava & Velasquez, 2021; Puntoni et al., 2021), which erode consumers' wellbeing, diminish their trust in technology and deteriorate their worldview overall.

Digital wellbeing trend is a market response to the criticism of technology consumption, driven by a goal of helping consumers achieve a "personal sense of wellbeing" (Google 2022) and an "optimal balance between the benefits and drawbacks obtained from [...] the integration of digital connectivity into ordinary life" (Vanden Abeele 2021, p. 938).

The market of digital wellbeing has been researched in the past primarily from the perspective of communication studies and human-computer interaction scholarship, focusing on consumer awareness (Parry et al., 2023); adoption rates, motives and challenges , (Almourad et al., 2021; Parry et al., 2023); usage patterns (Lyngs et al., 2024; Monge Roffarello et al., 2023; Monge Roffarello & De Russis, 2021); levels of consumer satisfaction (Parry et al., 2023); user profiles (Nguyen et al., 2024; Vanden Abeele & Nguyen, 2024), all primarily driven by the goal of improving the effectiveness of digital self-control tools per se (Lyngs et al., 2019; Monge Roffarello & De Russis, 2019, 2023). However, only a few studies have taken a critical perspective on this market (Beattie & Daubs, 2020; Van Bruyssel et al., 2023; Widdicks, 2020) or attempted a broader look at the market of digital wellbeing as a whole. This ongoing study attempts to address this gap and delve into digital wellbeing as a market trend to understand what exactly is being traded and consumed as "digital wellbeing".

Method

Driven by the goal of comprehensively capturing the market trend of digital wellbeing, the study first attempted to create a systematic map of digital wellbeing products and services. As a starting point of data collection strategy, the existing academic literature was examined for the lists of previously researched digital wellbeing products. Starting from such lists published in the communication and human-computer interaction journals in the past five years (2019-2024), data collection proceeded in the direction of cleaning and updating the records in line with changes in the market (e.g., new entries, mergers and acquisitions, re-naming, discontinued products etc.). In addition,

systematic searches using relevant keywords were conducted on such databases as Apple's App Store, Google Play, Kickstarter, Crunchbase, and TrustPilot. The final set comprised of a total of 371 items, comprising 263 digital tools, 19 gadgets, 45 information products, 30 books, and 14 services marketed under the umbrella of digital wellbeing. For each of the included products, textual data from market-level discourses were collected. This included product webpages on the digital platforms, product websites and other forms of promotional and/or institutional communication where available. The resulting data were analysed using thematic content and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2010; Lupton, 2010).

Findings

The market of digital wellbeing is dominated primarily by two types of wellbeing-oriented solutions (see Table 2). The first provides attention support and focuses on offering means to prevent the excessive use of digital technology by blocking distracting features of gadgets and/or removing the content that can be harmful or lead to diversion of attention from the tasks at hand. Some of the examples of such blockers include timers, reminders, device-blocking mechanisms to reduce online activity in digital (i.e., apps), service (i.e., digital detox) or material product (i.e., faraday cage) forms. The second most prominent form rather relies on informational support to consumers' own self-control strategies. This includes a range of self-tracking solutions that allow users to track and visualize the time spent using gadgets and certain digital services. Other types of solutions are available too, including motivational support, as well as interventions that create a distance between consumers and technology.

Table 2. Typology of digital wellbeing-oriented market solutions.

	Description	**Key value offering to consumers**	**Examples**
Attention support	Blocking of features of gadgets and/or removing the content that can be distracting	Prevention of excessive digital consumption	Timers, time limits, content blockers, device-blocking mechanisms (via e.g. digital apps, digital detox services, faraday cages)
Information support	Providing education and information to support consumers' evidence-based informed decision making and intentionality	Mastering technology consumption	Courses, training, self-help books and blogs, trackers and visualisations of digital consumption metrics, benchmark analysis
Motivational support	Supporting motivation to adhere to wellbeing-related goals in digital consumption	Simplification and gamification of self-control over digital consumption	Prompts, reminders, inspirational phrases, goal fragmentation, accountability partners, competitive support, bets, contracts
Distancing support	Creating temporal, spatial, or symbolic distance between consumers and technology	Re-connecting with non-digital spheres of life	Technology-free vacations, digital detox camps and retreats, dumbphones

Source: Own elaboration based on data analysis

Further, the digital wellbeing market overall presents itself as rather a contested space where the value of consumer wellbeing is interconnected (and sometimes even interchanged) with the orientation at individual and collective productivity. The same types of products, such as self-trackers or blockers, are interchangeably marketed as productivity or health-related solutions.

Irrespective of the declared functionality, market discourses advanced by the market of digital wellbeing rely on four distinct strategies to cope with negative influence of technology on consumers' quality of life, which range from consumer education, to containment of certain forms of technology consumption without abstaining from others, essentialisation of digital consumption, and, especially in the context of social interactions, temporary non-consumption of technology. Each of the strategies conceptualises digital technology's (potential) harm in its own specific way, yet sees the damage as contained (or potentially containable). Yet, one common assumption shared by all of the strategies is that digital wellbeing is universally based on consumers' individual responsibility (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014; Shamir, 2008) . Most importantly, even though each of the digital wellbeing strategies exists in order to empower consumers towards improved wellbeing, they all are not exempt from the risk of (inadvertently) creating consumer vulnerabilities, instead of or together with consumer empowerment.

Conclusions

The findings suggest that while digital wellbeing market trend aims to offer consumers better control over their technology use, they also raise critical questions about whether these tools truly empower users or create new forms of consumer vulnerabilities. This ongoing study is a step towards future attempts to grasp and analyze these tensions, particularly by examining the role of digital wellbeing products in shaping consumer relationship with technology and in redefinition of the very notion of wellbeing in the age of hyperconnectivity. A more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon and the market of digital wellbeing can help foster more effective and ethical approaches to digital designs, as well as technology-related interventions into consumer's quality of life.

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