



Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

Author/s:

Hendry, N

Title:

“Hey lovely! Don’t miss this opportunity!”: Digital temporalities of wellness culture, email marketing and the promise of abundance

Date:

2022

Citation:

Hendry, N. (2022). “Hey lovely! Don’t miss this opportunity!”: Digital temporalities of wellness culture, email marketing and the promise of abundance. *Journal of Sociology*, 59 (3), pp.1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14407833221101397>.

Persistent Link:

<https://hdl.handle.net/11343/303132>

Special issue: What do misinformation practices feel like? Wellness culture and digital health in a post-Covid world

“Hey lovely! Don’t miss this opportunity!”: Digital temporalities of wellness culture, email marketing and the promise of abundance

Natalie Ann Hendry

The University of Melbourne

natalie.hendry@unimelb.edu.au

Abstract

For the wellness industry, email communication, albeit mundane, remains an essential practice even as wellness entrepreneurs embrace newer digital technologies. Drawing on ongoing insights from a larger Australian digital ethnographic project, I explore how these ‘wellness emails’ — electronic mail communication (outside of social media) that typically circulate wellness-related content through automated email list subscriptions — promise an always-ready, abundant space for transforming bodies and optimising health. These emails teach alternative bodily temporalities, distinct from the inhospitable biomedical time of mainstream healthcare, yet also employ time-critical marketing tactics and stories to drive attention, where recipients are encouraged both to not miss out on opportunities but also to respect their own ‘divine timing’. Such temporal flexibility of wellness culture, and its promise of abundance, contributes to its global expansion, where email offers personal and marketised engagement and, critically, a potential escape from social media censorship and public health scrutiny.

Keywords

Email, wellness culture, email marketing, temporality, digital culture, social media

For wellness entrepreneurs, email communication, albeit mundane, remains an essential and popular practice even as they embrace and exploit newer technologies and media, including podcasts, e-courses, and live social media video. But what does email enable for entrepreneurs, practitioners and influencers in the wellness industry and wellness culture more broadly? This paper considers the cultural role of ‘wellness emails’, electronic mail communications (outside of messaging services or social media) that typically circulate wellness-related content through automated email list

subscriptions. As both new and more established media platforms offer opportunities for increasingly targeted and segmented advertising (Andrejevic et al. 2020), much of the commercial value of email marketing rests with its perceived technological freedom, an essential value for wellness entrepreneurs seeking to avoid censorship or being deplatformed on social media for potentially controversial viewpoints or misinformation.

Drawing on ongoing insights from a larger Australian digital ethnographic project investigating the public health pedagogy of health influencers and entrepreneurs (Hendry et al. 2021), I explore how these mundane emails and their temporalities structure the pedagogical and cultural potential of wellness culture in ways that are often overshadowed by other media research. While digital content and practices in the wellness industry have received recent attention (Baker and Rojek 2020a), email communication is often obscured. I suggest that these emails generate particular temporal relationships to bodies and health. Wellness emails promise an always-ready, abundant space for transforming and optimising health. They teach alternative body temporalities distinct from the inhospitable biomedical time of mainstream healthcare. At the same time, entrepreneurs employ time-critical marketing tactics and stories to drive attention and sales, where email recipients are encouraged both to not miss out on opportunities *and* respect their own ‘divine timing’. Such temporal flexibility of wellness culture and its promise of abundance contribute to its global market expansion, where email communication offers personal and commercial engagement and, importantly, a potential escape from social media censorship (e.g., being de-platformed for anti-vaccination rhetoric) and public health scrutiny.

Digital wellness culture

Digital technologies and social media have enabled the global growth of wellness industries and culture by (re)producing and circulating the immaterial value of ‘wellness’ and distributing access to goods and services. Wellness values and beliefs centre pursuits that optimise oneself and body and exceed general health and wellbeing through healthy ‘clean’ eating and daily exercise self-care routines (Baker 2022; O’Neill 2021). Although precedents of wellness culture—including New Age or new spirituality, alternative health and healing, self-help and self-development, and therapeutic culture (Baker 2022; Renser 2021; Rimke 2020; Salmenniemi et al. 2019)—of course predate the internet, understanding wellness through digital culture stresses its communicative role. As a knowledge practice, doing wellness is as much about learning different ways of thinking and doing as it is about buying products. Wellness culture continually recirculates ideas about bodies and being well, where ‘wellness’ is produced as a symbolic good, a marker of moral taste and a bodily discipline. As a *culture*, this orients us to consider how diverse (and sometimes contradictory) values, ideas, beliefs and practices about health, bodies, and the self are communicated.

Given wellness culture's discursive flexibility and propensity to appropriate other spiritual cultures (Renser 2021), it is difficult to neatly distinguish between wellness and other therapeutic or new spirituality discourses. Wellness culture is entangled with other often more-legitimised discourses where wellness practices and beliefs co-inform mainstream approaches to health (e.g., neoliberal governance, healthism; O'Neill 2021; Tiisanen 2021) as well as more challenging political beliefs (e.g., far-right extremism; Baker 2022). Likewise, wellness entrepreneurs may position their work to oppose or reject neoliberal or biomedical values, even as alternative health practices may incorporate those same values (Broom et al. 2014).

Wellness culture encourages spiritual or psychological growth where being one's best self or of service to the world requires ongoing inner work, mirroring (or as a subgenre of) therapeutic cultures that adopt psychological vocabularies to understand selfhood, "revolving around ideas of psychic interiority, autonomy, authenticity, self-responsibility and continuous self-invention" (Salmenniemi et al. 2019: 1) and incitements for positive thinking (Ehrenreich 2009). In wellness vernacular, 'abundance' conceptualises both the value of a practice and an outcome. It describes a plentiful existence grounded in a belief in the universe's capacity for creative production. Adherents trust that manifesting one's reality through positive thinking and energetic work will chaperone abundance to their lives (Carr and Kelan 2021) through "the law of attraction" where "external experiences are synced to internal states of mind or the frequencies of thought" (Gregory 2013: 281).

Although wellness influencers as micro-celebrities have received growing scholarly attention (Baker and Rojek 2020a; Hendry et al. 2021), these explorations have sidelined that wellness culture also relies on the (primarily feminine) mediated networks of health and spiritual practitioners, business owners and entrepreneurs, healers, counsellors and coaches, complementary medicine practitioners, therapists, and wellness enthusiasts and adherents. Other scholars have discussed how women and femininity dominate wellness culture (e.g., Baker and Rojek 2020a), aligning with broader gendered patterns in influencer culture and media economies (Duffy 2017). Given this existing scholarship, gender is downplayed in this paper. Instead, I focus on email communication modes and practices and use the term 'wellness entrepreneurs' (O'Neill 2021) to describe the diverse contributors to wellness culture who earn income from their content creation, services or products. These networks co-legitimise wellness entrepreneurs' cultural intermediary (Hutchinson 2017) work through mutual invitations on podcasts, live videos, and guest blog posts. As a potential form of influencer pedagogy (Hendry et al. 2021), co-promoting and endorsing each other's products or services distribute expertise within groups of wellness entrepreneurs and discourages within-culture criticism (e.g., "women don't bring others down"; Baker and Rojek 2020b) or the need for 'outsider' or professional legitimacy.¹

Digital marketing and email

Following the transformation of other bloggers to social media influencers and content creators (most notably fashion bloggers; Abidin 2018), the cultural and vernacular boundaries of wellness and alternative health communities online have shifted from blogging (sharing advice to help others) to more savvy digital entrepreneurship. This, in part, has been driven by growth in adjacent markets and digital industries: digital marketing; virtual life coaching and coaching for coaches; online education and e-courses; digital multilevel marketing; and passive income opportunities (e.g., downloadable content, ‘sovereign’ cryptocurrency income). Changing digital media trends offer endless new commercial opportunities for wellness culture to monetise ‘optimal health’, regardless of these growing markets’ social, economic, or environmental impacts (e.g., Magrach and Sanz 2020). However, what is on offer may not be new as entrepreneurs recycle and reformat existing health and spiritual practices for digital circulation. Learning new digital marketing approaches is as much the work of wellness adherents as learning and adopting new bodily practices.

Email is one marketing strategy for many wellness entrepreneurs. Unlike other platforms or apps, ‘personal’ email seemingly avoids the perils of social media moderation and allows entrepreneurs to ‘own’ their email list audiences. Email lists enable wellness entrepreneurs to bypass censorship, where email offers a moderation-free space unlike the ‘oppressive dictatorship’ of platforms like Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter. While circulating marketing material via an email list or e-newsletter is hardly unique to the wellness industry, I argue that email communication’s nonproprietary nature and the perception that email is more intimate or personal make ‘wellness emails’ an essential focus for wellness culture scholarship. Email lists are ‘safe’ because list owners ‘own’ their lists, and email is perceived as more accessible (what arrives in someone’s inbox and not in spam folders depends on email software management, a recipient’s internet service provider, and their interest).

More generally, Milne (2021: 4) has recently offered a media studies account to foreground email as “simultaneously banal, overlooked, indispensable, and reviled” and has traced the persisting claims that email is obsolete or the ‘loser’ in competition with instant messaging or social media-facilitated communication. Popularised in the 1990s, email’s “nonproprietary ease of access” and “vondorneutral approach” (not controlled by any one company) have contributed to its relative longevity where email has become so mundane that it now endures “complaints about its ubiquity” (Milne 2021: 209, 222, 16). These frustrations are familiar; managing email overload, etiquette, and expectations (e.g., responding to work email outside of work, negotiating damaging abuse) is a subgenre of popular and academic interests.

Email correspondence communicates and circulates differently from other social media communication. For Milne (2021: 208), what makes email endure in everyday lives is its storytelling capacity and how it enables narrative communication and a sense of intimacy or support: “Even if you haven't ever met in person, email often creates feelings of familiarity as it joins together groups with similar institutional, cultural, political, or personal interests.” These email stories can have a pedagogical and personal role. For instance, email discussion lists for people with similar life experiences offer validation and reassurance as they share stories with others, connecting emotionally and learning together. Like other forms of digital communication, email also blurs neat boundaries between private and public, personal and professional, individual and networked communication. One’s email address may collate spam, tax documents, newsletters from a salon, intimate updates from lovers, and work correspondence, all in one inbox or email address.

My focus is on email lists as newsletters and marketing subscriptions that “are transactional and so do not generate dialogue” (Milne, 2021: 147), distinct from ‘email discussion lists’ or ‘forum lists’ that invite multiple recipients to communicate to a broader group. While not all email newsletters are marketing, regular email newsletters are perhaps the earliest example of online or digital marketing (Piñeiro-Otero and Martínez-Rolán 2016). Email marketing objectives include directing attention to webpages (e.g., landing pages) or other platforms; promoting new products, services, or discounts to drive sales; and building business engagement (Piñeiro-Otero and Martínez-Rolán 2016); however, any one email may encompass different goals. Marketing and academic authors have offered insights for measuring and boosting consumer attention, such as personalising advertising email (using customers’ names in email text; Sahni et al. 2018), sending loyal customers regular information or discounts (Merisavo and Raulas 2004), strategically placing links in text to impact ‘click-through rate’² (Kumar and Salo 2018), and identifying optimal times to send email (Anenson et al. 2014).

For both marketing and non-commercial purposes, email lists may be managed through automated software (e.g., Mailchimp, Constant Contact, AWeber) to organise email delivery, monitor metrics (e.g., click-through rate), provide data on recipients at registration (allowing audience segmentation, e.g., people who haven’t purchased versus frequent consumers), and allow subscribers to manage their subscription without list owner/moderator engagement. To build a list, businesses and content creators collate recipient email addresses through online prompts or recipients signing up for ‘free’ access to discount codes, digital products or services. Email addresses can also be collected through purchase information or e-shopping, where potential customers may be emailed to reclaim their carts and offered discounts.

Temporality and wellness

My interest in wellness emails extends from Milne's analysis of email's storytelling capacity. I consider how these emails organise *time*: how email circulates and how the stories these emails share produce temporal relationships between bodies and wellness practices and knowledge. I offer that living with time is a type of affective practice (Wetherell 2012) that draws together the affective and the discursive to inform each other.

Time is sensorily felt and experienced by people and groups through practices, but also is a structuring discourse that normalises timing for different activities (e.g., the time needed exercise 'enough', how time may be 'wasted' online). Understanding time in this way orients temporality as a socially-contingent practice "that constrains us, creates possibilities, and structures our everyday lives" (Sidenius et al. 2020: 872). Time structures people's lives in different ways, where time pressures (e.g., managing work demands, outsourcing time-consuming tasks like cleaning) are dependent on uneven economic and social resources, and time-scarcity compounds existing health inequalities (Strazdins et al. 2011). We can also understand time as a social determinant of health and a resource that underpins individuals' and communities' capacity for good health (Strazdins et al. 2016). For example, chronic illness restructures how people negotiate the temporal demands of illness (through four temporal structures: "calendar and clocked time, biographical time, past–present–future time, and inner time and rhythms"; Jowsey 2016). Likewise, young people living in Danish psychiatric housing distinguished between their experiences of safer, "standstill" institutional time and what they perceived as everyday or ordinary time for youth, often viewed through peers' social media content that aligned to typical youth milestones they missed out on (Kessing and Ravn 2017: 969).

We can understand wellness culture as a form of, or adjacent to, therapeutic cultures and discourses. Studying personal development workers (e.g., coaches and group facilitators), Swan (2010: 142) frames therapeutic cultures as temporally-distinct as they:

...draw upon the metaphors of cure, healing, and growth. Each of these brings with it different temporalities and teleologies: cure and healing suggest a return to a former improved state; growth, the unfurling of the self from its nuclear state to a wiser, more able self, or the metamorphosis of the self into something very different, but much better.

Wellness culture adopts similar temporalities of healing and self-development. It is constructed, in part, in opposition or rejection of the biomedical (Baker 2022) and, in particular, biomedical 'time'. For example, wellness and spiritual Facebook groups dismiss how psychologists and doctors spend little time getting to "the root causes of problems", unlike alternative health or healing practitioners

(Renser 2021: 133) and fitness influencers suggest that time in school could be better spent learning about self-care, not mathematics (Hendry et al. 2021). Yet criticising how healthcare or biomedical systems structure time also occurs within those frameworks where temporal patterns may not always align with clinical or diagnostic frameworks (e.g., concerning psychiatry, Hautamäki 2018). Further, healthcare and the biomedical industry have long been a focus of critical research related to speed and temporality (e.g., Glaser & Strauss, 1974 [1968]); medical health care is framed as both ambivalently fast where patient care is likened to a mechanistic conveyor belt (Mottram 2011) *and* excessively slow where waiting times for care depict powerlessness (Ferrie and Wiseman 2019).

Making meaning of wellness culture temporalities and their bodily affects also requires us to consider how digital media modulate the tempo of people's lives. Digital media transform time and afford different temporalities (Kaun and Stiernstedt 2014). Platforms remediate earlier tensions between everyday temporalities, presence and absence at school, home, and public spaces (Lasén 2015). Smith and Copland (2021: 24), for example, engage with Lefebvre's (2004) rhythmanalysis to examine how "the logic of speed" underpins digital life, where speed not only refers to user experiences but also how content, like memes, spreads and amplifies across social media.

Collecting wellness emails

Other scholars have critiqued wellness culture's resource-intensive, often costly, and time-consuming demands. Here, I centre time as, I argue, email's temporalities are different to social media and likely influence wellness' 'temporalities'. To do this, I draw from a more extensive digital ethnography or "connective, itinerant, or networked ethnography" (Hine 2015: 70) project exploring the public health pedagogy of health and wellness influencers, educators and entrepreneurs (Hendry et al. 2021). Digital ethnography, as an "iterative-inductive" approach to research (O'Reilly 2005: 3), understands that media "are part of the everyday and more spectacular worlds people inhabit" (Pink et al. 2016: 7). I engaged with wellness content on social media (including Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, as the most common platforms for Australian wellness content) and actively followed networks between individuals and businesses via platform recommendations, algorithmic-driven suggested content, and search engine results (later including TikTok, following entrepreneurs as they moved to the platform through late 2020).

Potentially relevant wellness entrepreneurs were excluded if they did not have at least 1500 followers on any social media platform (as a proxy indicator for publicly visible engagement) or did not actively encourage public interaction with their social media or website content for financial profit (e.g., through advertising). However, some wellness entrepreneurs also ran small businesses beyond social media or were natural therapy, health, or beauty practitioners in Australia (e.g. Traditional Chinese

Medicine practitioners who were also influencers). Given that these individuals vary in their international reputation and popularity, thus blurring how we might understand public communication, in my discussion I do not name people and have “fabricated” and edited data (Markham 2012). Further, my interest is not how specific wellness entrepreneurs operate but how wellness and temporality are produced through email practices. What was especially striking was how similar email communication strategies were across the data, regardless of how popular an entrepreneur or influencer was.

I subscribed to email lists and e-newsletters and engaged with marketing ‘funnels’ (digital content to direct users toward buying) on wellness entrepreneurs’ webpages and social media accounts.³ This involved registering for digital memberships to access free content – typically ‘downloads’, check-lists, quiz results, e-books and discount codes – mainly through pop-ups on website landing pages, links in social media account bios or prompts (e.g., to “learn more”) at the bottom of paid advertising on platforms (e.g., sponsored Instagram Stories). I was also automatically subscribed to other wellness and health-related marketing emails, sent from accounts named, for example, “bad knees”, “mask mandate”, and “thyroid weight gain”.⁴ Thus, my researcher participation was mediated through interaction with websites, social media platforms and email, where my ongoing research field (Burrell 2009) comprised an archive of emails as well as moving back and forth between profiles and webpages. This overabundant data (Góralaska 2020) was supplemented with fieldnotes and reflections. Social media posts and advertising (e.g., Instagram Sponsored Stories, Facebook ads), website pages and pop-ups, and emails were saved within platforms to research-related accounts, downloaded or collected through screenshots. I used a previously established “junk” email address via Google’s Gmail to separate advertising and marketing content from my other email accounts. I did not use a virtual private network (VPN), so I engaged with predominantly Australian wellness content via search engines and social media and English-language content from the United States, United Kingdom, and New Zealand. This was influenced by my IP location, other content I had engaged with on platforms, responses to search engine queries, and platforms’ algorithmic processes.

Following ethics approval and active data collection from July 2020 (data collection is ongoing), my research email address has received over four thousand wellness-related emails and e-newsletters from over fifty wellness entrepreneurs or businesses. I understand these emails as both a research object and focus and an organising entry point (Burrell 2009) for studying wellness culture. Although emails may be studied through content analysis as digital visual texts, my digital ethnographic analysis was iterative and involved re-reading emails, screenshots and fieldnotes multiple times. Using writing as a form of “ethnographic sense-making” (Cole and Thomson 2016), I wrote and noticed recurrent themes and patterns in my data—including how time emerged in wellness emails—and moved between these fieldnotes, reflections and later, theories of temporality.

Email routines and storytelling wellness over time

My analysis illustrated how wellness emails produced different temporalities of wellness. Akin to other studies of wellness and adjacent cultures, topics discussed in emails or in content linked in emails related to many different elements of wellness culture: food, nutrition and bodies (e.g., anti-inflammatory foods, gut health, balancing hormones, losing “belly fat”); self-help (e.g., facing failure, your true or authentic self, life coaching services, social rebellion, setting life intentions); healthcare (e.g., using plants to support immunity, boosting immunity or metabolism, natural ways to optimise mental health, alternative health practitioners, eliminating the effects of electromagnetic fields caused by 5G networks); relationships (e.g., attracting “real love”, relationship truths, parenting challenges); sexuality (e.g., “unlocking orgasms and pleasure”, sensual sex); spirituality (e.g., finding “inner peace”, meditation, manifestation); productivity and work (e.g., optimising your day, coaching for wellness businesses); and finance (e.g., financial freedom, building passive income, cryptocurrencies), as well as customer testimonials for their services, content or products. Emails were sent from wellness entrepreneurs with varying qualifications and practices (e.g., certificate in integrative nutrition coaching, counselling) and, although most entrepreneurs were women, at least twelve different male entrepreneurs (including “holistic” personal trainers, spiritual coaches and meditation influencers) sent marketing material to my inbox. Emails directed recipients towards *action*: reading resources or blog posts, considering lists of tips or books to purchase, enrolling in e-courses or workshops, listening to podcasts, or buying wellness services or products.

After subscribing to an email list or e-newsletter, subscribers, like me in my fieldwork, were embraced with affectionate and relatable welcoming emails that thanked them for subscribing—“I’m so glad you’re here!”. For one male integrative medicine practitioner, new subscribers could access a “free gift” (e-books with “hormone-friendly” recipes) and were congratulated—in the email subject line and text—for starting on their wellness journey by the “whole tribe” working for the entrepreneur.

Expertise in wellness culture is established by sharing one’s personal journey, relying on anecdotal evidence, intuition, and optimising one’s inner thoughts and feelings (Baker 2022; Hendry et al. 2021; Renser 2021). Similarly, wellness entrepreneurs often shared reflections about their own “journeys” to health, abundance or sovereignty and scattered links or summaries of their “offerings” (e.g., recent blog posts, e-courses) through these first email stories. These entrepreneurs typically described their own health or lifestyle and the challenges they had overcome to regain their wellness. Stories of wellness were serialised across multiple emails, sent over numerous days or weeks, to slowly build a longer narrative of struggle (e.g., focusing on the ‘wrong’ things like corporate work, partying or

science-based practices), discovery (e.g., experimenting with alternative health practices), revelation (e.g., “optimising” life, welcoming “divine masculinity”), and finally abundance, which usually was accompanied with the goal to share their plentiful wellness secrets with others. How this journey was mediated through email stories was not distinct from other media content (e.g., Baker 2022); however, social media content often disorganised these longer, chronological journeys as entrepreneurs shared elements of stories across multiple channels or modes (e.g., a reflection in Instagram Stories about why they help others, photos on Facebook showing their skin before and after embracing a dietary change). Instead, wellness emails arranged these stories as a linear journey—often without describing any significant struggle after discovering wellness—and the long-form capacity of email enabled them to provide more contextual information than was appropriate for social media captions and posts. In these series of welcome emails, the final email typically directed subscribers to a central product or service they offered. In later emails, wellness entrepreneurs often returned to these stories as they introduced podcast guests or new products or services. A graduate of an alternative health course, for example, re-shared her story of “dismissing self-love” and being at “rock bottom”, then encountering a book that changed her life that urged her towards her path of self-discovery, before eventually enrolling in the course she was now promoting (with affiliate benefits).

Wellness emails were encouraging, stressed how simple the wellness journey could be, and reminded subscribers that they would be “with you on your journey”, which often required significant work or attention to maintain. Akin to O’Neill’s (2021) insights that wellness and nutrition are promoted as both enjoyable and easy yet also requires careful management, these early emails slowly coached subscribers in wellness vernacular (e.g., “do you know if your hormones are balanced? Let me share what I’ve learnt!”) and offered personal stories, explanations and rationales for wellness practices that stressed committing long-term to wellness. Illustrating this, a wellness practitioner who previously worked within the healthcare system initially described her work as “the science of wellbeing” before eventually shifting her email topics to explain manifesting and abundance. This was distinct from her content on Instagram and Telegram, which directly criticised biomedical frameworks. Instead, these emails eased subscribers towards thinking about their bodies differently through the prism of wellness.

Email narratives also employed questioning, curiosity and reflection—practices entrepreneurs encouraged subscribers to engage in over time—to guide subscribers to wellness ideas, values, or behaviours. In one email example, a sexuality and wellness educator wrote about her frustration with advertising. She reflected on how difficult it was to identify her desires and invited “you” and “us” to check in with “our” desire. The email was framed as inspiration and offered questions to help subscribers guide their self-reflection before linking to a “sneak peek” of their soon-to-be-released product. In another, a manifesting coach and speaker asked subscribers if they knew their “archetype”

(classifications of typical patterns of human behaviour), first sharing a story about parenting and how listening to an audiobook about the topic “startled me” into rethinking their ideas about relationships and self-knowledge. Other emails queried if recipients “really do have it all figured out”, “if you really know yourself” and “could you fall in love with your body/self again?”. Wellness was produced as a never-ending series of reflections and self-interrogation. Entrepreneurs gently encouraged reflection practices over long periods that also required entrepreneurs’ expert support or surveillance (often through their posts, podcasts, services, and products). Similarly, other studies demonstrate that wellness beliefs may value changing how one thinks to address problems (Renser 2021), an approach that aligns with psychology off-shoots like wellbeing science or positive psychology that champion changing one’s mindset or engaging in mindfulness to relieve cognitive distress (Gill and Orgad forthcoming).

“Catching up” with social media time

The temporal experience of wellness emails differed from more immediate social media platforms. These emails were not distinct from social media or other webpages but supplemented and extended what circulated through social media. Unlike other studies of wellness culture where gaining visibility was central to influencers or entrepreneurs’ success (e.g., Baker and Rojek 2020b), wellness email practices aimed to build attention in the background, ensure subscribers didn’t miss out on entrepreneurs’ work and reinforce wellness norms, desires, and practices. Email was a technological “backup” to buttress other, often fleeting, social media engagement and “keep in touch” because, as entrepreneurs explained, recipients were likely “too busy to check socials”, algorithmic processes would obscure their content (especially if it breached social media misinformation policies), or the format of social media posts, videos and other content were inappropriate to sharing multiple things (e.g., social media had limits to how they could share links or diverse content at once).

Emails curated social media content, where the newsletter format of some emails followed traditional newsletter structure: an introductory letter to the “issue”, updates on life events, lists of new things “to check out”, a “round up” of what they shared on social media, and details and invitations for new services. These emails were sent regularly, often following the initial welcome story emails, and were distinct from other emails to actively promote specific new offerings (see next section). For one manifestation and exercise entrepreneur, her newsletter design mirrored her social media aesthetics. It used bright emojis to dot point each item in her list of where she was “directing her energy” online (aka links to media content). Another alternative health practitioner’s newsletter was bannered “WHAT HAVE YOU MISSED?” and shared summaries of his podcast, e-course, blog, and membership group content. Other entrepreneurs preferred not to send newsletters regularly and instead chose to be spiritually guided by the timing of their emails and “gifts”. For example, an

Australian entrepreneur living in Indonesia explained in a series of Instagram Stories that she only sent emails when she had a “gift” to share (here, a meditation tool):

Filling the whole screen, she sits in a white silk robe, long hair styled to one side, smiling into the camera. After describing her “enchanted day” exploring her new cream-and-wood minimalist home, she promises, “I can’t wait to share more in the future”. Her words recall honey-voiced meditations on YouTube or Insight Timer: “I also want to let you in on a secret [she pauses], today I recorded something for my subscribers, a really em-pow-er-ing, really fun tool to help you [pause] create [pause] the day [pause] you want. When I’ve used it, or my clients too, it is just [she sighs] magical. So, if you want to know more, please go click the link in my bio. My newsletter only comes when I have something to offer you, when I’m guided to send a treat. So, look out for that!” (from my fieldnotes)

Each email offered a clear “call to action” to purchase a product or engage with content, including links to social media content, e-stores, blogs, websites, and podcasts. By directing attention towards wellness pursuits and “positivity imperatives” (Gill and Orgad forthcoming), wellness emails reproduced the symbolic and affective value of wellness culture as easily accessible, responding to their bodily and emotional problems, and always welcoming (O’Neill 2021). Emails also collated and circulated connections to other wellness entrepreneurs’ work, most frequently podcast episodes that featured other influencers or where they were guests. This mutually reinforced the legitimacy and intimacy of their wellness contributions where discussion and conversation suggested, rather than demanded, ever-evolving ways to think about health and body (unlike more commanding medical practitioners; see also Baker and Rojek 2020b concerning how wellness micro-celebrities quickly establish intimacy and influence compared to medical experts).

E-list subscribers, typically, do not talk back to senders, nor can they respond to all other members (Milne 2010). To build parasocial relationships (Horton and Wohl 1956) and “community”, wellness entrepreneurs curated interaction. They encouraged their subscribers to “continue the conversation” on other more interactive platforms or in blog comments, share the emails with someone else, reply to the email with their experiences of a practice, or “join them” on Instagram, Facebook, or closed membership groups that sometimes required on-going payment to participate (Baker and Rojek 2020a). This created a continuous loop between email and social media, extending the time recipients spent engaged with wellness content and reinforcing wellness as endlessly available and accessible to them. Email practices enabled community-creation that illuminated (e.g., offering health solutions to buy) *and* obscured (e.g., focusing on personal stories) the wellness industry as a commercial market.

Time-critical anticipation

Akin to other industry or businesses' common marketing strategies, wellness emails invited subscribers to take up time-sensitive opportunities such as “last chance” sales or services with limited timing or capacity. This contrasted with the more playful and regular reminders of wellbeing practices on entrepreneurs' social media postings (e.g., O'Neill 2021). This email intensity aimed to increase engagement and, hopefully, convert subscribers from interested followers to committed attendees or recent shoppers.

Wellness entrepreneurs reinforced these urgent temporal narratives across other social media by cross-promoting new or time-critical opportunities in ephemeral Instagram or Facebook Stories, posts to explain new products, reminders on WhatsApp and other chat platforms, and “sneak previews” in YouTube videos and podcasts. These posts often showed the process of working on the new product or service or hinted that they were working on something new “behind the scenes” and stressed that they were motivated to serve their communities or help others transform their lives. Urgency and scarcity motivated anticipation for wellness offerings but also reinforced that there was always something new — a product, service, or opportunity — in the ever-expanding wellness market for consumers to remake their bodies or lives. Unlike other biomedical or health discourses (e.g., being on a waiting list to see a medical specialist; Ferrie and Wiseman 2019), there were no limits to the opportunities provided by wellness entrepreneurs as they offered multiple services at different price points (e.g., free content on social media through to private workshops for tens of thousands of dollars; Baker 2022).

Entrepreneurs typically organised their new or time-sensitive opportunities through email. Links to sign up for access were added to social media profiles (“Jump on my list to be the first to know!”) for individuals to “make the cut” and be in the group or be added to a waiting list. Unlike live social media video, where anyone could generally join in or watch, emailing opportunities to separate webinars or private Facebook group links created a unique sense of exclusivity for their communities, especially for individuals who signed up early, accessing bonuses “the first to know”.

Crafting an attention-grabbing email subject line was central to these time-critical email practices. Even for regular e-newsletters, wellness entrepreneurs suggested that it was imperative to engage with their emails immediately:

“Two hours left to join our meditation challenge!”, “Annya, only 24 hours left and...”, “Last chance to level up your life”, “Your \$500 in bonuses ends soon” (e.g., bonuses for signing up to a year-long education membership), “Only six hours left to be the next wellness success”, “Don’t miss this opportunity!”, “Sorry you missed out”, “Time-sensitive - the food workshop closes now!”, “The opportunity you’ve been waiting for”, “Be first in line”. (email subject lines in my fieldnotes)

Entrepreneurs conveyed anticipation and excitement—even for products as mundane as e-books listing dietary sources of micronutrients—through their emails, where engaging with their offerings was “life-changing”. Invitations to join an event in emails and newsletters employed welcoming, collective language, such as “us”, “we”, and “together”, or included recipients’ names or other information gleaned from their list registration (e.g., Baker 2022). Personalising emails (enabled by email marketing software to automatically insert individuals’ names or additional information through mass emails) shifted emails away from reading like marketing copy and established recipients as part of an intimate *community* rather than *consumers*. Email also offered a sense of intimacy (as per Milne’s 2021 argument) as entrepreneurs encouraged subscribers to slow down, “grab a cuppa” (cup of tea) and join in their self-reflection, much like a journaling practice, on intimate or taboo topics like sex, trauma or “the truth about your poo”.

Perpetual (consumer) time and ‘sovereign’ entrepreneurship

Yet, at the same time, wellness entrepreneurs encouraged subscribers to reflect and decide if new opportunities would be personally valuable. For entrepreneurs who closely engaged with new spirituality discourses, this was also referred to as ‘divine timing’ where the ‘right’ time to take up an opportunity was both in the control of a recipient with freedom and agency but also perceived as an external, intuitive divine pull, gravitating someone towards an e-course, joining a healing circle, or purchasing a product (Renser 2021). Wellness entrepreneurs advocated that subscribers would “know in your body if this is right for you” or that they could “manifest” what they truly desired. Abundance was a sensory feeling where subscribers could “feel into” an offer to test its timing; it synced the internal mind to the external world (Gregory 2013). For example, one wellness speaker and author promoted their group online meditation event in an email invitation:

“Lovely,

Healing is not beyond us. We can use our reflection and meditations to open our hearts to life’s blessings.

We can heal ourselves. We can do this together.”

After providing details about the live event and pay-as-you-feel “donation” (waived for their members), they encouraged potential participants “to feel into this opportunity” and “I’ll see you in divine time”. Manifesting, in this way, requires control over and attention to one’s thoughts *and* relinquishing control and, in line with wellness markets, valuing uncertainty (Shaw and Thomson 2013). Emails like this produced wellness as a temporally urgent practice to start now, but also something that was always perpetually available to consumers; wellness was something one could control or a sovereign choice waiting to be made (O’Neill 2021). The work of wellness emails was both representational (via language, words, pictures, aesthetics, links) and an affective practice where wellness entrepreneurs engaged with social media and email to produce temporalities of bodily abundance and optimising health: wellness was both time-sensitive and time-spacious.

Email allowed wellness entrepreneurs to supplement their other social media connections but also respond to increasing actual and perceived political, social, and technological manipulation or interference from those same platforms. The personal, intimate and ‘sovereign’ vernacular used to describe ways of knowing your own body and health also extended to how wellness entrepreneurs characterised their email practices. Where personal sovereignty or freedom referred to listening to your own body’s changing needs and engaging with healthcare that afforded personal autonomy (unlike medical care or public health regulations; Baker 2022), sovereignty in entrepreneurship grounded how entrepreneurs were critical of authoritarian platforms or government oversight. Commercially, part of the value of email marketing rests in its relative technological freedom. Unlike social media platforms or commercial messaging apps, email is less subject to practices of corporate oversight from technology companies like Meta or Twitter. Entrepreneurs shared that they were concerned about being hacked or immediately removed from social media platforms for breaching moderation policies without notice or recourse. One wellness marketing website proclaimed that email was “the only way to own your community”. This value was also reiterated by a health influencer talking about advice received from Tony Robbins, a popular life coach, who advocates not focusing on any one social media platform as it risks losing one’s entire audience. In my fieldwork, only one wellness entrepreneur described being banned from their email marketing platform due to sending emails about Covid-19 and natural supplements that contravened its service terms. However, even though they described “losing” their email list, they could still access the service and download email addresses and other draft email content— dissimilar to social media censorship, where being banned from a service may immediately evict a user from full access.

Conclusion: Temporal flexibility and abundance

Although these examples of how wellness emails shape wellness culture and its temporalities are not exhaustive – there are likely other functions for email within wellness culture – these roles pay close attention to how an often forgotten medium like email contributes to how we understand the complex relationship between communication media, markets, and health. Email is both personal and institutional (Milne 2021). In turn, wellness entrepreneurs’ email practices balance and capitalise on this— building both an appropriately personal *and* appropriately commercial relationship with their list audiences that extend and supplement their social media channels. Here, email marketing plays a pedagogical role in wellness culture; it normalises how wellness requires particular temporal engagement with practices and educates audiences towards personalised, commodified, and networked wellness ideas and techniques that reinforce the (vernacular) expertise of wellness entrepreneurs, their services, and products.

These emails produce wellness as a relationship to time that requires ongoing bodily and lifestyle work to be well through regular engagement with wellness culture, echoing other studies of wellness culture. The discursive flexibility of wellness, how it draws different health, spiritual and therapeutic knowledges and practices together, also extends to its temporal flexibility. Wellness offers an always-welcoming relationship to an ‘optimised’ body right now or in the future, when you are ready, according to how you feel. This both incites and pacifies the urge to optimise in the present: “don’t miss this opportunity!” *and* “trust divine timing!”. Wellness emails reproduce the value of abundance as a symbolic and material relationship between consumer markets and health and spirituality. As forms of mundane technology, the background affective tempos of wellness emails are effective precisely because of both their affective banality and promise of abundance. Wellness emails promise that there is always the potential to live differently, even when medicine or mainstream healthcare may fail someone or not pay ‘enough’ attention to their problems (O’Neill 2021). By always recirculating new ideas or behaviours, wellness culture promises health distinct from structured biomedical time (organised at the right time for clinicians, not patients). It broadens the scope of the wellness market as ‘always open’.

Other media scholarship pays close attention to viral or memetic, popular, or spectacular content. Instead, I have discussed how often ignored media like email communication practices produce temporal relationships to bodies and health and marketise wellness culture. The lack of visible sociality—at least on the surface—of email communication and marketing funnels towards email enrolment facilitates the very unsurveilled practices that not only allow wellness to flourish as a culture alongside and beyond social media but also evade ridicule or platform censorship, and

critically for public health concerns, scrutiny, and criticism. Email co-facilitates the growing wellness industry but also potentially circulates dangerous public health messages (e.g., Baker 2022). Without attention to the dynamics of email communication, we miss understanding how this material guides, monetises and commercialises alternative health knowledge and how we might intercept misinformation or misleading claims or replicate these practices to support other, more equitable health projects.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Robbie Fordyce and the Monash University Creative Directions 2020 team for allowing me to present a very rough draft of this paper. Thank you to the special issue editors, Clare Southerton and Naomi Smith, who have encouraged me to continue with this article and, more importantly, continue thinking about wellness culture, after a very time-consuming period for us all. I also thank the reviewers for their generous feedback and productive suggestions to improve the argument and form of the article, as well as my colleagues Catherine Hartung and Rosie Welch, for their ongoing collegiality and curiosity toward wellness culture research.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethics statement

Ethics approval was granted by RMIT University (2020-23380-10720).

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Endnotes

¹ For example, Belle Gibson (Baker and Rojek 2020b) falsely claimed to overcome terminal cancer through wellness practices and developed a social media empire around encouraging others to follow her approach. In part, Gibson's authority was legitimised by wellness circles in Australia and globally (including qualified alternative health practitioners critical of mainstream medicine) who endorsed her

‘expertise’ and brand. Without this I argue, following Donnelly and Toscano’s (2017) insights, Gibson’s media reach might not have been so strong.

² “Click-through rate” or CTR refers to how frequently recipients click hyperlinks after or while engaging with digital media like emails or websites.

³ For some entrepreneurs, marketing strategies, like ‘sales funnels’ or focusing on financial metrics to measure success, do not align with their spiritual values of personal growth rather than material wealth. Some wellness entrepreneur coaches have reworked marketing vernacular to better suit wellness values, e.g., ‘spiritual’ or ‘sacred’ funnels, ‘selling with soul’, or selling as ‘service’ or a calling in life. This aligns with O’Neill’s (2021) research, where wellness entrepreneur Deliciously Ella actively downplayed that she was aiming for commercial success and that it simply followed her sharing her ‘personal journey’.

⁴ Although most email lists claimed that my address would not be shared with other individuals or organisations, this content continued to appear. I could not identify which intended subscription had passed on my address.

References

- Abidin, C. (2018). *Internet celebrity: Understanding fame online*. Emerald.
- Andrejevic, M., Fordyce, R., Li, N., Trott, V. (2020). *Unregulated and segmented dark ads on social media: Consumer education and regulatory options*. Australian Communications Consumer Action Network.
- Anenson, L.W., Brunt, A., Terbizan, D.J., Christensen, B. (2014). Participation rates in a worksite wellness program using e-mail wellness messages. *Journal of Education and Training Studies* 2(1), 44–52.
- Baker, S.A. (2022). Alt. Health Influencers: How wellness culture and web culture have been weaponised to promote conspiracy theories and far-right extremism during the COVID-19 pandemic. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 1-22.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494211062623>
- Baker, S.A., Rojek, C. (2020a). *Lifestyle gurus: Constructing authority and influence online*. Polity.
- Baker, S.A., Rojek, C. (2020b). The Belle Gibson scandal: The rise of lifestyle gurus as micro-celebrities in low-trust societies. *Journal of Sociology* 56(3), 388–404.
- Broom, A., Meurk, C., Adams, J., Sibbritt, D. (2014). My health, my responsibility? Complementary medicine and self (health) care. *Journal of Sociology* 50(4), 515–530.
- Burrell, J. (2009). The field site as a network: A strategy for locating ethnographic research. *Field Methods* 21(2), 181–199.
- Carr, M., Kelan, E.K. (2021). Between consumption, accumulation and precarity: The psychic and affective practices of the female neoliberal spiritual subject. *Human Relations* 1-28.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00187267211058577>

- Cole, R., Thomson, P. (2016). Beyond records and representations: Inbetween writing in educational ethnography. *Ethnography and Education* 11(3), 253-266.
- Donnelly, B., Toscano, N. (2017). *The woman who fooled the world*. Scribe.
- Duffy, B.E. (2017). *(Not) getting paid to do what you love: Gender, social media, and aspirational work*. Yale University Press.
- Ehrenreich, B. (2009). *Bright-sided: How the relentless promotion of positive thinking has undermined America*. Metropolitan Books.
- Ferrie, J., Wiseman, P. (2019). 'Running out of time': Exploring the concept of waiting for people with Motor Neurone Disease. *Time and Society* 28(2), 521–542.
- Gill, R., Orgad, S.S. (forthcoming). Get Unstuck: Pandemic positivity imperatives and self-care for women. *Cultural Politics*. <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/26558/>
- Glaser, B., Strauss, A.L. (1974 [1968]). *Time for dying*. Aldine Publishing Company.
- Górska, M. (2020). Anthropology from home. *Anthropology in Action* 27(1), 46–52.
- Gregory, K. (2013). Negotiating precarity: Tarot as spiritual entrepreneurialism. *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 40(3), 264–280.
- Hautamäki, L. (2018). Uncertainty work and temporality in psychiatry: How clinicians and patients experience and manage risk in practice? *Health, Risk & Society* 20(1–2), 43–62.
- Hendry, N.A., Hartung, C., Welch, R. (2021). Health education, social media, and tensions of authenticity in the 'influencer pedagogy' of health influencer Ashy Bines. *Learning, Media and Technology* 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2021.2006691>
- Hine, C. (2015). *Ethnography for the internet: Embedded, embodied and everyday*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Horton, D., Wohl, R. (1956). Mass communication and para-social interaction. *Psychiatry* 19(3), 215–229.
- Hutchinson, J. (2017). *Cultural intermediaries: Audience participation in media organisations*. Palgrave MacMillan.
- Jowsey, T. (2016). Time and chronic illness: A narrative review. *Quality of Life Research* 25(5), 1093–1102.
- Kaun, A., Stiernstedt, F. (2014). Facebook time: Technological and institutional affordances for media memories. *New Media & Society* 16(7), 1154–1168.
- Kessing, M.L., Ravn, S. (2017). 'It feels as if time has come to a standstill': Institutionalised everyday lives among youth with a mental illness. *Journal of Youth Studies* 20(8), 959–973.
- Kumar, A., Salo, J. (2018). Effects of link placements in email newsletters on their click-through rate. *Journal of Marketing Communications* 24(5), 535–548.
- Lasén, A. (2015). Rhythms and flow: Timing and spacing the digitally mediated everyday. In Wyn, J., Cahill, H. (Eds.), *Handbook of children and youth studies* (pp. 749–760). Springer.
- Lefebvre, H. (2004). *Rhythmanalysis: Space, time, and everyday life*. Continuum.

- Magrath, A., Sanz, M. J. (2020). Environmental and social consequences of the increase in the demand for 'superfoods' world-wide. *People and Nature* 2(2), 267–278.
- Markham, A. (2012). Fabrication as ethical practice: Qualitative inquiry in ambiguous Internet contexts. *Information, Communication & Society* 15(3), 334–353.
- Merisavo, M., Raulas, M. (2004). The impact of e-mail marketing on brand loyalty. *Journal of Product & Brand Management* 13(7), 498–505.
- Milne, E. (2010). *Letters, postcards, email: Technologies of presence*. Routledge.
- Milne, E. (2021). *Email and the everyday: Stories of disclosure, trust, and digital labor*. MIT Press.
- Mottram, A. (2011). "Like a trip to McDonalds": A grounded theory study of patient experiences of day surgery. *International Journal of Nursing Studies* 48(2), 165–174.
- O'Neill, R. (2021). 'Glow from the inside out': Deliciously Ella and the politics of 'healthy eating.' *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 24(6), 1282–1303.
- O'Reilly, K. (2005). *Ethnography*. Routledge.
- Piñeiro-Otero, T., Martínez-Rolán, X. (2016). Understanding digital marketing—Basics and actions. In Machado, C., Davin, J.P. (Eds.), *MBA: Theory and application of business and management principles* (pp. 37–74). Springer.
- Pink, S., Horst, H., Postill, J., Hjorth, L., Lewis, T., Tacchi, J. (2016). *Digital ethnography: Principles and practice*. Sage.
- Renser, B. (2021). "Am I really cursed?" Self-disclosure in a spiritual Facebook group: Conceptualizing networked therapeutic culture. *Mediální Studia* 15(2), 126–146.
- Rimke, H. (2020). Self-help, therapeutic industries, and neoliberalism. In Nehring, D., Madsen, O.J., Cabanas, E., Mills, C., Kerrigan, D. (Eds.), *The Routledge international handbook of global therapeutic cultures* (pp. 37–50). Routledge.
- Sahni, N.S., Wheeler, S.C., Chintagunta, P. (2018). Personalization in email marketing: The role of noninformative advertising content. *Marketing Science* 37(2), 236–258.
- Salmenniemi, S., Nurmi, J., Perheentupa, I., Bergroth, H. (2019). *Assembling therapeutics: Cultures, politics and materiality*. Routledge.
- Shaw, D., Thomson, J. (2013). Consuming spirituality: The pleasure of uncertainty. *European Journal of Marketing* 47(3/4), 557–573.
- Sidenius, A., Hansen, H.P., Mogensen, O., Rudnicki, M., Tjørnhøj-Thomsen, T. (2020). Temporality and timework: Danish endometrial cancer patients' experiences of an accelerated cancer patient pathway. *Time & Society* 29(3), 866–891.
- Smith, N., Copland, S. (2021). Memetic moments: The speed of Twitter memes. *Journal of Digital Social Research* 4(1), 23–48.
- Strazdins, L., Griffin, A. L., Broom, D.H., Banwell, C., Korda, R., Dixon, J., Paolucci, F., Glover, J. (2011). Time scarcity: Another health inequality? *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 43(3), 545–559.

- Strazdins, L., Welsh, J., Korda, R., Broom, D., Paolucci, F. (2016). Not all hours are equal: Could time be a social determinant of health? *Sociology of Health & Illness* 38(1), 21–42.
- Swan, E. (2010). *Worked up selves: Personal development workers, self-work and therapeutic cultures*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Tiusanen, K. (2021). Fulfilling the self through food in wellness blogs: Governing the healthy subject. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 24(6), 1382–1400.
- Wetherell, M. (2012). *Affect and emotion: A new social science understanding*. Sage.