Wellness, Discipline, and the Making of the Neoliberal Self

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Abstract: This paper examines how the neoliberal body is shaped by ideas of self-discipline and wellness. It shows how neoliberal ideology enters bodily practices, wellness talk, and digital tools. Using critical theories of biopower, surveillance, and capitalist subjectivity, the study shows how the body is treated as something that must always improve, guided by market rules and health duties. Wellness was once seen as shared and whole. Now it is turned into a product and treated as a personal matter. This change hides social inequality behind ideas of personal duty. The essay looks at how discipline is taken in through digital self-tracking tools and wellness buying. It also looks at the effects on personal choice, identity, and ways of care. The paper also examines new forms of resistance, such as body neutrality, disability justice, and shared healing. These practices question neoliberal rules and suggest other ways of living with the body.

Keywords: neoliberalism; self-discipline; wellness culture; surveillance; quantified self; resistance

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1. Introduction

In the era of late capitalism, the neoliberal model shapes almost all parts of social life. It affects work and rest, education and entertainment, and even daily bodily feelings. Neoliberalism works as both an economic system and a cultural idea. It supports individual choice, competition, and market rules (Vera, 2020). Under this system, people are no longer only workers or consumers. They are also managers of themselves. They are expected to keep improving their work ability, efficiency, and health over time (Rose & Novas, 2005; Lupton, 2016). This expectation turns daily life into a constant task of self-management and self-improvement.

A clear result of this system is the rise of the so-called "neoliberal body." This body is not only biological. It is also shaped by language, images, and social meanings. It is formed through practices of being seen, being watched, and self-control (Foucault, 1977; Kent, 2023). In this sense, the body is seen as free and self-directed. At the same time, it is tightly controlled by market values. People are asked to show health as a moral quality. They are also pushed to increase their physical ability as a kind of social and economic resource (McGillivray, 2005). These two demands exist together and place constant pressure on the individual body.

Wellness once focused on shared balance, care, and group health. Under neoliberal influence, its

meaning has changed in a deep way (Rahbari, 2023). Wellness is no longer treated as a public good or a social goal supported by policies and care systems. Instead, it is framed as a personal task. People are told to work on their bodies without end. They aim for physical fitness, mental calm, and emotional control as private goals (Welsh, 2020). Practices like yoga, clean eating, mindfulness, and detox plans once had healing or spiritual meanings. Now they are sold as lifestyle products. Their cultural roots and social meanings are often removed. Wellness becomes a sign of status. It shows control, discipline, and self-rule. This image of wellness is mostly open to people with enough money, time, and social resources (Lavrence & Lozanski, 2014).

This change can be clearly seen in the spread of digital wellness platforms and data-based health habits. In China, the fitness app Keep turns exercise into a game. It uses badges, rankings, and daily check-ins. These tools help users stay active. At the same time, they turn the body into a set of numbers and records (Docherty, 2021). Users are slowly guided to match their self-discipline with the app's system. The platform values clear effort, repeated action, and visible results. In a similar way, users on Xiaohongshu, also called Little Red Book, post their wellness routines online. They use tags, photos, and progress notes. Personal care becomes public content that others can see and judge. Wellness is judged less by personal feeling and more by likes, comments, and visual style (Eberhardt, 2024). These online habits strengthen ideas of self-checking, competition, and constant output. They do so while presenting wellness as freedom, choice, and lifestyle identity (Lupton, 2016).

This paper looks at the neoliberal body through the combined ideas of self-discipline and wellness. It focuses on how people are pushed, step by step, to accept market logic as part of daily life. It asks how neoliberal values change the way people think about health, the body, and personal duty. It also asks how wellness works as a tool that separates people in moral and social ways. These questions help explain how ideas of choice and care are reshaped under neoliberal culture. They also help clarify how responsibility is moved from society to the individual body (Badr, 2022; Vera, 2020).

2. The Neoliberal Turn and the Internalization of Discipline

Neoliberalism works as a political and cultural way of thinking. It strongly reshapes how people understand themselves. It no longer sees the individual as part of a shared group or as someone supported by social care. Instead, it defines the person as an independent and self-managing actor who must run life like a personal project (Rose & Novas, 2005; Lupton, 2016). Under this system, market standards move into everyday thinking. People begin to judge themselves using ideas of efficiency, output, and improvement. Success is closely linked to constant self-improvement. Failure is explained as a personal problem tied to weak effort, low endurance, or poor discipline (Vera, 2020). The body, which was once shaped by welfare systems or moral rules, now becomes the main space where these market ideas are carried out and shown in daily life (McGillivray, 2005). This change places the body at the center of personal responsibility and social judgment.

Scholars like Nikolas Rose and Carlos Novas (2005) build on Foucault's ideas and introduce the term "biological citizenship." They explain that in neoliberal settings, people are expected to take charge of their future health and bodies. They are pushed to reduce risks, follow healthy habits, and follow health advice from the state or companies. This pressure does not appear as force. It appears as freedom and personal choice. In this process, the individual becomes both the planner and the task itself. The body turns into a project that must be worked on over time. Value is created through health tracking, bodily control, and visible improvement. As a result, the neoliberal body is shaped by self-discipline. It is also shaped by self-selling. The body is treated like a set of assets that can be improved, shown to others, and at times turned into economic gain.

This form of discipline does not usually appear as direct control. It is built into daily habits and

routines. Food choices become moral signals. Eating turns into careful counting and rule-following through diets like keto, paleo, or intermittent fasting. Exercise also changes in meaning. It is less about enjoyment or play. It becomes a planned task with clear goals. Apps and digital devices record steps, time, and calories, and these numbers guide behavior (Docherty, 2021). Mental health follows a similar path. Practices like mindfulness and focus training are promoted as tools to stay productive and calm. At the same time, social causes of stress and shared forms of healing receive less attention (Rahbari, 2023; Welsh, 2020). The need to always improve the self slowly turns into unpaid labor. This labor has no clear end. It is praised by society and taken for granted in everyday life.

Within this system, the neoliberal subject becomes valuable in economic terms and symbolic terms. Health and fitness act as clear signs of moral quality and social value. A fit and controlled body signals self-control and social conformity (Kent, 2023). In this setting, discipline is not only forced from outside. It is also wanted. Many people link body control with strength and freedom. They often do this without seeing the limits set by ideology. The idea of choice hides the pressure to comply. Wellness feels personal and empowering. At the same time, it closely follows systems of tracking, ranking, and watching the self (Lupton, 2016).

3. Wellness as a Cultural Logic of Capital

In the neoliberal period, wellness is no longer seen as a shared or whole goal. It is now shaped as a personal activity guided by the market. It has changed from a public health goal into a consumer lifestyle that clearly separates people by income and status. This lifestyle follows ideas of profit growth and visual difference (Lavrence & Lozanski, 2014; Vera, 2020). Wellness is no longer linked to fair access to resources, community support, or public systems. It is turned into a private matter. It is sold as a product. It is also removed from political debate. At the same time, it becomes a planned display of personal effort and moral value. This change shifts attention away from shared responsibility and places it on the individual body.

This change shows a close link between wellness talk and neoliberal ideas. The market provides many wellness products and services. These include organic pills, plant-based food plans, costly gym access, biohacking plans, mindfulness trips, and wearable devices. All of them claim to help people improve themselves (Lupton, 2016; Docherty, 2021). Taking part in wellness culture becomes a kind of social resource. It shows body control. It also shows taste, money, and the chance to move up socially. A well-shaped body is not only healthy. It is also neat, managed, and admired. It sends signals about access to money and moral value. It also mixes self-care with self-promotion. The line between caring for the self and selling the self becomes unclear (McGillivray, 2005; Welsh, 2020). Wellness then works as both a health goal and a social marker.

Health is no longer treated as a shared political issue or a right protected by public systems. It becomes a moral duty shaped by market rules (Badr, 2022). Social causes of health problems, such as low income, unsafe housing, polluted environments, and long-term discrimination, receive less attention (Vera, 2020). At the same time, personal choice is stressed again and again. Illness, tiredness, or mental pain are often seen as personal failure. They are linked to weak effort, poor planning, or lack of discipline. This way of thinking removes the role of public systems and shared support in shaping health outcomes (Rahbari, 2023). As a result, care is framed as a private task rather than a social one.

Wellness culture also repeats and strengthens dominant ideas about gender, race, and class. Popular images of wellness often show a thin, fit, productive, and light-skinned female body. These images support narrow standards. People who do not meet these standards are often labeled as lazy or lacking discipline. This happens even when they face strong social or material limits (Welsh, 2020). In this sense, wellness works as a tool of control and judgment. It is not only a lifestyle option. It creates a split between the responsible person who invests in health and the irresponsible person who does not.

This split often follows existing social divisions and power structures (Lavrence & Lozanski, 2014).

Wellness in the neoliberal age focuses less on health in a broad sense. It focuses more on control and improvement. It works as a mild form of biopolitics. Care duties move from society to the individual. At the same time, every step of self-work is turned into a source of profit (Lupton, 2016; Rose & Novas, 2005). Rest and relaxation also change in meaning. Sleep tracking, digital breaks, and mindfulness apps promise better results and higher output. Market logic enters even quiet and private moments. Practices of care are reshaped into signs of performance, difference, and exchange value (McGillivray, 2005; Kent, 2023).

4. Surveillance, Technology, and the Quantified Self

In the neoliberal cultural setting, digital technologies have become very close tools for managing the body. They place systems of watching into daily routines. Devices like fitness trackers, smartwatches, sleep monitors, and health apps are described as tools that give power to users. They are presented as ways to check, study, and improve physical and mental states (Docherty, 2021). At the same time, there is quiet pressure. People are expected to keep tracking their bodies, keep adjusting habits, and keep improving results day after day.

The quantified self movement shows this process clearly. In this movement, people use digital tools to collect large amounts of data about their bodies and actions. Drawing on Foucault's ideas, Lupton (2016) introduces the idea of digitized biopolitics. She explains how the self is shaped and guided through data. She argues that self-tracking devices do more than guide behavior. They also change how people understand themselves. Users learn to see their bodies through numbers, charts, and system feedback. Health is judged through scores and trends. These systems create new standards and expectations. People become part of a constant system of watching and gentle control. Self-tracking becomes a shared form of labor. It supports wider systems of control and management (Lupton, 2016; Docherty, 2021).

These technologies are not value-free. They carry clear ideas about what a good or useful body should be. They repeat and support capitalist values like discipline, competition, and clear results that can be measured (Eberhardt, 2024). Rest and free time also change meaning. Sleep is no longer just rest. It is checked, rated, and compared with others. Walking is no longer simple movement. It becomes a task measured by steps and goals. Technology moves control of the body away from personal feeling and toward system advice and data rules (McGillivray, 2005). This shift reduces trust in bodily sense and increases trust in numbers.

The spread of wearable devices and wellness platforms creates a culture of constant display. Many people choose to share health data on social media or with company wellness plans. They often believe this sharing shows self-control and effort (Lavrence & Lozanski, 2014). This sharing is described as personal choice. In many cases, it grows from social or workplace pressure. Being visible becomes a quiet form of obedience. The watchful system replaces older forms of direct control. The algorithm becomes the new observer (Foucault, 1977; Lupton, 2016). Control works through design and routine rather than force.

This change also brings mental effects. The quantified self often leads to stress, distance from the body, and constant comparison with others. When numbers do not meet set goals, they are seen as personal failure. Normal body change is treated as poor effort or weak discipline. The body becomes a task with no clear end. It is always behind the ideal set by data systems (Docherty, 2021; Welsh, 2020). Improvement is promised, yet satisfaction stays out of reach.

The line between work life and private life becomes less clear. Things that were once private, such as mood, sleep, digestion, and rest, are now recorded and made readable to systems of control. The home becomes a place where data is produced. Rest is defined as preparation for later work. The neoliberal subject shaped by technology becomes a unit that

produces data and watches itself. This subject is a user of wellness platforms. This subject is also a product inside the digital health market (Kent, 2023; Rose & Novas, 2005).

5. Resistance and Reimagining the Body

Even though neoliberal rules of body discipline seem strong, they are not without breaks, pushback, and other ways of thinking. In many cultural, political, and bodily practices, people and groups are actively rethinking how to live in and care for a body outside ideas of constant improvement, high output, and moralized health (Badr, 2022; Welsh, 2020). These forms of resistance do more than say no to dominant rules. They also suggest other ways of living that focus on shared support, connection, and a refusal to treat life only as a tool for use. These efforts open space for bodies to exist without being measured only by value or performance.

At the center of this discussion are the changing meanings of care, discipline, and improvement. In neoliberal language, care is often described as a personal duty. It is reduced to buying wellness products, tracking the self, and following routines meant to boost performance (Lupton, 2016). This view matches Federici's critique of how care work and emotional labor are turned into market tasks and removed from political debate (Federici, 2012). In contrast, shared or radical care focuses on mutual need, public support systems, and responsibility within communities. It pushes back against the lonely logic of self-management. In the same way, discipline and improvement, which are praised in wellness culture, can be read through Foucault's work as forms of control that people take into themselves. These ideas shape how people manage their bodies to match social rules about efficiency and moral worth (Foucault, 1977; Rose & Novas, 2005). Control works quietly through habit and belief.

One clear space of resistance appears in body positivity and later body neutrality movements. These approaches move attention away from the need to love, fix, or perfect the body. They focus on accepting the body as it is, without pressure to change or seek approval from others (Welsh, 2020). This shift challenges fat stigma, beauty rules, and ableist ideas that are common in mainstream wellness culture. In East Asian digital spaces, for example, tags like "refuse body anxiety" spread widely on platforms such as Weibo and Douyin. These campaigns encourage users, especially women, to post unedited images and stories about tiredness and stress caused by beauty pressure. These acts are often framed as honest expression and care for the self (Badr, 2022). Sharing becomes a way to resist silence and shame.

The disability justice movement also offers strong criticism of neoliberal wellness ideas. Researchers and activists show how common health standards push disabled bodies to the margins. These bodies do not fit into systems focused on speed, output, and improvement (Rahbari, 2023). This work presents the body as something shaped by relationships rather than as a closed unit. Health is not seen as a personal win. It is shaped by access to space, tools, support, and care networks (McGillivray, 2005; Vera, 2020). This view shifts attention from personal effort to shared conditions and responsibility.

Feminist and queer critiques of the wellness industry also question its gendered and narrow ideas. They point out how care work, beauty pressure, and watching of bodies are built into wellness messages. Examples include tracking pregnant bodies and selling products that target women's fears and insecurities (Lavrence & Lozanski, 2014; Welsh, 2020). These critiques reject the idea that freedom comes from buying products or controlling the body. They support autonomy, pleasure, and bodily refusal as meaningful political actions. Choice is redefined as lived freedom rather than market choice.

Resistance often appears in simple daily actions. Rest can become a strong act in cultures that praise constant work. Slow living, eating based on body feeling, shared aid, and local healing practices all challenge the focus on speed, control, and profit (Kent, 2023). These actions take time back from market demands. They support the right to exist

without always improving or producing. Care becomes something shared and lived, not earned.

Creative work also offers space to push back against the neoliberal body. Through art, dance, online media, and storytelling, marginalized bodies show presence, voice, and emotional depth (Eberhardt, 2024). These practices resist being reduced to numbers or health scores. They highlight feeling, memory, and lived experience. In doing so, they open space for the body as a site of meaning and possibility, not only illness, failure, or output.

6. Conclusion

The neoliberal body is shaped by constant demands for self-control and wellness. It is both a result and a sign of modern forms of power. This power does not work only through force from outside. It works through daily habits and moral pressure. People take this pressure into themselves. They regulate their own bodies through routines of improvement, performance, and self-checking (Foucault, 1977; Lupton, 2016). What looks like freedom, such as choosing a diet, planning a workout, or joining wellness programs, is often limited by market rules. These rules define what counts as a good body, success, and social worth (Lavrence & Lozanski, 2014; Welsh, 2020). As a result, choice exists, but it exists inside narrow and unequal boundaries. Personal freedom is shaped by systems that reward certain bodies and ways of living.

Within this system, people are reshaped as health entrepreneurs. They are expected to fully manage their physical and emotional states. Responsibility is placed on the individual alone. At the same time, institutions step back from care duties. This creates a harsh moral climate. Illness, tiredness, or emotional struggle are treated as personal failure. They are rarely seen as outcomes of unequal systems or social harm (Rahbari, 2023; Vera, 2020). The body turns into a space of nonstop work. Rest, care, and reflection are pulled into cycles of output and consumption. Even recovery is framed as preparation for more effort (Docherty, 2021; McGillivray, 2005). Surveillance tools strengthen this shift. Measurement and comparison enter private life. Sleep, mood, steps, and movement are tracked and judged through numbers and charts (Eberhardt, 2024). Daily life becomes a process of watching and correcting the self.

The control of the neoliberal body is strong, but it is not total. It also faces challenge and refusal. Movements focused on body neutrality, disability justice, and shared care offer other ways of thinking and living. These movements reject the demand to always improve and optimize. They push back against turning life into data and profit. They argue that wellness should be understood through relationships, social conditions, and inclusion, not only through individual effort (Badr, 2022; Kent, 2023). These ideas move attention away from the polished and market-ready body. They place value on lived experience, exposure to harm, and mutual dependence. In doing so, they open space for bodies to exist without constant judgment or correction.

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