



“Healthy to heaven” – Middle-agers looking ahead in the context of wellness consumption



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ABSTRACT

Concentrating on personal health and well-being has become a central objective for people living in wealthy societies. In an age of consumerism, the current health enthusiasm can be observed particularly in the fast-growing wellness industry, the popularity of which has increased, in particular, among mature consumers, a trend also evident in people's individual strategies for aging well. As it is generally assumed that aging people consume wellness mainly to delay signs of aging, this study focuses on this understudied phenomenon with the aim of deepening the profile of mature wellness consumers. The data consist of eight group interviews of Finnish middle-agers (50–65 years). Interviewees' ($N = 41$) talk about the pursuit of wellness revealed several points of connection between their current life stage and wellness consumption. As people were experiencing many aging-related changes in their lives they tended to engage in different bodily practices with a view to an “active third age.” In the context of the life stage of middle-agers, wellness as a present-day phenomenon can be interpreted as one of the social settings in which people both reflect on their personal aging experiences and seek to strengthen the “wellness skills” they feel are necessary for personal self-care and life-management especially in forthcoming years.

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Introduction

Aging of the population has fostered negative connotations about old age and aging, as health problems have become something people face only as they get older. Never in the history of the world have so many people lived into their old age as healthy as today. Modern medicine, a high standard of living, and contemporary understanding of health and healthy lifestyles allow a growing number of people to live longer but also healthier and more vigorous lives. Consequently, in studies of aging the debate continues regarding the best strategies for maintaining quality of life as individuals get older (Katz, 2005). In this debate, individual lifestyle choices are often emphasized, as the ability to lead a healthy life is considered important for aging well (e.g. Craciun & Flick, 2015; Walker, 2002). Moreover, the current wellness trend, which encourages people to be comprehensively interested in their own health and engage in self-care, will add depth and visibility to this discussion (Crawford, 2006). As a result, the pressure to take personal responsibility for one's own health increases with age.

Against this background, this study examines the ways in which Finnish middle-aged people (50–65 years) reflect on the current ideas of aging and wellness. Here wellness refers to the holistic health

approach that emphasizes self-interest, self-awareness, and self-improvement (Mueller & Kaufmann, 2001). From the individual's perspective, pursuing wellness is about designing individual wellness strategies – mapping possibilities and making the “right” choices – to support one's own bodily needs and personal growth. Within this lifelong body-project people are greatly influenced by the surrounding social, material, and cultural world. In current socio-cultural conditions where consumption penetrates most aspects of our life, wellness has largely become an object of consumption (Featherstone, 2010). Accordingly, the fast-expanding wellness industry is now providing a plethora of different consumer goods and services aimed at improving holistic health and enhancing quality of life (Pilzer, 2002). In this paper we want to highlight this significant relationship between personal wellness promotion and consumption, and therefore we mainly write about “wellness and related consumption.”

The pursuit of wellness is also closely connected to one's age and life stage. Middle-agers on the verge of the third age are a demographic group which has been studied relatively little, although their economic and social position makes them an interesting group in the context of wellness. As people do not automatically adapt to the role of an “old person” when they reach the statistical age of a senior citizen, the transition phase from middle to old age has lengthened and increased in significance as a life stage for self-development and self-actualization (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000). Moreover, it has been stated that the popularity of wellness consumption reflects ongoing demographic change, with

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aging people increasingly using wellness products and services to meet society's expectations (e.g. Garnham, 2013; Schafer, 2016). This is said to apply especially in the Western societies, where social success is more strongly linked to looking and acting youthful than it is in, for example, many Asian cultures (Green, 2014).

So far, researchers have mainly concentrated on the commercial aspect of wellness, providing information to the wellness industry. There is a noticeable gap in the literature due to the fact that people's experiences of and underlying reasons for wellness consumption at different ages and stages of life have received less attention. In addition, in studies concentrating on mature consumers, the focus has mostly been on anti-aging aspects of wellness consumption. Therefore, we aim, by analyzing our interviewees' talk about the pursuit of wellness, to find out whether and how wellness and related consumption is connected to the interviewees' life stage, which can be described as a transition phase from middle to old age. Here, "transition phase" does not refer to a life-course transition in a scholarly sense but to our interviewees' descriptions of changes that they have experienced and expect to experience in their lives in the near future.

The article begins with a discussion of the life stage of middle-agers together with an overview of the current debate on lifestyles and future expectations of aging people. After that, the characteristics of wellness consumption are briefly outlined. Our data analysis is divided into three sections. In the first section we discuss the interviewees' way of talking about the pursuit of individual wellness in relation to age. In the second section we focus on participants' future expectations and future planning in relation to wellness. Finally, in the third section, we present our construct, *wellness skills*, which describes the proactive and target-oriented nature of the diversity of consumption modes and preferences in the context of wellness consumption.

Life stage and aging horizons

In late middle age, people face changes that have been shown to increase their interest in personal health and wellness (Mitzner, McBride, Barg-Walkow, & Rogers, 2013). People tend to assess their bodily well-being according to subjectively experienced aging, and therefore body-related consumption may start to feel timely when the physical signs of aging become more concrete (Calasanti, Pietilä, Ojala, & King, 2013; Laz, 2003). In addition, in late middle age, working life gradually settles down, childcare is no longer a necessity, and there might be more time for oneself and one's personal interests, all of which may enable, or even prompt people to assess their life from new perspectives (Green, 2014).

During the past two decades, concepts such as "active aging," "successful aging," "positive aging," and "productive aging" have emerged in aging studies to describe the later life stages. Common to these approaches is that they emphasize the future assets and capabilities of aging people instead of concentrating solely on aspects of aging that may appear to be a burden for society or the individual (e.g. Katz, 2005). On the one hand, these constructs have been criticized as manifestations of a neoliberal ideology that sees "activity as the 'positive' against which the 'negative' forces of dependency, illness, and loneliness are arrayed" (Katz, 2005, 136). On the other hand, it is obvious that since people live healthier for longer they also age with different future expectations and orientations than earlier (Karisto, 2007).

It has been suggested that chronological age no longer determines our life-course perspectives. Therefore, planning for old age has become a more reflexive process, and hence depends on people's own visions of aging (Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1994). People's expectations for their 'third age' – the period between active working life and "the oldest old years" – have now become more activity-oriented (Millington, 2015). Far from being a homogeneous group of people with disabilities, third-agers' lives are now more dynamic and framed by individual consumption-driven lifestyles (see e.g. Karisto, 2007). A recent study by Kornadt and Rothermund (2014) points out that while the transition

phase from middle to old age has lengthened so too has the nature of the preparations made for later life stages. Similarly, Craciun and Flick (2015) stress that today people value a healthy lifestyle as their main strategy for gaining positive aging experiences, and therefore the domains of health, appearance, lifestyle, and social relationships are connected to third-age preparations. Moreover, previous studies suggest that bodily control related to healthy lifestyles, especially in the context of aging, can be seen as a risk management strategy in conditions of uncertainty about the future (Lupton, 2014).

On average, women are more likely to lead a healthy lifestyle (see e.g. Divine & Lepisto, 2005) and therefore more interested in wellness consumption than men. One obvious reason for that is our culture, which embraces youthful looks and tends to be harsher for aging women than it is for aging men. However, the current wellness trend includes more than aspects relating to physical appearance. The idea of a body and mind as reflexive projects that can be improved throughout life equally concerns both men and women (Featherstone, 2010). For example, in media representations of people over 50 years of age, we can see the promotion of active lifestyles and the glorification of freedom, self-confidence, and life experience (Lumme-Sandt, 2011; Sawchuk, 2015) – all the aspects that have more to do with the individual as a whole and less with just one's gender and appearance.

In most developed countries today, people over 50 years of age are the fastest growing consumer group, and hence this group's patterns of consumption have started to interest both commerce and research. In Finland, incomes are highest at the age of 55–59 years (Ahonen & Vaittinen, 2015), which suggests that middle-agers may have a level of purchasing power that younger consumers lack. Furthermore, aging consumers have shown increasing interest in spirituality (Spindler, 2008), complementary and alternative medical therapies (Fries, 2014), wellness tourism (Chen, Liu, & Chang, 2013), and wellness technology (Mitzner et al., 2013), which indicates that they are, against many expectations, curious and adventurous consumers.

Consuming wellness

Visiting fitness centers and beauty salons, taking vitamins, reading self-help books and wellness blogs, going on an activity holiday or quieting down at a silent retreat are all examples of material and immaterial manifestations of wellness today. As the opportunities for modern citizens to affect their bodily well-being are almost limitless, "practicing health" has become a socially acceptable consumption practice (Crawford, 2006). This trend applies equally to people in all age categories, although its manifestations may not be exactly the same in these categories.

Recently, the "spiritual side of wellness," which before had generally been seen as part of Asian traditions of health promotion, has become more prominent in the wellness market worldwide (Smith & Kelly, 2006). In this regard, the rise of the "experience economy"¹ (Pine & Gilmore, 1999) is evident in the wellness industry in which people seek and reflect on different techniques and services aimed at self-development, learning, and relaxation, in addition to physical wellness (Erfurt-Cooper & Cooper, 2009). Overall the idea of "wholeness" of physical, mental, social, and environmental wellness seems to connect different forms of wellness consumption. Consequently, alternative medicine and environmental consciousness are also seen as parts of a wellness lifestyle (Chen et al., 2013; Fries, 2014). In addition, digitalization has opened myriad new opportunities for wellness innovations such as various self-monitoring technologies (Lupton, 2014).

The rise of the wellness industry can also be approached from the perspective of a more individualized society in which people are

¹ The "experience economy" has been used to describe the contemporary phenomenon in which services alone no longer provide practical solutions to the problems at hand but instead combinations of entertainment and services are growing in importance (Pine & Gilmore, 1999).

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