Fulfilling the self through food in wellness blogs: Governing the healthy subject

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Abstract
In the world of wellness, food and eating are fundamentally important to one’s subjectivity: the self in this sphere is created and maintained through food consumption along a plant-based, ‘wholesome’ and healthy personal journey to well-being. This article focuses on the analysis of wellness food blogs run by women, aiming to map out the technologies of the self through which the ‘ideal wellness subject’ is created. The analysis examines technologies of subjectivity as they aspire towards (1) balance, (2) healing and (3) narrativization of the self. The article suggests that the subjectivities related to wellness culture draw from postfeminist and healthism ideologies and are based on a neoliberal discourse of individuality and self-control. The sociocultural indifference of wellness culture and its prerogative to police the self through culturally hegemonic pursuits based on (the right kind of) consumption makes the language of wellness a prominent neoliberal discourse.

Keywords
Blogs, food, healthism, postfeminism, subjectivity, wellness

Introduction
Food is a universal medium that illuminates a wide range of cultural practices (Singer, 2014). People’s culinary preferences speak about more than just food, since food is, now more than ever, a cultural sphere that enables individuals to express themselves through cooking, farming, consuming and forming all sorts of culinary collectives. And still, considering ‘food as a hobby’ or even ‘food as a lifestyle’ does not really compare or give
the appropriate credit to the wellness food culture of the 21st century – where food is more than a lifestyle but is rather life itself; food is you, and you are, essentially, food brought into being.

In the world of wellness food, food and eating are fundamentally important to one’s subjectivity: the self in this sphere is created, perfected and maintained through food consumption, as the actors narrate their daily lives in terms of a plant-based, ‘clean’, ‘wholesome’ and healthy personal journey. The wellness lifestyle evokes an ideal of optimal health that is achievable through the correct diet (Braun and Carruthers, 2020: 83). Wellness food is, for example, plant-based, raw, ‘almost entirely organic’, ‘99% vegetables, fruits, whole grains, beans, lentils, nuts, and seeds’, dairy-free, gluten-free, sugar-free and additive-free. And yet, wellness bloggers themselves claim to enjoy ‘diets free from labels’, stating that ‘eating is about feeling good, not following rules’ (excerpts from My New Roots, Minimalist Baker and Green Kitchen Stories).

Wellness food blogs can be categorized as personal journal weblogs that contain ‘descriptions of and anecdotes from the blogger’s personal, daily life’ (e.g. Limatius, 2020: 24). Since the birth of the weblog in the mid-1990s, the blogosphere and the personal journals within it have evolved drastically, and the contemporary blog scene is more professionally driven than ever before. In these feminine blog communities, self-branding is crucial, and often bloggers’ ‘entire existence is built around work’ (Duffy and Hund, 2015).

Compared with traditional cookbook authors, food bloggers create and sell more than just dishes: they promote lifestyles and values through rigorous self-branding and the commercialization of diet-related philosophies. Instead of being solely skilled home cooks or food journalists, food bloggers often are (and aspire to be) lifestyle influencers, brands, life coaches, nutritionists and personal trainers. Contemporary food trends are significantly influenced by recipes and diets circulating in the food blogosphere, and many of the dishes that gain wider media popularity originate from the kitchens of food bloggers.¹ Successful individual bloggers gain additional media exposure through cookbook deals and media coverage (Rodney et al., 2017: 686). Despite their popularity and global influence, research on food blogs is scarce. So far, a few studies (e.g. Cesiri, 2020; Dejmanee, 2016; Dickinson et al., 2018; Lynch, 2010; Rodney et al., 2017) have focused on food blogs. Nevertheless, Cultural Studies’ perspectives are limited in the existing research. The objective of this study is to broaden the theoretical scope of food blog research by extending the focus to healthism and governmentality.

This article delves into the world of wellness through an analysis of wellness food blogs run by Finnish women. The aim of this investigation is to map out the techniques through which wellness subjectivity is formed in the blog texts and to examine how these techniques appear to be shaped by the postfeminist, neoliberal and healthist sensibilities and sociocultural characteristics of contemporary culture. After providing background on the central concepts of postfeminism and healthism, the article presents the data and method for this analysis. The article then moves on to three analysis sections that examine technologies of subjectivity (Foucault, 1988; Rose, 1999 (1989)) as they aspire towards (1) ‘balance’ between indulgence and (potentially pathological) self-control, (2) ‘healing’ one’s (already healthy) body and soul through nourishment and (3) ‘narra-tivization of the self’ through the metaphor of a personal wellness journey. Finally, the
discussion examines aspects of ‘wellness subjectivity’ within a broader neoliberal, classed and gendered (blog) culture.

**Deciphering wellness blogs**

*The feminine world of food blogs: domesticity and postfeminism*

Lifestyle blogs in general (Nielsen, 2014) and food blogs in particular are written and read predominantly by women (see Norén, 2011). Scholarly investigations of the feminine (food, DIY and lifestyle) blogosphere have been largely shaped by the dominance of postfeminist ideology or sensibilities in the discourses of women’s lifestyle blogs (e.g. Duffy and Hund, 2015; Jäntti et al., 2018). According to Gill (2007: 162), postfeminism is an articulation between feminist and anti-feminist ideas, which is expressed through a (neoliberalist) grammar of individualism. Contemporary food pleasures are understood as being constituted within a postfeminist climate in which gender equality is commonly framed around choice and empowerment (Cairns and Johnston, 2015b) and where femininity is performed through celebrating feminine stereotypes, as the collective roots of feminism as a social movement fade into the background (see McRobbie, 2009: 371).

In the feminine blogosphere, ‘entrepreneurial femininity’ is formed through the characteristics of valuable skills, informal knowledges and flexibility (and thus obscured labour) as well as modes of self-fashioning rooted in the consumer marketplace, where women are encouraged to work *through and for* consumption (Duffy and Hund, 2015: 2). Incorporating a postfeminist sensibility and becoming a postfeminist subject require constant work on oneself and utilizing various technologies of the self where subjectivity is not regulated by the State or by others but emerges from within, as a form of governing the self in aspiring for optimal selfhood. Although this analysis utilizes the concept of postfeminism, it is worthwhile to note that postfeminism is related to (as well as differentiates from) two other concepts highly relevant in scholarly discussions on contemporary femininity: neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg, 2017) and popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Neoliberal feminism emphasizes neoliberalism’s entanglement with – and not necessarily dismissal of – feminism, whereas popular feminism refers to the wide acceptance and circulation of feminism tied to media visibility (see Banet-Weiser et al., 2020).

One of the key sites of postfeminist analyses is the sphere of domestic femininity, where women test recipes, prepare food, clean, decorate and care for the well-being of their partners and children. Postfeminist domesticity is often described as a kind of reinvention of 19th-century Victorian feminine domesticity (see Cairns and Johnston, 2015b: 7) and middle-class femininity (see, for example, Hollows, 2003). According to Rodney et al. (2017), influential food blogs present idealized visions of domestic life, complemented with the occasional detail portraying ‘imperfections’ such as food cravings or cooking mishaps. Bloggers provide detailed (and curated) accounts of their culinary, health-related and personal philosophies among recipes and abundant visual presentations. The tremendous popularity of food blogs and thus their cultural impact makes
them a culturally significant site for studying dominant cultural understandings of (female) food work (Rodney et al., 2017: 686).

Wellness culture and healthism

The characteristics of the feminine blogosphere are visible in the blog subgenre of wellness food blogging. Despite the prevalence of wellness blogging in particular and wellness culture or wellness industry in general in the 21st century, there exists yet little research pertaining to this field of culture and media. Wellness, from a cultural studies point of view, has been the focus of analysis in a handful of articles over the years (Braun and Carruthers, 2020; Islam, 2014; Kent, 2020; Little, 2012; O’Neill, 2020). Food blogs identified as ‘wellness blogs’ (compared with lifestyle blogs or fitness blogs, for example), however, do not seem to have been the focus of scholarly investigations.

The wellness industry has ‘witnessed a triumphant ascension over the past decade’, growing twice as fast as global economic growth (Global Wellness Institute, 2018). Wellness culture includes myriad lifestyles and practices, from meditation retreats, clean eating, detox diets and health-focused wearable devices to comprehensive wellness policies used in schools, hospitals and private companies. These products and programmes promote health and self-improvement strategies while promising to boost productivity and curb health care costs (Blei, 2017). The term ‘wellness’ was popularized in the late 1950s; ‘high-level wellness’ was defined as ‘a condition of change in which the individual moves forward, climbing toward a higher potential of functioning’ (Dunn, 1959: 447), and a distinction was made between the absence of illness (objective and passive) and wellness (active and subjective).

In the academic world, aspects of wellness culture are most often addressed with the concept of healthism. ‘Healthism’ stems from theorizations regarding ‘medicalization’ that date back to the 1960s. Medicalization refers to the expansion of medical interventions into areas of life that were previously considered outside the medical sphere, and according to early critics (e.g., Szasz, 1961), medicalization transforms social behaviours and problems into symptoms of diseases, which allows medical practitioners to manage and govern the lives of individuals (Mayes, 2014: 4). Healthism does not address the expansion of the jurisdiction of medical professionals but rather points to the dissemination of medical perception and ideology among the wider (middle-class) population. Healthism, then, refers to lifestyles that revolve around wellness promotion, where the individual is responsible for his or her own health. Healthism grasps the expansion of medicine beyond and, in some cases, against medical professions and institutions (by criticizing the objectification of patients and the ‘clinical gaze’ of modern healthcare) (Turrini, 2015: 17).

The ideologies behind wellness date back to the beginning of the 20th century and the rise of European middle classes that wanted individual and holistic medical care – provided in ‘life reform’ resorts offering respite from the degenerative and unnatural life in industrial societies (Blei, 2017). Today, wellness and healthism still belong to the domain of middle-class experience and are tightly bound with neoliberal, middle-class understandings of lifestyle and individual agency. According to Scott (2020), healthism ideology focuses on lifestyle factors, eclipsing the role of environmental, genetic, social and
structural influences on health. Repetition of healthy behaviours in daily life becomes the duty of a responsible citizen, and those who cannot achieve a certain standard of health are constructed as irresponsible, lazy, uncivilized and morally lacking (Scott, 2020: 69).

The scholarly critiques of wellness culture all underscore the privatization of the struggle for well-being. Contemporary feminist scholars critique wellness culture as ‘a radical turning inward of agency towards the goal of transformation of one’s own body, in contrast to a turning outward to mobilize for collective action’ (Dworkin and Messner, 1994: 352). Finally, postfeminist sensibilities become especially magnified in wellness contexts: healthism has a major link to gender, since the lives and bodies of women are disproportionately medicalized (Mayes, 2014: 6). According to Bartky (1997), the disciplinary power and self-surveillance of our society operate to control women in particular, as the disciplinary techniques (especially – but not limited to – dieting and controlling one’s hunger and weight) through which the ‘docile bodies’ of women are constructed are exhaustive in regulating the body’s size, appetite, posture and general comportment in space (Bartky, 1997: 132–132).

Methodology

Data

The data analysed in this article consist of 170 blog entries from three individual wellness food blogs authored by Finnish women in English for an international audience. Blogs relevant for thorough analysis were identified by selecting a key site or an ‘entry point’ via which the rest of the data were then chosen and gathered for analysis (see Jäntti et al., 2018). The data gathering originated from arguably the most popular and most frequently awarded (SAVEUR Food Blog Awards and Blog Awards Finland) Finnish wellness food blog, Vanelja.

Due to the analytics regarding the readership of individual blogs being inaccessible through university channels, the popularity (and the amount of influence in wellness food culture) of each blogger was assessed by relying on the quantity of Instagram followers of the bloggers’ official Instagram accounts. In effect, the Instagram accounts were considered extensions of the main blog sites and thus indicative of the popularity of each blogger and their brand (see an overview by Poell et al., 2019, for ‘platformisation’ and the cross-platform nature of contemporary digital culture).

The objective of the sampling was to identify blogs (in addition to Vanelja) to be analysed in detail. An approach based on a single key blog site (or digital media personality/brand) functioning as ‘ground zero’ for further sampling and data gathering was chosen due to an assumption that the wellness blogosphere is a highly reciprocal field where influencers follow each other closely (and ‘who follows who’ has influence on the formations of the field, see ‘economy of visibility’ in Banet-Weiser, 2018). Along these lines, it was presumed that the most popular Finnish wellness food blogger would be likely to follow other notable influencers operating in this field. The sampling originating from the Instagram account vanelja (164,000 followers in February 2020) was conducted as described in Figure 1. Finally, two blogs were chosen to be analysed alongside Vanelja. These two blogs are My Berry Forest (90,200 followers on the myberryforest Instagram account) and Tuulia (23,800 followers on the tuuliatalvio Instagram account).
As my aim was to focus on self-formation through discourse, the data collection was limited to three blogs, while the blog entries examined were analysed from a relatively lengthy time period (between January 2015 and December 2016). This period appeared
to be the most congruent (similarly active in post regularity and frequency) in the blogs’ publishing history. The number of posts was 167 in total (Vanelja with 36 posts, My Berry Forest with 65 posts and Tuulia with 66 posts). In addition, the ‘about the author’ pages were considered in the analysis as well, since these included autobiographical information important to the bloggers’ identity narrative. Thus, the total sample for this study amounted to 170 blog entries.

The three blogs – Vanelja (2014–), My Berry Forest (2015–) and Tuulia (2014–) – are authored by Finnish women. The global world of wellness food content is, instead of emphasizing different national culinary heritages, remarkably homogeneous in its content and aesthetics. In effect, Finnishness was chosen as one of the sampling criteria predominantly in an effort to narrow down the overwhelmingly vast quantity of wellness blogs of the English-speaking blog world. The three blogs analysed here have both a Finnish- and an English-language version – that is, posts are written both in Finnish and in English. Solely the English versions of the blog texts were studied for this article.

The initial analysis relied on an open-coding process (see Rodney et al., 2017) in which all elements of the blog entries (photographs, personal narratives and contextual information) were considered for further analysis. This process provided a general map of blog content and aimed at identifying central tendencies across the blog texts, looking to see how they intersected with previous research into subjectivity and social media. The three wellness food blogs analysed proved immensely rich in themes linking to neoliberal and postfeminist sociocultural values (including pleasure, ‘girlboss’ discourses, dieting, care work, feminine entrepreneurialism, aesthetics and so on). Partly because of this, I decided to focus the in-depth analysis on the processes of governing the self that infuse all the different topics, cultural tactics and moral stances that make up the wellness food blogosphere and the technologies of self that are formed and performed in it.

The three bloggers each seem to identify as actors amid the wellness food blog culture a bit differently. Vanelja – with its slogan ‘it’s about pure pleasure’ – leans a bit more to the hedonistic side of the wellness field, whereas My Berry Forest – ‘creative plant-based recipes from the forest’ – concentrates on family and traditional health-talk. Tuulia – ‘healthy living + good vibes’ – is located somewhere in between, with a focus on health and comfort. Despite small thematic differences, all three blogs populate the same cultural sphere of wellness and perform their subjectivity and their wellness ‘journey’ in a culturally recognizable way. Finally, the three bloggers are also similar and ‘recognizable’ in appearance: white, able-bodied and lean. All of the bloggers have (white) male fiancées/husbands, and two of the three have one or more children.

In an attempt to map out the ways in which the self is policed, enhanced and taken care of in the wellness food texts, the following aspects were examined: what are the concrete, verbalized actions taken in order to govern or transform the self – what do the bloggers do to themselves or their surroundings to be more in line with the ‘ideal self?’ How do self-policing practices in the data relate to wider social norms? What kind of styles of existence do the authors aspire towards? What kind of subjectivities are represented as legitimate, and what kind of subject positions are at all discursively possible? The following section introduces theoretical concepts that guide the methodological approach employed in this analysis.
The analysis utilizes Michel Foucault’s (1988) concept of technologies of the self as an analytical device. As compared with other possible technologies (of production, sign systems and power) that people use to understand themselves and the world around them, technologies of the self permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (Foucault, 1988: 18)

Foucault was interested in how humans constituted themselves as subjects and how they sought to gain knowledge of themselves (Hernandez-Ramirez, 2017: 47). Nicholas Rose (1999 (1989): 11) speaks of ‘technologies of subjectivity’ or ‘techniques of the self’ that refer to the ways in which we are enabled to ‘act upon our bodies, souls, thoughts, and conduct in order to achieve happiness, wisdom, health, and fulfilment’. These three concepts are used interchangeably in this analysis.

Technologies of the self are linked to a few concepts that approach policing or managing oneself from slightly different viewpoints. Governmentality refers to the contact between the technologies of domination of others and those of the self (Foucault, 1988: 19), and the governing of one’s self and others takes place through an array of techniques and programmes that are usually defined as cultural (see Bratich et al., 2003: 4). Care of the self (Foucault, 1986 (1984)) could be categorized as a dimension of self-governing that has less to do with domination of others and more with the subject looking inward, acting according to individual ethics. Care of the self refers to an active, lifelong process of attending to and ‘returning’ to oneself, and ultimately bettering oneself through this rigorous self-surveillance (Foucault, 1986 (1984)). Foucault pinpoints the concept and the practices and ideals tied to it to the Hellenistic culture where care of the self was ‘a privilege-duty, a gift-obligation that ensures our freedom while forcing us to take ourselves as the object of all our diligence’ (Foucault, 1986 (1984): 47). In the neoliberal era, self-governing and capability to care for oneself can be considered as being once again universal duties (see Hamann, 2009).

As Hernandez-Ramirez (2017: 48) points out, three decades after Foucault’s essay on technologies of the self was published, the circumstances have changed, as most regions of the world have fully embraced the information society, and instruments that enable, accelerate and deepen self-modification have become pervasive. People exercise control over themselves especially through digital technologies to develop more attractive bodies, to follow more healthy lifestyles, to live ethically and to be more productive. Dietary movements, exercise routines and productivity methods, as well as mindfulness and meditation, all fit within Foucault’s original concept (Hernandez-Ramirez, 2017: 53). The ethic of individual self-fulfilment and achievement is the most powerful current in modern society, and the choosing, self-shaping human being who aspires to be the author of his or her own life is the central character of our time (see Bakardjieva and Gaden, 2012: 404).
The individualistic and entrepreneurial postfeminist subject of wellness culture adheres to neoliberal forms of citizenship and behaviour and is governed in terms of neoliberal understandings of self-responsibility and maximizing one’s human capital (see Repo and Yrjölä, 2015). The neoliberal subject balances between normative, palatable femininity and unapologetic striving for greatness as a woman (see Rottenberg, 2017). In the context of women-run food blogs, the subjectivities and technologies of the self available in this wellness discourse are specific as they are always gendered: tied to conducts, values and bodies deemed suitable for women in our contemporary neoliberal culture. The following sections introduce the strategies of governing the self that compose the ‘ideal wellness subject’ in these wellness food blogs.

**Making the subject of wellness culture**

*The balancing act: between very healthy and too healthy*

The postfeminist sphere of wellness food blogging encloses a preoccupation with finding balance: a culturally acceptable way of ‘doing wellness’ that steers clear of both abstinence and lack of control. Rottenberg (2017: 331) notes that ‘finding balance’ has become not only feminine, but a feminist ideal in neoliberal society in general. However, in wellness- and food-related contexts, balance has a specific cultural function. According to Cairns and Johnston (2015a: 154–155), hegemonic (food-related) femininity is built on caring about food but not caring too much – on being health- and body-conscious without obsessing over calories, on avoiding foods that make one fat while at the same time avoiding the appearance of dieting and on also knowing when to indulge. Here, the analysed blogs tiptoe on a fine line drawn between hegemonic and pathologized food femininities.

The culturally hegemonic status of positive philosophy that is in many ways at the core of wellness ideologies (see Grénman, 2019; Wright, 2014) and the neoliberal discourse centring on ‘good vibes only’ have a strong hold of the blog texts. More than concentrating on any negativity (strict rules or self-hate, for example) surrounding food, the bloggers emphasize ‘the good’ – the ‘win-win’ of wellness food culture. No food is forbidden or can be eaten to excess (as long as it is in line with the chosen plant-based dietary regime). The strategies of steering towards healthiness and distancing from pathological conduct are both constantly part of the wellness food-blog content: instead of concentrating on one or the other at any given time (like ‘cheat days’ evened out through healthy eating, as described in Kent, 2020), the blog authors enact a balanced, clean and healthy lifestyle simultaneously with – and often through – indulgence in desserts or other treats.

Combining healthy with delicious is abundant in the data, and phrases like ‘delicious taste and wholesome ingredients’ or ‘healthy and indulgent at the same time’ are used almost in a motto-like way to praise the foods discussed. The handicraft of this win–win approach relies on substituting ‘unhealthy’ ingredients (white sugar, any conventional flour, dairy products and food additives) with ‘healthy’, pure and ‘wholesome’ ingredients without losing any deliciousness:
A combination of coconut sugar, blackstrap molasses and vegan dark chocolate bring just the right sweetness. You’ll never miss refined white sugar! (M19/12/16)

Instead of having your cake – not the proverbial cake but an actual one! – and eating it too, the approach celebrates the possibility (and necessity) of eating both the cake and the vegetables. This subplot puts ‘hidden vegetables’ on centre stage:

This time I challenged myself to create the yummiest possible brownies with as many hidden vegetables as I could think of. (M12/9/16)

I’m all about secret ingredients . . . If I would tell you that one of the main ingredients in these delicious looking coconut chocolate bars is in fact potato would that spoil your appetite? I hope not, because that is truly the case. (V19/2/15)

Bloggers put a lot of effort into ‘healthifying’ foods, but they also make sure that this healthifying does not cross the threshold to health-obsessive action. For example, one blogger warns readers of the pitfalls of healthifying foods because ‘sometimes you end up creating something that tastes too healthy’: ‘[a] pie has to taste like real pie, not like a healthified version of a pie’ (M13/12/16). Another blogger agonizes over creating a pizza dough that has a ‘perfect crisp and a flavour that’s delicious and not “too healthy”’ (T15/6/16). Healthifying regular foods is, in the wellness blogosphere, thus both mandatory and always potentially pathological.

Emphasizing indulgence counteracts the potentially detrimental effects of rigorous healthifying. Bloggers routinely describe their ‘uncontrollable cravings’, ‘obsession’ with or ‘addiction’ to various foods framed as especially satisfying or even sinful (often sweet, energy-dense foods). However, these obsessions are nothing to feel guilty about, since they, too, adhere to the criteria of plant-based, gluten-free and non-additive-laden food. For example, one blogger describes her ‘uncontrollable sweet cravings’ that, if nothing freshly baked is at hand, can easily be satisfied with homemade nut butter ‘just eaten with a spoon . . . straight from the jar’ (M13/6/16). Similarly, another blogger gives herself permission to eat healthy almond butter ‘straight from the jar with a spoon . . . yum . . .’ while ‘standing in front of the fridge’ (T28/9/16; T28/8/15). According to Braun and Carruthers (2020), the vegan wellness discourse often describes foods through these types of hyperbolic claims to counter a construction of veganism as a deprivation of pleasure. My analysis supports their interpretation, even though, in the wellness context, hyperbole and emphasis on indulgence work to distance the individual from self-inflicted deprivation rather than convincing outsiders of a diet’s pleasurableness.

This stress on indulgence occasionally takes on a sensual form as pies get eaten while still standing in front of the kitchen counter with an apron on, the baker ‘sucking her fingers in between devouring because the pie is still way too hot, but at the same time way too tempting and delicious for her to keep her fingers away from it’ (V25/6/2015). And, as in the quote above, these moments of giving in to temptation often involve a specific, dream-like narrative style that distances the protagonist from the act of ‘devouring’:

I really love mangos, especially the really ripe and juicy ones, and I don’t even want to tell you how many times I’ve eaten them using only my hands . . . which means there’s a lot of that
bright yellow juice dripping on the corners of my mouth... and now there’s this one very juicy looking mango on my kitchen counter... But okay, let’s get back to the cake now. (T1/4/2015)

All of these moments of indulgence are an essential part of the wellness food discourse, although the actual food items that are being indulged in cannot be categorized as unhealthy at all (in addition to the foods mentioned above, the authors feed their addictions with homemade granola, salad pizza, fresh dates, dried mulberries, ‘pink food’ and ‘all things yellow’, for example). It could also be speculated that the emphasis on indulgence is a strategy of ‘hiding the illness’, illness here being some sort of orthorexia (disordered eating of foods considered as healthy) – not necessarily the orthorexic reality of a particular person but the orthorexic reality of wellness culture generally. The pathological behaviour needing to be balanced is not the usual suspect of failing to be a person who eats healthily, but the fear of failing to be a person who is able to enjoy the pleasures of food (and life) normally.

Compared with decades of women’s magazines circulating the idea that nothing is too healthy and almost anything can be categorized as not healthy enough, wellness food talk emphasizes enjoyment over abstinence. Whereas the ideal woman of past decades (or centuries) needed to restrict herself from eating, the postfeminist subject is supposed to self-indulge. According to Cairns and Johnston (2015a: 156), even the healthy and ascetic individual has the imperative to consume, and so the good and healthy citizen cannot be marked solely by restraint. They go on to note that the neoliberal postfeminist performance does not free women of corporeal or aesthetic ideals, but rather repackages these expectations through the language of postfeminist pleasure and consumer choice (Cairns and Johnston, 2015a: 162). The postfeminist, neoliberal femininity is characterized by the mixed messages and contradicting expectations whereupon the technologies of balancing become major discursive, cultural and mental strategies through which the self is governed.

**The healthy self in need of healing: boosting the body and comforting the soul**

Wellness food talk is thoroughly medicalized, as (the right kind of) food is portrayed as a cure for both current ailments and possible illnesses to come. Individuals following a plant-based and ‘clean’ diet are bestowed with improved physical abilities and a sense of well-being, nourished by wholesome food (see Scott, 2020: 73). In the data, the self is transformed through food: healed both physically and spiritually with the right kind of nourishment.

Differences between technologies of balancing and healing point to different strategies in the domain of self-governing. In the balancing strategies depicted above, authors govern themselves in ways that comply with contemporary cultural and gendered norms. And, although healing oneself cannot be described as not stemming from societal norms, discursively it leans towards a subject zeroing in on itself, disregarding outside distractions. Becoming a ‘healed’ subject hinges on taking care of oneself: cultivating oneself and making oneself feel better through healthist and therapeutic strategies. In the analysed data, striving towards personal wellness becomes visible as the subjects seek completeness through continuous fulfilling, nurturing, nourishing and energizing.
Technologies of healing the self employ a medicalized language that refers to food and nutrients as medicine. Food is described in terms of a ‘dose’, a ‘fix’ or as being created in a blogger’s ‘laboratory’ (home kitchen). These lexical choices contextualize food as a remedy, and the body consequently as needing to be healed – as always threatened by illness, underperforming, sub-optimal or lacking. According to Foucault (1986 (1984): 57), the self-governing connected to care of the self implies that one should form an image of oneself as ‘in a state of need’, as one ‘who suffers from certain ills and who needs to have them treated’. In the data, the ‘narrative of illness’ and a detailed attention given to dysfunction are channelled through both medicalized talk and a turn to therapeutic discourses preoccupied with healing.

The technique of improving one’s body is associated with traditional nutritional talk, including references to ‘loads of beta-carotene’, ‘intake of healthy fats’, ‘anti-inflammatory properties’ or ‘Vitamin C-rich’ foods, for example. However, more often than not, these scientific or medicalized points of reference are vague (compared with the nutritionist mother-housewives depicted in a study on Australian food magazines; see Schneider and Davis, 2010) and pseudo-medical in nature. Superfoods and other foods with favourable nutritional value are used for their ‘boosting’ properties, be it for gaining energy (‘a bit of boost from those powders to keep me going’, T8/9/16), reducing inflammation or strengthening the immune system (of a body that is constantly under potential threat):

With an antioxidant boost from matcha tea powder, I’ll happily call this green goodness superfood ice cream and eat a cone or two a day. (M29/7/16)

They’re my favorite – turmeric and baobab powder from Organic Burst, quite the perfect boosters during flu season. (M26/9/16)

Another technique of healing relates to consoling and comforting the self that does not feel like her optimal, best self. ‘Comfort food’ has gained cultural significance in the past decade and it has a strong connection with postfeminist, middle-class new domesticity: for example, Salvio (2012) states that comfort food is linked to strong gender roles and ideas of respectable domesticity and it is thus extensively entangled with postfeminist sensibilities. In the data analysed here, comfort food exists in a mixture of gendered therapy culture and medicalized care of the self. ‘Comfort’ can be categorized as a holistic approach to wellness or healing, emphasizing the mental and spiritual aspects of a wellness sensibility. Here, foods are primarily portrayed as ‘nourishing’ and ‘comforting’ and employed as therapeutic tools of introspection and self-love.

Comfort food is used as a device of turning inward, shutting out the outside world that threatens one’s inner peace or balance. Comfort food relates to memories and seasonality, both of which intertwine discursively and emotionally with nostalgia or melancholia. Comfort food is framed as nostalgic, and memories associated with, for example, Christmas cookies, warm summer days, Grandma’s porridge or old bread recipes are depicted as especially consoling. Seasonality, in turn, refers to blog authors’ practice of linking a particular time of the year or the weather (usually winter, autumn, rain, darkness or coldness) to both the need and the ‘permission’ to enjoy comfort food:
And just look at these vibrant green Brussels sprouts – don’t they look like the perfect medicine for a little winter blues? (M23/11/16)

[This] recipe here is one of the most relaxed ways to make an apple pie I have ever encountered. I’m glad that it popped into my head somewhere from the cosmos one cloudy day when I really needed a quick comfort food. (V8/3/16)

Along with pulling out my jumpers and jackets from the closet, I’ve been craving for warming, nourishing meals with plenty of summer vegetables. (T11/8/16)

Finally, ‘nourishing food’ is used as a common catchphrase associated with the holistic approach of wellness food culture, as nourishment is important both for the body and for the soul, and anything that is undesirable for the body is also unhealthy for the mind. However, in comparison with the ‘boosting’ foodstuffs mentioned above, ‘nourishing’ is in many ways a spiritual quality that, in order for it to exist or work, one has to believe in it. Nourishing is anything and everything – for example, warming, simple, comforting, grounding, balancing, energizing, easy to prepare, ‘creamy’ in texture, ‘filling yet light’ or ‘spicy but not too heavy’ – that can make its eater ‘whole’:

Then pay attention to what your body needs: is your body in need of exercise or rest? Think what would be the most nourishing thing for your body today. (T5/2/15)

Preoccupation with food’s ability to nourish the eater echoes perceptions of food as both potentially medicinal and healing as well as in constant danger of being malnourishing. Nourishment is the threshold between food that balances and heals and food that causes illness and shakes the self off course. Striving for nourishment encapsulates the neoliberal need for continual improvement and self-control that are repetitively recreated in the discourses of wellness food blogs.

Narrating the self: the (never-ending) journey to being whole

Like every great story, this one also starts with a mystery. (V/MY STORY)

In addition to technologies that strive towards a balanced and healed self, narrating one’s plant-based life in terms of ‘a journey’ or ‘an adventure’ builds a picture of self that has both subjectivity as a unique individual and agency in terms of having control over one’s own life (and body). The cultural narrative present in the blogs is constructed in the shape of ‘my journey’, which is a constant companion for the reader of the blog as well as an important part of the blogger’s brand, as outlined on the ‘about the author’ page. The authors of the blogs tap into and recreate a particular life narrative that ‘makes sense’ in wellness culture: a life-changing, near-spiritual and, most importantly, never-ending journey towards wholeness and wellness.

According to Illouz (2008: 172), narrative has become a key category in understanding how selfhood is constituted through culture, and narratives of self often draw upon
broader, collective scripts – ‘masterplots’ or grand narratives – that imbue these personal stories with socially significant meanings. A particular ‘wellness masterplot’ becomes visible when bloggers look back in time, recalling what their life was like before embarking on a ‘plant-based journey’, or look back on some specific moment in the transition process, and when bloggers declare fragments of their wellness-related philosophy as constituting an important part of who they are.

Techniques of self-narrativization put great emphasis on change, both the before and after stages as well as the transition phase where the bulk of this personal journey is narrated and ‘lived’. The ‘before stage’ paints a picture of both bodily and mental capacities having reached a critical state. The bloggers describe a time when their bodies were lethargic and bloated, they were losing their hair, feeling tired, sick all the time, unable to sleep and having issues with their skin or stomach. In addition to descriptions of bodily problems, issues were described in relation to mental health or coping with life’s challenges in general, or specifically relating to the bloggers’ (bad) relationship with food:

I’ve followed many diets in my life and they’ve all left me feeling miserable. I’ve been starving myself and then felt guilty when I’ve eaten something unhealthy. Before my healthy vegan life, I hardly ever enjoyed eating. (M1/12/15)

When I noticed that I wasn’t really able to laugh anymore and I felt constantly exhausted, I knew I had to do something to change the situation. (T9/4/15)

As in the excerpts above, the transformation begins from a life-altering realization that is portrayed as a key life event. The transition from a bad life to good life is portrayed plentifully in all the bloggers’ personal narratives. This phase specifically describes the administration of the cure – the food as an important element in the mental and life-stylistic transformation:

I needed to make sure I wasn’t just ‘going on another restrictive diet’ when changing to a healthy plant based diet. That’s why I wanted to change my attitude towards food. I didn’t want to see food as just good calories or bad calories, I needed to understand the whole picture. (M1/12/15)

[The switch] was a huge lifestyle change. But deep down I knew it had to be done. I taught myself to cook and within couple of months I felt reborn. (V/MY STORY)

The narrative technologies of ‘my journey’ differ in one crucial way from more conventional conversion stories. In mapping contemporary storytelling practices of journalism and social media, Mäkelä and her research team (2018) found a typical cultural masterplot: the conversion story of a well-being professional, where, after suffering burnout, the (not-yet) professional is forced to re-evaluate their life goals, experiences a sudden revelation, learns their lesson and becomes a better person – often accompanied by being able to capitalize on this conversion in the form of a book or inspirational speaking business (Mäkelä, 2018: 181). In the wellness blog data, and as seen in the technologies of balancing and healing that require constant effort in order to keep oneself
on a path to wellness, the journey never really ends and the ‘conversion’ never reaches its ‘goal’.

While there is a distinct ‘after’ (or ‘nowadays’) stage in the blog narratives’ chronological order, the healing or improvement of the body – that would arguably be assumed in this context – is hardly mentioned at all by the bloggers: one of the three bloggers mentions some vague ‘positive effects’ (M11/2/16) and ‘a shift in energy levels’ (M23/11/16), and another describes having ‘arrived into a much more peaceful and calmer place’ (V26/8/15). There are no overt mentions of actually getting rid of the troubles with hair loss, stomach issues, skin problems and so on, although it seems almost impossible to assume that these problems are still unresolved in this otherwise glorious ‘after’ stage. And, if the bloggers ever had any issues with their body image, or to put it more bluntly, if they ever wished that they would lose weight with the help of this plant-based, sugar-free and gluten-free diet, it certainly is never uttered in the blog material. This, of course, is in line with the contemporary discourse of the love-your-body and body positivity movements and arguably of the larger postfeminist discourse of the 2010s as well (e.g. Gill and Elias, 2014; Sastre, 2014).

In this light, ‘reaching wellness’ becomes a pseudo-goal that, in spite of being rigorously and time-consumingly strived towards every day, cannot realistically be achieved. Wellness is not understood in the data as some sort of a ‘life hack’ or ‘quick fix’ to monetize, but as a way of life that incorporates various techniques of subjectivity that facilitate subjects coping with (and benefiting from) contemporary society and the sensibilities and values most acceptable in it.

Discussion

From a sociocultural point of view, the extreme individuality and turning to the self of the wellness discourse renders social and political factors nearly invisible. In fact, compared with many food-related discourses that intertwine with cultural capital, privilege, taste and distinction (e.g. Johnston and Baumann, 2015 (2010); Zimmerman, 2015), actors in the wellness food sphere seem to work very hard to obscure any standpoints related to distinction.

Cultural, economic and racial privilege are not only discursive but embodied: the most popular wellness influencers worldwide are young, slim, class-privileged, able-bodied and almost uniformly white (O’Neill, 2020). O’Neill describes the privileged whiteness of wellness as a kind of luminosity as certain women are ‘illuminated – literally and symbolically – as embodiments of idealized femininity’, emitting a healthful radiance that acts as a testament to the virtuous lifestyles they lead (O’Neill, 2020: 629). In wellness culture, media and especially in the context of Finnish wellness, the totality of whiteness appears all-encompassing, as representations of white bodies take up the space of wellness as a whole.

In connection with class and economic privilege, what goes unmentioned in the data are, first, the economic capital necessary to successfully reproduce the wellness food regimen and, second, the educational or entrepreneurial labour that goes into being able to perform everyday duties in ways that fulfil wellness lifestyle standards. The gendered and postfeminist subjectivity of wellness addresses almost exclusively upwardly mobile,
aspirational women and is ‘unapologetically middle-class’, often cut off from any ‘obligation to less privileged women or those who are not “strivers”’ (McRobbie, 2013). Thus, similarly to race, class is invisible in hegemonic discursive spaces of wellness: the neoliberal subjectivity that this cultural field relies on does not really recognize class or even economic inequality as such – as structural, material disparities that have an impact on the stakes with which we try to pursue the ideal of ‘good life’.

Of course, this kind of indifference and impartiality to cultural, political or social stances makes the language of wellness a neoliberal discourse *par excellence*: all that is left visible is the prerogative to police and cultivate the self through culturally hegemonic pursuits that are based on (the right kind of) consumption. Wellness operates on a neoliberal cultural plane that is inherently middle-class – legitimate, normative, white, able-bodied, entrepreneurial, self-controlling and ‘ideal’ – but simultaneously ‘above class’ or beyond class divisions. In the food blog data, even if the discourse does not appear ‘classed’ in itself, the technologies of self are highly class-related, as the educational, cultural, embodied and economic capital required to enact these subjectivities renders wellness food culture inaccessible to many consumers and thus establishes the quest for perfect balance, excellent health and continuous preoccupation with the nourishment of the self as a privileged pursuit.

Finally, steering clear of uncomfortable social and political factors here has to do with the sub-cultural and ideological aspects of dietary regimes. In these data, the bloggers do not identify themselves as vegans or as following the ‘clean eating’ dietary regime. Instead, they refer to the preferred diet as being ‘plant-based’. The choice between ‘vegan’ and ‘plant-based’ is in no way coincidental: Harrington et al. (2018) state that veganism has experienced a cultural shift in recent years, and a holistic, health-centred and individualistic plant-based living has partly displaced the ‘aggressive’, ‘sandal-wearing’ activist identity of being a ‘vegan’. Here, bloggers do not adhere to any distinctive food ideologies that might be off-putting to readers or that might label the bloggers as part of something larger than just their personal preferences, something that could potentially pose a threat to dominant cultural norms (see Scott, 2020). Not ‘choosing a side’ enables actors amid wellness culture to both concentrate fully on their personal journeys towards peak well-being and, as Kanai (2019: 61) suggests, not to transgress the ‘normal’, approachable and pleasing characteristics allocated to women in our contemporary social and media environment.

**Conclusion**

This article has explored the technologies of self that are created and maintained in the discourses of the wellness food blogosphere. The article argues that the wellness subject persists through employing (discursive, affective and bodily) techniques of balancing, healing and self-narrativization in order to keep on striving towards a self that meets the requirements placed on a neoliberal individual. In a cultural space as highly gendered as the world of wellness food, these techniques morph with culturally feminine and post-feminist sensibilities that demand women strive for a normative, palatable femininity, rigorous self-care and self-love, continuous self-labour as well as bodily perfection.
The subjectivities of the wellness food blogosphere exist amid a postfeminist and neoliberal discourse of individuality, risk and self-control. The technologies aim towards establishing complete control: control over needing to choose and not having to choose, over performing in ways that are legitimate and not too pathological, over safeguarding the body and optimizing the functionality of the mind, over health and risks endangering that health and over the self and over one’s surroundings. According to Lupton (1996: 75), control over food is control over subjectivity, as by controlling what one eats, one can control what one is. The technologies of self through which the individual and cultural foodways of the wellness food sphere are governed aim at enabling blog authors to gain complete domination over their own reality.

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Notes
1. In the context of Finnish food, examples of this could be blogger Hanna Gullichsen’s *avocado pasta* from 2012 that circulated the traditional media widely and even generated separate ‘avocado pasta stalls’ (displaying, for example, avocados, spaghetti, pecorino, chilli and coriander) in some supermarkets, as well as Finnish blogger Jenni Häyrinen’s *baked feta pasta* from 2019 that found its way on TikTok and finally on more traditional international media outlets.
2. The blogs can be accessed through vanelja.com, myberryforest.com and tuulia.com.
3. The abbreviations stand for the blog title (*Vanelja, My Berry Forest* and *Tuulia*) and the date each post was published on the blog.

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