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MEDICAL SCIENCES

THE WELLNESS CONCEPT IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY: CULTURAL AND HEALTH PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

The wellness concept has developed into an interdisciplinary framework encompassing health promotion, disease prevention, recreation, and sustainable lifestyle practices. This study examines the healthcare and cultural dimensions of wellness and its contribution to healthy lifestyles and professional competency development within the wellness industry. A multidisciplinary methodology was employed, integrating literature analysis, theoretical modeling, cognitive assessment, and expert evaluation. The findings demonstrate that contemporary wellness extends beyond recreational services by incorporating evidence-based health promotion, balanced nutrition, physical activity, stress management, and natural therapeutic approaches into comprehensive programs. Despite the rapid expansion of the global wellness economy, a shortage of qualified professionals persists. Bulgaria addresses this challenge through accredited higher education programs, supporting workforce development and reinforcing wellness as an integrated model for sustainable public health, education, and tourism.

Keywords*:* wellness concept; health promotion; healthcare; wellness tourism; interdisciplinary education.

Introduction

The contemporary wellness sector, whether considered as a recreation destination, a niche tourism market, or a health-oriented lifestyle, primarily targets individuals leading dynamic and demanding lives who require effective recovery and comprehensive wellness programs (3, 13, 22). Modern wellness consumers seek deep relaxation, physical recovery, and re-energization through evidence-based therapies founded on natural products, balanced nutrition, and regular physical activity, thereby promoting a sustainable healthy lifestyle (1, 5, 14). The number of holidays involving travel to wellness destinations offering comprehensive health packages increased substantially during the period 2017–2020. However, the shortage of qualified personnel continues to represent a major global challenge (15). According to data published by the Global Wellness Institute (17), the worldwide deficit of professionals possessing specialized knowledge and competencies in wellness tourism is estimated at approximately 180,000 employees. The same report emphasizes the urgent need to develop specialized educational and training programs at all educational levels, ranging from operational staff to senior management (16). Globally, the recreation and niche tourism industries serve more than four billion people annually (23). They generating revenues exceeding €300 billion and positioning the wellness economy among the fastest-growing sectors worldwide (2, 10, 15, 21). Nevertheless, comprehensive statistical data regarding the economic performance of the wellness industry in the Balkan region remain unavailable (9, 11, 18, 20). In response to the increasing demand for qualified professionals, Bulgaria has successfully accredited five higher education programs dedicated to wellness management and related disciplines during the past seven years, including Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctoral degree programs within the professional fields of Sport (7.6) and Health Care (7.5) at the National Sports Academy "Vasil Levski" (4, 6, 7, 8).

Methods

To examine the cultural and healthcare dimensions of the wellness concept, a multidisciplinary methodological framework was employed, including: analysis of findings from previous scientific studies conducted by the authors and critical review of reports and policy documents published by international organizations; theoretical modeling using heuristic, prognostic, normative, heuristic-programmatic, and pragmatic approaches; transformation of subjective evaluations into structured cognitive concepts and measurable constructs; systematization, classification, and ranking of expert assessments to establish hierarchical relationships and identify the principal dimensions of the wellness concept.

The schematic and graphical data presented in this study provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of the global wellness market and offer real-time insights into the development of wellness culture, as well as examples of best practices within the recreation industry and niche tourism. Understanding wellness culture and achieving higher levels of individual and societal well-being enable meaningful comparisons at international, continental, regional, and national levels. At the same time, the wellness concept continues to expand beyond the individual perspective by incorporating broader dimensions related to community development, governmental responsibility, and national health policy, thereby reinforcing its role as an interdisciplinary framework for health promotion, sustainable development, and quality of life.

Results

Assessing wellness status as the cumulative achievement of a balanced and desired state of harmony is a complex undertaking. As illustrated in the concep-

tual framework presented below, wellness encompasses a broad range of interrelated indicators, the majority of which are inherently subjective. Consequently, wellness is difficult to objectify, quantify, and interpret consistently over time. In the present study, wellness status is analysed through the following dimensions: living and experiencing life to its fullest potential; achieving an optimal level of individual health; attaining balance across the principal wellness domains, including emotional, intellectual, spiritual, social (interpersonal), environmental (planetary), cultural, and financial health; achieving professional balance and harmony. This multidimensional model combines subjective perceptions of life satisfaction with objective indicators of physical health and other health-related dimensions to evaluate overall professional and personal well-being. However, because each component changes dynamically continuously interacts with the others, comprehensive assessment remains challenging and, to some extent, conditional. Contemporary society increasingly recognises wellness as a primary health objective, frequently equating it with optimal physical health (Fig. 1).

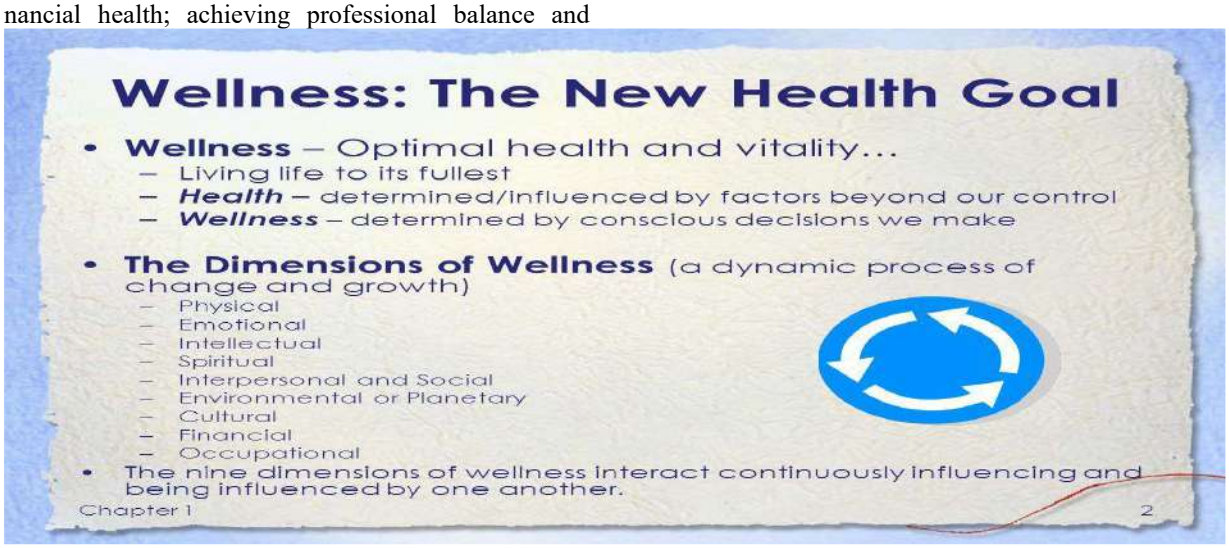

Figure 1. *Hierarchical Structure and Scope of Wellness Culture Indicators*

This widespread perception largely stems from the common assumption that wellness is synonymous with achieving and maintaining physical health and balance. However, this interpretation oversimplifies the concept and often confuses wellness with fitness. Fitness is generally defined as a state of physical preparedness achieved through proper nutrition, regular physical activity, sport participation, and adequate recovery. In contrast, wellness is a substantially broader concept encompassing multiple dimensions of health and quality of life that extend beyond physical fitness alone. The present study seeks to refine and expand the conceptual understanding of wellness by pursuing three primary objectives: To emphasize the cultural dimensions of health by examining the concepts of medical culture and health culture as essential components of contemporary health promotion; To define wellness culture as the newest dimension of health culture and as a contemporary standard for a health-promoting lifestyle; To highlight the growing relevance of the modern paradigm that "health is the new religion" which reflects the increasing social significance of health promotion concepts, preventive healthcare strategies, and wellness-oriented lifestyles (24). From a cultural perspective, the concept of culture refers to those meaningful aspects of human existence that are not products of nature but are created, developed, and transmitted through human activity. Culture may therefore be understood as:

1. an individual achievement expressed through work, creativity, values, and behavior; and
2. a collective heritage inherited from previous generations, continuously adapted and enriched through education, knowledge, self-development, and social practice.

Accordingly, culture may be defined as the totality of human-created systems, values, practices, and artifacts that complement the natural environment and are manifested through learned patterns of behavior, knowledge acquisition, self-awareness, education, and the symbolic expressions of society (24). Within this framework, wellness culture represents an interdisciplinary construct integrating health knowledge, behavioral practices, cultural values, and lifestyle choices that collectively contribute to individual well-being and sustainable health promotion. Health culture, including its medical dimension, is expressed through human activities that promote self-awareness, self-development, and the acquisition of health-related knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors aimed at maintaining and improving health. Consistent with the World Health Organization's definition of health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, health culture encompasses a wide range of preventive and health-promoting practices. Historically, the greatest emphasis has been placed on physical health, which is perceived both as a fundamental personal value when preserved and as a primary objective when compromised. The rapid development of fitness culture illustrates the evolution of a population-based approach to physical health promotion. More recently, this concept has expanded into wellness culture, which adopts a broader perspective by integrating multiple dimensions of individual well-being (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. *Architecture of personal health care for achieving a wellness-oriented lifestyle.*

This development raises an important question: *Which cultural phenomena provide the greatest functional benefits for human health?* Health-promoting practices that are readily accessible, require minimal resources, and can be incorporated into everyday life are generally the most sustainable. From a cultural perspective, human adaptation to changing environmental, social, and technological conditions may be regarded as an adaptive health-cultural syndrome, in which every process of medical cultural development contributes to the formation of new health behaviors, norms, and practices that facilitate healthy living and successful adaptation. Conversely, cultural patterns that restrict or hinder adaptation may adversely affect individual health and well-being. Among the various health-promoting strategies, regular physical activity remains the most widely adopted because of its well-established effectiveness, accessibility, and long-standing role in preventive healthcare. These characteristics have contributed to the global expansion of fitness as a health-promoting practice. Contemporary society, however, increasingly seeks more comprehensive health objectives that extend beyond physical fitness toward a higher quality of life, sustainable personal development, and long-term well-being. Consequently, wellness culture has evolved to encompass not only physical health but also social, intellectual, spiritual, environmental, financial, and digital health, together with modern concepts such as cyber health, ecological healthcare, health insurance, health management, telemedicine, and eHealth (fig. 3).

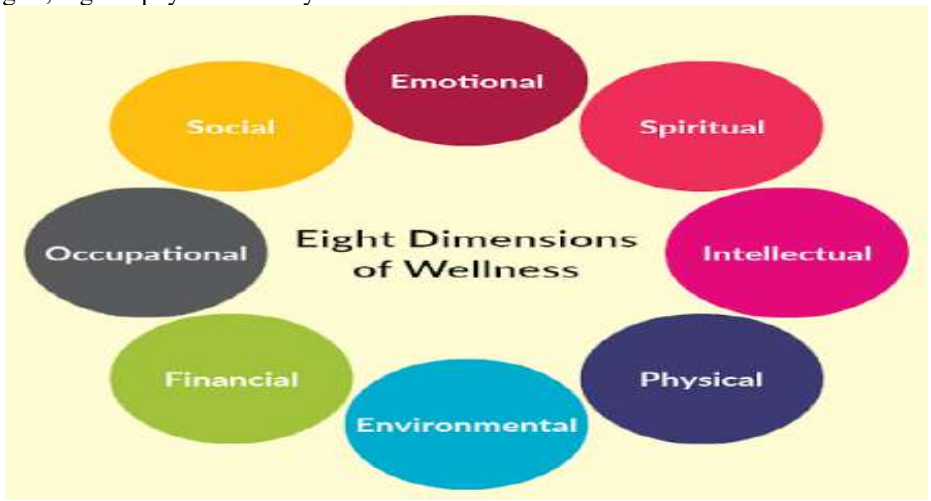

Figure 3. Classification of the main dimensions of wellness.

The growing acceptance of the wellness concept reflects this broader cultural transformation. Wellness is increasingly recognized as an accessible and person-centered approach to health promotion that encourages self-care, lifelong personal development, and integration with evidence-based preventive and rehabilitative interventions. Its flexibility, affordability, and compatibility with diverse health-promoting practices make it a practical framework for improving health-related quality of life and supporting sustainable healthy lifestyles.

Discussion

Wellness culture has been defined as a set of organizational policies, values, beliefs, customs, and supportive practices that promote healthy lifestyles and safe working environments within institutions and workplaces. Its primary objective is to foster health-oriented behaviors, improve employee well-being, and create organizational environments that support long-term physical and mental health (Fig. 4).



Figure 4*. Cultural norms shaping a healthy lifestyle*

Contemporary wellness culture should also be examined within the broader context of digital culture (cyberculture), where many health-related behaviors and social trends originate and rapidly disseminate. Digital technologies increasingly function as information management systems that facilitate access to health knowledge, encourage behavioral adaptation, and support health-related decision-making. Online platforms have become important environments for sharing physical activity programs, wellness interventions, nutritional guidance, and preventive health practices, making health culture more accessible than ever before. The interaction between humans and digital technologies has given rise to a distinct human–computer health subculture, which complements traditional verbal and written forms of health education. These virtual communities establish new social norms, values, and collaborative networks that influence health behavior and promote collective engagement in healthy lifestyles. This transition reflects a broader cultural shift from biomorphism toward technomorphism, accompanied by the emergence of new health-related cultural phenomena. Among the numerous values promoted within digital wellness communities, two appear particularly influential: social companionship through shared participation and the promotion of physical activity and health responsibility. Together, these factors strengthen motivation for sustained healthy behaviors and reinforce the principles of wellness culture in contemporary society.

Conclusion

Wellness culture has evolved into a fundamental component of the contemporary wellness paradigm, extending beyond traditional health promotion into the rapidly expanding digital environment. As digital health technologies and online wellness communities continue to develop, wellness culture is expected to play an increasingly important role not only for health-conscious individuals but also for healthcare systems and the wellness industry. Medical culture represents a specialized form of professional culture, whereas health culture is shaped by historical traditions, cultural heritage, and contemporary social values. Today, both concepts are increasingly integrated into cyberculture through digital health communication, eHealth services, telemedicine, and health management systems. Within this context, wellness culture may be regarded as an indicator of a modern, health-oriented society that values lifelong learning, personal responsibility, and holistic well-being. It reflects the characteristics of Homo cultus—an educated, culturally aware individual who actively promotes health, sustainable lifestyles, and continuous personal development.

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