

# Wearable Fitness Trackers: A Reflection on the Individual's Understanding of the Self

Jemima Ferreira

In contemporary society, our everyday lives are illuminated and simplified by, and often rely upon the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) (Line et al., 2013). This critical reflection explores wearable technology that is owned by one in every three Britons (Tankovska, 2020) – the wearable fitness tracker (WFT). Basic versions of WFTs collate data on movement such as, step-count, calorie consumption/burn, GPS, sleeping patterns and heartrate (Zimmer et al., 2020). Advanced versions go significantly further by measuring blood pressure, perspiration, blood oxygen levels and even posture (Kaiser et al., 2016; Toner, 2018).

In this critical reflection, I will examine how individuals regard the self through the use of these self-surveillant ICTs in a society governed by neo-liberal values. I will argue that through self-tracking, the idea of a reflexive, fluid identity is developed. Here, the self is malleable, measurable and perfectible. However, literature researching these devices has discovered drawbacks for the individual, most predictably the provoking of negative emotions (Goodyear et al., 2019) as argued by Lupton (2013) to be because of increased visibility of health, which will similarly be reflected upon.



In a reflexive society, the use of diverse therapeutic techniques, such as ICTs, demonstrates actors' control over their selves (Alexander, 1996). Underpinning this thesis is the disembeddedness of the self through the end of tradition and the confrontation with decisions to construct who we are as individuals (Giddens, 2013).

This process is called 'detraditionalization' and is further elucidated by Heelas (1996) as a new way in which we become disembedded from social constraints and traditional norms, so therefore identities are no longer inscribed. In

terms of WFTs, these devices encourage a reflexive self by keeping track of the everyday choices we make, whether to go on that morning jog, or just to stick with a single burger portion. Above all, WFTs create the ability to monitor our choices and their results, forcing the malleable individual to alter or maintain behaviour accordingly resulting in the never-ending construction of our own biographies (Beck et al., 1992; Sharon and Zandbergen, 2017).

The instability and pressure of identity no longer being fixed and the continual negotiation of lifestyle choices, has been a widely acknowledged problem of reflexive modernity (Kirby, 2008). For instance, Baumeister and Muraven (1996) exemplified

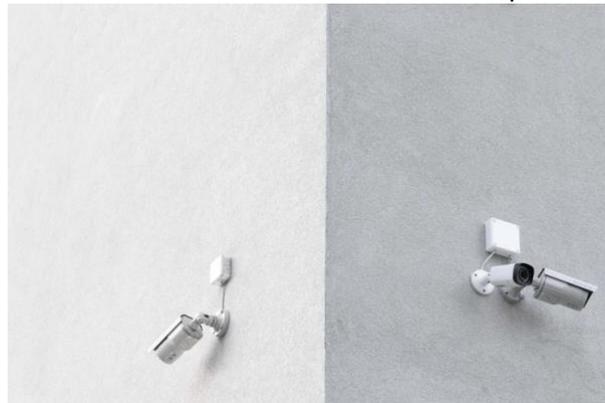
that through more choice, identity formation becomes strenuous and challenging, potentially provoking anxiety. Furthermore, Alexander (1996) argues that the thesis of detraditionalisation is flawed. He posits that it would be nonsensical to assume that all actions are entirely detached from traditional norms. Fundamentally, Alexander views detraditionalisation and reflexivity as a mere reiteration of the basic concepts within modernisation theory.

A possible contradiction with this argument in terms of the core principles of WFTs – self-tracking so as to monitor and change behaviour – Alexander’s argument does not apply as traditional societies’ lack of access to technologies meant self-tracking behaviours were rare (Sandywell, 1996). Therefore, although Alexander’s argument is convincing, in the specific case of WFTs, the self has undergone an exceptional and undoubtable disembeddedness as new vessels in society present an excess of forced lifestyle choices coercing their identity to be shaped and perfected, ultimately inhibiting stress and anxiety to the now, reflexive self.

A further consequence of reflexivity where the self is malleable and docile (Foucault, 2012), is identified by Shusterman (2000) as an overfocus on the external bodies, rather than the living experience. He argues that happiness and success does not only belong to those who are skinny and young, as portrayed by the media. This proposal unequivocally applies to WFTs as this is a device which although has health benefits (Andersen et al., 2020), is also used to monitor factors that are displayed on the body, i.e., body weight or athleticism. Therefore, users of this device may be too concerned about improving or monitoring the appearance and shape of their

bodies, catalysing a loss in interest or motivation to seek fruitful and satisfying life experiences. A further consequence of this overfocus on the external appearance has been linked by Lupton (2016) to an encouragement of addictive behaviours toward WFTs.

These consequences of possibly becoming addicted to a device that potentially steals you away from invaluable life experiences, could be seen as seriously concerning if not for Ledger and McCaffrey’s (2014) findings. They discovered most users



of self-tracking digital technologies (including WFTs) lose interest in such devices after a six-month period. However even so, this is the case for most user, not all, so the issues still remain.

Through the use of WFTs in a society underpinned by neoliberal values, the individual becomes an entrepreneur of the self (Foucault, 2004). The self becomes morally obliged to become the best she can be (Rose, 1999). Furthermore, through persistent use of WFTs that encourage self-disciplining and self-monitoring, the self becomes autonomous (Dean, 2010; Foucault, 2004). For an individual to be successful, the self must improve and present herself so to be marketised and then consumed by others (Weidner, 2009). WFTs provide us with the means to monitor our self-development, such as setting daily targets, so as to become the fittest or healthiest versions of ourselves.

O’Malley (1996) characterises neoliberalism as an abundance of risks for the actor that are not always unfortunate. In fact, how the individual controls this risk and waives it to their own

favour is completely down to them, with no one but themselves to blame if they fail in becoming the fittest or the healthiest (Brown, 2003; Layton, 2010; Sharon, 2017).

WFTs are a recent addition to the vast expanse of surveillant ICTs available at humanities disposal. This section will focus on the WFTs as a self-surveillant device, meaning that rather than an individual gathering information on herself for others' use (Dandeker, 1990), the effects of her own personal use will be considered. Foucault's (2012) concept of the 'Panopticon' prison explains how self-surveillant behaviour occurs. Inmates are unable to see whether guards are monitoring them specifically, or are even there at all (Foucault, 2012).

The guards' constant 'gaze' is internalised by the inmates, prompting them to regulate their own behaviour (Foucault, 1980; Vaz and Bruno, 2003). This gaze can be applied to WFTs as due to the many features it offers, including sleep evaluation, the individual will always be the subject of the WFTs gaze (Petherick, 2015). The majority of ICTs operate by collecting personal information and WFTs rely on it. Therefore, Lyon (2001) posits that a surveillance society is an information society.

Reflexivity implies that the individual essentially regards the self as 'free' to construct their own identity. Foucault's notion of self-surveillance does not allow the self to have privacy. The self-consciousness that the individual develops as a result of self-surveillance stipulates that the self is constantly being observed. Due to the user

being aware of this gaze, the self behaves in a way that is no longer authentic. Thus, through the use of WFTs individuals become the subject of their own constant gaze, regulating who they become and influencing how they behave (Goodyear et al., 2019), highlighting the importance and value of the individual's privacy (Introna, 1997). Fromm's (1960) depiction of contemporary society offers an insightful explanation of the endless gaze and its repercussions for the self. He hypothesises that as we have freed ourselves from traditional authorities, such as social constraints, we are unaware that we are now the prey of a contemporary form of authority, that may be permitted by surveillant technologies encouraging self-surveillance.

The power of this endless gaze has been identified as deep-rooted and profoundly influential (Webb and Quennerstedt, 2010). However, this raises the question of why WFTs are relinquished within the first six months of use. Vaz and Bruno (2019) postulate that individuals do not identify with the values of the gaze, it is only internalised. This is because individuals only change behaviour due to awareness of a surveillant device.

In other words, the individual does not believe that the changed behaviour is what is best for them, but to avoid potential punishment resulting from the constant gaze, they must continue to 'act'. Ergo, in the case of the relinquished WFTs users, some may have ceased to use them as they never fully identified with the values and importance of fitness and health that these devices relay onto users or they were not convinced that WFTs were the best option for them.



To conclude, this reflection has applied various concepts to the ideology of the self, created through the use of WFTs. A reflexive self is developed through a complex process of detraditionalisation, where the self is malleable and docile. WFTs present us with these contemporary choices forcing us to shape our identities as we please. The consequences of such a concept include emotional distress, feelings of instability and anxiety (Fromm, 2001), and an overfocus on external bodies leading the internal body to miss out on fruitful life experiences.

An esteemed critique of the concept, questioning the originality of reflexivity, was refuted as self-tracking (including technologies around it) is an original notion in many ways and therefore, requires further exploration to fully understand the extent of such practices. Since the WFT is a self-surveillant device as the self is aware that the device is constantly collecting data on the individual, the self is no longer able to have the luxury of privacy. WFTs represent a society underpinned by neoliberal values due to the marketisation of the self the device encourages, regarding the self as imperfect with a need to be presented and perfected to be consumed by others.

Not only does this create emotional distress again, but also large amounts of risk. Finally, the basis underlying the use of self-surveillant fitness trackers in a reflexive society underpinned by neoliberal values is that the self is regarded as a never-ending project of self-improvement. This narrative implies that the individual deems itself, from birth as an already flawed subject (Heyes, 2007).

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