Can the Benefits of Mental Health Apps be Fully Realised in a Neoliberal Society?

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Mental health awareness seems to be everywhere these days, and probably with good reason. The British Medical Association (2023) has identified a steady increase in the prevalence of adult mental disorders between 2000 and 2014, with COVID-19 and the associated lockdowns accelerating this trend – mental health service referrals were up 22% in 2022 compared to 2019. This critical reflection will start by using the theory of the Technological Information Society (Webster, 2014) to explain how the development of new technologies has changed the way people interact with each other and the social world, before then going on to discuss self-surveillance in the form of mental health tracking through apps and the benefits people can gain from this practice. Finally, it will situate the use of these apps within a neoliberal society to question the limits of placing responsibility for monitoring and treatment of mental health problems on the individual without also examining the social and cultural context in which mental health problems are experienced.

An Information Society is one in which information is the defining feature; information and knowledge are the key variables of the information society, as labour and capital were in industrial society (Kumar, 2005). The invention of the computer alone would have revolutionised industrial society, but the combining of the computer with telecommunication technology is what cemented the move to an information society by connecting the processing and communication of knowledge (Bell, 1980, cited in Kumar, 2005). Webster (2014) expands this definition to identify five different types of information society: technological, economic, occupational, spatial, and cultural. It is the technological information society, defined by the development of new technologies with ever greater capacity for creating, inputting, recording, and storing information, which is of most importance to the development of mental health apps. Advances in technology since Bell's identification of the significance of linking computer and communication technology in 1980 mean that 54% of the world's population own a smartphone (GSMA, 2023) and thus have access to the millions of apps available for uses ranging from social media, to entertainment, to health tracking.

The use of technology in medicine is nothing new. For centuries medical practitioners have been using whatever technology was available
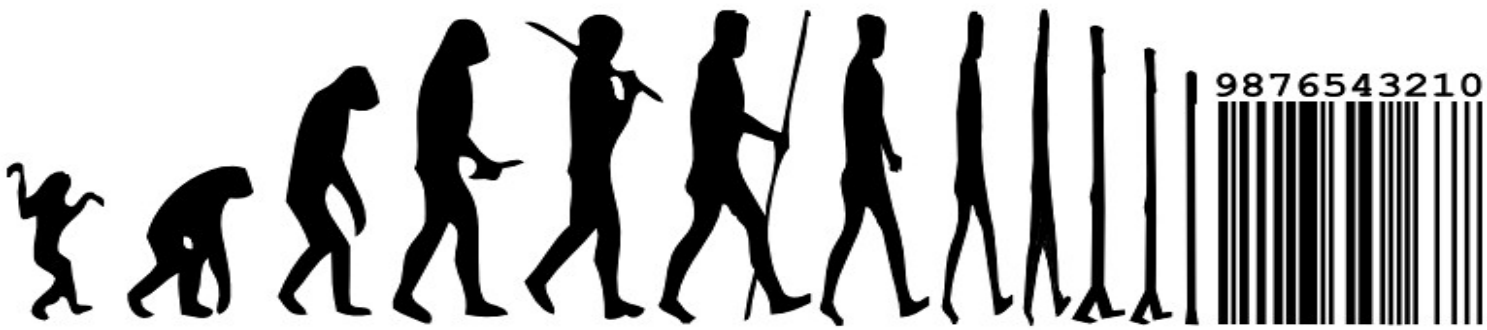
to them at the time in order to understand more about the body; the use of mobile technology for health tracking purposes can be seen as simply the natural progression of this practice (Lupton, 2012). There are currently an estimated 350,000 health tracking smartphone apps available (Marvel et. al 2022), with over 10,000 of these being specific to mental health (Schueller et. al, 2021).

A common feature of these apps is the ability to track one's mood and self-care habits, reflecting the current trend towards self-surveillance and tracking (Lupton, 2014). Lupton (2012) argues that the use of mobile devices to track and monitor people's health can be best understood as part of a surveillance society, in which tracking, recording, and surveillance are an ever-present part of daily life. While this general trend towards an increase in and normalisation of surveillance has been theorised as a negative move by some (for example Zuboff's 2019 work on surveillance capitalism), many people find this kind of self-tracking useful as a tool to reflect on their actions and potential changes they could make, in the pursuit of becoming their 'best self' (Lupton, 2014).

Alongside these developments in technology and increased self-tracking, there has been a global shift towards neoliberalism as the dominant political and policy discourse, starting most notably with Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Ronald Regan in the USA. Neoliberalism is a political ideology which champions market freedom and a rolling back of the state, viewing this as the best way to advance human well-being (Harvey, 2007). Teghtsoonian (2009) notes the simultaneous increase in depression as an area of public health concern in countries which have implemented neoliberal policies and, focussing on British Columbia, draws attention to the fact that many of the proposed solutions focus on treating the symptoms rather than investigating root causes.

Similarly, Iain Ferguson (2007) identifies 1975 as being the key year that happiness levels in Britain began to stall, linking this crucially with the fact that this was the year the expansion of the welfare state stopped, signalling a future of uncertainty for many people who relied on it. Following on from this, neoliberal policies implemented by Thatcher and every government since hers saw rises in poverty and huge expansions in inequality between rich and poor in the UK. Given that poverty and inequality have been associated with poor mental health and higher suicide risk (Acton, 2016; The Samaritans, 2023), neoliberal reform could be a contributing factor in the worsening of mental health, and the sheer number of mental health apps available shows one way people are looking to alleviate this problem for themselves.
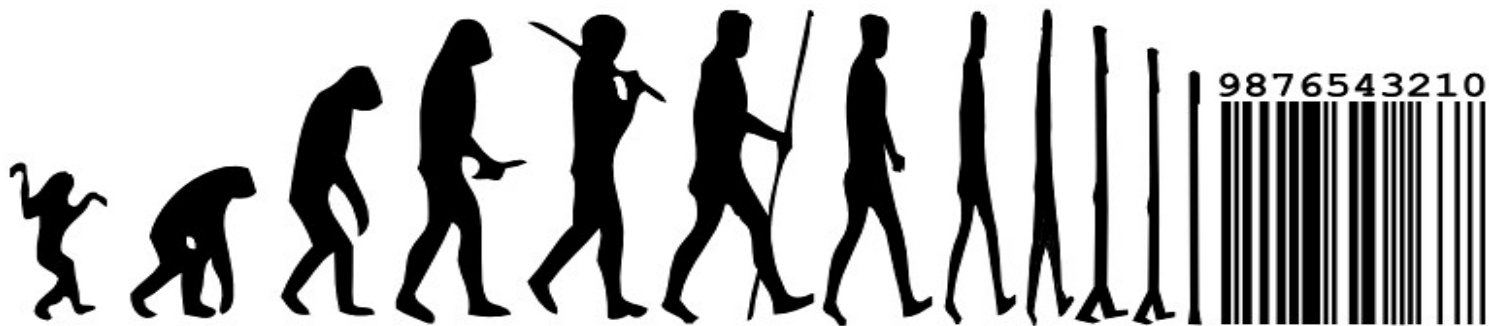
Self-tracking of any kind is seen by some as a way to centre purpose and intentionality in their daily actions and helps them to notice patterns and habits that may otherwise have remained invisible (Nafus and Sherman, 2014). In specific relation to the use of mental health tracking apps, one example from Nafus and Sherman's study was an individual tracking their mood leading to a realisation that the job they previously thought they were happy in was not the right fit for them. Without the aid of a mood tracking app, this individual may well have stayed in a job they didn't really enjoy purely because they were not noticing how it was making them feel. Alternatively, this purpose and intentionality may manifest in people cultivating greater awareness of their emotions through mood tracking, in order to be able to take a step back in times of heightened emotions, notice what they're feeling and act accordingly, as was reported by participants in Simmons et. al's (2023) study.

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Further evidence for the benefits of mental health apps comes from a meta-analysis by Eisenstadt et. al (2021) which found that they have the potential to improve users mood, manage their mental health symptoms, and improve emotional regulation.

While there is plenty of evidence for the benefits of mental health apps, it is important to situate these within the social context of their usage. The ideal of curating the 'best self', as mentioned previously, can be linked to neoliberal ideals of individualism and the entrepreneurial self (Scharff, 2016). The individual in neoliberal society is expected to be enterprising, self-managing and responsible; as Margaret Thatcher famously said "There's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families" (1987, quoted in The Guardian, 2013).

Mental health apps, and self-tracking more generally, place the onus of monitoring and managing symptoms on the individual, thus conforming to the idea of the neoliberal self being a fully responsible actor who does not need outside support. People of course can and often want to take some responsibility for their mental health, and apps are an easy and accessible way for many to feel empowered in doing this. However, too much focus on individualised solutions risks denying the role of any societal contributors to poor mental health (Gidaris, 2023), such as the neoliberal reforms and subsequent rise in poverty and inequality discussed earlier. Another consequence of neoliberal policies is the insufficient funding of NHS mental health services (Mind, 2022), making access to professional mental healthcare dependent on either being placed on long waiting lists, or being financially able to pay for private treatment.

This poses a potential limit to the improvement of mental health that people can get out of using apps. Their symptom tracking,
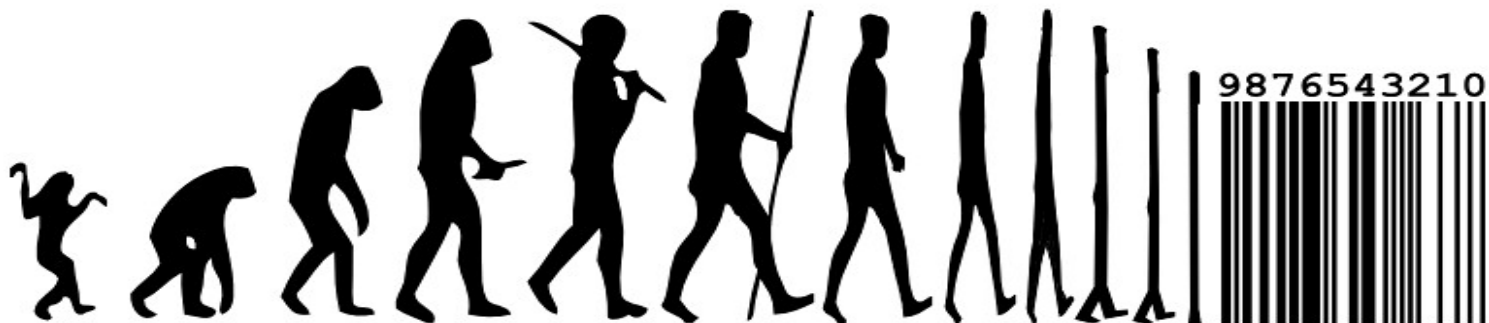
mood tracking, and medication reminder features can complement therapy and medication, but they cannot act as a complete substitute for traditional treatments (Collier, 2022). This suggests that if people are using the apps to track and manage their mood and symptoms but cannot access follow-up care through a trained professional, there is a limit to the usefulness of collecting this information.

The coming of an information society has revolutionised the way we live our lives through the development of ever more advanced information and communication technologies. The development of the smartphone application has many uses, with health tracking being a popular category of apps. The practice of self-tracking is a widely used method for people to gain a deeper understanding of themselves, reflect on their lives and implement changes to become their best self.

Mental health tracking apps have made mental health support available to a vast range of people, and have been shown to help improve mood, manage mental health symptoms, and improve emotional regulation and awareness. Through situating the use of these apps within the context of a neoliberal society with widespread inequality and a focus on individualised solutions to hardships, this critical reflection has questioned the extent to which people can fully benefit from these apps when using them in a society which does not provide them with easily accessible professional help and wider societal support systems.

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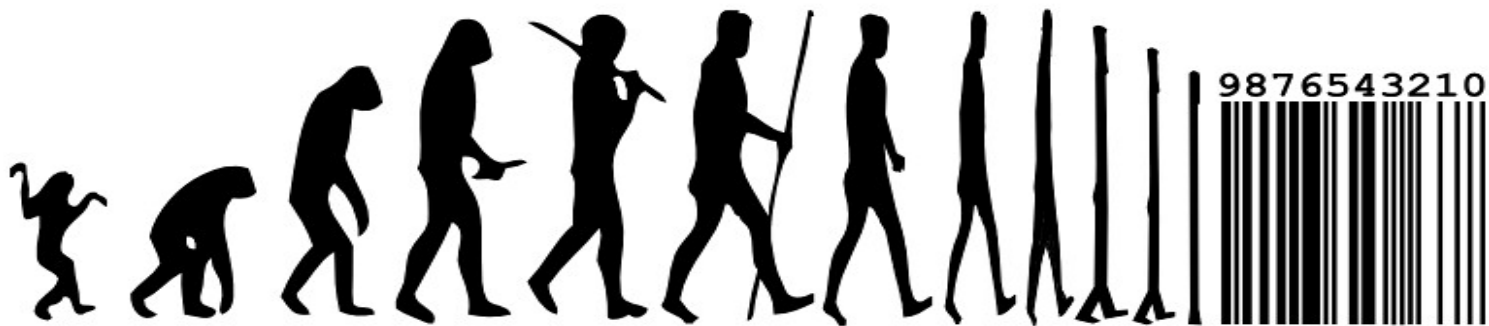
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