Introduction

In 2014, Apple announced the release of the Apple Watch; that year was predicted to be ‘the year of the wearable’, but the product has really come into its own in more recent years, with Gartner Inc. forecasting that worldwide shipments of wearable devices will reach 225 million this year.¹

Smartwatches have been marketed as the next big thing for personal health and fitness. Features such as measuring your heart rate, prompting you to stand once an hour, hit a daily exercise goal, and enter friendly competitions with friends and family, if put to good use, will no doubt motivate people to get up and be active. This is a key issue in today’s society, with 21% of men and 25% of women in the UK found to be completely inactive in 2018.² But how does this constant tracking affect our mental health?

For some people, fitness trackers will motivate them in a healthy way, to increase their activity levels. However, often, after an initial spike in activity levels upon purchase, activity levels begin to drop, therefore suggesting that smartwatches are not helping to form long-term habits. It seems the longer users own their device, the less it gets used: “nearly a third of users cease tracking activity six months after purchase”. For others, wearable devices can instigate feelings of anxiety or even obsessive tendencies surrounding exercise tracking and calorie counting since they enable hyper-vigilance. This could be especially dangerous for those who already have issues with their body image.

“...nearly a third of users cease tracking activity six months after purchase.”

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3 https://catalyst.nejm.org/stay-abandon-wearable-devices/
4 Pritchard, M. E., ‘Activity Tracking can Cause Anxiety and Hyper Vigilance,’ in Does the Internet Increase Anxiety?, ed. by Tamara Thompson, Greenhaven Press, 2016
A Slave to Steps

It’s commonly quoted that everyone should be aiming for 10,000 steps a day; that this qualifies you as ‘active’. The truth is, this figure is a completely arbitrary one. It originates from a successful Japanese marketing campaign after the 1964 Tokyo Olympics; the company ‘Yamas’ introduced the world’s first pedometer, named it manpo-kei, which translates to “10,000-step meter”, and so the idea was born. After this, studies were done, showing that on average people walk 3,000 to 4,000 steps a day and if this was increased to 10,000, many health risks decrease. But is it an increase in current activity levels that benefits an individual’s health, rather than a specific number of steps? It is possible that this supposedly harmless marketing campaign was where the trouble began – as Adam Alter says: “numbers pave the road to obsession” – made worse by the increase in technology and thus the increase in measurables (calories, laps, distance, the list goes on).

Constantly Connected

Wearables allow us to be connected at all times, even more so than smart phones. We can receive messages, notifications and even answer phone calls; we are always reachable. With this it is becoming almost impossible to separate work from life and “the very real risk... [is] with wearable technology further lengthening and intensifying the working day, turning the current mental health problem into a mental health crisis.”

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5 https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2018/sep/03/watch-your-step-why-the-10000-daily-goal-is-built-on-bad-science
6 Alter, A., Irresistible: Why we Can’t Stop Checking, Scrolling, Clicking and Watching, Random House, 2017
7 https://www.personneltoday.com/hr/wearable-technology-mental-health-implications/
(Un)healthy Competition?

Experts on exercise addiction have suggested that advances in technology have encouraged obsessive goal monitoring, with smartwatches and trackers being the worst offenders, providing constantly updated fitness metrics.\(^8\) On top of this, the gamification features that these devices now include, which allow users to set goals, win awards and compete with friends and family, keep these metrics at the forefront of our minds all day, every day. Schreiber explains that “focussing on numbers divorces you from being in tune with your body”.\(^9\) The need to reach the ‘goal’, the step count, or to win the competition, takes over and stops individuals from listening to what their body is telling them. This was seen in a 2018 university undergraduate study on the topic, which asked contributors to remove their fitness tracker for the second week of the study and manually relay how they felt their health was each day. At the beginning of the second week, one participant noted that she couldn’t determine whether she felt tired without checking her tracker; after a few more days without her tracker, she reported feeling much more in tune with her body and health again.\(^10\)

For those who are inactive, or not as fit as the people they are sharing results with, competitions and goals can quickly become demoralising and demotivating. One study found that people were made to feel bad when they had finished the day thinking they had done a great run or workout, only to find that their friend had run further, faster or burned more calories than they had.\(^11\)

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\(^8\) Alter, A., *Irresistible*, Random House, 2017


\(^10\) Farrer, O., *An Investigation into the Impact of Activity Tracker Usage on Perceived Health*, University of Bath, 2018

\(^11\) Farrer, O., *An Investigation into the Impact of Activity Tracker Usage on Perceived Health*, 2018
What was originally made to motivate users, is now possibly one of the most dangerous aspects of these devices and can be seen to accentuate feelings of anxiety, low self esteem and possibly promote behaviours that could lead to serious eating disorders.

However, this is an optional function of the devices, and so does not have to be used by those who believe or know it to have negative effects on them. For many, this element of competition is what drives them to stay active – a well-known treatment for many mental health issues – and can also be a way to socialise with others online; a positive for anyone struggling with their mental health.

‘Appy Days

Despite the tracking element of wearables having potentially negative effects on some who use them, there are aspects to these devices that are very beneficial to users’ mental health. With the help of the devices’ ability to track things like breathing, heart rate, body temperature and more, wearables can aid the tracking and measuring of our mental health, as well as our physical health. Application developers have used these features to their advantage and there are now tens of thousands of applications that claim to aid people with mental health struggles. These applications suggest real promise in helping people to deal with mental health issues such as stress and anxiety. However, we must be mindful that in some cases greater help is needed than an application can provide.
Final Thoughts

As with many things, some people handle technology better than others, which is especially key when considering the fitness tracker element of wearables; what may affect some, will not faze others. For this reason, it is difficult to say that wearables are unequivocally beneficial or harmful to mental health; it is very dependent on the individual.

From the view of an insurer, the rise and boom of wearable technology brings our attention to a whole host of new data possibilities that could be used to help consumers stay engaged during the lifetime of their policy, and maybe even get better prices. This form of data is not just a snapshot in time, like the current application form process; it can demonstrate patterns in consumer behaviour and therefore could lead to fewer questions having to be asked, because the insurer can already see the answers.

Thinking about wearables and the data that could come from them opens the door to other unconventional data sources that we could consider. For instance: credit card data, the Internet of Things, or even sources such as Spotify or Apple Music – remember, the younger generations are far less worried about giving away their data, as long as they will benefit from doing so.

“...wearable technology brings our attention to a whole host of new data possibilities that could be used to help consumers stay engaged during the lifetime of their policy, and maybe even get better prices.”

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