Rachael Kent, **The Digital Health Self: Wellness, Tracking, and Social Media,** Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press, 2023, 230 pp, $139.95 (hardcover).

Reviewed by
Xinna Li
University College Dublin

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the transformative potential of digital health technologies, making their role in our everyday lives increasingly apparent. In *The Digital Health Self: Wellness, Tracking, and Social Media*, Rachael Kent explores this phenomenon, examining how self-tracking technologies and social media shape health behaviors, identities, and societal norms. Grounded in ethnographic research and interdisciplinary theories, Kent offers a compelling analysis of how individuals navigate the promises and pitfalls of digital health technologies in a world increasingly driven by data and connectivity.

Kent's central argument revolves around her concept of the "digital health self," which she defines as "the embodiment of evolving with and navigating our everyday lives, traversing between personal lifestyle choice and wellness goals, shifting neoliberal international healthcare and governmental policies, technological advancements, under digital capitalism" (p. 6). This reconceptualization challenges conventional definitions of digital health, typically centered on wearables and medical apps, by incorporating the pervasive influence of social media in shaping health practices and identities. By expanding the scope of digital health to include platforms like Instagram and Facebook, the two platforms concentrated on in this book, Kent highlights how everyday interactions and digital technology habits contribute to a broader understanding of one's body and health.

At the heart of Kent's analysis is the notion that digital health technologies do not operate in isolation but are deeply embedded within the cultural and economic logic of neoliberalism. She reviews the history of health tracking in the United Kingdom from the post–World War Two development of the British National Health Service, through the birth of neoliberalism, to how the pandemic intensified the moral imperative to maintain one's health, aligning personal responsibility with good citizenship. The book delves into the political economy of health data, critiquing how self-tracking technologies and social media platforms commodify health and reduce it to easily quantifiable metrics. Kent discusses the "datafication" of health, where platforms collect and monetize user data in ways that oversimplify human experiences and frequently undermine both physical and emotional well-being, neglecting the nuanced realities of human health in favor of profit-driven models. Through empirical analysis from interview, reflexive diaries, and online content shared by participants, Kent illustrates how these simplified metrics can become coercive, fostering unhealthy behaviors and unrealistic expectations. This reductionist approach, she argues, often leads to damaging practices where individuals prioritize achieving arbitrary goals over listening to their bodies. For
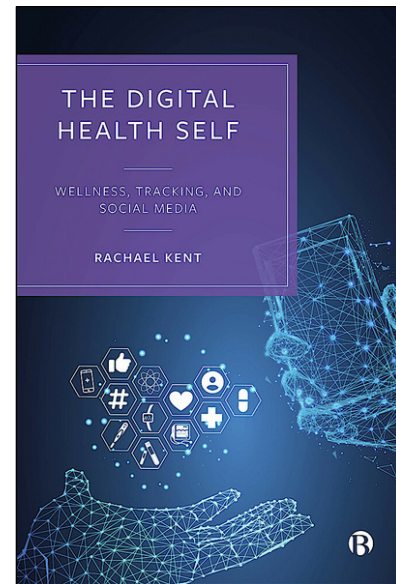
instance, the goals set by the digital health applications, like the time and distance left to go in running apps, might force users to finish the run when they have an injury or their energy is already depleted.

Kent's discussion of gamification and its impact on health behaviors adds another layer of depth to the book. By incorporating competitive and comparative elements such as badges, points, and leaderboards, self-tracking apps create a gamified experience that appeals to users' intrinsic motivation. However, Kent critiques the limitations of these design choices, noting that they often fail to account for individual difference in physical capabilities and emotional states. This critique is particularly relevant in a world where gamification is increasingly used as a tool to drive engagement across various digital platforms.

One of the book's most striking insights is its exploration of surveillance. Kent demonstrates how self-tracking devices and social media facilitate both self-surveillance and peer surveillance to reinforce societal expectations of health optimization. Through these technologies, individuals not only monitor their own behaviors but also become subject to the gaze of their peers in communities, creating an environment where norms of self-improvement are constantly upheld and amplified. This phenomenon is deeply intertwined with surveillance capitalism, in which personal data generated by users is mined, commodified, and monetized for health profiling and targeted advertising, often under the guise of self-improvement and presented as a pathway to personal betterment. Users, in turn, trade their privacy for using "free" services offered by digital platforms and achieving visibility for the communities' gaze, without knowing where and who their data were sold to.

Kent then looks into the performative nature of health representation on social media. Here, users construct their "healthy" identities, driven by the rewards of validation and feedback from their online communities. While this performative engagement can foster feelings of inclusion and motivation, it also simultaneously places significant pressure on individuals, often pushing them away from genuine self-care practices toward a facade of health designed to meet external expectations. In this context, Kent's critique of "economy of hope" (p. 52)—a term she uses to describe the perpetual striving for an idealized version of health—is particularly convincing. This "economy of hope" encourages individuals to invest time, money, and energy into self-tracking and optimization practices, often at the expense of their mental and physical well-being. For many, the pressure to achieve unattainable ideals set by "healthy role models" (p. 92) results in feelings of inadequacy and failure. Kent also highlights how sharing self-tracking data on social media fosters a sense of accountability for some users, while creating substantial emotional burdens for others. The positive reinforcement of likes and comments often encourages users to persist with health-related behaviors, but the absence of such feedback can lead to feelings of alienation. This duality underscores the complex interplay between technology, community, and individual identity in the realm of digital health. The performative nature of digital health is further emphasized through Kent's analysis of lifestyle representation. On platforms like Instagram, users carefully curate their health-related content to align with societal ideals of fitness and wellness. These representations often blur the line between authenticity and aspiration, as individuals strive to present a version of themselves that resonates with their online communities. Kent's exploration of these dynamics sheds light on the stress of maintaining a digital health identity, particularly in the context of gendered and sexualized body ideals.

The book's interdisciplinary approach is one of its greatest strengths. Drawing from sociology, media studies, and psychology, Kent provides a holistic view of the digital health landscape. Her ethnographic research and the reflexive role of the methodologies add depth and nuance, capturing the lived experiences of individuals navigating self-tracking technologies in their daily lives. This empirical foundation enables her to critique broader societal trends without losing sight of personal narratives. For instance, Kent's interviews with participants and their reflexive diaries reveal how individuals internalize feelings of guilt and shame when failing to meet self-imposed or socially driven health goals, emphasizing the moral weight associated with health behaviors in a neoliberal context. These insights provide a human face to her critique of the systemic issues underpinning digital health practices.

However, the book is not without its challenges. The book's theoretical framework, though rigorous, can be dense and occasionally overwhelming. Readers unfamiliar with jargon and theoretical concepts in this interdisciplinary field may find themselves struggling to keep pace. Additionally, the book's academic and conceptual depth might limit its accessibility to industry professionals, such as app developers or healthcare practitioners, who could benefit from its insights.

Despite this, *The Digital Health Self* is a timely and thought-provoking contribution to the field of digital health. Kent's critique of neoliberal governance and surveillance capitalism is both incisive and urgent, resonating with contemporary debates about data ethics and societal well-being in a digital world. Kent's call for ethical accountability in the design and implementation of digital health technologies is particularly relevant, given the rapid pace of innovation in this field. Her discussion of the "worried well," or individuals who become overly anxious about their health due to constant self-monitoring, is particularly relevant in today's context. This phenomenon highlights the psychological costs of digital health technologies, which often exacerbate rather than alleviate health-related anxieties. She advocates for a user-centered approach that prioritizes inclusivity, accessibility, and emotional well-being, challenging the industry to move beyond metrics-driven design. The book is definitely valuable for scholars and students in digital humanities, public health, and media studies, as well as policymakers and ethicists grappling with the implications of digital health technologies. Kent's insights into the ethical and societal dimensions of digital health in everyday life make the book a must-read for anyone interested in the future of digital health management.

As Kent concludes, digital health technologies are not neutral tools but are imbued with the values and priorities of the systems that produce them. By foregrounding the lived experiences of users, Kent's book not only illuminates the complexities of the digital health self but also opens up vital conversations about the future of health in the digital age. This book challenges us to reconsider our relationship with technology, urging users to balance the potential benefits of digital health tools with a critical understanding of their potential impacts and broader implications.