



# Young Feminist

## "Self-Care" Won't Solve Life's Problems – At Least Not the Way It's Sold to Women

By Sujaya Balachandran

Self-care has firmly established itself as a buzzword over the past several years and created a verifiable movement that has earned extensive media coverage, become the topic of popular TED Talks (Brubaker, 2020), and most saliently, created the "self-care" hashtag on social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram.

Social media influencers have promoted their own brand of self-care, prescribing the practice as a way of "becoming the best version of yourself" (The Take, 2022).

Self-care arose to address the symptoms of everyday stressors and to improve our mental, social, and psychological well being. Many people have found personal value in performing several forms of self-care and it has sparked necessary conversations about mental health.

Nonetheless, the self-care movement and the wellness industry that it has spawned raise several concerns, especially for women, to whom "self-care" is primarily promoted and marketed.

There are varying ideas as to what "self-care" means and what the practice entails. Popular self-care practices include aromatherapy, skincare, meditation, and exercise. However, self-care is a nuanced topic, and there exist distinctions between the interrelated concepts of self-care, self-soothing, community care, and structural care.

A handy infographic from author and technologist Deanna Zandt defines each of these terms as follows (Zandt, 2019):

- Self-care consists of activities that help you find meaning and support your growth and "grounded-ness"
- Self-soothing activities provide distraction and/or comfort during difficult times
- Community care are workarounds for systems that don't inherently support care (i.e., capitalism!)
- Structural care comprises systems that support community care, self-care, and self-soothing

Modern interpretations of self-care not only elude this nuance but recast self-care as a trend

that advocates for efficiency, productivity, and optimization. This rebranding of self-care removes it from the realms of wellness and overall health, using it to espouse what are arguably capitalistic and consumerist values.

A notable example is the "That Girl" trend that has emerged on Instagram and TikTok (Sharma, 2021). Influencers who endorse this trend share some common lifestyle practices: waking up early each morning, completing an exercise routine (often yoga or Pilates), making an "Insta-worthy" breakfast consisting mostly of fruits and protein supplements, or writing in a gratitude journal.



While ostensibly aiming to encourage overall wellness and health, these trends are in fact priming young women to brand themselves better and to become more productive workers under capitalism.

Ironically, this form of "self-care" is work itself.

The structured nature of these young women's highly regimented schedules and the emphasis on meeting certain metrics reads as a form of optimization or even "life hacking," a trend that predates "self-care" but has deeply influenced this problematic version of the practice.

Further, the women who populate the "That Girl" hashtag on TikTok and Instagram are often privileged young women of means, with disposable income and ample time to focus on themselves and carry out these "self-care" routines.

Leisure is often a privilege, if not an outright luxury for many, as working women, especially working mothers, find their free time constrained by the demands of their jobs, childcare, and household duties (Gilchrist, 2019).

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These women are often young, thin, able-bodied white women, meaning that this “self-care” trend excludes marginalized groups of women and women of various shapes and sizes. It has thus become another unrealistic and unattainable ideal for many women who do not see themselves represented by these social media influencers.

Many “That Girl” posts feel like curated and carefully manicured performances, which obscure the messiness and difficulties of everyday life.

Importantly, the self-care movement has birthed the wellness industry, which is now a \$1.5 trillion market, according to some estimates.

Opportunistic companies like Gwyneth Paltrow’s GOOP (valued at approximately \$250 million), and skincare and cosmetic brands like Tatcha (worth an estimated \$500 million in 2019), have marketed and sold myriads of products to women under the “self-care” label (Robin, 2019). A 2020 article from Marie Claire entitled “25 Self-Care Products to Treat Yourself to Right Now” underscores how deeply the public, especially women, associate “self-care” with skincare and cosmetics (Peng & Chilton, 2020). “Self-care” has thus become a ploy for the wellness industry to market specifically to women and secure profits.

Skincare is, of course, not an inherently vapid or indulgent pursuit, and many women find solace in being able to engage in a ritual where they focus on themselves.

As Sady Doyle contends in a Huffington Post op-ed on skincare, “What we’re talking about, when we talk about skin care, is not just female consumption or even female gender performance, but female pleasure (Doyle, 2018).” Nonetheless, many skincare products and services come with an inaccessible price point. The author of one article critiquing GOOP balked at “four-figure prices” of certain items at an upscale GOOP store in New York City (Mull, 2019).

And just as with the “That Girl” hashtag and the numerous social media influencers branding themselves as “self-care” practitioners, the marketing of these products to women creates further unrealistic standards when they are already contending with existing societal pressures to “have it all,” be successful, and to look beautiful.

Self-care is also often recommended as a perfunctory or “band-aid” solution to structural problems that require expansive changes like better wages, affordable housing, increased access to health care, and greater supports for women, like paid maternal leave and affordable childcare.

During the pandemic, “self-care” became a hollow refrain offered in response to declining mental health related to isolation, loss of jobs and wages, and grief from witnessing deaths from COVID-19 (Mayo Clinic Health System, 2020). Women, who perform the lion’s share of household labor, including emotional and care labor, found themselves on the receiving end of this “self-care” slogan while being unsupported at home and at work (Barroso, 2021).



## So what does true self-care look like?

A poignant Facebook post provides a frank and far less glamorous definition of self-care as “a very unbeautiful thing” that entails habits like paying off accumulated debts, cooking healthy meals, and going to therapy (Nepenthe, 2019). The author propounds, “True self-care is not salt baths and chocolate cake, it is making the choice to build a life you don’t need to regularly escape from.” The emphasis is on establishing and cultivating healthy habits that you can realistically incorporate into your life for genuine self-improvement. As discussed, self-care can also take the form of structural changes to our system, like universal healthcare, paid family leave, and living wages.

Let’s reclaim self-care from its commodified version and instead adopt a more holistic and nuanced approach to wellness.❖

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