

Has Optimization Culture Finally Maxxed on Maxxing?

How the gamification of living is ruining the game of life

By Jacqueline Strum

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Last week, Diary of a CEO podcaster Steven Bartlett shared that his life had essentially been ruined for three days after a night out with close friends, during which he indulged in—grab your pearls—two to three glasses of red wine. (Audible gasp!)

The fallout? He reportedly slept poorly that night and even “podcasted worse” than usual the next day. A tragedy.

Ordinarily, I would roll my eyes and move on with my day. But what happened next fascinated me: the internet collectively rolled its eyes even harder.

And the backlash felt...meaningful.

Over the last few years, a movement has taken hold across podcasts, social feeds, and pop culture, particularly among younger generations, that seems intent on measuring life based on wellness stats. A whole industry and culture has sprouted up with the supposed goal of helping us all reach our personally-assigned KPI.

It started with Andrew Huberman’s cold plunges—a mostly harmless albeit excruciating gateway drug into wellness culture.

Then came the increasingly elaborate morning routines. The 5:30 am wake-ups with no snoozes, a giant glass of lemon water, 10 to 20 minutes of natural light exposure, no phone checks for at least an hour. Oh, and you can’t have a cup of coffee until 90 to 120 minutes after waking.

Soon, our wrists and fingers were tracking our every bodily function with Oura Rings and Whoops. Then came protein-maxxing, sleep-maxxing, looksmaxxing, longevity-maxxing, and an endless parade of self-improvement projects that increasingly felt less like wellness and more like a competitive sport.

To optimize is human. To over-optimize is to miss what makes us human.

One of the internet's most recognizable millennial influencers, [Christina Najjar \(better known as @Tinx\)](#), immediately weighed in on the Bartlett backlash:

"I think it's really critical that we analyze what these 'thought leaders' are saying even in passing. My belief is that optimization culture has gotten out of control. It has robbed an entire generation of joy because of the demonization of fun."

These trends have undeniably shaped broader consumer behavior, including, in part, the [market corrections many of us in wine](#) are navigating today. Alcohol has become framed not simply as indulgent, but as antithetical to peak performance itself.

Influencers and non-influencers added to Tinx's reaction, revealing that perhaps we have finally reached peak maxxing. Max-maxxing, if you will.

Brand expert [Ashwinn Bego weighed in](#) on optimization culture to the tune of 1.5 million views. Dietitians like Jaclyn London told audiences that "[wellness culture is the new diet culture.](#)" Performance coach and researcher [Brad Stulberg](#) echoed similar concerns saying, "Actual excellence...demands resilience. It controls the controllables, no doubt. But it also ensures you don't optimize yourself into fragility." Even my favorite business news podcast, [The Best One Yet](#), joined the discourse.

Honestly? I have been saying this for years.

The crisis of isolation has never been more prevalent, and I suspect it is harming us far faster than an innocent glass of wine (or two) ever could.

Many of us eventually learn that trying to control every variable in life only ends in disappointment, anxiety, or misery, and yet we continue trying. We obsess over sleep scores, macros, steps, recovery data, peptides, glucose spikes, and perfect routines while quietly removing the very things that make life feel meaningful: mistakes, spontaneity, and real human connection.

As academic, author, and influencer Scott Galloway puts it:

"I think young people need to drink more. I don't see drunkenness. I see togetherness... My advice to young people is to go out and drink more and make a series of bad decisions."

His larger point being that people desperately need more connection, more strangers, more randomness, more missteps, more opportunities to bump into life and grow together. Because increasingly, many of us are becoming optimized for loneliness.

I come to an existential crossroads on the meaning of life more frequently than I'd like to admit. And when I do, I return again and again to one of my favorite episodes of one of my favorite shows: 30 Rock. Alec Baldwin's legendary workaholic character, Jack Donaghy, has a near-death experience. Lying in a hospital bed, speaking to the equally iconic Liz Lemon (played by Tina Fey), he says:

"All the time I've been on this Earth I have only one regret: I should have worked more."

The scene is funny because it so perfectly captures who Jack is at his core. But it is also funny because, of course, people famously have the opposite realization at the end of life that productivity is not everything.

Over the last few years, I've lost several people I love in a relatively short span of time. And you know what never came up in those final conversations? Their sleep score. Loss has one strange silver lining: it shines a very bright light on what actually matters. And I can tell you, without hesitation, that a spontaneous night out with friends, complete with two, or dare I say three, glasses of wine, will almost always make your life richer than a "perfect" day of work.

I'm relieved to see that perhaps, finally, more people are beginning to realize the same thing before it's too late.

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