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Transnational Bodies of Yogis: A Flow from Analogue Photography to Social Media

Abstract

In the initial stages of “modern, transnational yoga”, the image of the Indian yogi in a yoga pose became an effective medium for introducing the discipline to Western society. Due to this, the Indian subject began to be spoken about in terms of “showmanship”¹. At the same time, yoga began interacting with the practices of Western gym culture. Subsequent to the impact of photography, the emergence of the Internet and digital photography have created a different approach to yoga by practitioners. At the end of the historical process of modern postural yoga’s development, we encounter modern Western individuals who today utilize yoga as a way to present themselves through visual materials again, but in a digital space and different cultural context. In this paper, I present the historical evolution of yoga practices in Western society to reveal the re-contextualization of yoga as a transnational concept. Moreover, I question how transnational yoga became a means for modern individuals to present their identity in the context of social media. Here, the body is used as a means for both constituting a social dialogue and communicating self-identity. Even if these two subjects have different approaches towards yoga, Indian showmen and the modern yogi still have commonalities regarding the “show” in a Goffmanian sense². To investigate the transformation of yoga and highlight similarities and differences due to both technological changes and the dominance of visuality in culture, Instagram is an appropriate platform, as it claims to connect people via images. Drawing from a visual analysis of Instagram posts and a comparison of the bodily practices contained within them against publicly available images of the first yogis in the West, bodily representations are interpreted in the re-contextualized setting of modern society.

¹ Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice*, (Oxford University Press) (2010).

² Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, (University of Edinburgh, Social Sciences Research Center). (1959).

Key words: yoga, yogi, self-presentation, transnational body, photography, social media

Introduction

As a physical discipline in the modern fitness culture of the West, yoga has been welcomed around the world and appreciated by the masses for its benefits to people's lives since the early nineteenth century. Due to this growing popularity, the International Day of Yoga was adopted on the 21st June 2015 in a declaration by the UN General Assembly. The event was organized with the co-sponsorship of a record number of 175 nations. Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of India, proposed this Indian-led initiative, which is now celebrated all over the world, and the United Nations responded by emphasizing yoga's "global benefits" in terms of individuals' health and well-being³.

Along with the widespread embracement of yoga by various cultures, regardless of diversified traditions, customs, religions, or geographic regions, the interaction between this Indian discipline and the West makes it worth investigating as a transnational concept, as it is influenced by global flows of knowledge disseminated through modern visual technologies. While there are a variety of types of yoga, postural yoga—a popular physical activity based on bodily practices—is the focus of this paper. Instead of meditation-based branches of yoga, non-religious yoga practice has been chosen for examination since it is prevalent in contemporary society today. Although spiritual aspects of yoga are promoted in the public eye, common practice in the West suggests that yoga's increased popularity is due to the physical activity involved and the fact that it offers an enjoyable way of spending free time. Iyengar⁴, who is one of the most well-known yoga gurus in the world, offered the definition of yoga that states that it is not a religion, but is intended for personal growth and physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual balance. While the religious roots of this Indian discipline are not ignored, the concerns of this paper are limited to styles of yoga based on asana, yoga posture, and physical techniques for physical and mental health of individuals. The flexibility of postural yoga has made it suitable for a multitude of social settings, as proven by the celebration of Yoga Day in 175 countries.

Here, digital photography of yogi Instagram users was analysed to identify yoga as a means of presenting self-identity in the digital realm. Through this presentation, the body becomes the focus and the modern subject uses social media

³ International Day of Yoga, <http://www.un.org/en/events/yogaday/background.shtml>, date accessed 5 August 2016.

⁴ Bellur Krishnamachar Sundararaja Iyengar, *The Tree of Yoga: Yoga Vr̥kṣa*, (Shambhala Publications) (1989).

and Instagram to live out their yogic self online. To investigate the bodily representations, the data was obtained from Instagram posts of Western yogis and the mass-distributed images of the first yogis in the West. According to Gillian Rose⁵, images cannot speak for themselves: they must be analysed in a specific context in order to be meaningful. Therefore, it was important to consider the visual material in relation to the historical and social settings in which they were produced. Appropriately, the data was interpreted in terms of its content and the composition of the photographic images. Furthermore, understanding how users experienced the visual technologies as they developed over time is important in social research⁶. Hence, the photography's discursive construction was examined, focusing on medium-specific features of magazines with early image production technologies, and social network services in the era of digital photography. It is also worth noting that the term yogi refers to male yoga practitioners, whereas yogini is used for female practitioners. To avoid repetition, the term "yogi" is used here for yoga practitioners, regardless of gender. Furthermore, "asana", which means yoga pose or posture, is used throughout this paper for yoga moves in a sequence synchronized with breathing exercises⁷.

Yoga as a Transnational Practice

Stemming from the Sanskrit word *yuj*, the literal meaning of yoga corresponds to the English "unite", which is interpreted as uniting body and mind⁸. Since the late 19th century, yoga—with its diverse set of rules—has preoccupied Western society; from the techniques of hatha yoga, which has become a generic term for yoga based on physical posture, to vinyasa yoga, which is based on a sequence of yoga moves. While "every group in every age has created its own version and vision of yoga"⁹, its benefits on health and emotional stability have been manifested in dominant discourse.

As opposed to the common understanding of yoga in terms of its ancient roots and spiritual references, the modern postural yoga that we encounter today in the United States and European countries has a history of around 150 years¹⁰. Based on the works of Mark Singleton, one can affirm that what is practiced outside of India today should be viewed in relation to international gym culture. Concurrent with the proliferation of yoga in the West, it has continued to interact with

⁵ Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies; An Introduction To The Interpretation Of Visual Materials*, (London: Sage). (2001).

⁶ Sarah Pink, *Doing Ethnography: Images, Media and Representation in Research*, (London: Sage) (2001).

⁷ Andrea R. Jain, „The Dual-Ideal of the Ascetic and Healthy Body: The Jain Terapanth and Modern Yoga in the Context of Late Capitalism”, *Nova Religio* 15:3 (2012), pp.29-50.

⁸ Definition of Yoga, http://yoga.org.nz/what-is-yoga/yoga_definition.htm, date accessed 1 November 2016.

⁹ David Gordon White, *Yoga in Practice*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press) (2012), pp. 2-22.

¹⁰ Mark Singleton.

contemporary physical practices. At the end of this historical process, society encountered yoga as a transnational product. It is a result of the colonial process while India was under British rule, nationalist movements in which yoga was used as a means for Indian identity, and finally global influences that are very powerful in forming modern yoga through increased mobility and developed communication technologies¹¹. However, rather than being linear, the formation and re-formation of postural yoga has been influenced by increasing mobility in the modern world. Jain explains this, stating:

... (Yoga) does not move from India to Europe and North America, but rather moves back and forth among a plurality of spaces, resulting in multifarious forms that are perpetually constructed and reconstructed anew to adapt to new discourses, demands, and trends in the modern yoga market¹².

In the contemporary era, yoga is instrumentalized for Westerners' self-presentation in a different cultural context. This time, beyond the offline lives of the individuals, the digital realm provides a Goffmanian stage for the yogic self. Especially on profile-based Social Network Services (SNSs) such as Instagram, the yogi portrays a different self than the one lived out by the Indian yoga gurus of the 20th century. Yet, the yogi still presents relevant aspects of her/his identity through the utilization of visual material whose aim is to influence the viewer's impression. The self-identity in question appears in connection with consumption preferences regarding the yogic lifestyle, which is conveyed via specific sign equipment. Erving Goffman explains sign equipment as the tools that people employ for presenting themselves to others. These tools include the social setting of the communication, manner, and appearances, and allow individuals to sustain their performances during social interaction.¹³ For instance, healthy dietary habits are often shown on Instagram galleries and being a "vegetarian yogi" or "vegan yogi" is indicated in the biography section on Instagram. Leisure time activities and yoga outfits are also used as sign equipment for the construction of self-identity in the digital realm. After all, it is important to point out that all the choices framed in posted shots have a connection with the yoga body of yogis.

Regardless of the period of transnational yoga, the body has become the focus of the visual narrativization of yogic-identity and asana, or yoga postures; it has been used as a means of transmitting the messages beyond the physical practice itself. In addition to periodic differences and the characteristics of yogis, the yoga body has been portrayed within the bounds of the technology of its era. In this paper, I will investigate two periods of modern postural yoga and provide a comparison between yoga as self-representation by a post-colonial subject and self-actualization of the late-modern individual.

¹¹ Andrea R. Jain.

¹² Andrea R. Jain, p. 30.

¹³ Erving Goffman.

Here, Goffman's dramaturgical approach provides a frame for explaining what the yoga body corresponds to on Instagram. Subsequent to the impact of photography, the emergence of the Internet and digital photography created a new relationship with yoga that has still some commonalities with the portrayal in a Goffmanian understanding. Instagram is an appropriate platform for investigating and comparing this transformation due both to technological changes and the superiority of visual imagery in contemporary communication as it claims to connect people via images that create stories.

By considering bodily practices of yoga (asanas) and their relation to cultural health and strength training trends beyond India, I attempt to provide a deeper understanding of how the yogi body conveys certain aspects of the performer's identity from the past to today. Although the context and the motives have changed over time, I suggest that the visual presentation and dominance of viewing are effective for both the communication process of the yogi as well as the formation of transnational yoga.

The Subject of Yoga in the Age of Photography

In the historical process, the nineteenth century appears as a breaking point in terms of the transformation of yoga into a global case. Several studies on the history of modern yoga suggest that yoga was a spiritual, male-dominated local discipline before it started to be re-formed through European influences; it subsequently evolved into a physical practice that appeals to both men and women and has become a secular and transnational phenomenon¹⁴.

Especially in the second half of the 19th century, yoga was liberated from its traditional Indian context; after its interaction with other physical cultures such as Scandinavian gymnastics, a new phenomenon, which I refer to as modern postural yoga in this paper, entered the modern world's stage. Mass production and distribution of images from India to Europe and United States were highly influential in bringing yoga to the West. Trips by yoga gurus to other parts of the world and the transmission of visual material via magazines, photographs and even films, led to transnational yoga becoming an issue to be considered beyond the context of India. In other words, it changed discourses in the international realm, re-contextualizing what yoga signifies. However, I would first like to explain the migration of yoga to the Western world, followed by a demonstration of what postural yoga portrays on today's digital platforms, especially in the case of Instagram.

Turning back to the initial phases of modern yoga, the Indian post-colonial subject started to discuss his/her (mainly his) identity through yoga with the goal of

¹⁴ See, for example, Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice*, (Oxford University Press) (2010). And also see, Sarah Strauss, „The Master's Narrative: Swami Sivananda and the Transnational Production of Yoga”, *Journal of Folklore Research*, 39:2/3 (2002), pp. 217-241.

presenting a national identity based on physical capability¹⁵. At this point, the development of photography enabled them to present their imaged bodies to the world. These mass distributed images made the introduction of modern transnational yoga to Western society possible, *while Indian showmanship* focused on the *exotic and acrobatic Indian body*, drawing attention to a discipline which was supposed to be an ancient tradition¹⁶.

From colonial influences on Indian society to the revival of a national subject, yoga grew into an asana-based physical practice that took place in Western fitness culture, while the spiritual aspect of yoga has disappeared. In the modern era, national ideals have influenced the physical attributes of yoga to show strength and the vigour of the Indian man. In the past, yogis were not welcomed by society, rather, they were viewed as beggars or unwanted people. Freed from this pressure through a change in attitude, a new wave of physical culture appeared. When images from the period are examined, the man in a challenging yoga pose reflects a claim of Indian competence. On one hand, yoga is a means of supporting Indian ideals, which are the strength of the national subject and supremacy of the country's tradition. On the other hand, as in international gymnastics, showmanship is practiced at the same time.

The case of Krishnamacharya is a good illustration of how an Indian man freed from British rule presented a performance to Western audience with intriguing bodily dispositions. This yoga guru, who was also the trainer of Iyengar—one of the best-known yogis in the world—introduced a yoga based on asanas that was similar to gymnastic exercises and aerobic moves. Yet, it is still unique as the embodiment of the *authentic East* in Western societal perception. In addition to still images, a few videos display him surprising and entertaining audiences with extraordinary poses. These depictions of him with some poses, such as *Adho Mukha Vrksasana* (handstand), *Shirshasana* (headstand) or *Vrschikasana* (scorpion) made him popular. Today, the videos of Krishnamacharya on YouTube have been watched more than 150,000 times.



Figure 1: Krishnamacharya in a yoga pose (photo source: Wikipedia)

¹⁵ Mark Singleton.

¹⁶ Mark Singleton, pp. 40, 154, 164.

As illustrated in Figure 1, Krishnamachary's pose bears a resemblance to contemporary yoga asanas. Here, the pose reflects both the strength and flexibility of a yoga body. Thinking in the context of the early periods of the 19th century, one can understand how surprising and—in a certain sense—entertaining this was for Europeans and North Americans.

The Yoga Body on the Social Network Stage

In the age of social media, the medium for displaying yoga poses has changed and transformed from photography to digital tools and visual signs. In Instagram's case, its medium is its megadata, which is constituted by still or moving images, text, and hashtags. Today, the Western subject itself has become a figure of spectacle. However, the body has remained central in visual communication, even in a re-contextualized sense in which publicly distributed images of yogis of different societies represent various narratives in their own contexts.

Although its spiritual aspects are underlined and almost caricaturized in the public eye, yoga's increasing popularity and common practice in the Western world are related to free-time physical activities. Within the context of late-modernity, it can be said that yoga is a physical discipline that is associated with identities and lifestyles. Accordingly, individuals faced with daily complexity due to a plurality of choices consistently construct their identities in relation to consumer culture¹⁷.



Figure 2: An Instagram post of a handstand pose (courtesy of account owner)

¹⁷ Jeff Ferrell, Keith J. Hayward, Jock Young, *Cultural Criminology*, (London: SAGE Publications Ltd.) (2008).

Drawing on the definition of lifestyle sport¹⁸, yoga practitioners “identify themselves through recognizable styles, bodily dispositions, expressions and attitudes, which they design into a distinctive lifestyle and a particular social identity”. In other words, yoga’s connotations with certain ways of living reflect the characteristics of late-modern society and its efformation of a subject that is flexible, fleeting, and self-reflexive. Furthermore, the influence of the consumption-oriented disposition is seen in the subject formation in question.

As a way of self-actualization, yogis and yoginis share similar experiences that tie their bodily practices to non-physical attributes (but again by utilizing ‘tangible’ or ‘visible’ tools) in terms of a holistic physical culture. Asanas communicate a way for self-actualization and, as Giddens states, the modern yogi presents his/her social-self agency during his/her daily life¹⁹. Handstands (see figure 2), for instance, are an indication of the physical and mental strength of the individual, while a personal message is represented via an unusual bodily practice. Flexibility, openness, and being at peace with himself/herself are other examples of characteristics yogis emphasize about themselves on Instagram.

In the context of late-modern society and the culture of connectivity,²⁰ yoga practitioners from Western societies use Instagram galleries to feed their identity construction and share emphasized characteristics of themselves via digital images. In their posts, where they can be seen standing on their hands or heads, wearing yoga pants, or on a yoga mat, these people publicly exhibit more individualistic performances compared to their Indian predecessors.

Many of the posts are supported by the composition of visual elements, hashtags, and tags that provide a relevant personal message about the yogis. These are specific characteristics in the contemporary case. Since the current technological possibilities enable yogis to produce and share these images instantly, and the hegemony of visuality in society forms the presentation in question, the yogi Instagrammers have a direct focus on visibility. When patterns of Instagram use are analysed, it is clear that the motive is to reach as large an audience as possible. For this reason, even though both context and content have changed, the “show” continues to be performed.

By viewing popular yogis on Instagram, we can say with some certainty that handstands, headstands, or other acrobatic poses still draw the public’s attention, likely influenced by the display-like Indian showmen. However, compared to the early period of modern postural yoga, we now see Western subjects and find individualistic messages about their self-identities. At this juncture, the presentation of the yogi self suggests a spectacle in the Debordian sense. Defined as the

¹⁸ Belinda Wheaton, „Introducing the consumption and representation of lifestyle sports”, *Sports in Society*, 13:7-8 (2010), pp. 1057-1081.

¹⁹ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late-modern age*, (Cambridge, Polity Press) (1991). p.57.

²⁰ The phrase is borrowed from van Dijk who has a book with the same title.

manipulation of the visual world to enforce late-capitalism's expectations of the individual, the spectacle can be observed in the late-modern periods of yoga, in particular on the digital stage. "Spectacular representations"²¹ of the yogis intercommunicate with experiences commodified through consumption-related preferences. Accordingly, the yogic identity in question is communicated by mixing different elements of everyday life, and auto-narratives are re-created for maintaining the self-presentation according to the conditions of contemporary consumer culture. In this self-communication, yoga appears as a means for a reflexively constructed self-identity of the late-modern subject.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that modern postural yoga is a transnational phenomenon that arose from the interaction of the Indian original with colonial, nationalist, and global forces. Since its introduction outside of India, followers of yoga have reached an extensive number worldwide. Currently, its state reflects a new setting and context for the performances of yogis. Within the present social media environment, including Instagram, yoga has become related to both prevalent use of the online platform as a spectacle and its potential for supporting yogi self-actualization.

Because the visual medium has changed, the importance of keeping the performances updated and connecting asanas to more authentic meanings such as being physically and mentally strong has risen. This is achieved by supporting photography with texts on SNSs; in this way, transnational yoga is constantly being formed.

Drawing from visual analysis on Instagram posts of selected account owners and comparison of their bodily practices with the analogue photography of the first yogis in the West, there is ample support for the claim that the yoga body is a means for sustaining a display for social interaction and communicating self-identity, both in the past as well as today. However, it seems that due to changes in display, the concept has been transformed into a transnational phenomenon of the cultures with which yoga has interacted. Consequently, we can claim that modern postural yoga is a product of both the health and fitness system of the West, as well as original Indian tradition, and distributed by means of analogue images or smart phones.

²¹ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, (Detroit, Black & Red Publications) (1970).

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