

Digital Culture and Performative Acts for Online Identity: Social and Physical Consequences of Yoga Commodification

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Abstract: The rise of digital culture profoundly influences how individuals curate and present aspects of their lives to create online personas through social media profiles. This research focuses on the online identities of two yoga influencers, examining how their performative acts shape these identities and the resulting impact on social norms and expectations of an ideal yoga practitioner. Employing a semiotic approach, this study analyzes signs in the Instagram posts of these influencers to identify repeated actions and event series that shape their online identities. The results reveal that the performative acts of these influencers perpetuate two distinct potential false myths of yoga. Their online representations contribute to a public perception of yoga as an activity exclusive to the elite social class or merely a physical exercise, overshadowing yoga's other facets. With thousands to millions of followers, these influencers significantly influence yoga's online representation, particularly among young people whose subjectification occurs within digital culture. These potential false myths exemplify the social and physical consequences of yoga commodification. Further discourse analysis is needed to explore public responses, which can be conducted by examining comments and likes from their viewers and followers.

Keywords: Yoga myth, Asana, Ayurveda, Eight Limbs of Yoga

1. Yoga Commodification in Indonesia

In the era of digital culture, the commodification of yoga has become increasingly prevalent, with individuals using online platforms to construct and perform their identities within the realm of wellness. This phenomenon brings forth both social and physical consequences, as the digital space influences how yoga is perceived and practiced, potentially altering its core principles and values. Exploring the implications of this commodification is crucial to understanding the impact it has on individuals and society as a whole. As yoga becomes more commercialized and accessible through digital platforms, it has become easier for individuals to market themselves as yoga influencers or experts, often promoting unrealistic body standards and creating a sense of competition within the yoga community. Additionally, the commodification of yoga can lead to a superficial understanding and practice of the discipline, as people may prioritize the aesthetics and popularity of yoga rather than its spiritual and transformative aspects. It is important to critically examine the effects of this commodification in order to preserve the authenticity and integrity of yoga as a holistic practice.

When Demeter (2006) observed that U.S. culture has witnessed yoga's 'increasingly diverse commodification in forms of yoga mats, yoga clothing, and yoga accessories across the nation,' it appears that this trend is also global, extending to Indonesia. This commodification has enabled fashion industries to diversify their products for yoga, incorporating global fashion trends into yoga mats and attire to cater to style and fashion preferences. Bhalla et al. (2022) noted that 'the practice of yoga—along with its accompanying apparel, products, and studios—is also big business due to its widespread popularity.' Research focused on attire suitable for yoga aligns with the modern, globalized emphasis on contemporary yoga, particularly regarding the comfort of material fabrics for flexibility, and their heat and water absorption capabilities. For instance, studies on yoga attire, in the context of modern requirements, have concentrated more on the 'pressure comfort of yoga suits' (Liu et al., 2021) or the fabric's 'thermal sensation' (Lee et al., 2020) during the practice of asana and pranayama. However, these studies often pay little attention to the other six limbs of Yoga as elucidated by Patanjali. While the emphasis on comfort and

flexibility in yoga attire is important for the physical aspect of the practice, it is equally crucial to consider the spiritual and mental aspects of yoga. Patanjali's Yoga Sutras outline the eight limbs of yoga, which include ethical principles, self-discipline, breath control, concentration, meditation, and ultimately, self-realization. Ignoring these aspects in research on yoga attire limits our understanding of how clothing can support the holistic practice of yoga and its transformative potential. Therefore, future studies should strive to explore the relationship between attire and the broader philosophical and spiritual dimensions of yoga.

As yoga increasingly undergoes commodification, its consequences become more evident. Shearer (2022) identified four key consequences of yoga commodification: 'environmental consequences, social consequences, physical consequences, and cultural consequences.' This forms the foundation of the current research. The study aims to determine if the consequences of yoga commodification are discernible in the verbal and non-verbal signs found in the Instagram posts of well-known Indonesian yoga enthusiasts and instructors. In an era where digital culture is pervasive, the online identities of these practitioners are shaped through performative bodily acts. These acts, captured in their Instagram posts, convey signs and symbols that reflect specific roles and statuses, along with associated myths and ideologies." By analyzing the verbal and non-verbal signs in the Instagram posts of Indonesian yoga enthusiasts and instructors, this study seeks to uncover the impact of yoga commodification on their online identities. The pervasive digital culture of today has led to performative bodily acts becoming essential in shaping the identities of these practitioners. These acts, as depicted in their Instagram posts, serve as a platform for conveying specific roles, statuses, and the associated myths and ideologies surrounding yoga. Overall, this research aims to shed light on the consequences of yoga commodification in the context of Indonesian culture.

2. Theoretical Background

Semiotic analysis of the fashion used by the influencer is based on Barthes and Umberto Eco stating that fashion is embodied. In relation to body image, (Busch & Hwang, 2020) stated that "wearers produce a self-objectifying image of themselves." The fashion has a significant impact on the practitioners' emotions because, as stated by Cavazzana (2021), yoga clothing becomes one with the body reflecting and expressing the mood of the participants." Traditional clothing of Yogi, such as Dhoti, usually does not focus on the body line, but the fashion industry puts more emphasis on making the cloth also a part of showcasing the standard global social acceptance of beauty, so that "portrayals of women in yoga contexts often are accompanied by an objectifying, hegemonic gaze" (Bhalla & Moscovitz, 2020). The complex processes of mentalization, self-reflection, self-awareness, and all other body-conscious internal debate have created fashion and "the (clothed) ideal self-image"—what we call the "fashion phantom"—which plays the main part in animating fashion from being an object in the external world to becoming an inherent part of our emotional life and self-image (Busch & Hwang, 2020). This internal debate and fashion phantom contribute to the strong influence of fashion on our sense of identity and self-expression. Fashion is not simply a superficial aspect of our lives; it holds profound significance in shaping our sense of identity and self-expression. The fashion phantom, a product of our internal debates and self-reflection, animates fashion and transforms it from an external object to an integral part of our emotional lives. Through this complex interplay, fashion becomes a medium through which we express our true selves and assert our individuality. It is through fashion that we communicate our values, beliefs, and personal narratives to the world.

In the contemporary landscape, the fashion phantom not only resides within our internal debates but also extends its influence into the realm of digital culture. In the era of digital culture, social media plays an important part in negotiating social identities with different sets of values and myths. (Leeker et al., 2017) stated that digital technologies "invariably participate in the'making' of culture." Wulf (2023) added that "the subjectification of young people takes place in, with, and through digital culture," where "the imagery, the iconic character, and the performativity of the images of the digital culture play an important role." (Artamonov et al., 2021) also claimed that "digital mythology has become an integral part of the digital world." These statements highlight the pervasive influence of digital culture on social identities and the construction of cultural norms. Social media platforms, in particular, provide a space for individuals to express and negotiate their identities, often aligning themselves with specific values and myths. As digital technologies continue to shape and mold culture, the subjectification of young people becomes intertwined with the imagery and performativity of the digital realm. As a result, digital mythology has become ingrained in the fabric of the digital world, underscoring the significant role that social media plays in forming social identities.

This symbiotic relationship between social media and digital culture not only influences identity negotiation but also extends to various aspects of contemporary activities, such as yoga. Therefore, it is not surprising to see that yoga commodification and digital culture may create a new perspective on yoga and its consequences. (Malenović, 2016) claimed that the representation of yoga on leading Instagram accounts with millions of followers "is a typical idealized image of yoga and yoga lifestyle." The physical consequence of yoga, such as the yoga competition, ideal muscle flexibility, and yoga attributes and attire, are only to name a few. Signs of performative acts as our data are semiotically analyzed in order to discover a possible false myth of yoga as a mere physical activity or as an activity for a certain elite community. Therefore, it is not surprising to see that yoga commodification and digital culture may create a new perspective on yoga and its consequences. (Malenović, 2016) claimed that the representation of yoga on leading Instagram accounts with millions of followers "is a typical idealized image of yoga and yoga lifestyle." The physical consequence of yoga, such as the yoga competition, ideal muscle flexibility, and yoga attributes and attire, are only to name a few. Signs of performative acts as our data are semiotically analyzed in order to discover a possible false myth of yoga as a mere physical activity or as an activity for a certain elite community. This false myth of yoga as a purely physical activity or for a specific elite community can lead to the commodification of yoga. As yoga becomes more popular on social media platforms, it is increasingly portrayed as a trendy lifestyle choice rather than a spiritual practice. The portrayal of yoga as a trendy lifestyle choice rather than a spiritual practice becomes more pronounced, contributing to a cultural shift that may distance it from its roots. Furthermore, the fact that most Indonesians still earn the minimum wage creates an even bigger gap between the daily realities of most people compared to this performative act in the media.

The phenomenon is not unique to yoga, as seen in the cultural trend of "flexing" in Indonesia. As explained by Alton Eandarwanto Hadi Susanto et al. (2023), the flexing culture involves "showing off wealth" on social media platforms to enhance social status and self-existence. This aligns with the observations of (Antony, 2018), who pointed out the role of celebrity in constructing yoga as elite, sensual, and exotic. However, the stark reality that most Indonesians earn the minimum wage widens the gap between the performative acts depicted in the media and the daily struggles of the majority, emphasizing the potential disconnect between media portrayals and the lived experiences of the audience.

While acknowledging the physical benefits of yoga, particularly its impact on muscle flexibility, it's crucial to recognize that flexibility is not the sole objective of yoga. As highlighted by (Md Iftekher et al., 2017) and (Polsgrove et al., 2016), studies show improvements in flexibility among athletes practicing yoga. For example, they stated that "6 weeks of practicing yoga did help to improve flexibility measures in the actively training athletes while warm-up stretching did not." Similarly, Polsgrove et al. (2016) mentioned that "the athletes who practiced yoga for 10 weeks demonstrated improvement in both flexibility and balance measures." Yet flexibility is not the sole aim of yoga, because even Patanjali never mentioned flexibility as the most important part of yoga. It may be related to the asana, as one of the eight limbs of yoga, yet it certainly is not the final objective of yoga in the strict tradition.

3. Research Method.

The qualitative method of this research used a cultural study phenomenological approach. The discussion of the results of the study was performed descriptively in order to describe the consequences of yoga commodification as portrayed through the posts of the two yoga practitioners. The fashion, situational settings, verbal acts, and other attributes used were treated as signs and discussed under the study of semiotics to support the analysis. The research aimed to explore the effects of yoga commodification on the practice and perception of asana. The qualitative approach made it possible to comprehend yoga's cultural context and how commercialization has influenced it in-depth. Through the use of semiotics, the study examined not only the physical aspects of yoga, but also the symbolic and cultural meanings attached to it. The findings of the research shed light on the potential consequences of commodification on the authenticity and spiritual essence of yoga.

The phenomenological approach was applied for the data collection and analysis. The data were gained from the observed phenomena on social media of two influencers. For this particular research, the focus was on the Instagram posts of one Indonesian yoga instructor, Asjasmara, and one yoga enthusiast, Adie Zhou, both of whom are famous as leading yoga experts in Indonesia. Anjasmara is one of the leading enthusiasts of yoga and

actively supports the establishment of Perkumpulan Praktisi Yoga Nasional Indonesia (PPYNI), a legal community of yoga under KORMI, a governmental organization to support all recreational sports in Indonesia. Meanwhile, Adhie Zhou is famous for his years-long focus on yoga and was chosen to be the master for the master class competition held during FORNAS (Festival Olahraga Nasional) from July 2 to 9, 2023, a national event for competition for all recreational sports in Indonesia. Both Anjasmara and Adhie Zhou have made significant contributions to the promotion and development of yoga in Indonesia.

As for the documentation, we collected the data from their Instagram, downloaded using igram. When we started data collection, we limited the data to three months, starting in July and ending in September 2023. July as the starting point was chosen as Fornas started, when yoga was included as a recreational sport that competed, and when Adhie Zhou was appointed as the yoga master that would direct the class session. The data were then analyzed, with the support of secondary data used as a comparison to provide deeper insight concerning the social and physical consequences of yoga commodification.

4. Discussions

4.1. Yoga Constructed as an Elite, High Social Class Activity

The first yoga influencer for our discussion is Anjasmara, with his Instagram id @anjasmara. From this account, we can see that he shares his online identity as "Public Figure Actor, Producer, and Yoga Instructor, CEO @analaindonesia & Arkamaya Asmara Production," as explicitly stated in the bio. The account has 4995 posts up to September 20th, 2023, with new posts actively added. For this account, he has more than 8 highlight folders, and Anjasmara uses "yoga and travel" as one of the highlight folders. When we click on the highlight folder, we can see that he shares two yoga activities, one in Makassar and the other in the Yoga Boga Nusantara Event. Meanwhile, the other five reels shared his essential oil products.

Meanwhile, as Anjasmara has several other online identities, not all posts are related to yoga. From July to September, there were 31 posts shared. The last posts from September 28th portrayed a yoga charity event held to support the "Jelajah Timur" campaign, with ten pictures portraying activities with 70 participants practicing yoga with Anjasmara and 12 brands mentioned as the sponsors of the event. The event was successful in collecting 30 million rupiahs for the donation, as seen in the last picture shared. Of the 31 posts, 10 are not related to yoga. One post is when Anjasmara shared the b-clinic promo, one post of his flight with his wife and friends, two other flight posts from Jayapura and Nabire to Jakarta, and one post in Sarga Earthing Resort when he received a plant as a gift, two posts with his friend @andreiaksana, and three posts of him with his cat.

Out of the 21 posts closely related to yoga, we can see that yoga is consistently portrayed as an activity performed by participants from a certain high social class. Signs of social class can be retrieved from the location and setting of the event, as well as other signs that can reflect the social status and wealth of yoga participants. The first video post in July, for example, portrayed a yoga exercise practiced on a cruise ship heading to Labuan Bajo. The instruments required were a singing bowl for Anjasmara as the instructor, with participants wearing yoga apparel and using yoga mats. The events involved yoga sponsors. Other signs from the video also portrayed the cruise cuisine, the beach, and the excellent cruise crew services. These elements suggest that the yoga event was organized for individuals belonging to a high social class. The choice of a luxury cruise ship as the venue and the presence of expensive yoga equipment indicate that the participants are likely affluent individuals. Additionally, the mention of yoga sponsors and the high-quality services provided by the cruise crew further reinforce the notion of a high social status associated with this event. The same can be seen from the other posts. Although the posts were not as exotic as the cruise ship, similar signs of high class remained. Similar yoga apparel, yoga mats, and singing bowls can be retrieved from those posts. We can also see that a charity event means that each person can participate with a donation of at least 200,000 rupiahs. "Celebrity appeal combines with these characteristics to discursively construct yoga as elite, sensual, and exotic" (Antony, 2018).

In Indonesia, the Gross National Income per capita was USD4.140 in 2021 and USD4.580 in 2022. Most Indonesians are still living with minimum wages, and some are below the minimum wage. Therefore, for most people in Indonesia, yoga travel on a cruise ship to one of the most favorite tourist destinations in Indonesia is only an ideal picture, a dream, and certainly not for everybody. This is an act accessible only to a certain group

with high social status. The high cost of yoga travel on a cruise ship further reinforces the exclusivity of this activity in Indonesia. With the majority of the population struggling to meet their basic needs, indulging in luxury yoga experiences is simply out of reach for most. It perpetuates the notion that yoga is reserved for the privileged few who can afford such lavish experiences, reinforcing its image as an elite and unattainable practice. Thus, the combination of celebrity appeal, cultural exoticism, and the high cost of yoga travel on a cruise ship further solidifies yoga as a symbol of social status and exclusivity in Indonesia.

The whole setting, acts, and instruments used do not only denote yoga as it is but also connotatively indicate the social status of the participants involved. Although wealth can be a subjective matter, the stories captured consistently construct yoga as an elite activity. The media plays a significant role in perpetuating the perception of yoga as an exclusive activity. Magazines and social media platforms often feature celebrities participating in luxurious yoga retreats, further emphasizing its association with privilege. This portrayal creates a desire among the masses to be part of this elite group, leading to a surge in demand for upscale yoga experiences. As a result, yoga studios and retreat centers cater to this affluent market, offering high-end amenities and charging exorbitant fees, reinforcing the notion that yoga is reserved for the elite few.

4.2. Yoga Constructed as an Asana Performance

A very different angle is used by Adhie Zhou when he uses his Instagram to share his online identity as a "yoga enthusiast." Since he only uses this Instagram account for one online identity, the whole 275 posts seen up to September 30th are consistent in portraying different body postures. The visual elements portrayed focus on the body and bodily movements. Adhie Zhou's Instagram account showcases yoga as an asana performance, highlighting the physicality and flexibility of the practice. Each of his 275 posts, up until September 30th, captures a different body posture, emphasizing the visual elements of yoga. By showcasing these bodily movements, Zhou challenges the notion that yoga is solely reserved for the elite few and instead promotes the accessibility and inclusivity of the practice for all.

All videos and posts from the stories also focus on the flexibility exercise, portraying difficult, advanced movements and giving the spectators a performance that aroused admiration, as can be traced from the comments and replies of similar posts from the followers. From July to September 2023, there were only six posts on his account. The posts portrayed the same setting. The only yoga instrument required is the yoga mat. The pictures are taken from the same location, a room where the camera can focus to see his body movement on the mat. He does not encourage certain yoga apparel (most of his posts even do not portray him wearing shirts, showing muscle movement and muscle flexibility).

Since similar settings are used, the only thing that he emphasizes is the different postures. The body and the body movement are the battle arena for him in order to showcase yoga. The public may also see these movements, and when the audience shares their own progress to mimic the posts shared, he replies to the reels with supportive encouragement. Previous posts may indicate different activities of Adhie Zhou, such as his activity when he swam or rode bicycles. However, for this whole year, the posts have become more focused on the yoga activities.

There is one rare post where he shares his video with another yoga practitioner. As seen above, the video uploaded on July 10th portrayed how both yoga practitioners tried to sync their movements. From this video, we can see how human bodies and technological apparatus "enter instead into a relation of performativity" (Lecker et al., 2017), since they can practice and repeat all the movements and post the best version online, as seen from the comment of the other practitioner. This shift in focus towards yoga activities on the social media account can be attributed to the increasing popularity of yoga as a form of exercise and mindfulness practice. The video showcasing the synchronization of movements between the two practitioners highlights the performative aspect of yoga in the digital age. By sharing their best versions online, they are able to inspire and motivate others to engage in yoga as well. The comment from the other practitioner further emphasizes the positive impact of this online performance on the yoga community.

The visual elements—the setting, the instruments, the performance, and the body—are still the most important signs of a performative act. The ideology of yoga practitioners can be seen in their choice to focus only on the body or on more complex sets of signs. The visual storytelling enhances the frame of a certain social status or a

certain ideological battle. (Wulf, 2023) stated that "Gestures are performative, i.e., they are staged and performed; in digital culture, they create communities, collaborations, and aesthetic productions." In other words, gestures in digital culture serve as a means of creating communities, collaborations, and aesthetic productions through the performative nature of signs. Furthermore, these gestures contribute to the creation of aesthetic productions, as they can be carefully curated and designed to evoke specific responses or communicate certain ideologies. In this way, gestures in digital culture become a form of expression and a tool for shaping and defining social dynamics.

Artamonov et al. (2021) stated that "Social media and digital technologies...actively create a new mythology." In this research, we can see how yoga practice on Instagram portrays the social status of the practitioners and the participants. Some may picture yoga for the wealthy or yoga for a certain community. In order to keep up-to-date with the lifestyle of the rest of the community, the audience can see how conformity of social conduct constructs yoga in such a way that may lead them to have an image of what ideal yoga practitioners are and how they behave. The potential false myths developed through consistent performative acts need to be addressed. It is important to recognize that the portrayal of yoga on Instagram is just one facet of the practice and cannot accurately represent its true essence. By relying solely on social media, individuals may be susceptible to false ideals and misconceptions about yoga. It is crucial to emphasize the importance of authenticity and individuality in yoga practice, rather than conforming to societal expectations.

Another important thing that needs to be highlighted is that by using digital culture, the global, postmodern trend may leave behind all traditional myths (considered past) and assess the target market's sentiment as portrayed through modern social media applications such as Instagram. Since there is no explicit explanation given to the followers concerning what yoga really is, the audience may have the impression that yoga is just as portrayed and performed.

It is important for influencers to realize that for the audience, "the visuals tend to make this digital bonding more involved and committing." (Kupiainen, 2016). Therefore, for yoga influencers with thousands and millions of followers, they can provide a certain link on their bio, for example, to emphasize the importance of not only seeing what is portrayed in the posts but also having other resources to understand what yoga really is, so that the whole eight limbs of yoga can also be shared, discussed, and hopefully practiced. By providing additional resources and information, yoga influencers can encourage their audience to delve deeper into the practice and explore the various aspects beyond just the physical postures. This can help foster a more holistic understanding of yoga and its philosophy, allowing followers to integrate the principles and values into their daily lives. By doing so, individuals can experience the transformative power of yoga beyond the mat.

It is the task of PPYNI to deconstruct the potential false myths of yoga, especially those that do not reflect yoga and do not support the belief that yoga is an activity for all. Yoga is not only for a certain social class. It is not only for those who can access certain ranges of motion. Yoga is not only for physical exercise but also for physical benefit. Yoga is the whole embodiment of harmony in the body, mind, and soul. Yoga teaches individuals to cultivate mindfulness and self-awareness, which can be applied to various aspects of life. By incorporating yoga principles into their daily routines, individuals can enhance their mental and emotional well-being. Moreover, yoga promotes inner peace and stress reduction, allowing individuals to better navigate the challenges of everyday life. Ultimately, yoga is a holistic practice that can bring balance and harmony to all aspects of one's being.

Conclusion

The physical consequences of yoga commodification depict a leading yoga practitioner performing a performative body act that may construct yoga negatively. It may lead to the construction of yoga only as an elite activity, on the one hand, and it may also be reduced to mere physical flexibility, on the other hand. This reduction of yoga to its physical aspects undermines its true essence and potential for holistic well-being. To avoid this commodification, it is essential to promote a comprehensive understanding of yoga that encompasses its mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. By highlighting the transformative and healing aspects of yoga, we can encourage individuals to engage in a practice that goes beyond mere physical flexibility and fosters true balance and harmony in their lives.

The central role of the visual elements remains the same. The picture, the gesture, and the body play a role in constructing yoga. With additional visual storytelling, the construction has an even bigger impact. Therefore, in order to combat false myths, the influencers may also use attractive visual elements for the links that provide additional information concerning yoga for their followers. By incorporating visually captivating images and videos, influencers can effectively capture their followers' attention and pique their curiosity about the transformative and healing aspects of yoga. These visual elements not only add aesthetic appeal but also serve as powerful tools for conveying the essence of yoga practice, encouraging individuals to explore the practice beyond its physical benefits. Through the use of attractive visual storytelling, influencers have the opportunity to debunk misconceptions and provide accurate information, ultimately guiding their followers towards a deeper understanding and appreciation of yoga's true potential.

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