

## Social and Digital Mass Media Impact on the Perception of Yoga

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**Abstract:** *The article explores the extent a traditional yoga philosophy and practice are present and surviving the pressure of the contemporary image imposed by the marketing of yoga industry and social media aesthetics. Is the growing popularity of yoga and its extensive presence in the social media necessarily useful for development of yoga as a practice that possesses a capacity to benefit different areas of life. What is presented as yoga lifestyle in the media has become an inspiration and something that seems like the majority of us would like to practice. The article tries to answer the question what expectations such presentations of yoga in the mass media impose on the general public and what happens when a practitioner experiences the traditional yoga in reality.*

**Key words:** *popularisation of yoga, perception of yoga, yoga in the mass media, marketing of yoga, traditional yoga*

### Introduction

It is estimated that around 200 million people practice yoga worldwide, and that in US only the number of practitioners has grown from 20.4 million in 2012. to 36 million people in 2016. (Ipsos, 2016.). The industry of yoga marks a continual growth over the years. In 2016. only US yoga market, the largest one today, was worth over 16 billion US dollars comparing to 10 billion in 2012. (Ipsos, 2016.). Search of Instagram hash tag #yoga more than 35 million posts are suggested, and for #yogi, #yogini, #yoginisofinstagram over 11 million of posts. Most of the largest YouTube yoga channels have been opened only several years ago. On daily basis and broadly across the mass media there are numerous articles on how to fight depression, stress, anxiety and pressures of everyday life, how to manage

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our so called male and female principles, recognise a soul mate or discover past lives unresolved karmic debts. All of which have one common goal, to offer a solution for a happier life.

Above all these trends reflect social and economic changes one of the major being the recent global economic crisis that led to a high unemployment rates and unsustainable living struggling with bank credits and debts and left millions of people without basic life necessities such as housing or access to medical care, while at the same time spilled over the added pressure of survival from economic subject to individuals that are more than ever easily replaced in the labour market. Since all of the more or less familiar systems have failed, explanations and answers are searched for in different worldviews, so called new age beliefs and engaging individual potentials. An image of a new desirable model of life is created, the one that enables enough free time, economic independence achieved through entrepreneurial model and personal experience of life is precedent. Answering to these needs, new and existing industries of wellness, fitness, education, personal development immerge and grow, yoga including.

“Journalists love yoga because it fits perfectly into the narratives of everyday life.” (Love, 2006.). Stories and images about people who left everything behind, went to travel the world or decided to settle in some of the exotic destinations; images of beautiful, young, tanned, fit, dressed in modern sports outfits and mostly women in yoga poses telling stories about fulfilled purpose of life; young and successful entrepreneurs who earned millions and who meditate daily; celebrities doing yoga. „ I Quit My 6-Figure Career To Teach Yoga“(Elle, 2016), „ Better Sex and More Money: The Trendy Yoga Practice That Promises Perks Beyond Inner Peace“(Harper’s Bazaar, 2017). Quickly yoga becomes a trend supported by the yoga industry marketing constantly expanding its product range that promise a better experience of the practice, from antiseptic non-slippery yoga mats to yoga tourism. As Love wrote „The scent of patchouli has left the room; yoga now smells like money. “(Love, 2006.)

On the social media millions of people are posting images of yoga in any occasion, for any body, age and place, and regardless of how the practice is presented, these images are sending messages of great contribution of yoga to improving the quality of life, achieving personal freedom and joy of life. It is exactly that innate human need for free and joyful life, or at least a falls

representation that the ideal is achieved, that make yoga one of the most popular phenomena in the social media.

### **Subject and goals of research**

The article explores correlation of phenomena of yoga in social and digital media and the perception such presentation creates in the broad public. The goal of the article is to try to identify to what extent does the image of yoga presented in social and digital media reflect traditional yoga practice and philosophy, what key patterns and messages about yoga are conveyed through these media and to what extent the marketing of the yoga industry changes contemporary yoga practice comparing to the traditional one.

### **Method**

Primary method used is a qualitative and quantitative analysis of Instagram and YouTube accounts and some of the most influential online media globally, including specialised yoga issues. Analysed social media content was selected based on the leading lifestyle and yoga media articles that recommend the best yoga accounts to be followed, as well as based on the criteria of personal interest. In the cases where one analysed subject is present on both Instagram and YouTube, the account with the largest audience was taken for analysis. Total of 11 Instagram accounts and 132 posts, 9 YouTube channels and 100 videos, 10 media issues and 24 articles were analysed. The media were selected based on their global influence on the topics of lifestyle, trends and yoga, producing content in English as the most common language in the western culture that the article is covering and regardless of a specific country where the media is produced considering a global reach of the Internet. In both local and global literature search, one article on specific influence of Instagram on yoga was found, as well as studies and articles about social media impact on behaviour, fitness and health, and those that study the contemporary phenomena of yoga in the western culture media that were taken as relevant sources.

### **Analysis**

One of the primary segment on the YouTube channel is educational, “how to” content. Yoga on YouTube is mainly presented by yoga instructors

aiming to engage their audience to practice and present classes, tutorials and lectures.

**Table 1.** – Most common yoga themes/patterns on yoga YouTube channels.

<b>Themes/Patterns</b>	<b>No of channels</b>
Fit body, weight loss, building and toning muscles	8
Physical health (posture, body pain, thyroid health, digestion etc.)	8
Mental health (depression, stress, anxiety, insomnia etc.)	9
Class methodology in compliance with yoga class methodology	5
General recommendations and health warnings prior to practice	1
Content dedicated to 8 limbs of Patanjali's yoga	2
Outdoors – primarily or exclusively	1
Studio, interiors – primarily or exclusively	8
Advanced balance, inversion, strength poses	8

Yoga is primarily presented as a physical practice through different muscle and body toning, weight loss series, including achieving so called “beach body” or a perfect booty sequence that is present in 6 out of 9 channels. Physical and mental health, healing and personal happiness, content, finding a personal space and practicing self-love are other big topics presented. Only one channel, Yoga with Melissa West features general warnings and recommendations prior to practice in each of the videos. At the same time, this is the only channel that does not present demanding and potentially dangerous yoga poses such as headstand or yoga during pregnancy. If there are any recommendations and warnings on the other channels, these are featured occasionally as a part of a certain sequence and usually during a demonstration of some demanding pose. Only 2 channels explicitly speak about 8 limbs of yoga and goals of traditional yoga. The channel Yoga with Melissa West concretely connects and integrates eight limbs of yoga with the yoga practice in a way that the practitioner gets this knowledge through practice of asana, pranayama, relaxation and meditation. West quotes and refers to Patanjali Yoga Sutras, Hatha Yoga Pradipika, Baghavat Gita and other classical yoga literature. Her serial “Focused living” covers the topics of ahimsa, asteya, saucha, santosha, tapas, personal thought, consciousness, energy management, introspective practice of increasing awareness and finding one's life purpose. Although the channel is

active the longest compared to others, it has the least number of subscribers and is the single one that is not present in any of the media articles that recommend yoga on Youtube.

**Table 2.** – Most common themes and patterns of yoga on Instagram accounts

<b>Presentation</b>	<b>Number of posts</b>
Woman	101
Revealing outfit/ naked top body/ naked body	115
Fit appearance	125
Beach or a coast	40
Other outdoor location	22
Urban public place: (street, square, library, park etc.)	20
Yoga studio, interior	20
Dangerous locations: (roof, cliff edge, tree, airplane wing etc.)	41
Advanced balance, inversion, strength poses	92
Basic poses (trikonasana, virkhasana, sukhasana i sl.)	19
Meditative poses	6

The most common representation of yoga on the leading Instagram accounts whose audience counts in millions of people, is a typical idealised image of yoga and yoga lifestyle: exotic white sand beach and turquoise sea where a young, beautiful, slim and tanned woman whose body is in accordance to all of the modern standards of a fit body, dressed in a tight, revealing modern yoga outfit or a swimsuit only, takes some of the demanding yoga asanas followed by messages of happiness, love, fulfillment of life, creating a personal space and being in the moment. The number of asanas that demand extraordinary flexibility, balance and strength is impressive while many of those could rather fit into acrobacy than a yoga practice. Such asanas are often depicted in locations that potentially could be life threatening or at least cause a serious injury: cliff edge above an abyss, a very edge of the skyscraper rooftop, a tree branch, staircases, zebra crossings, railways, a hood of an automobile and even an airplane wing.

It is clear that such posts do not represent real yoga practice and even one of the captions below a short video of Yoga Girl one of the largest yoga Instagram accounts speaks about it: “What my practice actually looks like...

It very rarely includes fancy inversions or complicated transitions. It's completely unrelated to Instagram and the online world." In this video "Yoga Girl" is dressed in a loose trousers and a simple top, unlikely of the most of her images taken at exotic beach in tight and revealing outfits. A natural question that comes to mind here is what is than a cause of all these unrealistic and in often cases bizarre depictions of yoga in Instagram.

The most common topics covered in Instagram are the ones dealing in general questions of a contemporary life presented trough a personal experience of the account owner, such as selfesteem, selflove, selfrespect, overcoming of fears, stress, depression, anxiety, imposed body ideal. Some of them quote or mention the classical yoga literarute and tradition, Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, Hatha Yoga Pradipika, Upanishades, yet the visual compatibility and overall account content with such occasional captions is arguable. Dylan Werner Instagram post speaks about the importance of bringing awareness to breathing while take an extremely demanding balance pose at the top of a public square arch; he talks about meditation goals sitting in lotus pose but at the very edge of the what it seems to be a deep canyon and regardless that he writes in one of his earlier posts that everything we do impact others, Dylan decides to dedicate a few of the posts to making heandstands at the very edge of a skyscraper's roof top.

Misterely Instagram account gives some insights into traditional yoga practice quoting classical yoga literature and explaining yamas and nyamas in one of his posts in a language that corresponds to the social media aesthetics. However, unless one takes assumptions that some of the posts in Instagram overall reflect certain limbs of yoga, it is safe to conclude that the content that directly or indirectly gives insights into the traditional yoga practice in Instagram, is scarce and random compared to the content that present yoga asanas. Misterely account that presents traditional yoga in some of its content, isn't on the lists of the articles that recommend yoga Instagram accounts and with its over 31 thousand followers is far behind the largest accounts followed by millions. Speaking about the impact on the perception on yoga, it could be that a valid insight comes from this very account. Beginning og 2017. Misterely account started a competition for five free yoga classes in London. Only 7 people applied out of then more than 25 thousand followers. It is possible that the conditions were too complexed, as well as the yoga poses featured in this account were too demanding and therefore perceived as unachievable or that there were other reasons why more people didn't enter the competition. It is also very

possible that yoga Instagram accounts are followed with equal interest and motives as are different reality shows featured on other media and showing a life that is far more beautiful and exciting than our own.

All the specialised yoga media present yoga in an integral, traditional way covering topics on classical yoga literature and eight limbs of yoga. Many of them offer different insights how to integrate and practice eight limbs of yoga into an everyday life and yoga practice, using different video, tutorial and textual formats. Some of the media cover the topics of social media influence to the modern yoga practice and our perception on yoga. Yoga Journal publishes “Patanjali Never Said Anything About Yoga Selfies” article, and Yoga Interantional gives a podcast on “Has the Internet Changed How We Practice Yoga?”. Specialised media cover topics on yoga from different, comprehensive angles, many of them providing high value content to help enhance yoga practice, still it can be presumed that the largest portion of their readership are people who already have some experience or already practice yoga and takes this content in order to improve their existing practice.

For understanding the impact on the perception of yoga of the broadest public, it is far more interesting to observe the content of those media that cover lifestyle topics and that set trends themselves. The articles on yoga in these media are published under categories of health and fitness, celebrity, fashion, career, culture, love and sex, beauty, travel, food with some of the typical titles: “My workout: People are Surprised How Physical Ashtanga Yoga Is”(Guardian, 2017) article that also presents “must have yoga accessories”; “15 Things Yogis can’t Live Without” (Greatist, 2017); “5 Yoga Poses to Get Jennifer Aniston's Body” (Marie Claire, 2010), „ A.P.C.'s Jean Touitou Wants You to Wear Socks With Sandals, Yoga Pants With Boots“ (Elle, 2016.) “Breathing is the New Yoga! 9 Shortcuts to Calming Anxiety” (Vogue, 2016). Articles mentioning traditional yoga or eight limbs of yoga were not found, and the article titled that breathing is the new yoga clearly shows the author’s ignorance about what yoga practice is. Yoga is presented as a trend, very often a fashion or a beauty one, or a practice that mends brokenhearted or reduces stress, with mandatory so called “yoga accessories” that are marketed through the same media.

The media overtake or recommend the social media content. The criteria for these recommendations are often questionable: “Patrick Beach has accumulated a community of 252,000 followers of his clean, masculine aesthetic, where he teaches yoga adapted for all levels and has just created

his own yogawear line. A must-follow for his carefully posed shots in graphic and pared-down décor which makes a refreshing change from the legions of technicolor yogis on Instagram.” (Vogue, 2016).

At the same time the influence of yoga on social media can lead to a very positive perception change, especially when it destroys prejudice who is yoga for and all those about imposed perfect body image. Such is the case with Jessamyne Stanley account, a big body size jogina whose photographs and story were published in many of the media from Yoga Journal, The Guardian, Marie Claire and others, titled “How Jessamyne Stanley is Erasing Yoga Stereotypes”, “My Belly is There, but I am Still Strong: Jessamyn Stanley on body positive yoga”, “Yoga is For Every Body”.

## Discussion

Yoga practice presented in the social and mass media is largely inseparable from marketing messages while the term yoga is used in the contexts that are not related to the authentic yoga practice only because today yoga creates a great interest and almost always guarantees a good sales. “Unsurprisingly, yoga has recently also been used to brand make-up, perfumes, tea and even detergents. Certain visual motifs related to yoga, such as the lotus position, have become strong and recognizable symbols in themselves, and are sometimes used in advertising to sell products not in any way connected to yoga, such as beer.” (Puustinen, Rautaniemi, 2015). „Yoga in its original form requires no equipment outside of a simple mat, and yet, from sweat absorbent mats to copper infused clothing, there are several players in the business of yoga who are convincing the American public otherwise.“ (Castaneda, 2014). Yoga instructors and yoga business owners brand themselves into celebrities with a multimillion audience and perhaps more than any traditional commercial media or marketing, they create the perception of yoga we have today. “Your success as a studio yoga teacher depends on how much you market yourself.“ (Castaneda, 2014). In a constant race for a bigger number of followers, subscribers and prospect consumers, “Insta-yoga” celebrities as well as all those who aspire to such ideal, hyperproduce images of often dangerous acrobatic and bizarre presentations of yoga asanas, mixed with those where they present their exciting lives at exotic places, which, if not always utterly carefree as we are told by the account owners themselves, certainly do not lack material wealth. It is completely safe to agree with the statement “I think that without the marketing culture of [the U.S.], I don’t think yoga



would be where it is today”(Deshpanade, Herman, Lobb,2011). The only question is what kind of yoga is present today.

„Because all yoga, including the versions of yoga offered in America, encourages practitioners to look within, it is authentic.“ (Castaneda,2014). It is fairly possible that regardless of a motive we might have once we step onto a mat and start with the practice, we do receive through our personal experience all the levels of practice that are not so commonly displayed in the social and mass media. However, it is arguable to what extent the messages we receive from social and mass media can influence people to make this first step. “Social influence from anonymous online peers was more successful than promotional messages for improving physical activity”. (Zang, Brekbiel, Jang, Centola, 2015). Another study analysing the impact of social media on user behavior, questions the extent of the direct influence to actions in so called offline world, as opposed to actions further taken on the social media where a user present themselves as someone who shares with peers certain opinions, point of views and perceptions. (Loss, Lindacher, Curbach, 2013). It remains to be measured to what extent social media present real yoga practice, and how much of it is merely a reflection of a trend.

## **Conclusion**

As any other industry in the western neoliberal economic system, yoga is adjusting to the demands of its growing market. Yoga market expansion happens through emerging and promotion of different activities presented as the yoga practice. “Yoga with goats”, “Alien yoga” “Beer yoga” are just a few of the extreme examples, while many others are introduced in a far subtler ways such as “Aerial yoga” or “Acro yoga”. Such variations of yoga are not a new thing, nor is it a 21<sup>st</sup> century phenomena, especially in the US where the growing trend of “New age” spirituality during 60s and 70s affected different yoga modifications separating it from its authentic practice.

The presence of traditional yoga in all its complexity in social and mass media is rare and occasional, and more often than not parts of the yoga philosophy and teachings are shown out of the context and in the service of promoting something or someone. Yoga in social and mass media is presented primarily through its physical form of yoga asanas. The teachings on traditional yoga are narrowed to selected specialized media or isolated

personal social media accounts that are far behind the most popular ones. Still, traditional yoga is present in all of these platforms for those who want to learn and practice, as well as the growing public discussion about what yoga is in reality and how can it best be presented as such using new technology and available media formats.

Social and digital mass media cannot be the cause of such modernized, digested presentation of yoga. The content on yoga is rather caused by contemporary social and economic events, than it is a consequence of the media publications. It is without a doubt that the social and digital media have large, if not the largest impact on the way the perception of yoga is formed with general public. As long as the modern economic model exists, yoga will be only one of the presented products on the market that sells through the media which operate by the same marketing model themselves. At the same time, social and digital media are available to everyone today, equally so to the presentation and popularisation of traditional yoga practice that still has to find the best ways in how to use these channels to reach larger visibility and increase its impact on general public to fully understand the true yoga practice.

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