

Pop culture yogis as the new female role models
Investigating neoliberal and postfeminist
fantasies in today's digital yoga spaces

by
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B.A. (Arts and Culture), Maastricht University, 2015

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

in the
School of Communication
Faculty of Communication, Art and Technology

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SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
Summer 2021

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Abstract

This thesis locates the success and influence of modern yoga in the shared space of popular culture, neoliberalism and post-feminism. By focusing on the representations and discourse of the modern 'yoga girl', this project shows how neoliberal and post-feminist fantasies of individual autonomy, freedom, choice and authenticity are valorized over collective wellbeing and personal welfare.

Through the calculated exclusion of ethical foundations and politics, modern yoga is facilitating exploitation, growing social injustice and a path into a post-welfare era. Shifting the cause of suffering to the individual and not the political and economic system at large, makes modern yoga not only a lucrative business allowing participants to cope with the crippling effects of late capitalism, but further makes the popular yogi an unaware advocate for precisely the systematic injustices that cause their suffering in the first place.

The following research unfolds chronologically, first outlining the historical emergence of the modern yogi, followed by the analysis of her contemporary role in popular culture and significance for women. Among the issues discussed are the commitment of young women to the precarious work of yoga teaching, the objectification and governmentality over the female body and the demise of communal thinking and political action that were once intrinsic to premodern yoga systems yogic teachings.

Keywords: popular culture, neoliberalism, post-feminism, yoga, visual representations

Acknowledgements

Throughout this research project, I have received a great deal of support and assistance from both the SFU community, friends, and family.

First off, this project would not exist without Professor Martin Laba, whose enthusiasm and expertise created the space for my research to unfold. I would like to thank you for your sharp questions, insightful feedback, and invaluable review.

I would also like to acknowledge Professor Jody Baker, who I had the pleasure of working for as a teaching assistant. Your passion and curriculum have greatly inspired this thesis and I want to say thank you for the opportunity to have done so.

To my friends in Vancouver, thank you for being part of my support system in a foreign country. To my partner and his family, thank you for being a home away from home. And to my parents, thank you for everything – from motivating me to move abroad, encouraging me to live bravely, to being there for me through all the ups and downs of doing so.

And lastly, I would like to acknowledge the yogic teachings. Everyone who is showing up with the ache to connect deeply and live intently, thank you.

Table of Contents

Declaration of Committee	ii
Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
List of Figures	vii
Chapter 1. Introduction	1
1.1. Research Design and Methodology	4
1.2. Purpose Statement: A personal reflection	5
1.3. Inspired by Yogic Knowledge.....	7
1.4. Chapter Outline.....	8
Chapter 2. Yoga’s historical roots and cultural contexts.....	10
2.1. Pre-modern Yoginis: goddesses of the East	11
2.2. Yogis through the Western gaze: colonialism and orientalism [1750-1950]	21
2.3. Modern yogis: hippies, housewives and entrepreneurs [1960-1990]	25
Chapter 3. Yogis and the embodiment of neoliberal and post-feminist fantasies ..	29
3.1. Defining neoliberal fantasies.....	31
3.2. Defining post-feminist fantasies.....	34
3.3. Intersections of popular yoga, neoliberal politics and post-feminism	36
3.3.1. ‘Yoga for sale’ – Fantasies of consumer culture.....	37
3.3.2. ‘Sex Sells’ – Fantasies of the economy of visibility.....	39
3.3.3. ‘She’s got it’ – Fantasies of celebrity culture.....	41
3.3.4. ‘Feeling good, like I should’ – Fantasies of emotional capitalism	42
Chapter 4 Research Findings & Evidence Analysis.....	44
4.1 Introduction.....	44
4.1 Implications of neoliberal discourse on popular yoga	45
4.1.1 Motivations to participate in yoga	45
4.1.2 Précarité: political-economic implications of yoga teacher trainings	57
4.1.3 Orientalism and hegemony of yoga retreats	60
4.2 Implications of post-feminist discourse on popular yoga	64
4.2.1 Yoga Body.....	65
4.2.2 Sacred femininity	68
4.3 Yoga against the grain of late capitalism	72
4.3.1 Learning from feminism	72
Chapter 5 Conclusions	77
5.1 Reflections on the research process and future research.....	79
References.....	81

Appendix A ***Digital yoga spaces on Instagram by hashtags..... 85***

List of Figures

Figure 2.1 Timeline of yoginis transitions in visual culture	20
Figure 2.2 Historical timeline of a possible history of women in Yoga	20
Figure 2.3 Selected summary of yoga's popularization in the West	27
Figure 4.1 Yoga subscription boxes appealing to health (through consumption) .	46
Figure 4.2 Yogi box, a monthly delivery of popular yoga goods	48
Figure 4.3 Yoga, Weight Loss and Tea	50
Figure 4.4 'Before and After' trope on YouTube - Detox Tea	51
Figure 4.5 'Before and After' trope on YouTube - Yoga	52
Figure 4.6 Yogalebrities as questionable mentors	54
Figure 4.7 Yoga mats and the sustainability market	56
Figure 4.8 Yoga Retreats as sites of popular orientalism	61
Figure 4.9 Influencer retreats as reproduction sites of neoliberal fantasies	63
Figure 4.10 Consumer Activism in influencer retreats	64
Figure 4.11 TikTok Trend 'Amazon Leggings Challenge'	66
Figure 4.12 TikTok Trend 'Chicks who do yoga...'	67
Figure 4.13 The 'yoni' industry - Vaginal Celebrations	69
Figure 4.14 Sexualization of Asanas - Naked Yoga	71
Figure 4.15 Grassroot activism in Digital Yoga Spaces	74
Figure 4.16 Yoga activism through education	76

Chapter 1.

Introduction

The global popularization of yoga has been fuelled and elaborated in a marketplace that has long commodified yoga practices, sensibilities, values, and of course, goods. From athleisure to mats and gadgets, yoga classes ranging from singing-bowl meditations to workout classes, the offers are endless. But above the ample selection, governs a uniform figure of a yogi: female, flexible, slim, wealthy and white. This popular imagery of yoga is no longer restricted to mind and body practices that once were rooted in strong ethical and spiritual grounds but has made its way into Western pop culture in the form of burger advertisements¹, celebrity endorsements² and Hollywood movies³.

Indeed, all dimensions of yoga participation and representation—and more broadly, the “culture” of commercial yoga—conforms to and perpetuates the dominance of the ‘yoga girl’. Yoga, alongside related movements such as mindfulness, has become an asset for personal and corporate growth in the 21st century: “Focused non-judgemental attention, emotional self-regulation and pro-social behaviours are subjective capacities that have become instrumentalized – the central target of capitalist social relations” (Purser, 2019, p.193). Yoga’s ability to increase one’s performance in the capitalist market, while simultaneously offering a seemingly alternative to the unauthentic, commercial and manipulative reality of late capitalism, sits at the core of the

¹ Carl’s Jr fast food restaurant used the image of yogis in the 2007 advertisement “Great Buns”, causing backlash for the blunt sexism the ad portrait. The female yogis are portrayed as practicing yoga in order to “get better buns”, referring to their glutes, for their husbands. Fitting the “female, flexible, slim, wealthy and white” paradigm of yoga. A later campaign from 2019 “Malibu Yoga” was released to promote the introduction of the Beyond Meat alternative to the burger chain’s menu. Again, relying on the symbolic value of yoga to promote health and a feminine appeal.

² Celebrity endorsement has played a crucial role in the popularization process of yoga in the West (Jain, 2014, p.68). From the Beatles’ involvement to transcendental meditation TM to Madonna’s 1998 Oprah interview in which she proclaimed yoga as her secret to losing her post-partum body, yoga in the West is deeply entrenched in celebrity and higher-class culture.

³ Hollywood has long featured yoga characters for comedy and as a “ciphers of India and Tibet as signifiers of the transcendent” (Hackett et al., 2017, p.xiii). To name a few, the Ancient One from Doctor Who utilizes the yoga symbolism to signify transcendence, whereas the yoga instructor Yax, leader of the Naturalist Club in Disney’s Zootopia promotes humor.

success of modern yoga (Banet-Weiser, 2012, pp.191-196). And it is not by chance that modern yoga seamlessly blends with and claims to be ameliorative to the pressures, demands and anxieties of this day and age. Radically different to premodern yoga systems, (Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, and others), modern yoga has emerged out of consumer culture and was constructed precisely and comprehensively to suit the needs and the markets of that culture. As Singleton notes in his historical perspective on the development of yoga in the West:

Posture-based yoga as we know it today is the result of a dialogical exchange between para-religious, modern body culture techniques developed in the West and the various discourses of “modern” Hindu yoga that emerged from the time of Vivekananda onward. (Singleton, 2010, p.5)

Singleton outlines how modern yoga first arrived in the West in the form of a meditation and spiritual practice introduced to the broad public by Swami Vivekananda in his lecture series in Chicago in 1893. Initially excluded, postural *asana* yoga emerged for the desires of the North American audience in the following years. Yoga took its contemporary form set onto a global stage of unprecedented interest in physical culture, mediated through new technologies of photojournalism that were able to easily disseminate the postural contortions as a familiar component of the ‘exotic East’ (ibid, p.22).

Other works that explore modern yoga’s ties to late capitalism include Andrea Jain’s investigations on neoliberal spirituality and yoga *Selling Yoga* (2015), and *Peace, Love, Yoga* (2020), and Beth Berila et al. intersectional feminist analysis *Yoga, the Body, and Embodied Social Change* (2016). These studies certainly offer insights into the making of yoga into a vast and lucrative lifestyle consumer good in the marketplace, but there is no comprehensive account for the scope and power that draws in millions of women into the yoga industries and marketplaces, buying equipment, classes, teacher certification, and the like. But beyond the invitation to spend, yogis have now risen to the rank of role models for modern women, facilitating imageries of affirmative, optimistic and progressive femininity. These glamourized media representations fail to move beyond the gestural anticapitalism and gestural feminism intrinsic to the symbolic makeup of modern yoga:

Although they [spiritual entrepreneurs and consumers] gesture toward wanting to resolve the real devastating social and environmental conditions

that neoliberal capitalist structures create and perpetuate, they put the burden for resolving those conditions on individual consumers, as opposed to supporting collective dissent and radical policy change. (Jain, 2020, p.8)

It is within this shared space of pop culture, neoliberalism and post-feminism, that I position the normative appeal of modern yoga. This project parallels observations made inside today's yoga culture with Angela McRobbie's study of young women in the creative industry, who are dealing with the ambivalent demands of post-Fordist modes of work and post-modern desires for one's life (2016). Similar to the creative dispositif⁴, the yoga dispositif offers a pedagogic invitation for women to embark on a journey of self-discovery while hiding the hard facts of the subsequent individualization process⁵ (McRobbie, 2016, p.14). The yoga dispositif offers gestures of anticapitalism, activism and self-help while simultaneously prescribing women to the dominant ideology of never being enough in a state of constant competition. De-politicized and de-socialized, the modern yoga girl is trained to cope and support a post-welfare era, while being disarmed of the intellect grasp the true cost of capitalism.

This thesis sets out to investigate how the popular notion of a 'yoga girl' has come to embody the postfeminist and neoliberal fantasies of contemporary women and takes a historical look at the popularization of modern yoga in relation to the dominant cultural ideologies from the 1970s onwards. Contextualizing yoga through a critical cultural lens is the first step in outlining how yogis have gained their popularity and subsequent power. What follows seeks to answer why women in particular are so compelled to participate in yoga and accept precarious work conditions of yoga teaching, justify unattainable beauty standards and put a disproportional amount of trust in yoga influencers regarding health and politics. This thesis builds on feminist, cultural studies,

⁴ In Angela McRobbie's recent book *Be Creative* (2016), the author analyses why young women are drawn into the creative industries and outlines the romanization of the work mode as a key factor: "This romance [is] translated at an institutional level so that it functions as a kind of dispositif, a self-monitoring, self-regulating mechanism" (p.38). The concept of dispositif originated in Foucault's work and is described as "a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures...the system of relations that can be established between elements" (Foucault, 1980, p.194).

⁵ Individualization in McRobbie's argument encompasses a double process. On the one hand, the glamourization of individuals and stars in the public media. On the other hand, as a fluid, less permanent social structure in which individuals increasingly have to become their own micro-structures (2016, p.18).

media and political economy scholarship and asks critical questions of representations, community engagement and hegemony in the yoga industries.

1.1. Research Design and Methodology

The research subject “popular yoga” is comprised of on the one hand personal reflections made within the yoga culture and evidence selected through a threefold measure of popularity as developed by Sarah Banet-Weiser: first, popular as a means of ranking based on media visibility; second, popular as a condition of being liked or admired by likeminded people; third, popular [culture]⁶ as a terrain of struggle over meaning and in contrast to both mainstream and counterculture. The latter definition derives from the work of Stuart Hall on popular culture as one of the “sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged” (Hall, 1998, p.453). This means that pop culture yoga is not a fixed entity but context sensitive. There are many different yoga systems circulating in popular culture at a moment in time, with some more visible than others.

By focusing on the digital spaces facilitated by Instagram and TikTok, the measure for popularity is partially implemented by looking at the likes, shares and those posts deemed ‘top’ or ‘trending’ by the social media’s own algorithm. To verify my personal observations, I created a new account on Instagram to track what type of digital yoga space opens up when following the most popular suggestions. As a starting point, I chose the account *yoga* with 1,7 million, which upon following suggested *yogadailypractice* with 810 thousand followers and so forth (see *Appendix A*) Additionally, I frequently checked for the top posts for the hashtag *yoga*. All in all, the results were predominantly displaying of slim, hyper flexible white women or girls and thus consistent with the yoga culture that I had experienced.

While making use of a variety of visual methodologies⁷ to analyze the above-mentioned samples, the overarching method of this project is the critical cultural essay.

⁶ Stuart Hall theorises popular as an uneven and dynamic terrain, constantly negotiating between consent and resistance, mainstream and counter cultures.

⁷ Gillian Rose highlights that modernity is made up of an ocularcentric culture in which ‘seeing is believing’ (2001). Visual methodologies include semiotics as well as discourse analysis, that aim to uncover the cultural significance, social practice and power relations embedded in the

Hence, theory and method overlap and follow the footsteps of Stuart Hall, and the general poststructuralist assumption that “webs of meaning [are] constructed by humans through their language and arguments” (Merrigan, 2012, p.224). My project sets out to highlight how the contemporary meaning of yoga was constructed through culture and ideology and challenges the resulting dominance and power relation established within the yogic discourse (ibid, p.230). Qualitative and interpretative by nature, the cultural inquiry that follows is embedded in theoretical frames well established and widely accepted to compensate for the level of subjectivity intrinsic to critical scholarship:

Work in this area is bound to be interpretative – a debate between, not who is right and wrong, but between equally plausible, though sometimes competing and contesting, meanings and interpretations. The best way to settle such contested readings is to look again at the concrete example and try to justify one’s reading in detail in relation to the actual practices and forms of signification used, and what meanings they seem to you to be producing (Hall, 1997, p.9)

The rationale for choosing this method emerged in a two-fold way. On the one hand, the historiography of modern yoga in the West suggests that its popularization is context-sensitive, and the popular yoga discourse was constructed to suit the ideological bearings of consumer culture. And on the other hand, the political stance of the critical researcher against power, oppression and privilege aligns with my research goal to re-position yoga against neoliberal exploitation. Accordingly, this method as described addresses the key task of my research, namely, to identify the historical, economic, and political sources of the dominant ideologies of neoliberalism and post-feminism embedded in the popular yoga discourse. Building on the aspect of the researcher’s positionality, my personal involvement in the subject matter has not only motivated, but also informs large parts of this project.

1.2. Purpose Statement: A personal reflection

Reflecting on my personal introduction to yoga, I can easily identify how my motivations to participate in yoga mirrored contemporary neoliberal and post-feminist

constructed codes of visual sign and signifier (p.75). Similarly, discourse refers to “particular knowledge about the world which shapes how the world is understood and how things are done” through the means of language (p.136). The notion of discourse is central to post-structuralist thinker Foucault.

imaginaries⁸. Newly enrolled in university, I was drawn to the promise getting in shape, handling stress and participating in something that was deemed popular within my habitus⁹. The local yoga studio in my mid-size student town was chic, catering to the upper-middle class cohort of largely female student body¹⁰. The classes were all postural *asana* based, ranging from flexibility focused *yin* yoga to full-body workouts running under the power *vinyasa* yoga label. Except for the occasional Sanskrit reference of poses, yoga philosophy and history were absent from the curriculum. Similarly, the digital yoga spaces I had entered through following different teacher's social media, was a homogeneous bubble of precisely the "female, flexible, slim, white, wealthy" 'yoga girl' mentioned earlier.

As a well-represented member of the yoga community, with no pre-existing knowledge of yoga other than what I was exposed to, I was blissfully unaware of the alliance between yoga and the logics of capitalism, a system largely at fault for the issues practitioners seek shelter from in yoga. I had always wanted to do a highly visible and advertised yoga teacher training (YTT), but with a price tag of 2000\$ and more I couldn't afford it. During the global covid-19 pandemic, the American Yoga Alliance¹¹, the institution of runs said certificate, allowed for the trainings to be completed virtually for a limited time only. All of the sudden, programs were popping up for 500-1000\$ and I enrolled in an online yoga teacher training I was quickly shocked by the discussions I witnessed in the forum from single-mother's blaming themselves for not completing the

⁸ As the title of this thesis suggests, I refer to neoliberal and post-feminist fantasies to highlight the discrepancy between lived experience (the hard fact, reality) and the promises (fantasies) made. In his compelling book *Crises of imagination, crises of power: Capitalism, creativity and the commons* (2014), Max Haiven approaches neoliberalism from the angle of critiquing its value system. In that, imagination or fantasy, are most important to capitalism's renewal as it promotes the idea that "no alternative is possible" and functions to normalises an amoral system (p.57).

⁹ Habitus refers to a system of attitudes, values, beliefs and all the things expressing them. Pierre Bourdieu describes how fields, class and taste as forms of distinction are maintained through the mechanism of habitus (1992).

¹⁰ Maastricht University has 60% female students and an overall higher than average living cost of 800-1,100 euros (Masterportal.com, 2021).

¹¹ American Yoga Alliance is the leading institution that issues the Yoga Teacher Training certificates (YTT), which allows teachers to register and purchase insurance through the non-profit organization. The certificate program is voluntary but has grown to become an American standard. The organization has been in steady critique for lack of keeping teaching standards up, monetarizing yoga as well as lack of awareness towards abuse and rape scandals surrounding several yoga gurus. A new competitor has launched in September 2020 called Yoga Unify, claiming to prioritize ethics and focus on unifying the yoga community (yogajournal.com).

program to others who incurred considerable debt after opening their own studios. The program first introduced me to yogic philosophies, but more importantly, it showed me the gap between the teachings and the socio-economic reality of the yoga community.

This project is committed to a critical exploration and analysis the current state of the global yoga culture and aims to provide insights and knowledge that can help create more diverse, accessible and just [yoga] spaces in the future. In her analysis of pop culture feminism, Andi Zeisler concludes that media friendly feminism isn't enough and has transformed a once collective goal to a consumer brand (2016). Yoga similarly proposes a collective goal and has become a particularly influential and lucrative global brand. Yoga as a consumer culture is fraught with elitism and exclusion, inaccessibility and unaffordability, and this thesis seeks to provide critical perspective on the industries, the manufacturing, and the promotion of yoga as high consumerism.

1.3. Inspired by Yogic Knowledge

There is of course, no single “yoga” and neither is there a single ownership over yoga. Authoritative perspectives of yoga reinforce the singularity that marks contemporary discourse around yoga as pure, monolithic or as a seamless continuity of theory and practice over centuries (Godrej, 2017). Modern yoga “that is taught and practiced today, has very little in common with the yoga of the *Yoga Sūtra* ¹²” (White, 2012, p.2). And even within India’s ancient yoga traditions:

Yoga has a wider meaning than nearly any other word in the entire Sanskrit lexicon. The act of yoking an animal, as well as the yoke itself, is called yoga. In astronomy, a conjunction of planets or stars, we as well as a constellation, is called yoga. When one mixes together various substances, that, too, can be called yoga. The word yoga has also been employed to denote a device, a recipe, a method, a strategy, a charm, an incantation, fraud, a trick, an endeavour, a combination, union, an arrangement, zeal, care, diligence, industriousness, discipline, use, application, contact, a sum total, and the work of an alchemist. But this is by no means an exhaustive list (White, 2012, p.2)

¹² *Yoga Sūtra of Patanjali* are a widely used and often translated collection of aphorisms *sutras* dating back to 325 – 425 CE including “the refined cognitive states known as samadhi; the practical methods to attain these states (sadhana, including the well-known yoga of eight limbs or auxiliaries, astangayoga); the special powers (siddhi, vibhuti) acquired through practice; and the final state of liberation (kaivalya)” (Singleton, 2016, p.xvii).

Clearly, the defining attributes of the cultural, philosophical, and spiritual histories and foundations of yoga can be understood as contradictory to the commodification and industrialization of yoga in the consumer marketplace. This thesis explores these tensions around yoga and the marketplace through an analysis and synthesis of the key and critical theoretical trajectories of neoliberalism, post-feminism, and popular culture studies.

1.4. Chapter Outline

Chapter 2 contextualizes the emergence of modern popular yoga in the West and show its embeddedness within as well as its absorption of the cultural currents through the decades. Starting with a short excursion into the Ancient history of women and yoga in which I highlight the complex and ambivalent place women held in yogic spiritualities (Wittich, 2020), this chapter focuses on the particularity of femininity in modern yoga and how key female figures such as Indra Devi. Female yogis were addresses as housewives, hippies and entrepreneurs, each adding a new particular set of meanings and desires that yoga could address.

Chapter 3 investigates yoga's ability to function as a trojan horse for neoliberal and post-feminist fantasies. First, the chapter defines the history and socio-economic impact of both neoliberalism and post-feminism. Secondly the chapter discusses the intersections of popular yoga, neoliberal politics and second wave feminism. Shared spaces are identified, and common "fantasies" are discussed such as emotional capitalism and yoga for emotional control (Ilouz, 2007), the beauty myth and yoga for beauty (Berila et al. 2012), and hyper-individualism and yoga for fame (Banet-Weiser, 2012).

Chapter 4 ventures into the contemporary digital yoga spaces and analyzes the extend and how the popular yoga girl embodies neoliberal and post-feminist fantasies. The first half focuses on neoliberal fantasies, collecting evidence for the motivations to participate as signs of self-investments, anti-capitalist gestures in a capitalist work mode, and precarious work of yoga teaching. The second half focuses on post-feminism and discuss themes of female empowerment, the female body as a site of male consumption and the depoliticizing of political issues.

Finally, chapter 5 concludes and reviews the portrayal of the popular 'yoga girl' as a role model with questionable value for women. It returns to the assumption that yoga in its most basic definition is a practice of freedom and offers lessons and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2.

Yoga's historical roots and cultural contexts

In the contemporary popular culture of yoga, the practice of yoga is generally regarded as dating back directly to ancient India. Whether such regard is promulgated by Western secular perspectives or is an imperative of the “Hindu origin position” that delegitimizes Western influences on yoga, the claims equally distort the particularity of modern yoga (Jain, 2014, p.450). Several issues arise from both essentialist viewpoints. The former bearing cultural appropriation¹³ that privileges a Western grip on yoga; the latter pursuing a political goal of reclaiming ownership over yoga¹⁴. Two discourses that are “in conflict with the historical experience” (ibid, p.447). The oversimplification in both cases leaves no room for a critical assessment of modern yoga as a thing of itself, which in turn leaves us empty handed in the quest for creating a more informed, accessible, and ultimately beneficial yoga culture.

In her recent book *Pop Culture Yoga: A Communication Remix* (2020) Kristine C. Blinne analyses why popular yoga relies so heavily on cultural categories manifested in stereotypical representations. She concludes that participants rely on imagined boundaries¹⁵ to forge seemingly authentic, complete and established identities for themselves. As a result, a variety of groups emerge claiming for themselves a single yoga authority, authenticity, and ownership. Such claims of course, are problematic given the plurality and diversity of yoga cultures and development:

¹³ Cultural Appropriation as an umbrella term refers to the act of “taking possession over” or “to make one’s own” without authority or right. A more nuanced stance that overcomes the dichotomy between separated cultures, which in reality interact and shape each other, is found in Richard Roger’s work on ‘transculturation’: “[transculturation] creates hybrid fusions of forms that circularly appropriate elements across cultures. Per Roger’s typology, debates about yoga and cultural appropriation most often speak in terms of cultural exploitation and/or dominance, rather than exchange or transculturation.” (Blinne, 2020, p.246).

¹⁴ Andrea Jain lays out how the Indian government has joined the ownership debate, spearheaded by The Hindu American Foundation (HAF) such as the ‘Take Back Yoga – Bringing to Light Yoga’s Hindu Roots in 2010’ (Jain, 2014, p.430).

¹⁵ Benedict Anderson’s book *Imagined Communities* (1983) describes how nations are socially constructed community imagined by the people who perceive themselves as participants of said group. Similarly, yoga groups determine themselves by imagining boundaries between those part of their group and the outsiders.

Thus, instead of positioning yoga culture as a static, fixed, or monolithic tradition with some standardized definition, we would be better served to consider yoga through the lens of culturing, a verb that recognizes the ways in which yoga is not one culture but many cultures or ecologies that are always in flux, highlighting the messiness, complexity, and diversity of contested ideas about yoga as they move through various places, historical moments, and sociocultural contexts (Blinne, 2020, p.236)

In order to understand yoga systems in their plurality establish the foundation for the latter half of the thesis which will delve further into the semantic network of modern yoga, this chapter highlights some of the most important associations to the past made within modern yoga culture and offers historical corrections to problematic representational strategies around yoga.

2.1. Pre-modern Yoginis: goddesses of the East

Earlier, the popular notion of a yogi as a female, flexible, slim, wealthy and white woman was detailed. Inspecting her presence in the digital yoga spaces, she appears wearing mala beads, posing in temples, or simply at home, in the goddess pose *utkata konasana*. Loose references to this goddess archetype¹⁶ are present all throughout the modern yogic discourse, seamlessly tied into feminism, body positivity movements and the like. With many claims circulating in the popular yoga spaces regarding ‘awakening one’s inner goddess’, let us consider who in fact, are the yogic goddesses, the first female yogis known as yoginis who possessed or practiced yoga gendered female.

The earliest visual artefacts of yoginis can be found in temples, illustrated manuscripts and printed broadsides and date back to the 9th century India. Ancient yoginis encompass fierce goddesses, who sustained themselves by drinking human blood and mortal women who through tantric¹⁷ ritual became those goddesses:

¹⁶ Archetypes first introduced by Carl Jung, describe how the human’s primitive past remains at the basis of human psychology and through classification can offer insights on psychological malaises and patterns. In her popular book *Women Who Run With the Wolves* (1992) Clarissa Pinkola Estes collects a variety of women archetypes, revealing “the ways and means of woman’s deepest nature” (ibid, p.3). With regard to the goddess archetype, in particular within the yogic context, the goddess archetype is the quintessential embodiment of *shakti* female power responsible for creation, mothers, birth and death.

¹⁷ Tantra broadly speaking refers to “South Asian philosophical systems centred around the use of embodiment as a path to transcendence. It involves the embrace rather than the denial of

The [practitioner] of great spirit should recite the mantra, naked [and] facing south. After seven nights, the yoginis come – highly dangerous with terrifying forms, impure, angry and lethal. But seeing this, the [practitioner] of heroic spirit should not fear; after prostrating, he should give them the guest offering... pleased...they tell truly [the future], good or bad (Brahmayamalatantra, XVI, translated by Shaman Hatley)

From the 9th century onwards, tantric yoginis¹⁸ often appeared as a group of 64 both mortal and divine women with occult and supernatural powers (Diamond, 2020). In this period, “Hatha yogis¹⁹, orthodox Hindus, and monarchs began appropriating and domesticating Tantric yoginis” (Diamond, 2013, p.13). Kings across India began sponsoring yogini temples by paying different tantra cults to perform exoteric rituals on their behalf to gain access to future readings and protection of their kingdoms. The yoginis were represented with wild hair, untamed and powerful.

bodily pleasure, which had up to then [10th century CE] characterized the more predominant ascetic systems of yoga in South Asia” (Godrej, 2016, p.774).

¹⁸ Shaman Hatley (2013) offers a polythetic definition of yoginis consisting of (1) Multiplicity, yoginis occur in groups (2) Manifestation in/ as mortal women, yoginis blur boundaries between goddess and women (3) Organization into clans, mother hierarchies (4) Theriomorphism, animal shapeshifting (5) Danger, Impurity and Power (6) Protection and transmission of esoteric teachings (7) Flight.

¹⁹ Hatha Yoga, while not doctrinally whole or belonging to any single school of Indian thought, is often credited in modern yoga as the source of asana teachings (Singleton, 2010, p.27). Hatha translates to ‘forceful’ or ‘violent’ and in its earliest form was “concerned with the transmutation of the human body into a vessel immune from mortal decay” (ibid, p.28). Earliest hatha texts describe the preliminary stage of hatha as purifying the body, the six steps include for example “*dhauti*, the cleansing of the stomach by means of swallowing a long, narrow strip of cloth” (ibid). Additionally, to the cleansing protocol and few postures, breathwork and knowledge of the subtle body including the chakras, was part of early hatha. With regard to pre-modern and modern hatha yoga, Singleton concludes: “While some schools of modern yoga catering to an international audience do conserve some of these elements, in the main they have become distinctly subordinate to the practice of asana, which is itself rationalized in ways markedly alien to the kind of hatha yoga outlined in [the early scriptures]” (ibid, p.31).

Figure 2.1 Timeline of yoginis transitions in visual culture



Notes: The slides are a courtesy of Dr Debra Diamond, from her lecture at the SOAS Centre of yoga studies in July 2020. Her lecture ‘Yoginis, Power and Visual Culture’ is based on her exhibition at the Smithsonian Museum called ‘Yoga: The Art of Transformation’.

A shift occurred as Hinduism and Islam became less esoteric and the Medieval yogini representations became more benign and domesticated. The figures have their hair tied up, dressed in fine gowns and often shown at courts and in gardens (ibid). What is important to note is that pre-modern yoginis were not a majority among women of that time but limited to “a few female poets [who] where considered to be saints or yoginis” as well as princesses (Wittich, 2020, p.10). Most women, for most of pre-modern yoga’s timeline, were partially or completely excluded from the practice and spiritual life:

Figure 2.2 Historical timeline of a possible history of women in Yoga

Ancient Yoga	2500 BCE	Archaeological findings	Little known, but women were likely a part of spiritual life. Yogini representations in temples
Classical Yoga	2 nd – 4 th C AD	Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras	Exclusion of women from spiritual practices
Medieval Yoga	11 th C AD	Hatha Yoga Pradipika	Female poets indicate the possibility of some yoginis, in contrast to the scholarly notion that women were completely excluded from hatha yoga.
Colonial Yoga, British Indian Empire	1757 - 1947	Various	Yogi as everything wrong with Hinduism, spiritual practice forbidden. Yogini either sexualized or victimized

Modern Yoga	1893	Swami Vivekananda	Vivekananda promoter of women's rights and yoga in the West. Source of inspiration for the popularization of yoga in the following years.
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Notes: The table above summarises the article written by Agi Wittich for the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (2020)

In today's popular yoga culture, we can see a return to the notion of the wild, ancient yoginis. In line with feminist movement's celebration of women's sexuality and the normalization of menstruation, a resurfacing of the wild women archetype is taking place in popular culture. But popular feminism still exists along a continuum, where media-friendly expressions achieve more visibility, and "expressions that critique patriarchal structures and systems of racism and violence are obscured" (Banet-Weiser et al, 2020, p.9). The lessons and stories about womanhood, sisterhood and a universal *shakti* female energy represented by modern alterations of the yogini, remain distorted by the power structures dominating popular culture. As Estes argues:

Stories are embedded with instructions which guide us about the complexities of life... Sometimes various cultural overlays disarray the bones of stories... Most old collections of fairytales and mythos existent today have been scoured clean of the scatological, the sexual, the perverse (as in warnings against), the pre-Christian, the feminine, the Goddesses, the initiatory, the medicined for various psychological malaises, and the directions for spiritual raptures. (Pincola Estes, 1992, pp.22,23)

The following section outlines the initial adoption of the yogini into the Western context and the subsequent changes that followed to the popular notion of a yogi from the European perspective.

2.2. Yogis through the Western gaze: colonialism and orientalism [1750-1950]

Suppression and appropriation of Indian yoga systems expanded with the arrival of British colonists in India in the 18th century. The term yogi acquired a far broader significance in colonial India, as the European visitors had difficulties distinguishing between the various categories of mendicant orders and would commonly conflate the Hindu yogi and the Mohammedan fakir (Singleton, 2010, p.35). Prohibitions were issued

and the yogi became the topoi for everything that was wrong with India for Europeans, from lack of rationality to weak bodies:

For these visitors, yogi tended to signify the social group of itinerant renouncers known for their disreputable and sometimes violent behaviour, mendicancy, and outlandish austerities... Large numbers were forced into lives of yogic showmanship and mendicancy, becoming objects of scorn for many sections of Hindu society, and of voyeuristic fascination or disgust for European visitors... The swell of disenfranchised *nāgas*²⁰ during the nineteenth century ushered in a heyday for yogic showmanship and provided a wealth of material for newspapers and popular ethnographers. (Singleton, 2010, pp.40, 55)

Yoga became a spectacle, and while Indian practitioners were sanctioned, and women were discriminated as “either voluptuous sirens or chaste but ignorant victims”, Westerners made a business out of the rich resources the Otherness²¹ of India offered to them (Wittich, 2020, p.15).

This is exemplified by the fictitious character “Koringa, the only female yogi”, played by Renee Bernhard who performed between the 1920s and 30s in France, the UK and the US with the Bertram Mills’ Circus and Menagerie (Lipscom, 2013). Bernhard claimed to be an orphan from India, raised by fakirs who taught her magic; her acts were displays of such including dancing on a ladder made of sword blades and posing with snakes. Her show utilized imagery from the ancient yoginis, such as immortality and control over animals (Diamond, 2020). Her femineity was represented as wild, uncivilized to Western eyes. The intentional dichotomy between the West and India played a crucial role in the popularization of yoga and Bernhard, reflecting the fin-de-siècle Zeitgeist of Western orientalism. As Lipscom notes, “We may see Koringa as a product of colonialist fantasy of India and the exotic woman. [But] Renée Bernard’s Koringa can [also] be interpreted as an homage to these ancient goddesses, who in turn helped her achieve fame and fortune” (Lipscom, 2013).

²⁰ *nāgas* refers to a naked wandering ascetic, in particular one belonging to a sect whose members carry arms and serve as mercenaries. The name originates from Hindi *nāgā* meaning ‘naked’ (Merriam-Webster.com)

²¹ Othering as a philosophical concept refers to the identification of self through differentiating it from other human beings. Cultural critic Edward Said describes the act of Othering as a part of Orientalism, in which the conceptual framework of Us-versus-Them creates a power dynamic of the West subordinating the East. Othering occurs in other forms of racism as well as sexism, in which the Other is dominated through the “knowledge of the Other” from the socio-politically powerful point of view of the Self (Foucault, 1990).

The evolution of yoga didn't stop here, and after being banned and seen as a mere spectacle, it transformed into respectable practice with the help of a handful of business savvy advocates. In the midst of the global body culture and healthism of the 20th century, as well as the Indian independence, postural practice "progressively became the most prominent component of mainstream modern yoga" (Singleton, 2010, p.12). The revival of modern yoga in India became a project (so did Hinduism itself) to fulfill the "sociopolitical demands of the emergent modern Indian nation" (ibid, p.208). Influential yoga teachers began receiving guest students from abroad, such as Indra Devi²² born Eugenie Peterson, and travelled to the US themselves lecturing and teaching yoga to promote not only their own schools and businesses, but also to represent India after centuries of oppression: "yoga helped to recalibrate Indian authority over the practice when Western counterculture interest in yoga began to burgeon" (Black, 2020, p.16). Key players in the global dissemination of yoga included "B.K.S. Iyengar and K. Pattabhi Jois, both students of Krishnamacharya, each innovated their own schools of postural practice (Iyengar and Ashtanga Yoga respectively)" (Godrej, 2017, p.776).

While the male Indian expats relied mostly on the trope of Ancient spiritualities and wisdoms, Latvian born Eugenie Peterson occupied an alternative niche in the newly emerging American yoga market, creating a practice "perfectly calibrated for Eisenhower's America" (Goldberg, 2016, p.393). The Eisenhower era from 1953-1961 was marked by the suburbanization of America, the prominence and priority of the automobile, and the rise of social norms of conservatism and conformity, represented in popular culture by symbols of the affluent life, the luxury car, the suburban home with a white-picket fence, and of course, the housewife. In her book *Yoga for Americans* (1959), Devi writes: "It [yoga] will help businessmen and sportsmen, public speakers,

²² Eugenie Peterson's transformation into yogini Indra Devi begun at age 15 after reading a yoga manual by Yogi Ramacharaka, synonym to the American author and occultist William Walter Atkinson. The young actress and dancer had escaped the Bolsheviks and fled to Berlin with her mother, where her fascination with India was sparked through her introduction to the Theosophical Society. At age 28, she set off to India enabled by her fiancé, who she left in order to pursue an acting career in India under her stage name Indra Devi. Her fame in India allowed her to study at the Mysore Palace alongside Iyengar and Pattabhi Jois led by the teachings of guru Krishnamacharya. Following her diplomat husband to China, she taught yoga in Shanghai until the unexpected death of her spouse, when she was forced to relocate given the political turmoil of the Chinese Civil War. She arrived in California in 1947, and through her connections of being a diplomat's wife, opened her yoga studio on Sunset Boulevard in 1948 (Goldberg, 2016)

models and housewives, and also people employed in offices, factories and stores where they must either sit at a desk, stand on their feet for long hours at a time, or work under stresses and tensions” (Devi, 1959). But despite being intended for all Americans, Devi’s 6-week-program and her overall following turned increasingly female, led by her celebrity students Greta Garbo, Eva Gabor and Gloria Swanson as the faces to an “uplifting ritual for cosmopolitan, spiritual-but-not-religious women” (Goldberg, 2016, p.272).

From the Western point of view, yoga offered two crucial benefits that contributed significantly to its popularisation and helped it overcome its initial bias as a showbusiness throughout the 20th century. First, yoga was a regime that was rebranded to enhance ones physical and mental wellbeing in a time when eugenics and Social Darwinism held a powerful grip on the Western psyche (Singleton, 2010, p.98). Yoga was particularly attractive to women, because it offered a practice to the newly emerging cultural persuasions of psychology²³ and liberal feminism that shaped women’s selfhood. As Ilouz elaborates, “Key motives and symbols of [psychology and liberal feminism]: equality, fairness, neutral procedures, emotional communication, sexuality, overcoming and expressing hidden emotions, and centrality of linguistic self-expression are all at the modern ideal.” (Ilouz, 2007, p.29)

Secondly, Americanized yoga contained just the right amount of Otherness to counter the rattling experiences of Western modernity and technological sophistication and advance. As Lao explains,

Discourses relied upon an Eastern agelessness, in opposition to a Western modernity... In this way, the West is represented as a highly individualised, technologies, and scientized modernity, while the East remains the timeless representation of collectivity, spirituality, nature, and harmony. (Lao, 2000, p.132)

By the 1950s, modern yoga was not yet part of the mainstream culture but had successfully established itself as a popular practice within elite and eccentric social

²³ Sigmund Freud’s reformulation of ‘the Self’ unfolded from the 1909 onwards, after his lectures at Clark University. In his sweeping series, he introduced the audience to “the major ideas of psychoanalysis, or at any rate those ideas which would find a resounding echo in American popular culture such as slips of the tongue, the role of the unconscious in determining our destiny, the centrality of dreams for psychic life, the sexual character of most of our desires, the family as the origin of our psyche and ultimate cause of its pathologies” (Ilouz, 2007 p.6).

groups. But only through the cultural shifts that occurred during the counterculture decade of the 60s and its absorption into the full-fledged consumer culture from the 70s onwards, modern yoga took the shape and form by which we know it today (Jain, 2015, p.42).

2.3. Modern yogis: hippies, housewives and entrepreneurs [1960-1990]

Yoga's expansion into global popular culture must be seen alongside consumer culture in the latter half of the 20th century in a two-fold way. First, as Jain notes, consumer culture gave the blueprint for the distribution of yoga as a brand led by entrepreneurs such as Indra Devi and B.K.S. Iyengar:

As economies in urban areas across the world increasingly shifted toward the production and consumption of customized products based on individual consumers' desires and needs, yoga became subject to branding processes. Yoga brands signified the dominant physical and psychological self-developmental desires and needs of many contemporary consumers. (Jain, 2015, p.94)

Second, the brand myth of yoga was established in contrast to the alienating effects of consumerism and mass culture, and came to represent something authentic to counter the very consumerism that enabled yoga's popularisation: "As much as individual consumers are not in control of their physical living conditions or places on the socioeconomic hierarchy, spiritual shopping gives consumers a sense of control over their lives" (Jain, 2020, p.25).

In the 1960s, a new market opened up in addition to the previously mostly middle-aged yoga audience. Youth and counterculture movements' fascination with India was spearheaded by the Beatles' spiritual romance with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, transcendental meditation and Indian metaphysics (Singleton, 2015, p.20). The flower power generation turned to "music, dance, sexual liberation, political protest, huge festivals, visionary drug experiences, and practices like yoga and meditation that cultivate interior development" as an antidote to a stagnant culture of war, greed, and inauthenticity (Walker, 2012, p.10). With its absorption into popular culture, yogis became skinnier, whiter and more conventionally beautiful:

The images of women used to model yoga have tended to change with the ideal body image projected by society... originating from a long tradition of women selling things in advertisements, a proven way of attracting the interest of both women and men. Fashion followed the growing consumer market of the youth... The middle-aged population that made up the bulk of yoga practitioners were affected by the social discrimination of their age relative to the cultural standard of youth as essential to feminine beauty. (Newcomb, 2007, p.52)

The representation of yoga as an 'elixir of youth' has remained at the core of the modern popular yoga culture of the 21st century.

An extraordinary and ironic transformation occurred in the last three decades prior to the year 2000. The prevailing cultural values of the 1960s that were "antithetical to the technologies and social structures powering the cold war and its defense industries" became the birthplace of the new digital culture of the Silicon Valley entrepreneurs (Turner, 2006, p.3). The tech entrepreneurs that grew up during the counterculture era, took yoga with them to the new digitalized world. At the memorial service of Steve Jobs in 2011, which he had planned in detail, hundreds of influential leaders in business, politics and popular culture were reminded of the importance that spirituality and yoga played in the success of Jobs²⁴. As Benioff describes,

On the way out, they handed us a small brown box. I knew this is going to be good, because I knew that this was a decision that he had made that everyone was going to get this. Whatever this was, was the last thing he wanted us to all think about. What was in this brown box? It was a copy of Yoganada²⁵'s book... The message was 'actualize yourself'. That was Yoganada's message (Benioff, 2013)

Self-actualization became the central purpose of yoga from the 1970s onwards. The cultural focus of yoga shifts away from communal activism towards the self, as its domain becomes saturated with the ideology of neoliberalism, the political agenda of the Thatcher and Reagan era from the late 1970s onwards. Self-actualization became

²⁴ Apple Computer Inc. was founded in 1976 in California by college dropout Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak

²⁵ Yoganada was an Indian Monk, yogi and guru who's book *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946) has become a classic of the modern popular yoga culture. The book describes Paramahansa Yoganada's encounters with spiritual leaders in both East and West, and how he established his teachings based on his life experience. It introduced meditation and the power of self-realization to the broad masses as well as famous advocates from Steve Jobs to George Harrison.

connected to, and articulated through business, entrepreneurialism, and materialism, all of which were reconciled with a new supremely lucrative concept of marketplace yoga.

Early to realizing the appeal of neoliberal self-actualization for the masses, was founder of the athleisure brand Lululemon, Chip Wilson. He freely combined business, social responsibility, self-optimization, post-feminism and yoga discourse to forge the brand that would later become synonymous with the modern yogi (Lavrence& Lozanski, 2014). Providing the lifestyle brand to a new generation of yogis seeking “management of self and emotions” in order to boost their “self-esteem as a vaccine against sources of social instability, such as gender inequality” (ibid, p.80). Situated in the heart of modern popular yoga, Lululemon has grown its stock value twentyfold, from its 2007 IPO price of 17.03\$ to an all-time high of 375.67\$ in 2020. This thesis argues that it is precisely because of the cultural motifs of neoliberalism and post-feminism and their presence in digital popular culture spaces, that the yoga industry continues to grow. The following chapter elaborates on the fantasies of neoliberalism and post-feminism.

Figure 2.3 Selected summary of yoga’s popularization in the West

Year	Event
1893	Swami Vivekananda introduces yogic philosophies to a large US audience in his lecture series at the World Parliament of Religions Chicago
1948	Indra Devi born Eugenie Peterson opens her yoga studio in Hollywood
1961	Richard Hittleman teaches yoga on television <i>Yoga for Health</i> (1961-1970s)
1965	Revision of the U.S. law from 1924 on the quota of Indian immigration sparking a wave of Indian spiritual teachers arriving in the US (for example Bikram Choudhury, founder of Bikram Yoga, in 1971)
1966	B.K, Iyengar publishes <i>Light on Yoga</i>
1968	The Beatles travel to India and spark global interest in TM. Inclusion of Sitar and alternative instruments in Western pop music
1969	Sri Swami Satchidananda opens the Woodstock festival with a yogic prayer
1971	Ram Dass (Richard Alpert) publishes his book <i>Be Here Now</i> and tours US university campuses
1975	Pattabhi Jois establishes Ashtanga Yoga in the US

1975	The Yoga Journal is founded by members of the California Yoga Teachers Association
1997	The NGO Yoga Alliance is founded in the US
1998	Madonna holds her infamous Oprah interview, pronouncing her dedication to Ashtanga Yoga
1998	Chip Wilson founds Lululemon in Vancouver, BC
2007	Several new yoga brands emerge, Alo Yoga founded in California now one of the leading fast fashion athleisure brands
2008	Hollywood sensation Gwyneth Paltrow founds the high-end wellness brand goop
2009	Wanderlust Yoga Festival is founded in California and continues to grow globally
2010s	Yoga breaking into mainstream Hollywood movies such as <i>Forgetting Sarah Marshall</i> (2008) and <i>Couples Retreat</i> (2009)
2012	Yoga with Adriene, the leading yoga related YouTube channel begins posting classes on the platform

Chapter 3.

Yogis and the embodiment of neoliberal and post-feminist fantasies

The changes in the spirit of capitalism²⁶ that occurred between 1970 and 1980 not only affected the cultural context of yoga, but fundamentally changed yoga on the inside. New fantasies and desires were forged in the spirit of freedom, individualism and identity politics to which yoga culture could offer an embodied practice. 'Finding your true self', 'awakening' and 'reconnecting to your inner goddess' are only a few examples of popular yoga culture discourse that showcase the shift towards the neoliberal self, in which "empowerment, choice and self-care reinforce the responsabilized self that is the core of contemporary neoliberal societies" (Lavrence& Lozanski, 2014, p.76).

In the process of entering the commercialised mainstream culture in the 1980s, yoga in the United States adopted another, more traditional, characteristic. The cultural context of the 80s was determined by the neoliberal alliance with neo-conservatives, which merged together to counter the liberation movements and social activism of the previous decades. In addition to the notion of hyper-individualism, modern yoga also internalised conservative ideals of the self. In particular for women, as Newcomb points out, the traditional definitions of femininity, the nuclear family and gender roles became a central appeal of yoga as a tool to 'balance it all':

The physical practice of yoga created a sense of freedom and autonomy within the body, much like the bicycle was physically liberating for previous generations of women... [Yoga] promoted a woman's freedom, health, and well-being while simultaneously supporting traditional obligations to be beautiful and available to husband and children (Newcomb, 2007, p.59)

Yoga culture makes an excellent case study for the divergence between lived experience and overarching narratives. On a larger scale too, we must differentiate

²⁶ Spirit of Capitalism refers to "the ideology that justifies people's commitment to [the absurd system of] capitalism" (Boltanski& Chiapello, 2005, p.162). As a methodological tool, the concept allows to combine simultaneously "the changes in capitalism as well as the criticism which it faces", thus buttressing the observation that "criticism is a catalyst for changes in the spirit of capitalism" (ibid, p.173). In short, the spirit of capitalism outlines how capitalism digests its crises and critiques to uphold and adapt its ideological makeup.

between neoliberalization as a historical process, and neoliberal narratives as the “ideology that justifies people’s commitment to the [absurd system of] capitalism” (Boltanski& Chiapello, 2005, p.162). It is crucial to outline the discursive strategies through which capitalism upholds itself, namely through common-sensing and normalizing amoral economic, political and social realities of capitalism (Haiven, 2014, p.57). Similarly, only by promoting itself as authentic and anti-capitalist, was yoga able to flourish within consumer culture. In both cases, the fantasies of liberation, empowerment and individualism emerge out of the realms of the social and cultural critics of capitalism²⁷. But by being absorbed into the market discourse of brands, the anti-capitalist stances are stripped of their political potential and re-introduced as marketable brand myths.

Yoga was not alone on the long list of movements that altered their counterculture potential upon entering the commercialised mainstream culture in the 1980s and 90s. Second-wave feminism that emerged as a critique of state-managed capitalism in the 1960s, became the handmaiden of neoliberal capitalism as the discourse of women’s liberation was appropriated by free-marketeers and incorporated into their narrative of liberal-individualism (Fraser, 2013). Yoga culture incorporated the female desires of post-feminist ‘feel-good culture’. As McRobbie emphasizes:

Being independent, earning her own living, standing up for herself against demeaning comments, remaining funny and good humoured throughout. Without being angry or too critical of men, without foregoing her femininity, her desires for love and motherhood, her sense of humour and her appealing vulnerability (McRobbie, 2009, p.22).

Together, the neoliberal notion hyper individualism and the post-feminist femineity laid the foundation for what throughout the 21st century manifested as popular yoga culture and the “fantasy of the ‘yoga girl’, the idealized yoga practitioner whose body, beauty, and purchasing power mark her as the epitome of yoga aspirations” (Balizet& Myers, 2016, p.277)

²⁷ The artistic critique and the social critique in the spirit of capitalism step in as the mechanism to maintain the validity, and if needed transform the spirit of capitalism. Social criticism points out “inequalities, misery, exploitation and selfishness and on the other hand artistic criticism, a more intellectual and elite critique of the “massification of society, standardisation and pervasive commodification” (Boltanski& Chiapello, 2005, p.176).

In order to be able to recognise and identify the neoliberal, neo-conservative and post-feminist fantasies that buttress today's popular yoga culture and define its role model the 'yoga girl', this chapter offers a detailed account of neoliberalism and post-feminism and concludes by elaborating on the most pervasive concepts with which modern yoga culture is inextricably connected.

3.1. Defining neoliberal fantasies

Neoliberalism as a policy model and new economic configuration unfolded in the US under the government Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. Definition of the concept vary, as its use in both academic as well as popular culture rises. Overall, neoliberalism has acquired a negative normative valence, and can be found mostly in the critical accounts of the socio-economic configuration of late capitalism (Flew, 2012, p.45). David Harvey provides one of the most authoritative definitions of neoliberalism:

A theory of political economic practices that proposes that human wellbeing can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free market, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices (Harvey, 2005, p.2)

His definition exemplifies the Marxist implementation of the concept of neoliberalism as the overturn of the welfare state by the dominant class consisting of the free marketeers in the 1980s. This straightforward definition focuses on the material conditions that contributed to the new economic configurations.

For the sake of this critical cultural analysis of popular yoga, this project relies on the definitions deriving from the Foucauldian tradition as represented by scholars like Wendy Brown. It differs insofar to the Marxist definition, as it appoints more importance to the market rationality in all realms of life:

Neo-liberalism casts the political and social spheres both as appropriately dominated by market concerns and as themselves organised by market rationality ... the state itself must construct and construe itself in market terms, as well as develop policies and promulgate a political culture that figures citizens exhaustively as rational economic actors in every sphere of life (Brown, 2006, p.694)

By building on Foucault's work on governmentality²⁸ and discourse, the project follows the poststructuralist assumption that "webs of meaning [are] created through their language and arguments" (Merrigan, 2012, p.224). As such, modern yoga was created under the influence of the neoliberal discourse at the end of the 20th century.

Neoliberalism emerged out of the intense post-war dissatisfactions and criticisms regarding the welfare and New Deal policies of Franklin Roosevelt. During the instability and financial hardship of the war-riddled first half of the 20th century, Roosevelt's cardinal "freedom from wants" and the optimism of Keynesian economics for a holistic prosperity achieved through fiscal policies, offered assurance and safety for a nation in need (Harvey, 2005). But as the American economy recovered, free marketeers turned on the governmental interventions with a rhetoric of "freedom to...", appealing to the nation's founding ideology of liberalism that birthed their independence in 1776.

Challenges to the American governmentality, the art of government, sit at the heart of neoliberalism. America was formed on the ideals of liberalism as the leading rationality in the art of government, a philosophy that emerged in the 18th - making any appeals to the 'fundamental freedom and agency' of the American citizens extremely powerful until today. While Europe experienced the first epoch of governmentality under the Raison d'Etat from the 16th to the 18th century, a time concerned with economic mercantilism, internal management through police and external structuring through diplomacy and the army, America was founded just as a new paradigm unfolded that focused less on pre-existing legitimacy of kingdoms and god-given rulership and was more concerned about outcomes and effectiveness of governments (Foucault, 2008, p.19). In need of a new measure of verification (revealing truths), the new governmentality took to the markets that had long been a site of justice. The political economy of liberalism was built on the notion that markets obeyed ~~to~~-natural, spontaneous mechanisms, which left alone will provide the just price and true value of things (ibid, p.19).

²⁸ In his lecture series *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault discusses governmentality as the ways in which subjects are governed through mentalities, rationalities and techniques. Questions of governmentality include considerations on 'how not to govern too much or too little' as a state and on an individual level under neoliberalism include the shift towards the self-governance.

Following the post-war non-liberalism of the 20th century, the re-evaluation and re-appraisal of liberal governmentality swept America radically and exhaustively (ibid, p.75). But neoliberal reason differed in several ways from the traditional liberal reason, stemming from the traumatic experiences of the “series of crises in liberal governmentality gestated by Keynesianism, fascism, Nazism, state planning and social democracy” (Brown, 2015, p.59). As a result, competition became essential (an *eidos*) for the neoliberals, taking economic competitiveness beyond the market and into politics and culture. Improving one’s human capital becomes the sole purpose of the neoliberal individual, the *Homo Oeconomicus*²⁹ (ibid, p.63).

In the pursuit of increasing human capital, self-investments expanded into “education, training, leisure, reproduction, consumption and more... as strategic decisions and practices related to enhancing the self’s future value” (Brown, 2015, p.62). Neoliberal education takes place across all age groups, from pre-school, to universities and life-long skill trainings. By positioning the objective of learning as the acquisition of human capital, education fails to deliver public sensibilization of democracy (ibid, p.176). Appealing to this pervasive neoliberal fantasy of human capital, yoga adopted the trope of being a ‘practice for the self’. Operating the mind-body complex was no longer concerned with philosophical enlightenment and spiritual practices but aligned to economic principles of bettering oneself. As a result, yoga trainings and teacher trainings become a site of reproduction of the fantasy of human capital disguised as a journey to the self.

The privatisation and financialization of everything also places the self at the centre of individual and collective health, unburdening big corporations of the responsibility to take care of their consumers. Kauer offers an overview of the far-reaching cultural effects of neoliberal healthism that highlights the social segmentation as a result of different economic mobilities:

The lack of one’s health, or disease, is often blamed on the individual and their inability to obtain or maintain a healthy body by engaging in carefully prescribed exercise and fitness regimes. Such models of wellness and health reproduce classed, raced, gendered, and sexed bodies that serve

²⁹ *Homo Oeconomicus* opposes the *homo politicus* in his reasoning stemming from market principles rather than democratic considerations. Under neoliberalism “the normative reign of *homo oeconomicus* in every sphere means that there are no motivations, drivers, or aspirations apart from economic ones” (Brown, 2015, p.44).

the consumer capitalist marketplace, while simultaneously pathologizing and demonizing transgressive corporeality. The imagery of health and beauty for women has been equated with a particular kind of body that reproduces hegemonic ideals of femininity. (Kauer, 2016, p.91)

Yoga does not only appeal to the physical fantasies of the body, but further promises the management of emotions and to allow the “individual to develop the emotional proficiency necessary to overcome structural barriers and their consequences” (Lavrence& Lozanski, 2014, p.80). Yoga culture seeks to provide solutions for contemporary anxieties by stabilizing the body physically and mentally, a strategy at the “core” of today’s popular yoga culture because of its resonance with the hyper-individualism that dominated the contemporary cultural framework (ibid, p.90). Clearly the purported values, aspirations, philosophies and practices of popular yoga culture of the 21st century stands in contradiction to, and indeed, naturalizes and obscures broader and substantial inequalities intrinsic to neoliberal capitalism.

3.2. Defining post-feminist fantasies

Similar to neoliberalism, post-feminism is a term with a multitude of applications within the feminist cultural critique. In a first instance, it is understood as an analytical perspective, “an epistemological break within feminism” that took place within the larger philosophy of postmodernism. Alternatively, post-feminism is also used to describe a historical shift after the height of Second Wave feminism, making it synonymous with Third Wave feminism. Another way of using the term is to refer to the normative or ideological content of the ambivalent discourse of post-feminism. Focused on the content and representations, this entanglement of feminist (feminism is achieved, girl power) and anti-feminist (dissatisfaction with the righteousness of political correctness, feminism as a liability) defines post-feminism (McRobbie, 2004). This research project relies on the latter definition of post-feminism as an object of critical analysis, a sensibility that can be found within popular yoga culture. The distinctive sensibility consists of a variety of interrelated themes, including but not limited to the delineation offered by Gil:

The notion that femineity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; and a resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference (Gill, 2007, p.147)

Post-feminism as a sensibility spread across social and cultural landscapes of the 1990s in the English-speaking world. Media discourses were flooded with sense of female autonomy, agency and choice that perfectly encapsulated the neoliberal ideology of freedom and individualised selfhood. The power blocks of second-wave feminism disintegrated into female subjectivity; “dispersing women across divisions of time and space, age and class, ethnicity and sexuality so that those who might otherwise have found some common causes together are increasingly unlikely to do so” (McRobbie, 2009, p.49). As a result, women were being disempowered through the very discourse of empowerment and positivity. The post-feminist fantasies were distributed through popular culture productions like *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (1996) and *Sex and the City* (1998), that portray strong autonomous female characters, succeeding in their careers but ever chasing “Mr. Big”³⁰. Modern yoga facilitated the same notion of femineity. The “yoga girl” addresses both the sexist notion of ‘beautiful feminine’ as well as the empowered notion of ‘freedom of expression’ and ‘economic independence’. Balizet and Meyers offer an instructive concept of ‘yoga girl’:

The yoga girl is idealized through the juxtaposition of thin, beautiful models with altruistic depictions of yoga practice, she is literalized through social media, in which individuals can post pictures of themselves, viewable publicly, indexed by the hashtag “#yogagirl”...This discipline extends beyond the physical body, however. Mainstream depictions of yoga also promote the notion that the practice of yoga can lead to financial gain by removing mental obstacles to individual success. (Balizet& Myers, 2016, p.282)

Yet, as Gill et al detail, what post-feminist accounts of womanhood did not depict, were the ongoing political, economic and social inequalities:

Celebrations of ‘girl power’ and female success sat alongside the intense hostile scrutiny of women in the public eye; pronouncements about gender equality were juxtaposed with the growing misogyny of ‘lad culture’; and assertions about the redundancy of feminism were paired with an intensified interest in sexual difference, and with the repeated assertion that any remaining inequalities were not the result of sexism but of natural differences and/or of women’s own choices (Gill et al., 2020, p.5)

³⁰ Mr. Big is a central figure in the series *Sex and the City*. The female and seemingly independent protagonist Carrie, despite being financially independent and flourishing in her social life, is on a continuous quest for finding ‘Mr. Big’. This character becomes synonymous for the post-feminist narrative of female freedoms contained by their desire to find ‘the perfect husband’, not out of economic necessity, but out of ‘free will’ (McRobbie, 2009).

The naturalization of sex-based differences found great resonance in the yoga community, fueled by the New Age movement's interest in everything 'natural'³¹. The gender divide was re-branded, and its modern iteration was sold as "apparently advantageous to women, especially young women" (McRobbie, 2009, p.23). This process of undoing feminism took place most visibly on privileged sites, making the female subject of post-feminism "white and middle-class by default" (Tasker & Negra, 2007, p.3).

By the 1990s, yoga had entered A-list pop culture, partially because it offered a stage for both neoliberal and post-feminist fantasies. In her famous Oprah interview in 1998, Madonna announced her devotion to Ashtanga yoga. Yoga as a "workout for the body, the mind and the soul" allowed her to balance the demands of motherhood and fame, making Madonna a prime example of post-feminist sensibility. Her album of the same year *Ray of Light* embraced Kabbalah, Hinduism and yoga in a fusion with Western pop music. Praised for her "spectacular feminine", Madonna became a key ingredient for the 21st century modern yoga culture.

3.3. Intersections of popular yoga, neoliberal politics and post-feminism

Neoliberal and post-feminist fantasies go hand in hand in creating "cheap and available narrative pleasures, in the form of popular entertainment" (McRobbie, 2009, p.3). This fairy-tale world is far removed from the socio-economic realities of the majority of women who are excluded from the apparent advantageous and accomplishments of neoliberalism and post-feminism. Popular yoga culture has incorporated a variety neoliberal and post-feminist fantasies into its discourse. Before addressing the examples from the contemporary digital yoga spaces, the following sections identify and categorize the most common 'pleasurable narratives' stemming out of the intersection of yoga, neoliberal politics and post-feminism.

³¹ Natural birthing movement emerged during the 1970s based on the negative experience of childbirth and disconnect of the women and her bodily experience: "The feelings of isolation, lack of body awareness due to medication, and absence of consultation with the woman about possibilities for intervention were just a few of the discontents many women had with their experience of labour" (Newcomb, 2007, p.55). Yoga as an embodied practice, was a natural complement to the movement's awareness of the women's autonomy over her body.

3.3.1. 'Yoga for sale' – Fantasies of consumer culture

The popularisation of yoga was first and foremost advanced by yoga's commodification, since, in contemporary consumer culture, the masses produce popular culture through consumption (Jameson, 1991, p.4). From the 1980s onwards, the diversification and enhancement of consumable choices for yogis progressively replaced the guru-based 'teacher to student' dissemination of yoga. Mass-marketed yoga products overcame and eliminated the time and place limitations of practicing yoga, to produce a customizable, easy-access yoga lifestyle. By embracing consumer culture³², modern yoga co-opted the market logic and branding strategies into its very discursive makeup - popular yoga brands emerged that utilized the same appeal towards consumer choice and autonomy that dominated society at large:

Yoga brands are saturated with meaning insofar as they signify what consumers deem valuable. That often includes certain persons deemed to be paragons of virtue or style. They also illustrate that consumers choose based on what they consider the most effective and accessible path—or brand—to get there (Jain, 2015, p.94)

Making yoga consumable meant not only offering a variety of different yoga styles, such as Beryl Bender Birch's Power Yoga (1995), but also creating goods that one could purchase to display their yoga habitus and promoting oneself as a yogi.

Consuming branded yoga goods gives at once access to the vast cultural significance of Ancient yoga systems as a bearer of the promotional messages of Eastern transcendentalism (Wernick, 1991, p.16). While fully removed from the pre-modern yoga systems ethical and practical requirements, modern postural yoga acts as an iconic representation of the Ancient East. Liberation and self-realisation achieved through the "systematic transformation of consciousness" as laid out in the eightfold

³² Consumer Culture, also known as promotional culture in Andrew Wernick's work, refers to the capitalist culture in which customers make sense of their world and themselves through consumption of material goods and lifestyle choices. Wernick builds on that notion and continues that under late capitalism, everything one does, from drinking, wearing, resting or eating, is a promotion of something: "A promotional message is a complex of significations which at once represents, advocates and anticipates the circulating entity or entities to which it refers (1991, p.185).

path³³ is replaced with the simplified consumer consciousness of acquiring habitus through purchasing it. As Lau elaborates,

In fact, this very desire for bodily mimesis, for a literal appropriation of another group's *habitus*, inspires many of the popular discourses around aromatherapy, macrobiotic eating, yoga, and t'ai chi. In essence, these discourses sell the possibility of exchanging one's own bodily status for another, higher one through the use of alternative practices that promise to reshape and rework the body (Lau, 2000, p.15)

Yoga brands then, are seen to enable access to the remedy for modernity's individualized, technologized and scientized reality in an easily available form consisting of "Eastern representations of collectivity, spirituality, nature, and harmony" (Lau, 2000, p.132)

Consumption is a determinant in terms of politics as well as the marketplace. Commodity activism is a lucrative way for brands to turn social issues into campaigns, and for social movements to use brands as launch points for political issues (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p.18). As Jain argues, yoga brands have long incorporated the concept that customers express their political standing through purchases, while offering no real political outcome at all:

They [spiritual brands] evoke and capitalize off discourses and purity alongside greenwashing and charitable activities, none of which are substitutes for political dissent since they do not entail efforts to actually transform the policies and systems (ideological, economic, behavioral, or political) that produce the environmental degradation, poverty, hunger, and other inequities they gesture against (Jain, 2020, p.9)

The lack of political outcome doesn't matter, as long as the fantasy of morality satisfies the consumer and continues to increase sales.

³³ The Eighthfold Path of Patanjali: *yama* (general ethical principles), *niyama* (principles of self-restraint), *asana* (the postures for meditation), *pranayama* (breathing techniques), *pratyahara* (sense-withdrawal), *dharana* (concentration), *dhyana* (meditative absorption), and *samadhi* (ecstasy). Also known as the eight limbs of yoga in Ashtanga yoga.

The particular appeal of yoga to women can be located along the line of consumer activism, namely in the form of commodity feminism³⁴. Intersecting with the post-feminist fantasy of empowerment, the growing market for [yoga] “girls centred ‘girl power’ as its key selling point and cultural, social and economic context that clearly saw the ‘power’ in girl power as almost exclusively about consumer power” (Banet-Weiser, 2020, p.9). Women are offered a false sense of empowerment through consumption; a fantasy that overlooks the dissipating effect of equating the socio-economic capacities of women with their political agency (McRobbie, 2007, p.2). Taking place within the market, only what sells is deemed worthy. For feminism and other activist movements, this means only the most media-friendly ‘fights’ that don’t challenge existing capitalist structures are given a voice in today’s popular culture (Zeisler, 2020).

3.3.2. ‘Sex Sells’ – Fantasies of the economy of visibility

In contemporary visual culture visibility creates and validates reality to the extent that there is an economy and politics of visibility. As Banet-Weiser elaborates,

The politics of visibility has thus long been important for the marginalized and continues to be. To demand visibility is to demand to be seen, to matter, to recognize oneself in dominant culture... In the current environment, however, while the politics of visibility are still important and remain politically efficacious, *economies* of visibility increasingly structure not just our mediascapes but also our cultural and economic practices and daily lives... Economies of visibility fundamentally shift politics of visibility so that visibility becomes *the end* rather than a means to an end (Banet-Weiser, 2018, pp. 23,25).

As a result, modern yoga culture has not only favoured yogis who fit the dominant beauty standard but has furthermore favoured a postural practice which offers impactful visual material to the practitioners. Yoga becomes the means to achieving acrobatic, hyper-flexible bodies that can be shared and posted on social media in the quest for popularity.

Operating within the cultural context of late capitalism, the mediascapes in which popular yoga operates are typically organized in a Western patriarchal framework that objectifies the female body (D’Enbeau, 2011). Stemming from the 19th century beginning

³⁴ Commodity Feminism refers to the way feminist ideas are appropriated for commercial purposes. Feminism becomes a branding tool, de-politicized and stripped of its collective activism.

of urban capitalism, women have internalised the notion that access to the public sphere is rewarded for “bodies’ physical appearances and presumed sexual availability [as] key gauges of character and social standing” (Schrank, 2016, p.156). The female body itself takes the form of a signifier of status, sexuality, and consumer possibility. Since neither fashion nor the body are stable, the constant obligation to shape and re-shape one’s body to fit societal standards offers a plethora of marketable material to the yoga industry, in which pre-modern and modern signifiers are blended:

Those include, the sacralization of the body, the mystico-erotic union with divinity, pleasure, the path to self-actualization or self-realization, as well as modern notions of health, beauty, sex appeal, and fitness. In the postural yoga world, yoga can signify all of these meanings and functions (Jain, 2015, p.173)

As such, modern yoga is increasingly at risk of losing the deep release and joy that it can offer practitioners as yoga becomes synonymous with certain standards of physical and sexual attractiveness.

Additionally, the discourses of public femininity occupy an increasingly spectacular space in the cultural milieu, in which the competition for visibility takes place. The ideal feminine is created based on the post-feminist and neoliberal masquerade and as subjects women to the patriarchal norms. There is a tyranny of the “technologies of self” and the “feminine spectacle”, as McRobbie points out:

The commercial domain provides a proliferation of interpellations directed to young women, with harsher penalties, it seems, for those who refuse or who are unable to receive its various addresses. That is, it becomes increasingly difficult to function as a female subject without subjecting oneself to those technologies of self that are constitutive of the spectacularly feminine. There are new norms of appearance and self-presentation expected not just in leisure and in everyday life but also in the workplace, and government concerns itself with this aspect of self-management through various initiatives (McRobbie, 2009, p.60).

Within modern yoga, visibility as interpellation excludes groups that fail to obtain the ‘spectacular feminine’, while reward in the form of visibility is offered to those yogis who display sufficient neoliberal and post-feminist values. For example, yoga for weight loss, flexibility or ‘glow-up’ makeovers are a constantly trending format that highlights modern yoga’s deep entrenchment in the economy of visibility. The market-inspired notion of

yoga focuses on the body and consumption practices that allow access to the ideal yoga body.

3.3.3. 'She's got it' – Fantasies of celebrity culture

Within modern popular yoga, it is those yogis who portray the most spectacular neoliberal self and post-feminine bodies that rise to fame. Yoga influencers in North America “converge on the belief that they must play the [visibility] game to attain influence” (Cotter, 2019, p.904). In the ‘visibility game’, algorithms further emphasize and normalize the invisible rules that certain topics and representations are rewarded with more visibility than others:

The visibility game echoes these analogies, particularly Bourdieu’s analogy of a “game of culture” in his field theory (Bourdieu, 1996). The visibility game inherits many features of Bourdieu’s ideas, namely the process of acclimation to rules and strategies within a field, the corresponding goal of accumulating various forms of capital, and an understanding of behavior as resulting from an interrelationship between structure, *habitus*, and strategy (Cotter, 2019, p.900).

As a result, popular yoga increasingly consists of conforming bodies, namely the ‘skinnier, whiter and more conventionally beautiful’ ones.

The majority of celebrity yogis lead teacher trainings and run workshops that offers participants the tools and knowledge to become yoga influencers themselves. Yoga becomes a tool for self-branding and producing the ideal self (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p.217). Taking place on social media, the ‘production of the self’ relies on the feedback of the metrics of engagement such as “likes” and “share”. Reproducing the aesthetics and content of successful yoga celebrities, who themselves adhere to ‘the rules of the visibility game’, endlessly reproduces neoliberal and post-feminist fetish of individualism and identity. Furthermore, the likelihood of economically benefitting from a career in yoga are is extremely slim. As such, the notion of ‘everyone can be a yogalebritie’³⁵ marks a dominant fantasy in today’s yoga culture.

³⁵ Yogalebritie refers to yoga celebrities. One of the most influential yogalebrities in North America is Brett Larkin, who runs her personal digital yoga space Uplifted Yoga Community. In addition to the various yoga teacher trainings, she also offers product placements and glimpses into her personal life on Instagram.

The status of influencers in today's celebrity culture³⁶ does not only affect the purchasing behavior of their followers but romanticizes the individuation process as such. As McRobbie explains, the media has always glamorized individuals as uniquely talented 'stars', and influencers in turn build narratives of themselves as 'self-powered' micro-structures:

What individualization means sociologically is that people increasingly have to become their own micro-structures, they have to do the work of the structures [kinships, communities, social class] by themselves, which in turn requires intensive practices of self-monitoring, or reflexivity (McRobbie, 2016, p.18)

The cultural effects of hyper-individualism are clearly seen in the contemporary yoga marketplace, and serve to emphasize and prioritize individual benefit and focus over collective action and well-being.

3.3.4. 'Feeling good, like I should' – Fantasies of emotional capitalism

On the individual's level, any less than successful attempts at achieving the glamourized and idealized forms of 'self-realization' are experienced as personal failures. To avoid failure, we are offered solutions in the form of consumption. For women in particular, tools are sold that promise control over their bodies in the hopes of maintaining societal standards. As Urla and Swedlund put it, "Not getting too fat or flabby, in other words conforming to gendered norms of fitness and weight, have become signs of individuals social and moral worth" (Urla & Swedlund, 2007, p.141). While yoga has increasingly highlighted its bodily effects, it also appeals to the desires of self-sufficiency on an emotional level. Amidst today's emotional capitalism³⁷, the public sphere that once was thought to be an a-emotional space, has been saturated with the

³⁶ Celebrity Culture in today's globalized world describes the high-volume perpetuation of celebrities in personal lives. With the introduction of social media, celebrities have taken on a strong emotional bond with their fans, who place immense trust in their idols (Fox, 2015).

³⁷ Emotional Capitalism is the central concept introduced in Eva Illouz' book *Cold Intimacies – The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (2007). Against the common belief that capitalism has produced an a-emotional, technological and sterile society, Illouz argues that capitalism has created an intensely emotional culture. In a dual process where economic relations become emotional, and emotional relations are defined through economic models, the 20th century has given rise to a public and private sphere, economic and emotional realm, closely intertwined.

psychotherapy discourse popularised by Freud (Ilouz, 2007, p.6). Yoga has flourished by marketing itself as a self-help tool with therapeutical benefits. As Jain elaborates:

Under neoliberalism, emotional regulation is an obligation to both the individual and society...Subjects are increasingly expected to not only manage, but also prosper in the context of volatility. The popularity of relation, self-improvement, self-care, and stress management technologies, therefore, reflect the salience of models of subjectivity that prioritizes the subject's ability to respond and exercise control over their feelings in response to precariousness (Jain, 2020, p.35,36)

The fusion of the 20th century cultural persuasions of therapy, economic productivity, feminism and communication technologies placed “emotions into micro public spheres, that is, domains of action submitted to a public gaze, regulated by procedures of speech, and by values of equality and fairness” (Ilouz, 2007, p.37).

Modern popular yoga as it is practiced and negotiated in digital public spaces, has been subject to the regulations and “feeling rules” of neoliberalism and post-feminism in recent years:

Neoliberal or postfeminist ‘feeling rules’ shape how young women are allowed to be and to feel, inciting them to deal with difficulties through ‘humorous, upbeat quips’ in which pain and struggle must be rendered into ‘safe, funny, “girl-friendly” anecdotes’. Women must disavow – or at least render palatable - a whole range of experiences and emotions - notably insecurity, neediness, anger and complaint (Gill, 2017, p.619)

The resulting feel-good discourse is omnipresent in today's popular yoga spaces, where positive sentiments and inspirational quotes obscure or gloss over the confinement of the ‘yoga girl’ to the neoliberal and post-feminist fantasies.

Chapter 4

Research Findings & Evidence Analysis

4.1 Introduction

As argued in Chapter Two and Three, modern popular yoga³⁸ has come to dominate globally by incorporating the ideologies of Western capitalism into its discourse. Given the fundamental differences between pre-modern yoga systems predominantly from India and modern yoga, the question arises how Western ideologies are communicated within the popular yoga culture. This thesis argues that it is within the contested spaces of pop culture, neoliberalism and post-feminism that pop culture yoga created its highly marketable yoga habitus. By reproducing neoliberal and post-feminist fantasies, pop culture yoga has created a highly idealized 'yoga girl' that perfectly fits the societal norms of late capitalism. The 'yoga girl' does not only sell yoga by advertising a variety of lifestyle consumer goods but has grown to function as a role model on how to 'live yoga'. "Living yoga" promises the ability to 'live their most authentic life', and in effect, offers up instructions on how to navigate the sociocultural dimensions of life in late capitalism. As a result, modern yoga in its most marketable form advocates for precisely the systematic exploitation it gestures towards countering in the first place (Jain, 2020).

This chapter identifies and discusses the travails and complexities of becoming a "yoga girl", and situates this odyssey in the broader determinants of neoliberal and post-feminist ideologies. Venturing into the digital yoga spaces, the first half of this chapter presents tropes of neoliberal fantasies within popular yoga, such as the notions of individualism, self-investments and gestural anti-capitalism. The latter half focuses on themes of post-feminist fantasies including empowerment and the necessity of the female body to be seen. This is by no means a complete list, but rather a qualitative investigation into some of the most influential cases of neoliberal and post-feminist

³⁸ Pop culture yoga is the name I chose to refer to the particular form of yoga that dominates globally due to its place in the global capitalist market and US inspired popular culture. It is important to note that is one of many yoga systems that exist simultaneously all over the world. The specifics of pop culture yoga or popular yoga in the context of the West is its occupation of digital spaces and its leading role in the capitalist marketplace.

fantasies that I have encountered in pop culture yoga. The evidence is selected based on the measure of popularity³⁹, emphasizing cases of high interaction and impact within digital yoga spaces⁴⁰. While the overall focus lies on the visual representations, discourse analysis further supports the following discussion.

4.1 Implications of neoliberal discourse on popular yoga

4.1.1 Motivations to participate in yoga

Trying to locate the normative appeal of the 'yoga girl', a good starting point is to investigate the motivations to participate in yoga in the first place. According to a 2016 US survey⁴¹, the primary appeal of yoga to first-time practitioners was equally exercise and stress relief, while the reason to maintain yoga changed for 62% of students to a spiritual appeal. According to Park et al, "such shifts in motivation have been characterised in the physical activity literature as moving from extrinsic motives to intrinsic motives" (Park Et Al., 2016, p.888). The appeal of practitioners differs to the intended appeal of yoga brands, including both retail as well as personal influencer brands. As shown above, yoga and consumer culture are intrinsically linked, as modern yoga gained its global popularity as a consumable lifestyle brand from the 1980s onwards. As such, any psychological explanation⁴² of the appeal of yoga needs to take into account the broader culture.

³⁹ Evidence selected through a threefold measure of popularity as developed by Sarah Banet-Weiser: first, popular as a means of ranking based on media visibility; second, popular as a condition of being liked or admired by likeminded people; third, popular [culture]³⁹ as a terrain of struggle over meaning and in contrast to both mainstream and counterculture. The latter definition derives from the work of Stuart Hall on popular culture as one of the "sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged" (Hall, 1998, p.453).

⁴⁰ See *Appendix A* 'Digital yoga spaces on Instagram' for an example of the most interactive hashtags on Instagram and the visual representations of the idealized 'yoga girl'.

⁴¹ The US based survey examined 360 yoga students and 156 yoga teachers for their motivation to adopt and maintain a yoga practice (Park, Riley, Bedesin & Stewart, 2016). The study found that the primary reason for starting yoga is physical exercise and stress relief, but "over 62 percent of students and 85 percent of teachers reported having changed their primary reason for practicing or discovering other reasons; for both the top changed primary reason was spirituality" (ibid, p.887).

⁴² Psychological theories of consumer behaviour include Kevin Keller's CBBE model (consumer-based brand equity). In contrast, Holt's own cultural branding model shifts the attention from the individual appeal of brands to the collective ability of brands to act as a stage for participants to negotiate and display their identities with the wider culture.

Conventional psychological theories of branding have an Achilles heel that we should no longer ignore. Outside of certain technology-, and service-driven categories, where brands are built largely through reputation effects, branding's big stakes are decided increasingly by cultural symbolism. Brand symbolism delivers customer value by providing culturally resonant stories and images that customer use to buttress their identity (Holt, 2005, p.273)

It is the brand symbolism of 'yoga girls' and other yoga brands that structures popular yoga culture, by "performing myths that address the most important social tensions that pulse through the nation" (ibid, p.291). It is yoga's gestural subversion of capitalism (neoliberal and post-feminist fantasies included) that sit at the root of yoga's desirability. In the following sections, some of the most persuasive yoga brand myths⁴³ will be discussed.

4.1.1.1 Yoga for Self-care

Rooted in neoliberal concepts of privatized health, popular yoga culture offers a variety of goods and services that appeal to the myth of 'healthy living' as a means to mitigate the risk⁴⁴ of the pressures of life in late capitalism. Smoothing over and "re-directing surplus anxiety" that is intrinsic to today's liquid modernity⁴⁵, becomes a key appeal in the industries of fitness and mental wellbeing (Bauman, 2000, p.19). While the pitches and promotions for wellbeing and fitness are omnipresent in popular yoga culture, it is particularly explicit in the marketing of yoga gadgets. Packaged in cute and trendy boxes, the myth of self-care and health is widely available in subscription boxes curated by yogalebrities and yoga brands, catering to the needs and anxieties of the aspiring 'yoga girls'.

Figure 4.1 Yoga subscription boxes appealing to health (through consumption)

⁴³ Brand myths derive out of Holt's cultural theory of branding and refer to the "powerful identity: simple fictions that address cultural anxieties from afar, from imaginary worlds rather than from worlds that the consumer lives in" (Holt, 2005, p.278).

⁴⁴ Mitigating the risk in the late capitalist society falls onto the individual as a balancing part to the increasingly unstable economy and hands-off governments. Health as a personal responsibility is seen in "positive terms as a functional prerequisite of society and illness in negative terms as 'failure to keep well'" (Williams, 1998, p.436).

⁴⁵ Liquid Modernity is a concept derived from the book by the same name and written by Zygmunt Bauman (1999). Liquid modernity is characterised by light or liquid software-based economies replacing heavy hardware focused ones. Rapid change and uncertainty are further hallmarks of the liquid modernity.



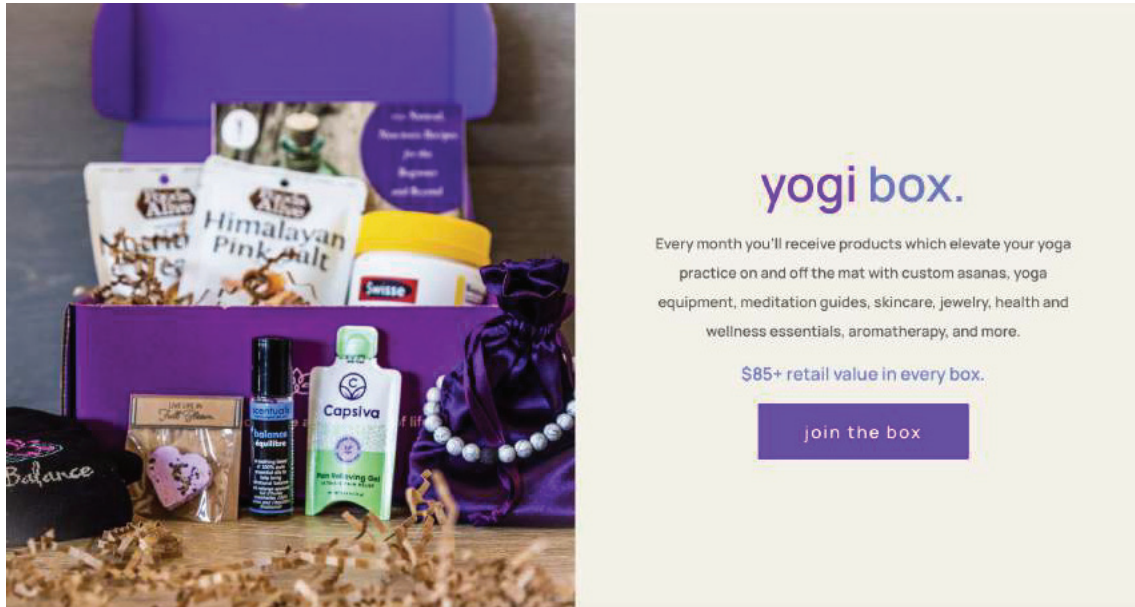
Notes: Yogalebrity Candace Cabrera introducing her followers to her subscription box service 'Mantra Box – Healthy Indulgence' retailing for 49.99USD <https://www.yogabycandace.com/ybc-mantra-box/>

Yoga teacher, influencer and author Candace Cabrera offers monthly subscription boxes to her followers, with each box including curated “healthy living products to support [your] physical, emotional and spiritual health” (Cabrera, 2021). Each Mantra Box comprise roughly ten items from small businesses and aims to introduce the customer to new “health conscious...natural beauty products” (ibid). If “you are always looking for ways to better take care of yourself”, Cabrera claims, “you will love this box” (ibid). The sample shown in *figure 4.1* includes electrolyte powders, body wipes, dental floss, essential oils, bee wax wraps, moisturizer and a hemp tincture. The loosely related items are branded as solutions to the anxieties of the modern women and help her “relax, unwind, and bask in the glory of a cozy home” (ibid).

The Mantra Box ensures the customer that the act of self-care, here performed through consumption, is a form of “guilt-free indulgence” by “supporting small businesses” (ibid.). Self-care is positioned as the ‘responsible choice’ and grants the customer a sense of “personal and moral achievement” (Lavrence& Lozanski, 2014, p.76). The consumption of yoga gadgets and paraphernalia becomes a form of “signifying a spiritual lifestyle of responsible self-care” that implies a certain hierarchy opposing those who “fail as individuals and deserve their health problems” (Jain, 2020, pp.20,21). The motivation to participate in the yoga marketplace derives from the brands

appeal to the duty of the neoliberal self to ‘take care of yourself’ (Cabrera., 2021). Yet ‘being taken care of’ does not include improving social, environmental and political conditions, but solely take place on an individual indulgent.

Figure 4.2 Yogi box, a monthly delivery of popular yoga goods



Notes: The Yogi box retails for 39.95USD, claiming a value of at least 85USD per box <https://yogisurprise.com/?afmc=1d>

While many yoga teachers turn to entrepreneurialism to create subscription boxes themselves, some retailers have emerged solely for the purpose of producing a yoga subscription box service. The leading brand ‘Yogi Surprise’ was founded by self-proclaimed “subscription commerce pioneer” Jameson Morris in 2014 (Morris, 2021). While the previous example marketed itself heavily through yoga teacher Candace Camberra, and subsequently her practice of yoga, the ‘Yogi Surprise’ box fully unhinges the spiritual consumption from the spiritual practices of yogic traditions. The box promises to “elevate your yoga practice” and appeals to a variety of yogic principles; “ahimsa⁴⁶ - yogi is committed to providing ethical, socially-conscious, and sustainable

⁴⁶ Ahimsa in Hindu, Buddhist and Jainist traditions refers to the acts of non-violence, respect for all living things and avoidance of harming others. In its modern iteration in the West, it is often used as an argument for Veganism.

offerings in every box”, and “*dhana*⁴⁷ - whether it’s through charitable giving, sustainability, or highlighting small businesses, every Yogi box contributes in some way to our community” (yogisurprise.com, 2021).

By infusing self-care discourse with political activism, spiritual consumption hints at the social inequalities of capitalism but simultaneously hinders real action to take place as the commodities the spiritual consumers choose in many ways uphold class hierarchies, racism and misogyny. As Jain explains,

Although spiritual consumers often imagine their spiritual lifestyle as representing a unified, universal, and coherent system, their commodities in fact represent a remarkable bricolage, a combination of heterogeneous ideas and practices appropriated from a tremendous array of sources, for example, yoga, tantra, Native American cultures, Taoism, and Buddhism as well as Western metaphysical traditions (Jain, 2020, p.21)

The bricolage of items the Yogi Box includes are smudge sticks used traditionally by Indigenous cultures and mala praying beads found predominantly in Hinduism and Buddhism; degraded to a consumable token of self-care (yogisurprise.com, 2021). The self-care discourse utilized by popular yoga brands, first and foremost is a self-serving product of the neoliberal order of economy and society.

4.1.1.2 Yoga for weight loss

Rooted in the deep seated physical and body culture of the West, ‘weight-loss’, ‘transformation’ and ‘before-and-after’ tropes have been utilized by marketing companies across the board. No longer limited to the exercise industry, fitness, or ‘looking fit’, has become a central aspect of neoliberal self-care. Recognized by the pioneers of the 21st century yoga industry, specialized programs are widely available, each tackling specific bodily concerns. A quick stroll through YouTube suggests ‘Yoga for Strength’, ‘Core Power’ or ‘Healthy Back’ classes ranging in times to be suitable for the working demographic. To recap, this stands in a stark contrast to premodern yoga traditions that had very little or no focus on body physiques. A concerning ‘side-effect’ for women engaged in yoga as a physical practice has been the thinning of the ideal yoga body over the years (Bhalla& Moscovitz, 2019).

⁴⁷ Dhana in Sanskrit refers to the virtue of generosity, charity or giving of alms in Indian philosophies.

In the digital yoga spaces, 'weight-loss' is a leading promised reward that draws particularly women towards yoga. In a first instance, the vanity-driven world of Instagram (see *Appendix A*) features hundreds of thousands of selfies tagged #yoga, showcasing photos of slim women performing challenging postures (Gregoire, 2014). This first introduction to yoga sets the tone for the wider popular yoga culture that "shapes female identities in ways that establish narrow ideals for women's bodies and female identity" (Bhalla& Moscovitz, 2020, p.93). Yoga brands rely on this trope to market their latest programs and goods to the customers. In recent years, detox and weight-loss teas have been increasingly popular on social media and highly visible in the digital yoga spaces.

Figure 4.3 Yoga, Weight Loss and Tea



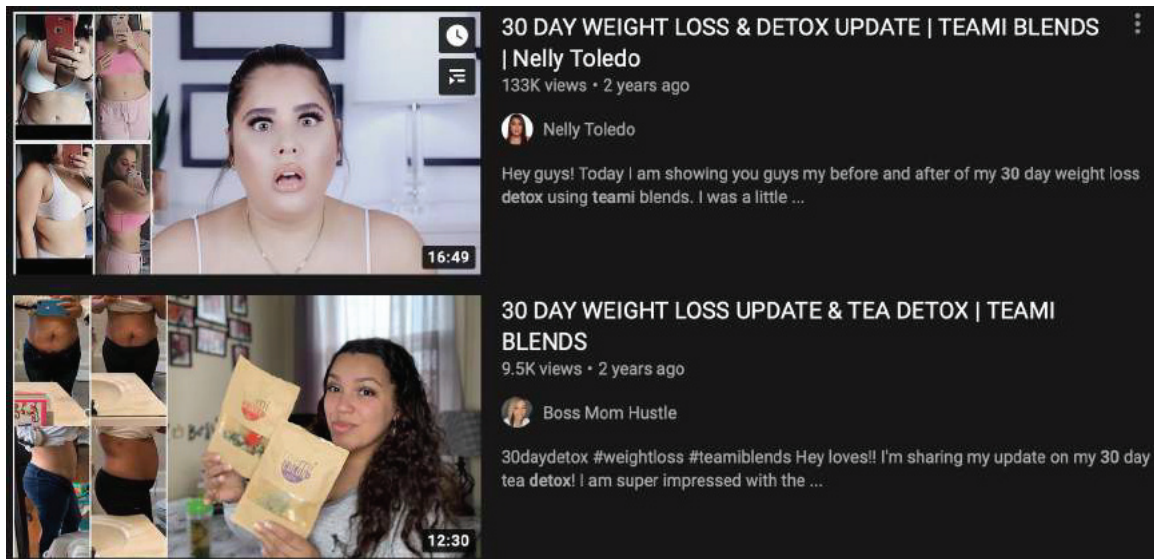
Notes: The Teami advertisement was posted on the brand's website as a blogpost titled 'Natural Ways to Reduce Stress' and recommends the Teami Relax tea blend as well as yoga, exercise and bathing (teamiblends.com, 2021)

The brand Teami has been caught up in a lawsuit over its deceptive health claims in 2020, being accused by the U.S. Federal Trade Commission to utilize misleading marketing strategies (Ellis, 2020). The website is full of promises of the attainment of health, well-being and personal fulfillment: "Between taking care of the kids, working, trying to be healthy, or spending time with family and friends – finding the time to do everything during the day can be stressful" (Teamiblends.com, 2021). The claims to reduce stress, 'detox' the body and promote weight loss lack scientific backing and rely solely on the brand myths of healthism and neoliberal selfhood: "Ready to

kickstart your healthy lifestyle? We believe that maintaining a healthy gut is vital in living your happiest, healthiest life” (ibid). Health is not only privatized but linked to a skinny complexion.

Founded by Adri Arezzini in 2013, Teami sells a variety of tea blends, with its two most popular and most advertised products being the ‘teami SKINNY’ and the ‘teamie COLON’, together often marketed as the ‘Detox Pack’ (teamiblends.com). The ‘30 Day Detox’ is so popular on social media, it is the topic of hundreds of YouTube video reviews and result diaries. The video thumbnails often include ‘before and after’ shots of the women’s bodies. While not all Teami content is explicitly linked to yoga, the habitus overlaps by association and shared signifiers.

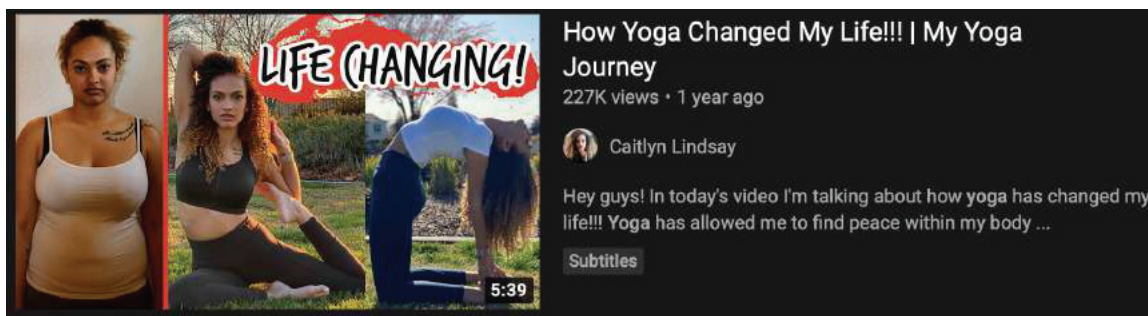
Figure 4.4 ‘Before and After’ trope on YouTube - Detox Tea



Notes: The screenshots above are the top video suggestions when looking up “teami blends” on YouTube.

The motivation to participate in yoga is reduced to similar looking ‘transformation’ videos, often titled ‘yoga journey’. The reward is claimed through likes, shares and revenue from brand sponsorships and YouTube’s ad earnings. In this scenario, yoga is reduced to a tool for achieving goals that stem out of the neoliberal fantasies.

Figure 4.5 'Before and After' trope on YouTube - Yoga



Notes: These thumbnails are scattered all throughout today's digital yoga culture. While the explicit search for 'yoga journey' will result in more of the 'before-and-after' images, the transformation trope also appears in the suggested video list when following a non-suggestive YouTube yoga class.

In yoga culture, women's bodies are seen as a source of value, with even their spiritual and mental transformations being positioned in an almost competitive manner in digital yoga spaces. Yoga then emphasizes and prioritizes ideas of 'makeover', including the requirements to 'upgrade' one's psychic life to be positive, confident and glowing (Gill, 2020, p.5).

4.1.1.3 *Yoga for emotional and financial success*

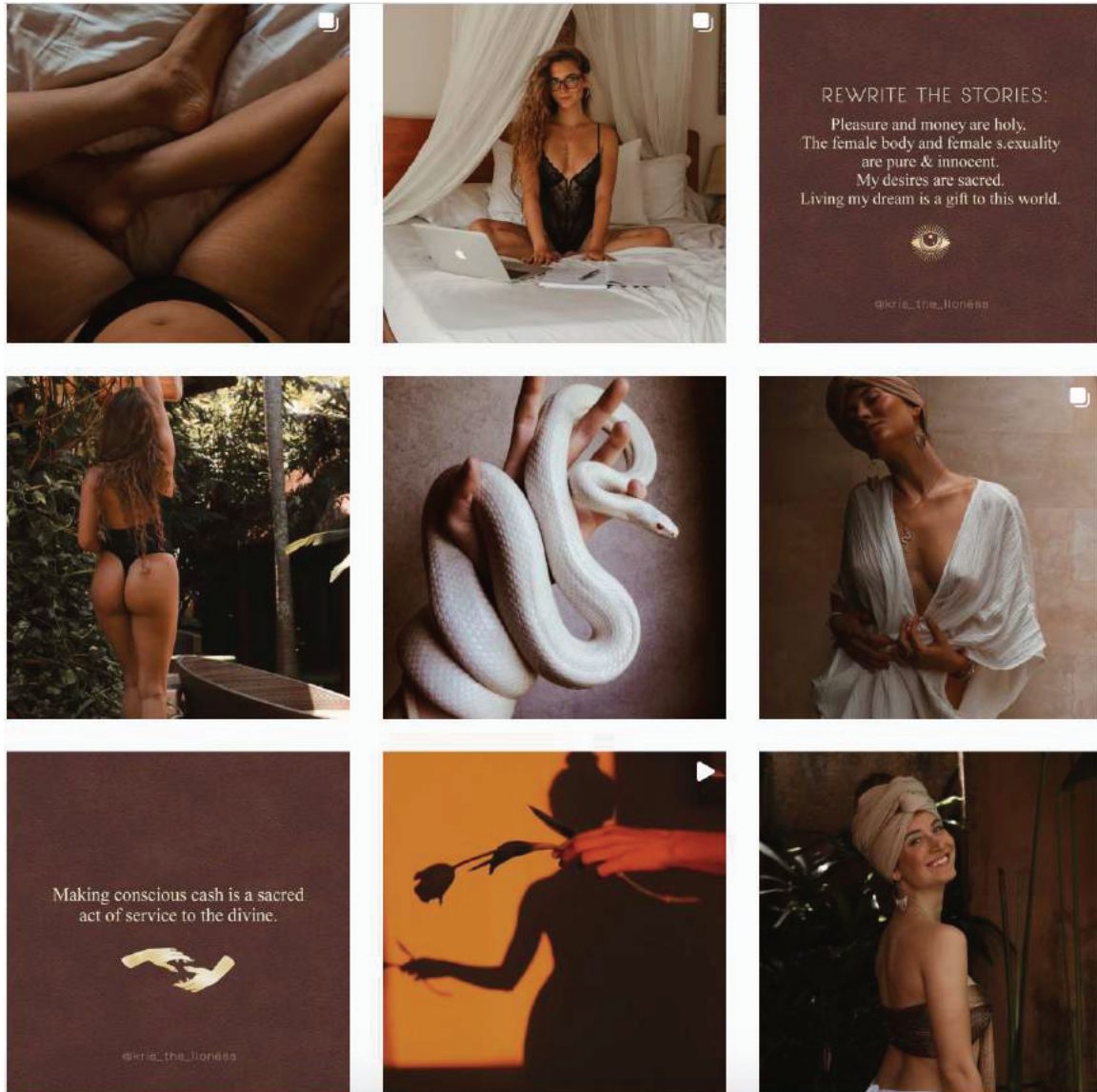
Underlying the previous examples of motivations to participate in yoga for weight loss, is the explicit role of popularity and achievement in digital yoga spaces. Yogalebrities are never short of showcasing their tropical retreat destinations, affiliation with big yoga brands like Lululemon or sharing their personal success stories that are all too familiar by following the storyline from 'rags to riches'. But with the need to be authentic and humble as well as embodying the neoliberal discourse of 'ever improving', the 'yoga girls' must make sure to highlight personal development and the act of 'overcoming' all kinds of real and fictional hardships in their social media presence. Within the fictional world of yogalebrities on social media, yoga is the key to their success – both emotionally and financially:

Biographies of powerful, successful and glamorous women are thus told as tales of perpetual quest for their inner self, a struggle with one's emotional life and the final psychic liberation from its emotional shackles. As Michel Foucault laconically remarked in his *History of Sexuality*, the care of the self, cast in medical metaphors of health, paradoxically encouraged a view of a "sick" self in need of correction and transformation (Ilouz, 2007, p.54)

So-called ‘Shadow Work’⁴⁸ is one of the most explicit alterations of this therapeutical self-help myth in popular yoga spaces. In order to promote their own workshops, books or simply gather a larger following, the yogalebrities must “translate their own language, problems, identities or interests into those of others... For in order to be better – the main commodity promoted or sold in this new field – one must first be sick” (ibid, p.61). Struggle is only allowed, as long as it is being ‘treated’. Simply being overwhelmed or paralyzed by one’s socio-economic standing or the inequalities faced, on the other hand, are unacceptable. These ‘feeling-rules’ acknowledge the presence of “ugly – psychologically and aesthetically unappealing” emotions, but demand to “quickly move on, reframing their experience in an upbeat, forward-thinking and positive manner” (Gill, 2017, p.620).

⁴⁸ Shadow Work stems out of the early work of the 20th century psychologist Carl Jung. He categorised the human mind into the self, the ego and the shadow. The shadow makes up the unconscious and often denied part of the conscious self, and “is roughly equivalent to the whole of the Freudian unconscious” (Stevens, 1990, p.43). Shadow work in today’s popular [yoga] culture often implies journaling, meditation and counselling, with the promised results of increased happiness, creativity and ‘embodying the full true self’ (@kris_the_lioness).

Figure 4.6 Yogalebrities as questionable mentors



Notes: Images are a curtesy from @kis_the_lioness instagram page, the screenshot was taken in May 2021. The symbolism of various religious and cultural background is mixed with a sexualised and sensualised feminine. The quotes, often regarding entrepreneurialism and the value of money, add to the neoliberal and post-feminist fantasies present.

With a lack of scientifically⁴⁹ proven benefits to their methods, the often untrained but self-proclaimed 'mentors' prey on the emotional distress and anxieties of their female

⁴⁹ Pseudo-scientific certificates (which in itself is a hint towards the neoliberal fantasy of growing one's human capital through certifications (Brown, 2015)) such as Neurolinguistic Programming

followers. One of the most popular influencers occupying the emotional niche of popular yoga culture is Kris the Lioness (full name unknown) with nearly 80 thousand followers on Instagram. This is just one of hundreds of examples of yogalebrities, teachers or mentors from the digital yoga space. Kris frequently shows herself vulnerable, resting and crying, but the 'struggle' is glorified, always followed up with the invitation to "step into this space of empowerment in which we can lead ourselves from a place of love, compassion and support" (kristhelioness.com). The motivation to participate in the variety of offerings by Kris, relies throughout her brand on the neoliberal self-help and hyper-individualism myth: "Pleasure and money are holy...My desires are sacred, living my dream is a gift to the world" (@kis_the_lioness, 2021). Throughout her online presence, the motivation to participate rests upon the myth to become better, more competitive in today's capitalist society, while the visual representations of Eastern mysticism function as gestural subversions of the very ideology it so firmly embraces.

4.1.1.4 Yoga for a better Planet

An underlying claim found in most popular yoga brands is the discourse of sustainability and other philanthropic endeavors. 'Giving back', 'Oneness' and 'Conscious' are tropes we frequently encounter in the popular yoga sphere. The motivation to participate in yoga stems from the firm belief that practicing and purchasing yoga is something 'more'. Advertising their products and programs as something more than a fitness routine or self-care, brands "harness the politicized rhetoric of commodity activism...[making] a plea to consumers to act politically through consumer behavior" (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p.16). With the most obvious issue being the blatant greenwashing⁵⁰ of some yoga brands, consumer activism should be seen critically. Because consumer activism operates in the marketplace, it always contains political protest within the limits of capitalism. As such, whatever the causes being promoted, consumer activism always sells "ideologies about the ideal consumer" in the first place

(NLP) are often used as a token of trustworthiness and positioned as equivalents to a degree in clinical counselling or psychotherapy, which requires a full university degree. These 'short-cut' trainings become sites of 'building out human capital' and operate as for-profit businesses.

⁵⁰ Greenwashing refers to the act of brands focusing on the green and sustainable image over the actual environmental impact. The marketing scheme is used to appeal to the consumer activist and motivate customers to purchase the items as a replacement for their political orientations and for a good consciousness.

(ibid, p.26). In the popular yoga sphere, only the aesthetically pleasing and most media-friendly issues sell. Hence, popular yoga relies on a false sense of ‘do good yoga’.

Figure 4.7 Yoga mats and the sustainability market



Notes: Liforme ‘supports’ a variety of causes and frequently launches new mat designs that fit the particular occasion. For example a bright yellow mat with rainbows named the ‘Rainbow Hope’ mat donates 5% to GLAAD, the LGTBQ media advocacy organisation (liforme.com, 2021).

One of the leading yoga mat brands Liforme, founded in 2008 by British James Armitage, sells high-end mats for almost 200 USD each. The price is excessive, given that their mats rank lower in terms of biodegradability and use of natural products than their competitors like the eco-friendly, 80USD Jade Yoga mats or the various cork mats averaging below 100USD. Liforme relies on their “eco-conscious” brand myth in all aspects of their online presence, whether it’s the ‘donation per mat’, the ‘special cause mats’ like the “Rainbow Hope Mat” supporting LGTBQ projects or the “Life for more Community blog” that offers the readers a variety of inspirational articles each month (liforme.com, 2021). Through careful branding efforts, liforme has become one of the iconic yoga brands by “performing powerful identity myths... that resolve the identity desires and anxieties” (Holt, 2000, p.279). To participate in yoga by joining the liforme brand not only satisfies the individual’s need for self-care but becomes their form of fulfilling civic duties. The contradictions are obvious, as Banet-Weiser points out: “Yet, the logic of market capitalism is that it often masks inequalities while simultaneously claiming to address and alleviate them” (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p.49). These contradictions and ambivalences are central to the realm of popular culture, but as long

as activism and protest are dominated by an invisible neoliberal bias, it remains questionable if any structural change will emerge:

The subversions of spiritual commodities—against global violence, hunger, suffering, globalization, colonialism, imperialism, and inequality—actually return to a neoliberal ethic of individual responsabilization, therefore functioning as a superficial point of resistance (Jain, 2020, p.99)

4.1.2 Précarité: political-economic implications of yoga teacher trainings

The influence of neoliberalism on popular modern yoga does not only inform the motivations to participate but has socio-economic effects on the industry and practices of yoga themselves. For many ‘yoga girls’, often due to the neoliberal notion of increasing human capital and the entrepreneurial fantasy of ‘passionate work’⁵¹, a yoga-teacher-training (YTT) becomes the natural follow-up to their personal practice. Introduced by the American Yoga Alliance, the different leveled yoga teacher certificates are part of their voluntary credential system: “Yoga profession credentials serve as markers of high quality, safe, accessible, and equitable yoga teaching” (yogaalliance.org, 2021). Within the North American context, the registration with Yoga Alliance is not so much voluntary, as majority of studios rely on the individual teacher to register and obtain insurance independently (through the Yoga Alliance). The various YTT differ immensely depending on the hosting school and lead teacher:

Many training opportunities exist from one-month intensives to weekend trainings stretched over months... The cost to attend these programs ranges almost as much as the variety of styles available... 200-hour programs (not including accommodations for intensives) have tuitions that vary from \$2,300 to upwards of \$6,000 (Blinne, 2020, p.37,38)

A particularly popular option are YTTs abroad, such as Costa Rica or Bali, where the prices drop according to the purchasing power of the hosting country.

⁵¹ The concept of ‘passionate work’ as discussed by McRobbie describes the transition from the now parental generation of middle-class workers classified by the statutory rights and entitlements associated with the post-war welfare regime to a new model of work that rests upon the idea that work is something to which one has a passionate attachment (McRobbie, 2016, p.100). Work in the neoliberal context is a source of happiness, passion and fulfillment and as such is no longer bound to be responsible for socio-economic circumstances.

The entrance and hence most popular YTT is the 200-hour format⁵². The basic training that since the covid-19 pandemic is increasingly taught online, consists mostly of self-paced study of the material and some zoom classes-and covers an eclectic mix of 'yoga philosophy', 'anatomy and postures' and 'teaching as a business'. Regarding the complex history of yoga, for the sake of easy consumption and coherent branding, yoga is presented as a homogeneous, ancient practice.

With regard to the 'teaching as business' chapter that was present in the sample YTT-200, a political-economic shortcoming becomes apparent. The introduction to the 'yoga for a living' chapter from onlineyoga.school reads as followed:

Many yoga teachers would love to teach yoga for a living, but they can't afford to do it. This is because most people do not understand how to treat yoga as a business. It may take some time, but there are a lot of ways to build up your yoga business. I went from teaching up to 27 classes a week (not a good idea) at multiple places to creating my own business and creating my own classes. Within a few months, I was earning \$5,000 a month teaching yoga, without owning a studio, just doing workshops, retreats or trainings (onlineyoga.school, 2021).

Appealing to the entrepreneurial 'yoga girls', yoga here is clearly treated as an opportunity for personal and economic growth. What is not discussed is the individuation process that stands in sharp contrast to the branded 'oneness' of yoga. Constantly keeping the attention on the individual, "Knowledge, thought, and training are valued and desired almost exclusively for their contribution to capital enhancement", rather than community forging and achieving the 'oneness and unity' of yoga (Brown, 2015, p.177).

Yoga teaching is an extremely unregulated industry, as majority of teaching positions are filled by contractors and not employees. The latter type of employment would mean that the studios be required to cover social and health insurance of their staff. As contractors, yoga teachers are stuck in a cycle of precarious work that moves the yoga industry fast and ferociously away from the "statutory rights and entitlements" of the welfare state (McRobbie, 2016, p.100). Situated within the larger neoliberal gig

⁵² In the summer of 2020 amidst the global covid-19 pandemic, I personally enrolled in a virtual YTT-200, as the prices had dropped significantly and Yoga Alliance announced that for a limited time only, YTT were allowed to be conducted online. This raises concerns regarding the increased scalability and lack of community in the already profit driven YTT industry.

economy⁵³, the YTT I attended recommended the use of fiverr.com⁵⁴ for obtaining marketing material (onlineyoga.school). The glorification of entrepreneurship is further accelerated by yogalebrities and their incorporation of neoliberal fantasies. Acting as role models for the aspiring yoga teachers, their success overshadows the thousands who do not achieve economic success. As Banet-Weser details, failure is to be blamed on the individual, and often associated with a lack of commitment or confidence:

Aspirational labor relies on, among other things, confidence—confidence that the work will eventually pay off. The sheer irrationality of this confidence in a contracting economy that is deeply disproportional in terms of who actually “makes it” does not, then, disrupt or harm the discourse of confidence. Rather, confidence sustains neoliberal capitalism: all one has to do is work on *confidence*, and mastery and success will apparently follow (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p.95)

What remains hidden behind the neoliberal fantasies of passionate entrepreneurship are the precarious socio-economic realities of yoga teaching.

While there are exceptions (see *Chapter 4.4*), the overall structure of YTTs, in particular those offered by popular brands like Vancouver based YYoga, is a “top-down profit maximizing” model (Zeisler, 2020, p.5). Contrary to the economic reality, the branding and discourse of the YTT appropriates the ethical and moral foundations of yoga as a unifying practice. As such, popular yoga culture falsely claims to facilitate “sites of training, education, community building and philanthropy” (ibid). In particular the notion of ‘karma’⁵⁵ is appropriated by studios to exploit free labor from the aspiring teachers. Unpaid labor is so common in the popular yoga culture that studios advertise ‘karma exchanges’ for willing yogis to trade front desk and cleaning positions for free yoga classes. What sounds innocent enough, often operates as gate keeping. In order to perform unpaid labor, the individual must be in a privileged economic standing to begin

⁵³ Gig Economy refers to a free market system in which temporary positions are common and companies avoid paying health support and benefits to their short-term workers. The independent contractors are often stuck in precarious work cycles.

⁵⁴ Fiverr is a platform that allows businesses to access freelance services on a global scale. Most popular services are web and mobile design, ghostwriting and drop shipping (fiverr.com). In other words, fiverr is a platform operating the gig economy.

⁵⁵ Karma in Sanskrit means action, work or deed. It also implies the spiritual principle of cause and effect, often used to describe actions as rewarding ‘good karma’ or bad deeds resulting in punishment.

with. In sum, the industry of yoga teacher training not only enabled neoliberal modes of working but installs them as aspirational fantasies in the popular yoga culture.

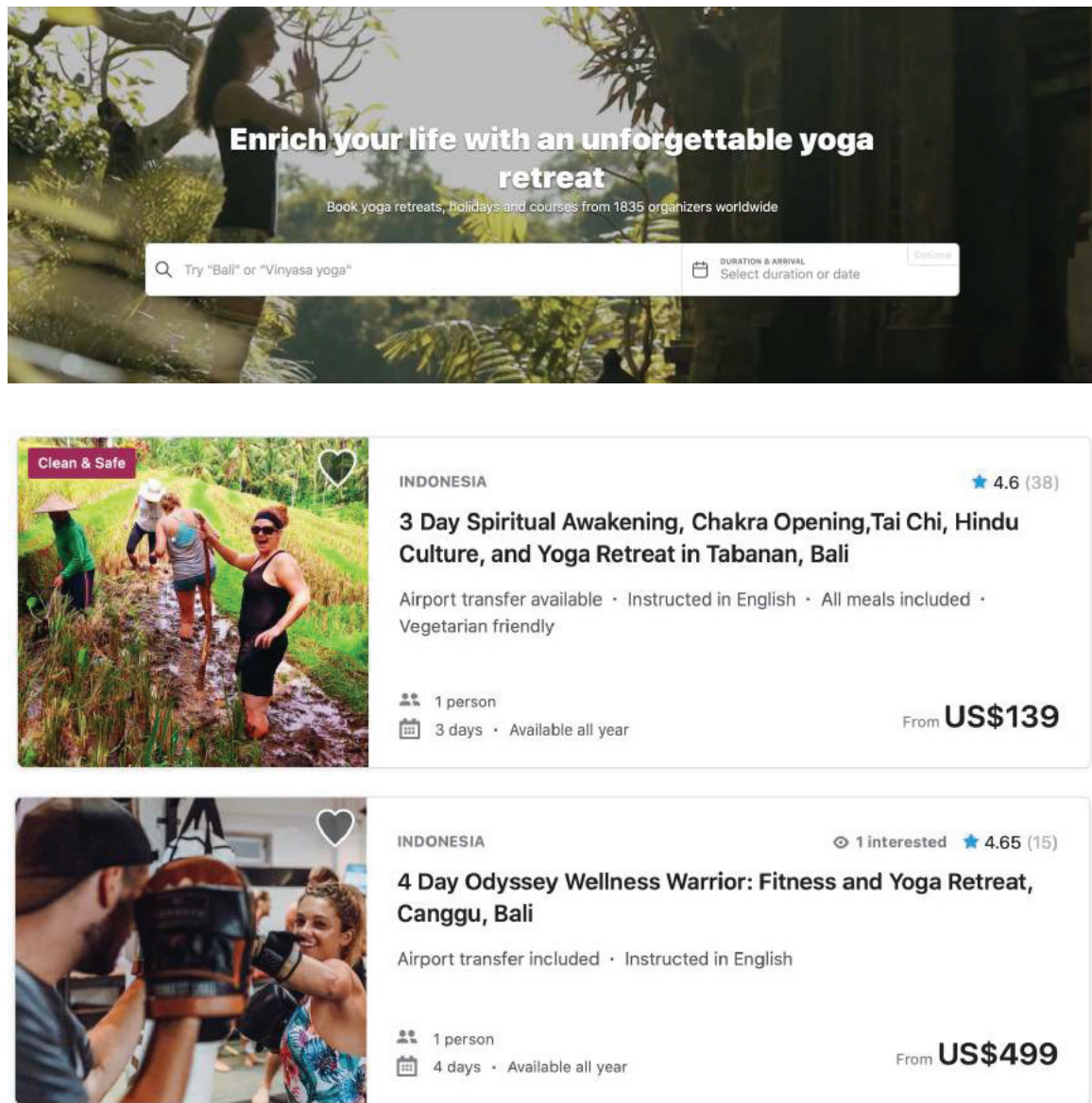
4.1.3 Orientalism and hegemony of yoga retreats

Neoliberal fantasies do not only operate within the West but uphold power relations globally, as the case of popular yoga suggests: “Yoga grows and acculturates in the West” and as such continues to export the capitalist ideological undercurrents (Singleton, 2010, p.210). Through the immanent opposition between East and West, popular yoga culture establishes dominance by subordinating non-capitalist, Eastern ideologies to the market logic. In order to balance the alienating effects and anxieties of modernity, the East is appropriated for spiritual guidance, social alternatives and the celebration of nature and the natural (Lau, 2000, p.8). In its most blatant iteration, the discourse of popular orientalism is implemented in the marketing material for yoga retreats. As Lau explains:

The common trope of popular orientalism which entangles the East in a romanticizing past: The East as a timeless place that transcends the problems of this world, a place where the West can escape from its ills, a place where the West can seek peaceful solace (Lau, 2000, p.8)

Rather than addressing the non-Western countries as actual alternatives or equals, the retreat destinations are portrayed as “poor in material goods but rich in spirit [India]” or as places “of natural innocence and wisdom [Bali]” (Beaman& Sikka, 2016, p.84).

Figure 4.8 Yoga Retreats as sites of popular orientalism



The screenshot displays the homepage of the website bookyogaretreats.com. At the top, a banner features a woman in a black tank top practicing yoga in a lush, green outdoor setting. The text on the banner reads: "Enrich your life with an unforgettable yoga retreat" and "Book yoga retreats, holidays and courses from 1835 organizers worldwide". Below the banner is a search bar with the placeholder text "Try 'Bali' or 'Vinyasa yoga'", a "DURATION & ARRIVAL" filter dropdown set to "Optional", and a "Select duration or date" button.

Below the search bar, two retreat listings are shown:

- Retreat 1:** "3 Day Spiritual Awakening, Chakra Opening, Tai Chi, Hindu Culture, and Yoga Retreat in Tabanan, Bali". It is located in Indonesia, has a 4.6 rating from 38 reviews, and is priced from US\$139. The listing includes a "Clean & Safe" badge and a heart icon. The description mentions "Airport transfer available", "Instructed in English", "All meals included", and "Vegetarian friendly". It is for 1 person and available all year.
- Retreat 2:** "4 Day Odyssey Wellness Warrior: Fitness and Yoga Retreat, Canggu, Bali". It is also in Indonesia, has a 4.65 rating from 15 reviews, and is priced from US\$499. It includes a heart icon and the description "Airport transfer included" and "Instructed in English". It is for 1 person and available all year.

Notes: The screenshot was taken from the website bookyogaretreats.com in May 2021. The online booking site includes various retreats all over the world and in a variety of styles. Some retreats focus more on the detox, spiritual and meditative site for more mature clients, while others cater to younger generations and include surfing, fitness, excursions and volunturism.

Besides the neoliberal fantasy that 'no alternative to capitalism is possible or desired', yoga retreats furthermore appeal to the neoliberal sense of hyper-individuality: "Enrich your life with an unforgettable yoga retreat" is the slogan of one of the leading yoga retreat catalogues (bookyogaretreats.com). The descriptions of the various retreats

appeal to the sense of self-care and responsibility: '7 Day Mental Health & Emotional Healing Retreat', '21 Day Nature Healing, Self-care Retreat' and '11 Day basic Detox Retreat' are the top suggestions for retreats in Bali (ibid, 2021). Commodifying the benefits of yoga as a tool for "self-actualization by fulfilling material and psychological needs...tends to reiterate rather than question the colonial and imperial gaze that views yoga as an exotic commodity" (Singamsetty, 2016, p.84).

This phenomenon of journeying elsewhere, literally (geographically), culturally (to the 'exotic' and 'authentic' East), and historically (constructing a present more connected to a past), to effect a deep personal/spiritual transformation warrants attention beyond the notion of 'religious tourism'... 'Spiritual travel' involving journeys to places 'elsewhere', which are imagined offering the possibility of profound personal transformation. These imaginings are tied up in a continuation of the exoticization of the East (Beaman& Sikka, 2016, pp.2,3)

Yoga travel enriches first and foremost the predominantly Western travelers themselves, as well as their home communities to which they return with the obtained knowledge (ibid, p.85). While local communities give in to the competitive market pressure of attracting customers, they cater increasingly to Western desires. As a result, the capitalist ideology of 'hustle culture' is omnipresent in the structure of many yoga retreats: "Rather than providing a break from non-stop, jam-packed schedules, retreats keep us overloaded with activities" (McEachern, 2021). So, instead of facilitating sites of encounter and transculturation, yoga retreats exploit their host cultures by dominating their customs and traditions for the taste of the West (Blinne, 2020, p.246).

A particularly exploitative niche of [yoga] retreats are the influencer retreats that are designed specifically to attract their young female followers. While not exclusively marketed as yoga retreats, the events almost always include yoga and meditation in their daily schedules and overall rely heavily on Eastern spiritualities. Branded as 'self-love', 'divine-empowerment' or 'intuitive', the advice-type retreats not only rely on popular orientalism as well as cultural appropriation of Eastern spiritualities for profit, but act as vehicles for neoliberal fantasies. As an example of hundreds of influencers retreats, the latest creation of influencer Claire Michelle stands out. Claire Michelle is also known as @plentifulsoul and has over 248 thousand followers on Instagram. Her brand clariness.com offers virtual and in person retreats, courses, coaching and wellness sessions. The entire brand myth of clariness.com is a reproduction of hyper-individualism, healthism, entrepreneurship and growing one's human capital, from the

most obvious glorification of entrepreneurship “create magic and an impact with your business”, to the more subtle cues of the neoliberal self to “self-discover” and “selflove” (clariness.com, 2021).

Figure 4.9 Influencer retreats as reproduction sites of neoliberal fantasies



We are so happy you are here!

Clariness Collective

We are a collective that loves wellness, intuitive business and travel, so we combined all three worlds to create Clariness!

We create beautiful retreats, experiences and events in magical locations.

Our intention is to help you find greater *clarity* through *wellness*.

Clarity. Alignment.
Community. Self-discovery.
Travel. The little things.
Selflove. Intuitive Business.
Wellness.

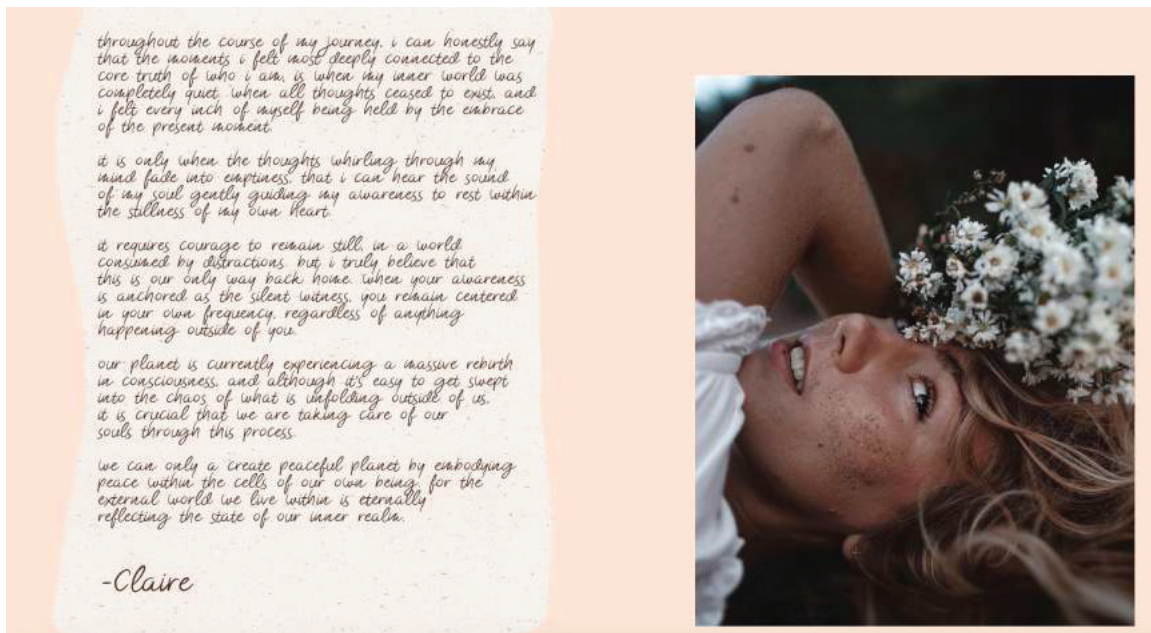


Notes: Clariness.com is the most recent launch of influencer Claire Michelle (@plentifulsoul, 2021).

Monetizing free experiences like enjoying nature and connecting meaningfully with other humans reinforce the homo oeconomicus, who perceives “education, training, leisure, reproduction, consumption and more... as strategic decisions and practices related to enhancing the self’s future value” (Brown, 2015, p.62). Michelle’s latest online retreat ‘The Cocoon’ included “ceremonial chants, self-love practices, guided meditations, journaling prompts, mantra chants, and guided small group discussions” (clariness.com, 2021). The retreat did not only appeal to the neoliberal self but gestured to activism too: “we can only create a peaceful planet by embodying peace within the cells of our own being. For the external world we live within is eternally reflecting the

state of our inner realm – Claire” (ibid). These forms of consumer activism contribute to the slow killing of the homo politicus, “the creature who rules itself and rules as a part of the demos” and replaced by a triple logic of “the economy as once model, object and project (Brown, p.41, p.62).

Figure 4.10 Consumer Activism in influencer retreats



Notes: “A note from your host” included in the advertisement of ‘The Cocoon’ online retreat by Claire Michelle in July 2020. The gestural subversion of the real crises of capitalism are used to promote the entrepreneurial endeavours of the influencer herself

4.2 Implications of post-feminist discourse on popular yoga

The previous chapter highlighted the most pervasive implementations of neoliberal fantasies in the realm of popular yoga culture. While neoliberalism and post-feminism go hand in hand in forming “pleasurable narratives”, the distinctive role of femininity in popular yoga demands further inquiry (McRobbie, 2016). The ‘yoga girls’ not only utilize tropes of hyper-individualism, freedom and growing human capital, but rely heavily on notions of empowerment and naturalizing sexual differences (Gill, 2007, p.14). The ‘divine feminine’ as the ultimate expression of female empowerment is paired with conservative characteristics of womanhood, making it a prime example of the ambivalence that marks the post-feminist sensibility.

Since the 1990s, the English-speaking world has been flooded with a sense of female autonomy that fitted seamlessly into the neoliberal quest for freedom. At the same time, yoga was popularized by a new frontier of celebrities such as Madonna (see *Chapter 3.2*). ‘Yoga girls’ became more spectacular, as popular yoga continues to exist along a continuum, where spectacular, media-friendly expressions achieve more visibility, “and expressions that critique patriarchal structures and systems of racism and violence are more obscured (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p.4). In this context of the economy of visibility, femineity was reduced to a bodily property, displayable to the outside world (Gill, 2007). The following section will discuss examples of the impact these post-feminist fantasies had on today’s popular yoga.

4.2.1 Yoga Body

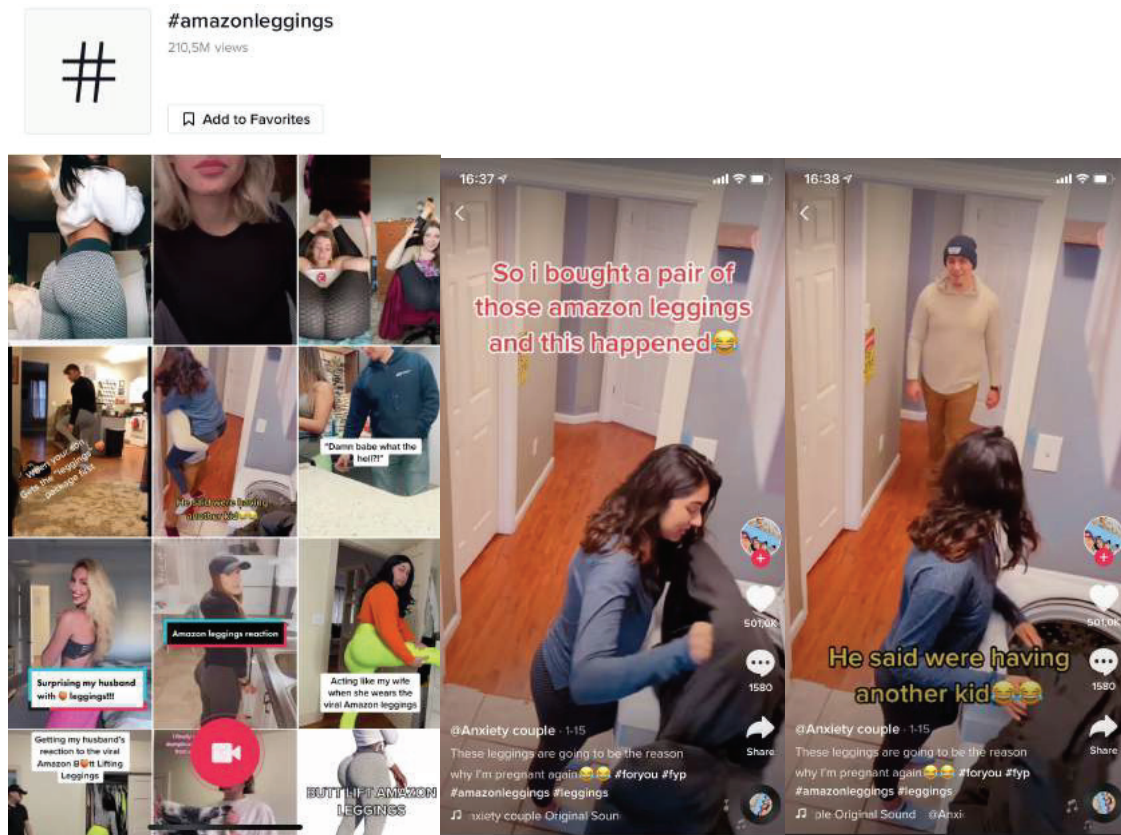
In order to be seen in the popular yoga realm, female bodies must perform the spectacular feminine as defined by the underlying patriarchal structures of late capitalism. The post-feminist discourse hides this small-print condition, which states that “women’s adherence to specific standards of female beauty and attractiveness remains crucial to their positions of power within public life” (Balizet& Myers, 2016, p.279). The ‘yoga-girls’ as seemingly self-sufficient, empowered and successful role models, unconsciously reproduce this power dynamic by creating content that fits the “face of yoga... white, hyperflexible, able-bodied, upper class, heterosexual, thin, and traditionally beautiful cisgender woman” and is subsequently rewarded with visibility (Klein et al, 2016, p.3). While this phenomenon can be observed by the sheer majority of posts fitting the ‘yoga girl’ description (see *Appendix A*), some social-media trends incorporate the male-gaze⁵⁶ even more unambiguously.

Two recent Tiktok trends stand out, both motivating the female platform users to oblige to the clearly sexist trend-task. Both trends distorting the practice of yoga “to a means of reshaping the natural body into something more palatable for male consumption” (Blaine, 2016, p.130). The first trend became popular in early 2021 and features women posing in a particular yoga pants from online retailer amazon.com. The ‘Amazon Leggings Challenge’ tasks women to purchase and wear the leggings which

⁵⁶ In feminist theory, the male gaze describes the act of depicting women from the masculine, heterosexual perspective that objectifies the female body as a spectacle for male consumption and pleasure.

are said to enlarge their buttocks and record their husband's reaction. In line with the post-feminist fantasy that feminism is obsolete, the desire to free femineity from the "unattractive and embittered" feminists is conducted here by embracing sex appeal and male approval (McRobbie, 2009, p.157). The ambivalence of on the one hand freedom to be as sexy as they wish and on the other hand subordinating themselves to the male gaze, is part of the larger patriarchist undertones of the popular yoga culture and the post-feminism sensibility.

Figure 4.11 TikTok Trend 'Amazon Leggings Challenge'

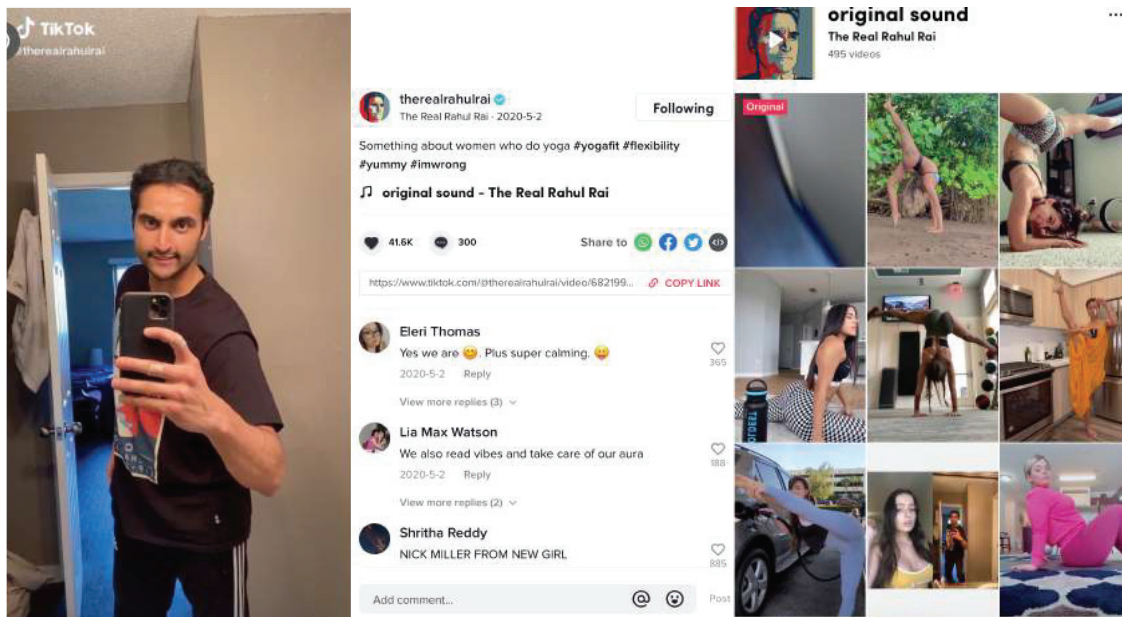


Notes: The 'Amazon Leggings Challenge' is a trend that gained popularity in early 2021. Recording their significant other's reaction to a particular pair of amazon leggings does not only represent an example of the male gaze, but in the case shown above furthermore features the women doing household work and referencing the women's reproductive role. The overall conformity to heteronormativity is striking in almost all submissions to the #amazonleggings.

While popular yoga culture is saturated with empowerment talk, the conditions for women to be strong and independent are still bound to conservative gender roles. The first example discussed above focuses exclusively on the yoga body, the next case highlights both the physical and emotional attributes of the 'ideal yoga girl' and the

willingness of women to oblige while participating in the economy of visibility. The second Tiktok challenge was trending all throughout 2020 and started when actor turned social media star Rahul Rai released a video on the platform: “Stay away from chicks who do yoga. They are super flexible and really nice” (Rai, 2020). The sound was used by nearly 500 users to respond with their own interpretations of the ‘yoga chick’. Placing Rai’s voiceover on top of their performances of acrobatics. The clips usually end with the women winking or smiling into the camera. ‘Chicks who do yoga’ are not only showing off their bodies, but also display their emotional state as ‘nice’, confident and cool.

Figure 4.12 TikTok Trend 'Chicks who do yoga...'



Notes: The original video was posted by actor and now Tik Tok star Rahul Rai in May 2020 and has generated over 41k likes to date. More interestingly, the sound has been used by nearly 500 Tik Tok users, mostly women, to showcase their flexibility and bodies, with the top video earning close to 500k likes and 3 millions views. https://www.tiktok.com/music/original-sound-6821996101625776902?lang=en&is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1

Adhering to the feeling-rules of late capitalism is crucial, both in the real-life workspaces as well as in the social media ‘visibility game’ (Gill, 2017). In order to succeed, men are expected to display “courage, cool-headed rationality, and disciplined aggressiveness” while femininity demands “kindness, compassion, and cheerfulness” (Ilouz, 2007, p.15). And while popular culture in particular sees deviations from these stereotypes, the context of it all remains defined by the logic of capitalism that relies on “an intensely specialised emotional culture” to uphold its exploitative labour division (ibid,

p.16). The post-feminist sensibility does not encourage women to challenge the system, but rather invites them to 'lean in' and be confident within it. As Banet-Weiser elaborates:

In this way, postfeminism celebrates a kind of gendered "freedom" in which women are apparently free to become all they want to be. Women just have to be a "Girl Boss" or "Lean In" in order to overcome sexist history. Materially, what this means is that neoliberal values such as entrepreneurialism, individualism, and the expansion of capitalist markets are embraced and adopted by girls and women as a way to craft their selves. These values are privileged within postfeminism, rather than feminist politics, which are seen as unproductive and obsolete. Postfeminism can be characterized as a set of ideas, elements, feelings, and emphases that operate as a kind of gendered neoliberalism. (Banet-Weiser, 2018, pp.19,20)

The 'yoga girls' are deeply invested in the narrative of gendered neoliberalism and surrounded by a plethora of invitations to 'Claim your Crown'⁵⁷.

4.2.2 Sacred femininity

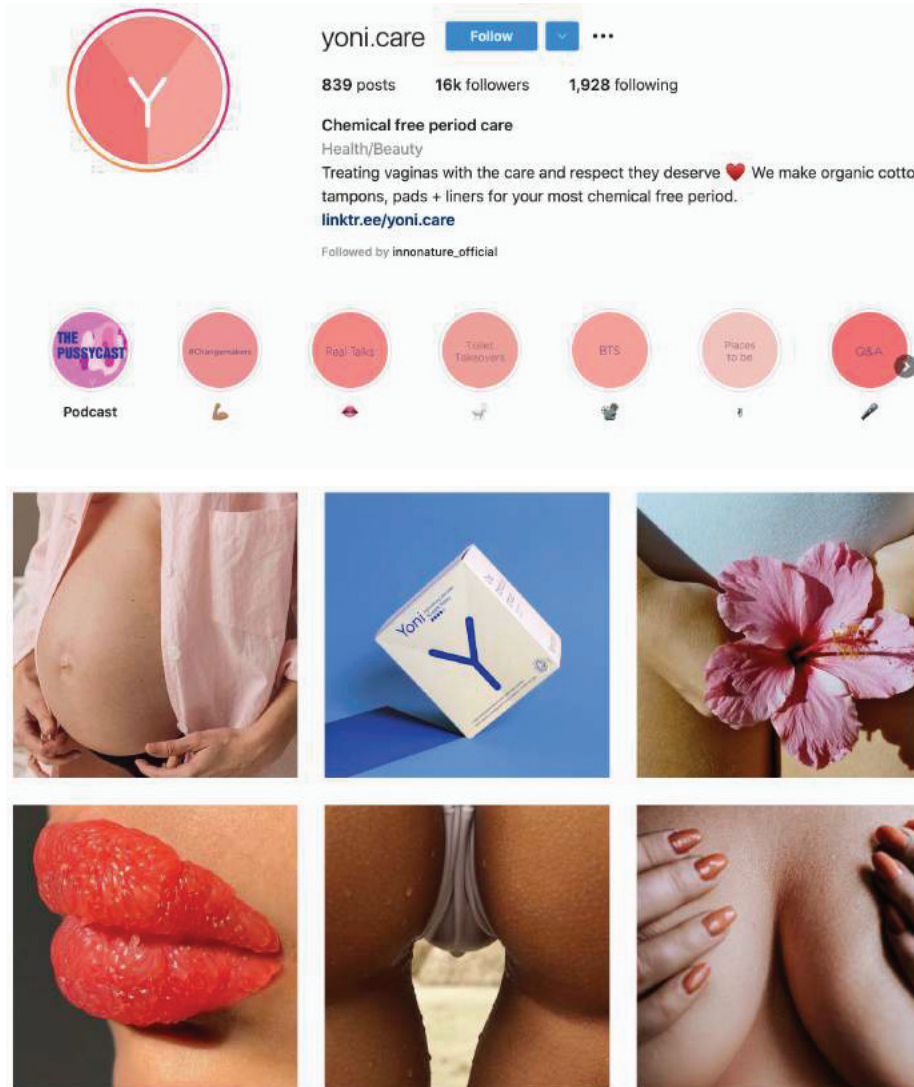
'Leaning In' to the gendered neoliberal ideology (post-feminism) requires the naturalization of the gender divide to justify that "any remaining inequalities are not the result of sexism but of natural differences and/ or women's own choice" (Banet Weiser et al, 2020, p.5). Popular yoga culture expertly operates a highly specialized market targeting femininity in its most 'natural' and 'divine' form. While the taboo around women's sexuality was (and in most non-Western places still is) a cultural dominant for centuries, vaginas are the newest monetized social anxiety that brands are offering resolutions for (Mahdawi, 2020). Amidst the rise of self-care and wellness, vaginas have become the new symbol of resistance in the capitalist marketplace, making it another great example of gestural subversions of capitalism. Gwyneth Paltrow's infamous 'This smells like my Vagina' candle sold out despite its 75USD price-tag and sheds light on the emerging industry of vaginal glorification in the self-care sector.

The 'yoga girl' habitus with its celebration of the natural in the face of "anxieties about risk society and modernity" makes a goldmine for the companies selling 'yoni'

⁵⁷ 'Claim your Crown' is another influencer program hitting the market in June 2021 by Kris from @kristhelioness. The 9-week program costs around 1000USD per person and includes workshops, a workbook, and a so-called 'masterclasses. The topics range from shadow work to meditation, manifestation and yoga.

products⁵⁸ (Lau, 2000, p.8). For example, the in 2014 founded Dutch company Yoni makes “organic cotton tampons, pads and liners” as well as sharing “knowledge about all things vulva” (yoni.care, 2021).

Figure 4.13 The 'yoni' industry - Vaginal Celebrations



⁵⁸ *yoni* in Hinduism refers to the aniconic representation of the goddess Shakti and is usually shown with its male counterpart *linga*. The literal translation from Sanskrit means womb, and in today's pop culture is used as a loose term referring to the female reproductive organs. Yoni Products thus include period care, but also traditional Chinese medicine such as yoni eggs (different crystals inserted and held to strengthen the pelvic floor) as well as yoni steaming famously advocated for by Gwyneth Paltrow. The yoni hype takes place largely on social media as well as wellness businesses such as goop.com, and has been in sharp critique for false medical claims and potential dangers to the unassuming female users Paltrow's Goop was fined 145,000USD over false medical claims regarding their yoni eggs (Belluz, 2018)

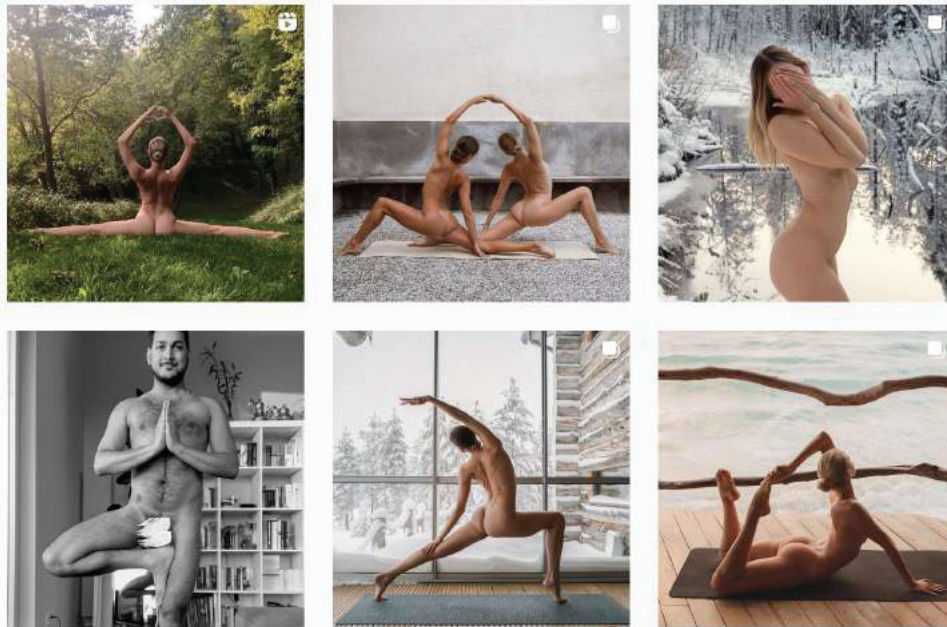
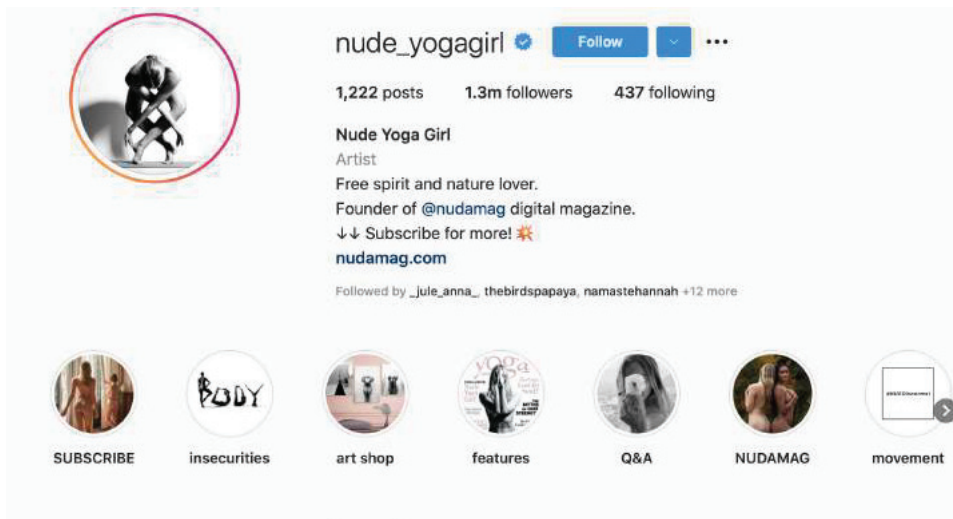
Notes: The upscale female hygiene brand founded in 2014 by dutch Mariah Mansvelt Beck and Wendelien Hebly sells a variety of organic and 'chemical-free'. Their social media channel includes suggestive, sexual and provocative images.

With issues of cultural appropriation on the one hand, the commodification of menstruation amidst a global period poverty⁵⁹ marks another problem in the high-end feminine hygiene industry. The inequality of 'who is included' in the sacred femininity movement of 'yoga girls', becomes an issue overshadowed by the post-feminist fantasy of self-actualization and empowerment.

The sacralization of body and health is a driving myth in today's popular yoga culture and can be furthermore observed in the popularity of naked yoga. With studios offering 'naked yoga classes' as well as the online world celebrating the nude yoga bodies, "yoga's prevailing link to physical fitness makes it difficult to separate from the surveillance and categorization, indeed, fetishization, of bodies in American culture" (Schrank, 2016, p.163). One example that stands out is the social media phenomenon @nude_yogagirl on Instagram. Several of the anonymous woman's photographs have been printed in the Yoga Journal, the Playboy magazine and many other publications.

⁵⁹ Period Poverty described the global phenomenon of lack of access to sanitary products, safe, hygienic spaces in which to use them and the right to manage menstruation without shame. Not only does it affect the immediate wellbeing of girls and women, but furthermore interferes with their education and sometimes life safety. In popular yoga culture in the West, the glorification and invitation to 'celebrate one's womanhood' often overlooks the inaccessibility for many to partake in the movement and creates yet another privilege gap.

Figure 4.14 Sexualization of Asanas - Naked Yoga



Notes: The anonymous blogger, model and photographer has turned yoga into a visual art on her 2015 found instagram account. Strategically avoiding the sites 'no-nudity' rules, which first and foremost include the female nipples, the instagram account has gained over 1.3million followers on the social media site.

While the artistry of the photographs is undeniable, the question remains why yoga and the female body must be linked to hyper-sexuality and sensuality. The answer, as this thesis has argued, lies in the logic of the economy of visibility. To gain popularity and succeed in the terrain of popular [yoga] culture, displaying control and discipline over

one's body is the key to visibility. Schrank elaborates on visibility in terms of the signifiers of the female body:

Our bodies have become so laden with signifiers of status, sexuality, and consumer possibility that it is quite easy to feel simultaneously dissociated from our physical selves and obsessed with how our physical selves look and perform. Since neither bodies nor fashion trends are stable, shaping and reshaping ourselves can feel like a relentless obligation to meet an ever-elusive goal. The weight of this pressure is especially pronounced for women, who have been taught since the nineteenth-century beginnings of urban-industrial capitalism that access to the public sphere came with patriarchal and misogynistic expectations that their bodies' physical appearance and presumed sexual availability were key gauges of character and social standing (Schrank, 2016, p.157)

The female body in today's neoliberal marketplace is in a constant need of improvement. Popular yoga offers the tools to shape, calm and strengthen the modern mind and body. Modern yoga girls, often unaware of their role in advocating for neoliberal and post-feminism due to the gestural subversions of yogalebrities and yoga brands, become the role models for the next generation of yogis – reproducing the neoliberal and post-feminist fantasies and fueling the spiritual marketplace

4.3 Yoga against the grain of late capitalism

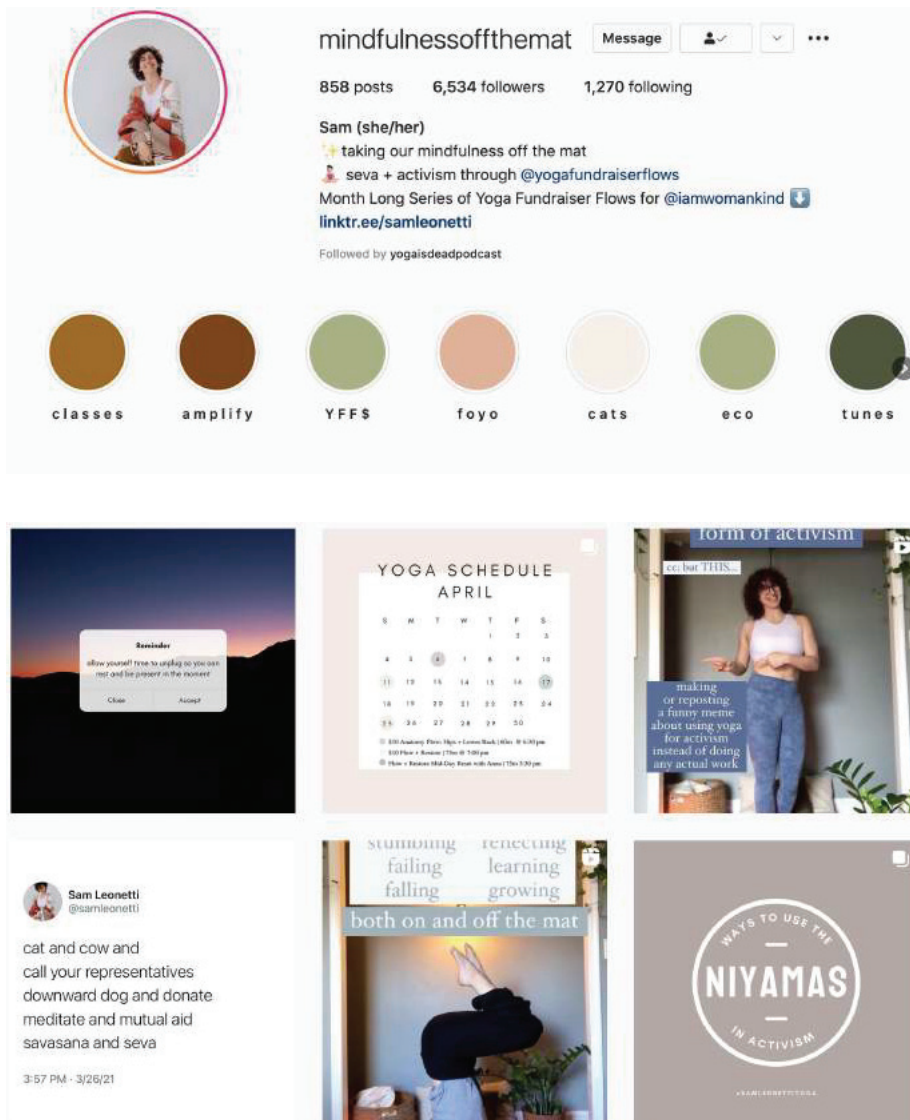
4.3.1 Learning from feminism

The examples above have been chosen to highlight the seamless embeddedness of popular yoga and the neoliberal and post-feminist fantasies that bolster today's capitalist economy. That is not to say that 'modern yogis have it all wrong', but rather to shed light on the intersections of yoga, neoliberalism and post-feminism (see *Chapter 3.3*). Within today's popular yoga culture, there is resistance and genuine activism taking place. But as Stuart Hall has concluded, popular culture is always marked by "the double movement of containment and resistance" by the dominant class that aims to "disorganise and reorganise popular culture; to enclose and confine its definitions and forms within a more inclusive range of dominant forms" (Hall, 1981, pp,228,233). Nevertheless, the anti-capitalist tendencies matter in the negotiation of meaning and relevance in the public sphere. Two examples, one grassroots yoga teacher and one well established organization that stand against capitalist injustices, will be discussed below.

Yoga instructor Samantha Leonetti has positioned her teachings and social media presence clearly against the popular, depoliticised yoga culture. Rather than focusing on the physical practice and postural representations, her account features informative posts such as ‘ways to use the niyamas⁶⁰ in activism’ and funny clips criticizing the current yoga industry (@mindfulnessoffthemat, 2021). The overall language used is inclusive, and all her classes have sliding-scale payment options with most being part of a fundraiser that changes monthly. She frequently features non-white, non-heteronormative instructors in her ‘amplify’ Instagram story series and speaks up against the fast-fashion yoga industry – while linking her contemporary activism to the philosophical and ethical foundations of pre-modern yoga systems. It is easy to observe the fundamental differences to the previously discussed popular yoga culture that shies away from political engagement. Also noteworthy is the difference in popularity, while not indicative on its own, the smaller following in comparison to the hyper-flexible ‘yoga girls’ supports the thesis that popular yoga culture operates in the economy of visibility.

⁶⁰ Niyamas are part of the eightfold-path and refer to the personal duties in addition to the yamas, the social ethics. The niyamas consist of saucha (purity), santosha (contentment), tapas (austerity), swadyaya (self-study) and iswara-pranidhana (surrender). The modern interpretations and exertion depend on the translation used and the practitioner themselves and varies accordingly.

Figure 4.15 Grassroot activism in Digital Yoga Spaces



Notes: Yoga teacher Samantha Leonetti has recently changed her social media handle from @samleonetiyyoga to @mindfulnessoffthemat in order to make the profile less about herself and more about a collective movement of likeminded yogis. The profile differs immensely from the more popular ‘yoga girl’ content that has been discussed above.

The second example is the globally recognized “Off the Mat, Into the World”, an organization founded by Seane Corn, Hala Khouri and Suzanne Sterling in 2007. The organization offers educational workshops for yoga teachers and practitioners on how to expand yoga philosophy ‘off the mat’ and collaborates with “global and local leaders to seed and support grassroots change... bridging the tools of yoga and self-awareness with

effective community action through continuing education” (offthematintotheworld.com, 2021). By focusing on the social and cultural shared experience, rather than the individual only, they resonate the second wave feminism that circulates a collective political imaginary, instead of a merely privatised and individualised experiences” (McRobbie, 2009, p.42). What becomes apparent in their work is the importance of operational sites of training, education, community building and philanthropy in the quest for lasting change (Zeisler, 2016, p.5).

Figure 4.16 Yoga activism through education



Upcoming Trainings and Events



Upcoming and Past Online Courses

Our Online Trainings support conscious, sustainable activism, connecting leaders with opportunities for action and offering people at every level of engagement with yoga skills and community support to create meaningful change in the world from a place of service, solidarity, and accountability - Building a strong community of leaders working to extend the bridge between yoga, self-awareness, and effective community action.

JAN 1, 2021 - JAN 1, 2022



OTM Book Club

We'll be hosting a new book every two months, and within the two months will have an interactive space where you, as community members, will be able to share thoughts and ideas around the readings. AND as we close out each book, we'll be offering a **LIVE Q&A** with the author. The book club will be **FREE TO JOIN** - you'll just need to get the book.

Join the Facebook Group

JAN 18, 2021 - DEC 31, 2021

Features from the Blog



An #ActuallyAutistic Response to Autism Awareness Month

I've tried so many times to start



Why Some Commonly Used Language Hurts People with Atypical Neurology



Trauma and Social Justice: Why we can't talk about one without including the other

Notes: The screenshots are taken from the organization's website and give a brief overview over their latest actions. The courses are paid and vary in price, but the collective offers a lot of their material for free, such as the bookclub and the articles on their blog (offthematintotheworld.org, 2021).

Chapter 5

Conclusions

This thesis has taken a thorough inventory of today's popular yoga culture and has formulated a critical perspective on popular yoga through an application and interpretation of theories of neoliberalism and post-feminism. By outlining the myths that circulate in today's popular yoga culture and identifying the sites where and how the neoliberal and post-feminist fantasies are reproduced, the aim of this thesis was to explore and analyze the complexities and contradictions of the development and currency of pop yoga in the context of dominant market ideologies. Clearly, critical analyses of popular yoga are meant to recover the ethical and moral foundations of pre-modern yoga systems while giving critical insight and acuity to the neoliberal rationality driving contemporary popular yoga.

Popular yoga now, is predominantly taught and communicated through the digital spaces of social media. As such, it obeys to the laws of the 'economy of visibility', in which visibility is "the end rather than a means to an end" (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p.25). This necessarily obscures the foundations of pre-modern yoga and contradicts the anti-capitalist activism that modern yoga frequently gestures towards. It has been argued here that modern yoga and the related wellness and spirituality industries act as pillars of an exploitive capitalism from which modern yoga supposedly offers refuge (Jain, 2020). It is important to note that this thesis does not understand modern yoga as a direct descendent of pre-modern yoga traditions, nor as being 'owned' by a single culture or religion. Rather, this project shifted the focus to the particularity of modern yoga and its entanglement of consumer culture and digital spaces. Hence, the thesis has addressed issues of representation, discourse, and power within popular yoga culture and its digital spaces.

It has been argued that the 'yoga girls' are role models with questionable values and popular representatives of pop yoga that gain economic surplus and social power by reproducing the neoliberal and post-feminist ideologies. The case studies discussed in *Chapter 4* have revealed the strategies of yogalebrities and yoga brands to attract female customers and followers. The thesis has shown that the ambivalent brand myth

of yoga consists on the one hand of anti-capitalist, non-Western tropes, and on the other hand appeals to the neoliberal and post-feminist fantasies of hyper-individualism, liberation, empowerment, and authenticity. The resulting yoga habitus is extremely appealing as it raises awareness to the very anxieties that it simultaneously offers the solutions to. Additionally, popular yoga acts as a stage for its participants to promote a variety of meanings and identities that have been attributed to yoga through its rich and multicultural history. These include but are not limited to morality, confidence, happiness, sustainability, feminism, and passion.

To understand and explain the (brand) myths that operate in the yoga habitus, *Chapter 2* took a close look at the semantic network of femininity and yoga by tracing the history from the yoginis of the past to the 'yoga girls' of the present. Unlike the common belief and often implied marketing strategy that yoga is an ancient practice, the chapter concluded that there is little to no continuity in the historical involvement of women in yoga (Wittich, 2020). Investigations into the visual culture of female yogis (yoginis) has shown that the ancient goddesses were domesticated and excluded from many the spiritual yoga systems (Diamond, 2020). The inclusion and particular marketing of yoga towards women unfolded in the 20th century, when predominantly male Indian teachers came to America and offered alternatives to the alienating effects of modernity. Catered to the Western taste, modern yoga became increasingly postural based and embraced notions of orientalism, spiritual-but-not-religious, physical enhancements, emotional regulation, youth, and selfhood.

Chapter 3 paralleled the popularisation of yoga with the changing ideological currents in the West. With the advent of neoliberalism in the 1980s and post-feminism in the 1990s, this chapter concluded that yoga's explosive growth was attributable in no small measure to its embodiment of neoliberal and post-feminist fantasies. Neoliberal fantasies are rooted in the economization of everything and include seeing oneself as an ongoing project of increasing human capital, the necessity of remaining competitive and the privatisation of health and social responsibilities (Brown, 2006). The post-feminist fantasies that found resonance in popular yoga include the naturalization of sex-based differences, femineity as a bodily property and the dominance of the makeover paradigm (Gill, 2007). Popular yoga addresses these needs, as *Chapter 4* continued to show by laying out a variety of examples that highlight the intersections of neoliberalism, post-feminism, and yoga.

5.1 Reflections on the research process and future research

This thesis was instigated and is informed by “practicing yoga” and “purchasing spiritual goods” as a perceived form of political/consumer activism and an expression of self-care (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Modern popular yoga is its own entity, and as such not more or less authentic than other yoga systems (Singleton, 2010, Jain, 2015). But rather than expending critical focus on the popularisation and dilution of yoga, this thesis has argued that we should concern ourselves with the elaboration of neoliberal capitalism through yoga and the resonances and impacts of neoliberal capitalism on the consumer popular culture of yoga.

Paradoxically, yoga “through breath, movement and meditation has the ability to release the psychic pressures of performing learned cultural ethics” (Kauer, 2016, p.94). But due to its entanglement with neoliberalism and post-feminism, pop yoga continues to reproduce narratives instead of creating space for change. While there is a growing number of resources available to individuals (see *Chapter 4.3*), it remains to be seen how yoga on a global and corporate scale will be able to transform, rather than uphold market rationality and capitalist hegemony. Inviting critical thought and research into the various yoga spaces should be emphasized, as those spaces continue to expand and are increasingly found in schools, prisons, and other institutions of education and socialisation.

Perhaps the biggest surprise in this research endeavour is the lack of regulations and reliable sources of information in the realm of popular yoga. The majority of pop yoga mythologies rely on extremely simplified or completely made-up yogic knowledge. Such simplification and improvised “knowledge” are most evident in the history of yoga, and in terms of the very bodies that practice yoga. For the latter, pseudo-scientific methods are marketed as miracle cures, including but not limited to all kinds of ‘energy healing’ and ‘detox’. This can have serious and dangerous consequences for practitioners who place their health and trust in ‘certified’ teachers.

Certifications mark another problematic site in yoga culture they reinforce the Western dominance over practices by excluding (mostly non-Western) teachers who cannot pay for the ever-increasing demands for certificates. While content and quality of

the trainings varies, the new industry of digital retreats and trainings is concerning due to their increased scalability and lack of social and political frameworks. Taking certification programs and teacher trainings online supposedly makes them more widely available, but this availability must be understood as the global marketing of a multi-million-dollar enterprise in the franchise of commodified health and well-being.

Many complex and provocative questions arise out of this study. How can the ethical and philosophical foundations of pre-modern yoga be translated into a modern context? What reforms are needed to transform yoga teaching into a stable and living-waged career? And how can digital yoga spaces become more accessible? Above all is the need to engage in comprehensive critical inquiries into yoga as an influential and ever-expanding form of global popular culture. Such analytical rigour addresses and provides critical accounts of the pop yoga habitus while at the same time opening up new perspectives on the complex connections between yoga and issues of gender, feminism, representation, commodification, popular commercial culture, neoliberalism and the marketplace, and more.

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Appendix A

Digital yoga spaces on Instagram by hashtags

Top yoga hashtags	Related posts total	Top Posts
#yoga	95.4M	
#yogaeverydamnday	19.2M	
#yogainspiration	13M	
#yogalife	12.7M	

Notes: Evidence was collected on the 24th of April 2021 on Instagram