

Thematic article

“Narrating” Bodies. Physical “Reflexive” Activities between Gender Images and Socio-pedagogical Processes Research on the Yoga’s Representations

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Abstract

This article intends to offer a reflection on how reflexive physical activities can support a socio-pedagogical approach to educating about gender diversity through media communication. We use the term “reflexive” to refer to all those activities aimed at enhancing the person and his relationships, self-realization, self-knowledge, and self-improvement: in other terms, a circuit of bodily experiences that determine bodily knowledge as a social construction (as described by Connel, 2005). These activities focus mainly on ethical purposes, rather than on performative ones. An example of such disciplines can be considered the practice of yoga which is a currently growing phenomenon both in Europe and in the United States. Yoga is practiced today in the USA by 35.2 million adults, by over 2.5 million people in Italy, and is garnering scientific interest in its contributions to balanced, healthy growth of children and adults. The World Health Organization, in its global action plan on physical activity 2018-2030: More Active People for a Healthier World, calls it a means to improve health. The diffusion of these disciplines responds to a personal and social search for meaning that weighs especially heavily on highly secularized Western culture. This diffusion also portrays a media phenomenon, whose images and messages validate and reinforce capitalist ethics. From this point of view, the “mediated” representation of sports bodies appears to apply to the world of consumers. The images of women practicing yoga, oriented toward alternative values rather than beauty and sexuality, are above all confirmed by the purchase of goods and services that are not related to outward personal appearance. Using the results of an analysis carried out in 2021 of two main international yoga magazines, we are going to discuss the role of yoga as a “reflexive” physical activity and its pedagogical potential oriented to the body as a “primary place of experience”, not just a consumer item, but also a tool for education about gender diversity.

Keywords: reflective physical activities, gender diversity, education, body, social representations

Introduction

The “wellness society”: representations of healthy living

In past decades, the physical and mental well-being of the population has become one of the primary goals of developed and modern societies. The idea of well-being is now a “concept guide” for innovative actions in health, consumption, and sustainable lifestyles. With a prospect of greater “lifetime value” (Rifkin, 2000: 11), individuals are becoming more aware of themselves and their needs. Naturally, this leads to a much more complex issue than simply overcoming disease, pain, or a specific social class. The notion of health is strongly

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intertwined with that of a healthy lifestyle, intersecting sports practice and physical activity, two main keys to help us understand the socio-cultural change called “wellness”. Current literature reveals additional terms corresponding and interrelating to this construct, expressions like well-being, satisfaction with life, quality of life, human development, flourishing, and happiness (Foster, Keller, et al. 2011). In our opinion, the term refers not only to the idea of improving/preserving the health of the individual and to better well-being, but also to spread this vision to the community and the environment (Russo, 2018).

Today, in Europe, sport and physical activity stand as both a strategic tool for public health policies aimed at promoting the well-being of its inhabitants, and as an important element of the “health system”. This system is comprised of a plurality of social actors (beyond medical personnel) who are responsible for organizing the social construct of health. One such actor is the media. Its job is to communicate how quintessential health and living a healthy lifestyle really is, and to help keep people informed about how to go about staying fit. By being informed, they can then make more health-smart choices. Through the media lens, health communication has now become a widespread phenomenon, an integral part in spreading post-materialistic ideas, in changing the views on consumption and the body, and also in globalizing healthier ways of life (Horne, 2006). Thanks to this media coverage, healthy lifestyle tips and information are becoming more popular. As the “Readly Trends Report” (2021) on digital reading states, among the categories of magazines most read by Italians, we find those of health and well-being in second place (growth of + 118%).

Not surprisingly, “keeping fit” has become a fundamental goal for people desiring to take care of their bodies, resulting in a consequent increase in the consumption of goods and services in the fitness and wellness industry. This transformation is the result of a sports culture that, since the ‘70s, has replaced the panicked race to accumulate and consume things with the relaxed aim to appreciate and experience life. The aesthetic prevails over the agonistic. This change is associated with the social movements of the previous decade and with the influence of Far-East philosophies and holistic disciplines that gave power of speech to the body³. The goal is to find the value of being fit while enjoying the practice itself.

In the ‘80s and ‘90s, fitness implied work on the body that combined training and leisure. It was understood that these practices were the connection between active lifestyles and health. Since then, the fitness culture focus has shifted from fitness as a technique to get in better shape to fitness as a holistic wellness philosophy (Sassatelli, 2010). In disseminating this philosophy, the media’s and various companies’ inspiring health messages are key. The diffusion of the wellness market (Borgogni, Digennaro, Russo 2018) influences individuals to want a better life, thus stimulating them to take up healthier practices (Soper, 2007).

On this basis, the aim of this article is to discuss one of the most widespread motor practices in Western society – yoga – as an expression of this change, from a reflexive perspective (Rifkin, 2000; Beck, Giddens, Lash 1994). An examination will take place of some wellness magazines focused on the practice of Yoga and its socio-pedagogical potential, ability to incorporate the individual as a social context, and its usage by both men and women. Two yoga magazines from a content analysis carried out in 2021 will be the subjects of this article. We use the term “reflexive” to refer to all those activities aimed at enhancing a person and his relationships, self-realization, self-knowledge, and self-improvement.

Background and Research design

Sport and wellness: a portrait of Italy

Nowadays, sports in Europe is used to stay healthy or become more fit, while it is also a means of social interaction. Thus, practicing sports goes beyond competition, and enhances quality of life. With this in mind, progressive wellness culture develops a fluid model of the body, the aesthetic dimension, and of consumption (Codeluppi, 2007)⁴. The fit, beautiful, sporting body expresses both the influence of the hedonistic culture (reminiscent of Hellenist Greece) (Lipovetsky, 2013)⁵, and is a strong commercial driver.

According to ISTAT data (Italian National Statistic Institute), it is estimated that over 20 million Italians (from three to 60 years old or older) practice one or more sports; an ever-growing trend. The percentage of men

³ According to: Giddens (1991); Bourdieu (1979); Goffman (1969); Le Camus (1984).

⁴ The “flow body” transforms itself thanks to the many “sporting” tools (physical activity, body building, professional sports training techniques, but also aesthetic surgery, diets, supplements, clothing ...), without forgetting the new ethical issues and values that attract the most current consumption world.

⁵ In terms of “artist capitalism” in which the aestheticization of the world it is no longer art but consumption.

who practice sports continuously (29.5%) is higher than that of women (19.5%), but it is true that continuous sporting practice increases over time for both genders, of all ages. Interestingly, the cumulative data for both sexes attributes 25.2% to the gymnastics, aerobics, and fitness (5 million and 97 thousand people, which exceeds football's 24.2%, or 4 million and 642 thousand). When analyzing the distributions by sex, however, this category clearly is more practiced by women. Out of the total of practitioners, for women this discipline is in first place (39.5%) clearly ahead of other major categories (29.9% water sports, 13.5% dance, 11.2% winter sports, 10.8% athletics, and jogging).

It is clear that the female sporting choice heavily favors a hybrid of well-being, physical fitness, and satisfaction rather than team competition. In fact, if the percentage relating to gymnastics, and dance are added up, the total of female practitioners who chose physical-motor activities aimed at well-being and physical fitness rises to 53%.

As for male practitioners, the choice seems in favor of both individual and team competitive sports: football and five-a-side football (39.7%) are in first place, followed by water and underwater sports (18%). Gymnastics is in third place (15.3%) followed by cycling sports (14.2%), winter, ice, and mountain sports (11.4%), and finally by ball and racket sports (8.2%). Therefore, if only these sports are taken into account, well-being and physical fitness among males mainly involve competition and outdoor physical activity.

Yoga Statistics

Unfortunately, ISTAT and other major Italian statistical agencies (e.g. Censis) do not provide specific data on the world of Yoga, rather it is more generally assimilated into physical activities related to well-being. However, after carrying out a more extensive investigation, it was found that Yoga's practice was far more widespread than once thought, deeming it worthy of further scrutiny.

According to a study conducted by the American CDC (Center of Disease Control and Prevention) it is practiced by 35.2 million adults and 4.9 million children and teenagers. From 2012 to 2017 it grew by 5.3% (meditation alone grew in the United States by 10.2%).

Though in Italy it is practiced by only 2.5 million people, yoga is also a trending and popular activity. The number of institutes that teach yoga in its many forms (Hatha, Asthanga, Vinyasa, Bikram, etc.) have doubled in the last ten years. In 2021, www.yogamap.it, the geolocation site on the activity of yoga schools in Italy, registered 1067 centers (+70% compared to 2005) and 262 schools founded by individual teachers in the municipality of Milan alone. This trend implies an increase in the entirety of yoga equipment production. This brought a turnover that, in Italy alone, settles at 200 million euros. According to E-bay, from 2012 to 2017, the increase in purchases of clothing and equipment related to the practice of yoga increased by 115%.

According to Zinola (2021), the production sector develops on three main fronts:

- a) The development of ad hoc cosmetics such as those of Yuni Beauty (www.yunibeauty.com), a brand born in 2014 to satisfy a double objective: to support the health philosophy of wellness practices and at the same time to support a selfie-proof aesthetic also under strain.
- b) The increase in clothing specific to yoga is polarized on two fronts: apparel developed by already famous brands such as Nike and Adidas, and, yoga-wear created specifically for the wellness market by brands such as Canada's Lululemon (<https://shop.lululemon.com>) or Amercia's Gaiam (www.gaiam.it)
- c) The development of the market relating to male practice, which, while remaining in a clear minority (about 30% of practitioners), is made attractive endorsement by famous personages (such as Adam Levine), and by creating specific athletic courses aimed at those who already practice other sports.

On the teaching front, yoga is becoming a "new profession", currently regulated by the UNI standard. It is projected by financesonline.com that, between 2021 and 2027, business for yoga instructors will have a steady increase of 9.6% annually, meaning some 66.2 billion dollars in revenues. According to the data, it is most frequently practiced by women.

Without a doubt, yoga today responds to a call for psycho-physical well-being and can be considered, in its own right, as being among the well-being practices that best respond to reflective needs for self-realization and personal expression (Russo, 2018). However, there are questions that have yet to be asked regarding this ancient mystical discipline. Two questions in particular stand out as important:

- 1) In a socio-cultural context that is changing rapidly, does the practice of yoga offer an alternative picture of women, compared to the sexualized one projected by the mainstream media?
- 2) What is its commercial impact?
- 3) How does yoga affect the educational realm?

Research Method and Results

To answer these questions, field research was carried out between June 2020 and November 2021. A content analysis was done of the two main international journals currently circulating in Italy, *Yoga Journal* (monthly) and *Vivere lo Yoga* (bimonthly). The aim was to analyze the main types of the yoga discipline as regards well-being, health, experience, and gender representation. Analysis was done of the content (classifying topics on the cover and within the magazine); the keywords; and the communicative style (use of images, graphics, layout, and language metaphors).

The analysis period was one year, and the issues examined were:

- 1) *Yoga Journal*: from issue #147 (November 2020) to issue #155 (October 2021)
- 2) *Living Yoga*: from issue #93 (June-July 2020) to issue #101 (October-November 2021)

The total of the magazines examined, therefore, amounts to 18 issues.

In order to understand the gender representations conveyed, we have taken into account the following factors:

- 1) Images in which the subject is female
- 2) Images in which the subject is male
- 3) Decorative and background images

To these, a brief analysis of the content on the titles and subtitles of the articles was added to better understand the contents, and to contextualize them within the gender representations.

A total of 1853 images were examined, divided up on the basis of how much they covered within the magazine, more precisely:

- 1) Cover image (the one with the greatest purchase power -18 images.
- 2) Images in the text (considered important for the ability to translate the contents of the articles on an iconic level) – 1412 images
- 3) Advertising images (considered important for their potential to attract public attention to products and services) – 423 images.

On the basis of these distinctions, we observed that:

- the cover image was entirely feminine (100% of images);
- the in-text images were mostly of women (75% of images);
- advertising images were predominantly of women (74% of images).

We can therefore affirm that both magazines are oriented to women, also confirmed by the styling via the decorative and background images (12% of the total images) that evokes the sinuosity and delicacy commonly characteristic of women (43% sinuous and rounded geometries, 33% plants and flowers, 24% pastel-colored spots and hearts). Having been processed cumulatively, the distribution of the images in both journals appeared homogeneous, and no specific distinctions between the journals emerged.

Discussion: Media representations of femininity in yoga

From the first observations, we found that the readers' target in the selected magazines, while not neglecting the male component, was primarily female. But which kind of representation of femininity is conveyed in Yoga disciplines?

From the analysis of the considered magazines, a clear communication strategy emerges aimed at enhancing physical form, primarily as the ideal of an independent woman who takes care of herself, in search of psycho-physical and relational well-being. The female world is the subject of communication that deals with the body in terms of pleasure and "feeling good": the body is an object that contributes to re-working (not only metaphorically) one's own self. The following elements of observation go in this direction.

Below we have analyzed the messages that the images evoke, both in terms of the outward appearance (clothing, posture, setting) and inner attitudes. First of all, most women on the cover page are between 20 and 35 years of age, set in yoga attire in a gym setting; their photos are natural yet well-finished (75%). The body appears fresh and toned, agile and flexible, and able to execute even the most difficult positions. The face and body express serenity, both facing away from the viewer (95%). The same trends also seem to be repeated in the images of women present in the magazine, albeit with different percentages.

With regard to age, 50% are younger than 35 years old, 23% settle between 35 and 45 years and only 27% seem to be over 45. Therefore images of young women seem preferred. In terms of content, the articles refer to lifestyle and psychological attitudes regardless of age. Therefore, age does not seem to be important, but rather

being or appearing younger seems to be the primary goal to be achieved by yoga. It could be said that the image put to the reader is one of youth, natural beauty, flexibility, and inner serenity.

With regard to clothing, the trends on the cover are also confirmed in the text: 68% wear yoga apparel, 18% wear comfortable oriental-style dress, and 14% wear comfortable but not distinctive outfits. Although the yoga-technical pose and the more natural pose are equivalent in presence, and do not show significant polarizations, the reference to the gym environment found in 65% of images seems to reinforce the athletic and functional body typical of the wellness world. Regarding body and facial expressions, the same trends on the cover are also confirmed within the magazine: 100% of facial expressions evoke peace and relaxation, while, 78% of body positions show an attitude open, facing outwards, and 22% evoke intimate emotions. It, therefore, seems that the psychological attitude most supported by editorial choices is the extroverted one.

A further noteworthy aspect is the use of only or several subjects. In these pictures, 84% were of a single subject, and 16% of a group – 50% predominantly female, 25% predominantly male, and 25% having both men and women. This data has led us to hypothesize that the focus of attention is centered on a single individual, as is also found in the language used. In this regard, 187 titles and 187 subtitles were analyzed for the linguistic category – a total of 374 phrases. 59% of these are characterized by language that refers to physical space, with 41% relating to the intimate-spiritual sphere.

Regarding the contents of the articles, 40.47% deal with psycho-physical wellbeing, 38.1% describe the techniques of yoga, and 21.43% are concerned with motivational phrases (mantra). From the totality of the phrases examined, it appears that the individual envied is always (directly or indirectly) the specific target of communication about the psycho-physical state, and practices that he or she should perform to improve his/her state of well-being (functionally and attitudinally). Therefore, the socio-relational component acts as a background for a communication strongly centered on the individual, distinct from his or her context.

Conclusion

The focus on the individual according to mainstream media sources, therefore, highlights a yoga perspective in opposition to the traditional vision. If we analyze the Yoga Sutras, one of the main texts of Yoga philosophy written by the mystic Patanjali in 2500 BC, the foundation for self-realization is the social discipline (Yama) and not the physical exercises much followed by Western society. A social discipline that involves the cultivation of non-violence, sincerity, appreciation of what one has, moderation, generosity, the ability to forgive, to be steadfast in mind, compassionate, sincere, honest, and to maintain a moderate diet, since even a healthy diet affects the state of health necessary to generate harmonious relationships (Rossetti, 2011). The very object of traditional yoga seems to differ considerably from the combination of beauty and well-being, with which this discipline is currently practiced .

As Eliade (2007) states:

“(...) Temporality (human, ed.) ... makes a man a ‘conditioned being’, an indefinite and evanescent series of conditions”. But precisely the problem of man’s ‘conditioning’ (and its corollary, rather neglected in the West: ‘deconditioning’) constitutes the central problem of Indian thought. Europe would therefore have an interest in learning: 1) what India thought of the multiple conditioning of the human being 2) how it faced the problem of the temporality and historicity of man 3) what solution it found to the anguish and to the despair that naturally arises from the awareness of temporality, the matrix of all “conditioning (...)” (Eliade, 2007: 12).

According to the Indian tradition, Yoga becomes a state of inner freedom that is produced following a profound discipline of human deconditioning, constituted, according to the Yoga Sutra (Longhi, 2001), by outward social practice and an inward self-discipline. Yoga is thus a human condition, not a discipline consisting of a series of physical and mental exercises. The focus, therefore, is not aimed at the body and its beauty or its functionality, but on the ability of the human being to reach a state of inner freedom that does not relate to the achievement of an objective individual and/or social condition, but to a state of mind and a way of thinking about existence. While referring to further studies of other texts (Gnoli, 1993; Mai and Trippodo, 2003; Longhi, 2001; Eliade, 2007a and 2007b; Rossetti, 2011; Iyengar, 2013) it is clear that the huge pedagogical potential of traditional Yoga seems to have been hidden by a syncretism that has assimilated this philosophy to Western culture. This means transforming the body has changed from a “tool” through which to achieve the self-realization of the individual, to a “purpose” to achieve beauty, well-being, and functionality – from a means to

an end. The body, therefore, becomes the main place towards which both aestheticization (Caccamo, 2008) and medicalization processes (Maturò, 2013) operate.

A clear example is the Anti-Aging Medicine market. As Maturò (2013: 71) suggests:

«Just type anti-aging into Google to find that under this label there are very different therapeutic practices and approaches: from those based on stem cells, nanobiology, genetic therapies, and growth hormones; from food diets and yoga, up to the proposals by transhumanists for artificial organs and cloning (...) Anti-aging therapists are oriented towards an optimal idea of health. Therefore, they do not accept expressions such as: 'feel good for your age'. The idea is that any person should live and feel as if she were 25-30 years old ...

In support of this statement, in our case, the 25-30 age range is the age represented by the large majority of the models in the magazines analyzed. It is a way to inform female readers about the physical prowess and prosperity of youth.

In light of what has been observed, we can therefore conclude that doing yoga, or some other practice that seems specific to women highlights the need to shift the focus of women's sport involvement off outward beauty and sexual attractiveness.

The yoga discipline that emerges from the categories analyzed, in a pedagogical key, builds a communicative formula that seems to be clearly feminine: a woman focused on taking care of her body that becomes the foundation and experience of her own gender identity. In this way, we can consider the yoga practice, a body-reflexive one, because – as Connell argues (2005) – formed through a circuit of bodily experiences which link to bodily interaction and bodily experience via socially constructed bodily understandings that lead to new bodily interactions. As result, yoga as a body-reflexive practice is able to address the “flexible” body through a “social process and drown into history” (ibidem), representing a starting point through which the social definition of gender can be read.

In these terms, reflective practices, in general, and yoga in particular, can be considered “narrative places” in order to experience self-reflection, introspection, and self-care. In the same way, they can turn out to be “virtual places” capable of offering refreshment in daily life and in the sphere of duty and necessity.

Compared to the pedagogical potential of traditional yoga, this discipline today is expressed as a reflective practice, according to the media. The bodies and practices of yoga construct a narrative whose images are linked to a natural aesthetic, to a fluid and dynamic body, eternally young and healthy, thus expanding the territory of consumption and aesthetic capitalism to which this discipline refers.

The alternative values regarding yoga practice that the media puts out become only linguistic-discursive constructs in these dynamics, not rooted in an authentic experience of media deconditioning and reunion with a bodily experience that with its bio-rhythms and its natural transformative stages, could become the territory for a gender education based on the empathic experience of oneself, that is, an authentic reflective practice.

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F. Rossetti wrote: Research method, Discussion, Conclusion

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