

Aleksandra Budzisz¹

Kamil Łuczaj²

Speaking Yoga, Framing the Body: Sociolinguistic Constructions and Symbolic Boundaries^{*}

This paper examines how young adults understand yoga and their own bodies, focusing on how practicing yoga can serve as a resource for constructing symbolic boundaries. While yoga is a form of physical activity, it also carries an inherent spiritual dimension. Drawing on Bourdieusian theories of sport, we argue that the practice and perception of yoga in relation to the body can shape one's position within the social space. By exploring diverse interpretations of yoga – such as “physical activity”, “physical relaxation”, “a path to self-knowledge” or “mental cleansing” – and varying conceptions of the body – such as “an instrument”, “a temple”, or “an expression of identity” – among both practitioners and non-practitioners, this study reveals yoga's potential to foster symbolic boundary-making. Crucially, this process appears to be shaped not only by participation in yoga but also by the class-based dispositions and cultural competencies that inform individuals interpret and engage with the practice. As the findings suggest, the distinction between instrumental and symbolic understandings of the body may reflect broader patterns of social differentiation rather than being solely attributable to the effects of yoga practice itself.

Keywords: yoga, body image, class distinctions, symbolic boundaries

Rozumienie ciała z perspektywy jogi:
socjolingwistyczne konstrukcje i granice symboliczne

Autorzy analizują, w jaki sposób młodzi dorośli rozumieją jogę i własne ciała, koncentrując się na tym, jak praktyka jogi, może stanowić zasób służący konstruowaniu granic symbolicznych. Choć joga jest formą aktywności fizycznej, ma także nieodłączny wymiar duchowy. Odwołując

^{*} Artykuł został opublikowany w 2025 r.

¹ Jagiellonian University, Academy of Physical Education named after Jerzy Kukuczka in Katowice, aleksandra.budzisz@uj.edu.pl.

² University of Lodz, kamil.luczaj@uni.lodz.pl.

się do teorii sportu Bourdieu, argumentujemy, że praktyka i percepcja jogi w relacji do ciała mogą kształtować pozycję jednostki w przestrzeni społecznej. Poprzez analizę zróżnicowanych interpretacji jogi – takich jak: „aktywność fizyczna”, „fizyczny relaks”, „droga do samopoznania” czy „oczyszczenie umysłu” – oraz różniących się ujęć ciała – takich jak: „narzędzie”, „świątynia”, „wyraz tożsamości” – wśród osób praktykujących i niepraktykujących ujawnia się potencjał jogi jako sprzyjającej wytwarzaniu granic symbolicznych. Proces ten wydaje się kształtowany nie tylko przez uczestnictwo w jodze, lecz także przez różnice klasowe i kompetencje kulturowe, które wpływają na to, w jaki sposób uczestnicy interpretują tę praktykę i angażują się w nią. Wnioski z rozważań sugerują, że rozróżnienie między instrumentalnym a symbolicznym rozumieniem ciała może odzwierciedlać ogólniejsze wzorce zróżnicowania społecznego, a nie być wyłącznie efektem samej praktyki jogi.

Słowa kluczowe: joga, obraz ciała, dystynkcje klasowe, granice symboliczne

Introduction

This study explores the social dynamics of yoga practice, emphasizing its role in constructing symbolic boundaries and reinforcing social hierarchies. While yoga is often positioned as a non-competitive, introspective activity, its integration into the capitalist market and its alignment with post-sport ideals reveal its dual symbolic significance. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus, we analyze how yoga practitioners and non-practitioners conceptualize yoga and corporeality. Practitioners frequently frame yoga as a means of “physical relaxation” and “self-knowledge”, distinguishing their engagement from utilitarian physical exercise. In contrast, non-practitioners tend to perceive yoga as a form of fitness “physical activity”. These contrasting perceptions reflect conflicting dispositions within the dominant social class, reinforcing its cultural capital through practices of self-care and holistic well-being. Although the study focuses on students – a relatively homogeneous social group – their orientation toward yoga illustrates how symbolic distinctions can emerge even within privileged circles. Unlike competitive sports, which prioritize external validation, yoga functions as a marker of aesthetic and intellectual refinement, further accentuated by its financial accessibility barriers. This study demonstrates how yoga, despite its emphasis on personal growth, operates as a site of social distinction, where conceptualizations of the body – whether as an “instrument” or a “temple” – serve as indicators of class-based habitus. These findings contribute to the broader discourse on embodied cultural practices and their intersection with economic and social stratification.

Yoga, rooted in Indian spiritual and philosophical traditions, has been recontextualized and widely adopted in modern Western societies as a secular practice centered on physical and mental well-being (Jain 2012). Stripped of its religious

and spiritual dimensions, it is often marketed as a lifestyle activity, with a focus on physical postures (asanas) and stress-reducing techniques such as mindfulness and controlled breathing. This adaptation has enabled yoga to permeate diverse settings, including fitness centers, schools, and workplaces, where it is presented as a universal remedy for contemporary challenges like stress, anxiety, and sedentary lifestyles (Ross et al. 2013; Akdeniz, Kaştan 2023). Despite these transformations, yoga retains its foundational emphasis on balance and unity, albeit reinterpreted through the lens of health and wellness.

This paper aims to analyze yoga's potential to reinforce social stratifications, particularly through the construction of symbolic boundaries. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* – the deeply ingrained dispositions shaped by one's social and cultural environment – yoga participation can function as a marker of class distinction (Bourdieu 1984, 1999). In Western contexts, yoga is often associated with middle- and upper-middle-class *habitus*, where engagement in the practice signifies cultural capital. The commodification of yoga – evident in high-cost studio memberships, branded attire, and luxury retreats – further underscores its role in distinguishing individuals within a competitive social hierarchy (Smith, Atencio 2017; Akdeniz, Kaştan 2023). This exclusivity is reinforced by the imagery and narratives prevalent in popular media, which frequently depict yoga practitioners as affluent, healthy, and predominantly white, reinforcing class-based accessibility and ideals. Notably, exceptions to this representation often emerge in the portrayal of yoga gurus, who tend to be of ethnic origin.

Literature Review

In this paper, we analyze how the body and physical activity associated with yoga are constructed from a linguistic perspective within the broader context of individuals engaging in various forms of physical exercise. Additionally, we explore how these perceptions – central to the process of building symbolic boundaries, or “lines that include and define some people, groups, and things while excluding others” (Lamont et al. 2015: 850) – differ between yoga practitioners and non-practitioners. Within this framework, yoga can be seen as both a personal and social endeavor that reinforces contemporary norms of health and productivity. Participation in yoga aligns with societal expectations of self-discipline and bodily control, reflecting the ethos of neoliberal individualism where self-care becomes a marker of responsibility and status. As such, yoga is not merely a practice of physical and mental wellness but also a reflection of the multifaceted ways in which class, culture, and identity intersect in contemporary life.

In the classical Bourdieusian framework, the dominant classes act as tastemakers, shaping cultural patterns deemed worthy of cultivation (Bourdieu 1984). The emergence of a new cultural ideal is subject to symbolic struggles, with different social groups promoting their lifestyles as aspirational. Regardless of which faction of the dominant class prevails, the core stakes of this struggle revolve around social respectability (Skeggs 1997; Urbańska 2017; Olko 2021) and the pursuit of moral worth (Lamont 1992). In today's individualized world, physical effort is often perceived as essential for gaining control over one's body. Within visual culture, appearance has become one of the primary markers of a person's moral worth – a concept explored by sociologists such as Michèle Lamont (Lamont 1992; Lamont et al. 2015) and Andrew Sayer (2005).

A defining characteristic of the dominant classes is their ability to actively control their bodies, in contrast to the passive admiration of sports spectatorship (Bourdieu 1999). While members of the dominated classes often engage in sports that build physical strength, the dominant classes gravitate toward activities that refine the body and skills as ends in themselves (Bourdieu 1999). This distinction makes yoga particularly effective at reinforcing social hierarchies. Although it is highly symbolic, it also has material consequences and shapes social positioning. Yoga aims to affect both physical appearance and the mind. Nowadays, typical sites of bodily discipline include gyms and sports facilities, where physical effort translates into visible and health-related outcomes. In this context, exercise can be likened to a market transaction: the more the effort invested – both physical and mental – the greater the expected return. Those unwilling or unable to conform to this standard – such as individuals who are obese, unfit, or indifferent to physical activity – often become subjects of symbolic violence, reinforcing social hierarchies and exclusions.

Although it is not universal and influenced by social factors beyond class location, the ideal of a fit and disciplined body is a symbolic standard that is embraced by most middle class groups. The systematic review by Park et al. (2025)³ identified that demographic factors such as being female, middle-aged, and well-educated were strongly associated with yoga practice. Moreover, health-related motivations (e.g., managing chronic conditions) and psychosocial benefits, including enhanced emotional regulation and stress coping, were frequently reported by practitioners. The review highlighted how these individuals often engaged in yoga not only for physical health, but also for psychological well-being and personal growth (Park et al. 2025). These findings point to yoga's alignment with neoliberal governance ideals, where self-transformation and self-optimization become central (Schnäbele 2013). Yoga, in this context, functions as a mechanism for regulating

³ The paper was accepted for publication in 2025 and assigned to one of the journal's overdue issues. For this reason we referenced some sources published in 2024 and 2025.

health, appearance, and professional performance, emphasizing values such as hard work, self-reliance, and individualism (Schnäbele 2013). This dynamic reflects broader societal norms within post-industrial economies, where personal traits, physicality, and soft skills are increasingly commodified and tied to economic productivity (Schnäbele 2013). Viewed through the lens of post-sport, one of its most common framings, yoga moves beyond the competitive and hierarchical structures typical of modern sports. Post-sport practices, including yoga, prioritize inclusivity, personal transformation, and mental well-being, with fewer entry barriers beyond financial accessibility (Atkinson 2010). These practices intentionally shift the focus from physical performance to holistic engagement, emphasizing mindfulness, self-discovery, and community connection. Importantly, the non-competitive ethos of yoga reinforces its alignment with post-sport ideals, providing participants a space to redefine physical activity as a tool for both psychological growth and self-care, rather than an arena for external validation or rivalry. This perspective situates yoga as a counterbalance to the performative values of mainstream fitness, offering a more inclusive and introspective approach to wellness.

Research from various countries suggests a strong link between sports participation and social class. Similar patterns of engagement can be seen across Europe: in Finland, yoga has been associated with improved psychological well-being (Park et al. 2025). In Denmark, healthcare professionals use yoga to navigate tensions between naturalistic and instrumental body ideals (Larsen et al. 2022); and in Italy, yoga serves as a practice through which women negotiate social norms and reclaim embodied agency (Magiarotti 2022). In Greece, the yoga habitus is primarily cultivated among urban, educated, middle-class women, for whom it becomes a means of emotional regulation and distinction within a competitive neoliberal environment (Sakellariou 2023). Together, these examples reflect the global spread of yoga as a culturally adaptive and personally meaningful practice.

These differences are often attributed to the financial investment required for the former group of sports compared to the latter. In Poland, research has shown that “upper-class respondents were more likely to practice individual sports, also known as lifelong sports” (Organista, Lenartowicz 2019: 131). This finding supports Bourdieu’s (1984) theory that sporting preferences are primarily influenced by habitus, with financial resources playing only an indirect role.

The American example shows how yoga has evolved from a niche practice associated with devout New Age practitioners to become an integral part of the mainstream culture (Gregoire 2013). As Andrea R. Jain (2012) notes, this change reflects yoga’s increasing impact on contemporary conceptions of health, beauty, and well-being. Clara S. Lewis (2008) further highlights the rapid expansion of the yoga market, characterized by savvy online marketing and the proliferation of physical spaces and products, including specialized clothing and accessories. This

marketization has been accompanied by the rise of celebrity instructors, yoga competitions, branded class packages, travel experiences, diets, and other commercial offerings, reflecting a broader commodification of the practice (Jain 2012; Kern 2012). In 2012, it was estimated 20.4 million Americans practiced yoga, contributing \$10.3 billion annually to yoga-related classes and products, representing a 44.7% increase since 2008 (*Yoga Journal Releases* 2012). This process is amplified worldwide through Instagram and influencer marketing, where yoga is often presented through a highly curated aesthetic that merges wellness, consumerism, and personal branding. Recent analyses have shown that yoga influencers cultivate aspirational lifestyles that commodify not only the body but also forms of spirituality, rendering yoga both a symbolic and economic asset in the digital sphere (Simonds 2022).

In the Polish context yoga is a relatively new phenomenon, yet an interest in it grows fast. Representative national-wide surveys suggest that while in 2013 only 1% of the population was interested in yoga, this percentage, increasing to 2% in 2018, and reached 5.2% in 2021, which corresponds to approximately 1.89 million individuals, representing all age cohorts between 20 to 60 years (CBOS 2018). Moreover, data from 2018 (CBOS 2018) on yoga proficiency levels reveal a significant gender disparity: while 5.2% of the population reports having yoga skills, women dominate the practice, with 8.4% identifying as proficient compared to just 2.3% of men. This gap becomes even more pronounced at the advanced level, where 5.1% of women report high proficiency, compared to only 0.4% of men. These figures reinforce the notion that yoga remains a predominantly female-led activity in Poland.

In addition to its growing popularity, recent international studies suggest that regular yoga practitioners in Poland report higher levels of quality of life, particularly with regard to mental health, vitality, and emotional well-being (Piekorz et al. 2022; Pluto-Pradzynska et al. 2022). Studies have shown that yoga is associated with improved life satisfaction and reduced stress, particularly among women who tend to engage more deeply with its psychosocial and holistic dimensions. These findings help to contextualize the gendered patterns observed in Poland, where yoga's appeal appears strongly linked to its perceived ability to manage emotional and physical stress.

The perceived benefits of yoga practice are closely linked to socio-demographic status, which helps explain its rapid rise in popularity within large urban areas, where the concentration of practitioners is notably higher than in other regions of the country. The majority of yoga practitioners belong to the top earners nationally (GUS 2021).

In terms of the financial aspects of yoga, it is worth highlighting the various employer-sponsored motivational systems (such as Multisport and Medicovert), which offer access to organized classes – including aerobics, cycling, fitness, and stretching – as well as yoga within the structure of gyms. This broadens access for certain segments of the middle-class workers. These programs require an affordable monthly subscription, offering users a wide range of physical activities.

In some cases, these programs are linked to yoga schools, though additional fees may apply. More traditional yoga schools, such as those offering Ashtanga or Hatha yoga, often do not accept these sports membership cards. This means that participation in classical yoga schools requires a greater commitment to a specific form of practice, both in terms of time and financial investment. As access to these schools is independent of broader fitness programs, their fees are often higher compared to yoga classes offered in gym settings. This example highlights that treating various yoga schools as identical or similar overlooks important differences among the people who practice them, thereby strengthening the socio-economic context and grounding yoga in the class system.

The diversity of yoga forms is vast, encompassing traditional styles such as Ashtanga, Hatha, and Iyengar Yoga, as well as more modern adaptations like Vinyasa, Kundalini, and Yin Yoga. In addition, yoga has evolved to meet contemporary needs, offering variations that require less commitment than classical forms and focus on specific adjustments, such as adapting the practice for pregnancy, alleviating back pain or integrating strength and flexibility training. These include: Power Yoga, Hot Yoga, Functional Yoga, Spine Yoga, Fascial Yoga, Prenatal Yoga, Restorative Yoga, Aerial Yoga, Acro Yoga, and other lesser-known styles (*Types of Yoga* 2025). This extensive list underscores the diverse premises and modes of participation in yoga, ranging from serene, meditative practices like Yin Yoga to the dynamic, flowing sequences of Vinyasa. Likewise, the settings in which yoga is practiced vary significantly in their connotations, from commercial gyms and aging school gymnasiums to dedicated yoga studios designed specifically for the practice. Furthermore, participants attending different types of yoga sessions and venues often have distinct preferences and motivations. For instance, someone dedicated to traditional Ashtanga practice is unlikely to be drawn to a gym class titled Yoga for the Spine in a shopping mall. These distinctions extend beyond the style of practice and are also followed by the financial aspects of yoga.

Ashtanga yoga, with its structured, lineage-based system, tends to attract practitioners who engage with yoga as a disciplined and transformative life practice – where physical activity is just one component, and mental and spiritual engagement are equally emphasized. Its focus on daily repetition, ethical precepts, and a guru-student model reflects its roots in traditional South Asian pedagogies. The spatial organization of Ashtanga practice typically avoids gym or fitness center settings and instead takes place in spaces dedicated solely to yoga – often minimalist, ascetic rooms with little more than a mat and an open floor. Although these settings may appear to require fewer material resources, participation is paradoxically more expensive than commercial classes. This is due to the significant financial, temporal, and symbolic investments required, which function as informal

gatekeeping mechanisms for what is perceived as “authentic” or “serious” yoga. In this way, classical yoga schools – whether intentionally or not – foster social exclusivity and distinction.

Classical yoga schools (such as Ashtanga or Hatha) differ markedly from their commercial counterparts in terms of participant expectations. These schools typically require a higher level of commitment – financially, temporally, and emotionally. Students are expected to demonstrate discipline, attend regularly, and adapt to the guru-student dynamic. As a result, these settings may foster stronger social bonds among participants, who share similar long-term goals and a deep sense of engagement with the practice.

By contrast, the popularity of yoga in commercial venues such as fitness centers, shopping malls and branded wellness franchises reflects the neoliberal logic of flexibility, individual efficiency and consumer choice. These settings often offer a wide variety of instructors and class types, some of which differ significantly from traditional yoga. Rather than emphasizing discipline or philosophical depth, commercial classes tend to focus on practical outcomes such as stress relief, improved posture, and physical conditioning (e.g., stretching, strengthening, and relaxation). Participation is casual and temporary; individuals can “pop in” or “pop out” without making a long-term commitment or investment.

Interestingly, this distinction also reveals a linguistic paradox: the term “commercial yoga” commonly describes more accessible, lower-cost options, whereas “classical” or “traditional” yoga refers to practices that, despite their ascetic presentation, often require a greater financial investment. Thus, the labels of “commercial” versus “authentic or classic” carry implicit value judgments, inverting conventional assumptions about cost and exclusivity.

This division highlights a layered yoga landscape shaped by class, gender, and cultural capital. Traditional yoga studios operate as sites of distinction – places where embodied expertise and traditions elevated taste and commitment, whereas more commercial spaces promote inclusivity at the cost of depth and continuity. This landscape reflects broader neoliberal tendencies in the field of health and embodiment, where individuals are encouraged to take responsibility for optimizing their physical and emotional states. Therefore, decisions regarding yoga practice are not merely personal preferences but social acts embedded within the logics of identity formation, distinction, and governance.

Methodology

Building on existing literature, this paper examines the diverse definitions of yoga articulated by both yoga practitioners and non-practitioners, aiming to uncover the multifaceted ways in which this practice is understood across different contexts. Specifically,

we explore how yoga is defined as a lived experience, with a particular focus on its interplay with individuals' perceptions of their own bodies. Through this analysis, we highlight yoga's role in constructing and maintaining symbolic boundaries. By doing so, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of yoga not only as a physical or spiritual practice but also as a means of shaping social and cultural distinctions.

The study was conducted among young adults from the Silesian region of Poland and focused on exploring the experiences of participants engaged in different forms of physical activity. Participants were divided into two groups based on their voluntary selection of physical education (PE) classes at the University of Silesia in Katowice in 2018: a yoga group ($n = 36$) and a non-yoga group ($n = 43$). Notably, yoga classes were optional and required an additional fee – a factor of significance when considering issues of social class and accessibility in the broader yoga landscape.

At the beginning of the summer semester, students enrolled in their preferred PE classes, which determined their group allocation. All participants provided informed consent prior to data collection. Both groups were required to attend a minimum of twelve 90-minute sessions (one per week), corresponding to the duration of the academic semester. Surveys were administered following the completion of the PE classes to collect data on participants' experiences.

The sessions took place in a non-commercial setting – a gym room within a university building – without mirrors or other appearance-oriented distractions. Both yoga and non-yoga classes were led by highly qualified instructors with over ten years of professional experience (including one of the authors). The yoga sessions followed traditional Hatha yoga principles and emphasized a non-competitive, interoceptive, and supportive environment. Mats were provided free of charge, and the instructor wore simple, comfortable clothing to avoid drawing attention to physical appearance.

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling and had an average age of 21. The sample was predominantly female. In the yoga group, 33 out of 36 participants were women, while in the non-yoga group, 32 out of 43 were women. This gender disparity reflects broader trends in yoga participation, where women continue to represent the majority of practitioners (see: Literature Review). The study adopted a mixed-methods approach, utilizing a questionnaire that incorporated open-ended questions to collect textual responses. While both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered, this paper primarily focuses on the qualitative findings (see Konecki et al. 2024). Data collection was conducted during the semester of the physical education classes. In the non-yoga group, data were collected during the first week of classes, while in the yoga group, data were collected after completing 14 yoga sessions. Participants in the yoga group were beginners, with no prior experience in yoga. The survey included introspective questions such as, "What does yoga mean to you?" and "What does your body mean to you?"

Participants were encouraged to respond freely, with no restrictions on the length of their answers or the time taken to complete them. This open-ended approach facilitated the collection of rich, nuanced insights into participants' perspectives and experiences, providing a deeper understanding of their evolving relationship with yoga and their bodies.

For this reason, we focused on open-ended questions, which were coded using the Atlas.ti 8 software suite. A thematic analysis (Naeem et al. 2023) of the responses identified the following categories, with each survey response coded under all relevant categories by two independent coders (both authors of this paper). In cases of disagreement, the coders reached a consensus on the interpretation of responses with multiple possible meanings. In the following sections, we present typologies of various understandings of yoga practice and self-perceptions of the body. While percentages are used to highlight key patterns in the data, the emphasis remains on the social construction of these categories rather than statistical relationships.

This paper addresses key research questions aimed at diagnosing the symbolic value of yoga practice: How do participants perceive their bodies? What is the relationship between imaginaries of yoga and one's own body – whether instrumental or autotelic? How do these perceptions shape definitions of yoga and verbal descriptions of the body? In the Discussion, we explore how yoga aligns with the dispositions of dominant classes, as described by Bourdieu.

Results

Yoga Definitions

While analyzing the meaning of yoga for our interviewees, we grouped various response into four main and distinct categories. The study demonstrated that Yoga was narrated as a “physical activity”, “physical relaxation”, way of obtaining “self-knowledge” or “mental cleansing”. While offering a qualitative interpretation – which is the core of this paper – we also present some indicative metrics to illustrate the scale of the phenomenon. However, these should be treated with caution, as our primary aim is to answer the question of **how**, rather than **how many**.

One of the most common responses when defining yoga was to describe it in terms of **physical activity**. The answers were placed into this category if they referred to the physical component of the activity, including stretching, strength building, improvement of fitness, sports training, or an activity that could improve posture. This category concerned the functional understanding of yoga as a form of activity with a clearly defined goal. It aligned with the traditional perception of

yoga as a sport rather than a post-sport practice, which may indicate a lack of the dominant class's "feel for the game".

Yoga, in my understanding, is a method based on stretching the body according to one's abilities; it provides the opportunity for gradually developing endurance. (Y36)⁴

Thanks to it, I work on my posture; it complements my other training routines. (Y43)

Yoga is a form of sport that helps improve one's posture, flexibility, and body suppleness. (N03)

Yoga is one of the forms of sport, but rather calming than exhausting. For those who practice it, yoga is also a form of "relaxing" stretching. (N31)

A second group of responses highlighted the physical aspect of yoga, without putting any emphasis on its "sporting" nature. These included statements referring to yoga as a form of **physical relaxation**: bodily relaxation, unwinding, and physical restfulness. It emphasized the physical component associated with relaxation:

Yoga is a method of relaxation, consisting of gentle and calm exercises. (Y25)

For me, yoga is a way to relax – a set of exercises that allow for unwinding. (Y30)

For me, yoga is a way to relax – a method for releasing tension. (Y50)

A third category, named "**self-knowledge**" was related to deepening self-awareness by practicing yoga. Responses in this category defined yoga by its role in fostering a deeper understanding of the body, including its needs – such as movement and relaxation – as well as physiological processes like heart rate and breathing rhythm. Participants also described recognizing bodily sensations, including fatigue, stress, or muscle activity. This category encapsulates self-knowledge from a physical-biological perspective, but specifically through mindful awareness of bodily sensations, reflecting a deeper connection between body and mind.

Yoga is about understanding one's own body. (Y17)

Yoga is about focusing on oneself. (Y22)

Yoga is a time when I can think only about myself and my body. (Y24)

Thanks to yoga, I can discover my own capabilities. (Y31)

Another group of responses that defined yoga through its impact on the mental component emphasized yoga's role in quieting the mind, relieving stress, and

⁴ Letter N indicates a response from a non-yoga group participant, Y indicates a response from a yoga group participant. The accompanying number denotes the participant ID. These codes are used throughout the manuscript.

forgetting the worries of everyday life. This category was named “**mental cleansing**”. Examples of responses grouped within this category include:

Yoga is an activity that allows one to free oneself from overwhelming thoughts. (Y7)

Yoga is a way to calm down and relax. (Y10)

Yoga is a time for relaxation for me. It helps me unwind and rest. It provides me with calmness. (Y41)

Yoga helps achieve inner peace and relaxation. (Y23)

Along with “self-knowledge”, the “mental cleansing” responses suggest a more holistic understanding of yoga. In these cases, yoga was no longer seen purely as a sport but rather as a mental or spiritual practice, making it more suitable for constructing symbolic boundaries.

Body Definitions

To gain a deeper understanding of the yoga practice experience, we also explored the participants’ perceptions of the body, as reflected in their responses. Through qualitative analysis, we identified six distinct body categories: “Expression of identity”, “Instrument”, “Sculpture”, “Temple”, “Unwanted”, “Other”.

The first category “**Expression of identity**” derived from the responses describing the body as a means through which one can express oneself and showcase identity. In these responses, the body was defined as both a determinant of identity and a representation of something deeply personal and intrinsic.

It is my outer shell, responsible for how others perceive me at first glance. Through my body, I can express myself. (Y6)

My body is an externalization of my person. It represents me, and its condition reflects my health and well-being. (Y39)

My body is only mine. (Y24)

My body is something intimate. It is connected to attractiveness or lack thereof, the body meaning external appearance. (N07)

In the “**Sculpture**” category, participants also defined the body through the lens of the possibilities it offers, but in this case the body was understood as a form of a physical resource that could be shaped and developed. The responses reflected the idea of a capacity that could be realized through appropriate effort and care, emphasizing the importance of nurturing the body.

A sculpture I am working on, something I strive to take care of. (Y3)

My body is something that requires constant work and care. (Y43)

My body is a form that can be shaped. (Y41)

The body is like clay that can be modelled. (N17)

“**Temple**” is a category emphasizing a positive and respectful approach to the body. It included responses describing the body as a safe home or sacred sanctuary. These responses viewed the body as a physical object in space (a home, place, or refuge), intrinsically connected to the mind or soul.

The body is a partner to the mind, walking through life together. One greatly influences the other. Neither can be excluded. Any attempts to separate them end in disaster. (Y7)

The body is my refuge and provides me with safety. (Y20)

My body is a home for my soul. (N09)

My body is my shelter, a shell that protects me. (N16)

Responses that reflected an instrumental view of the body were grouped into the category “**Instrument**”. This way of defining the body emphasized its biological functions, highlighting its role in enabling movement and performing essential biological tasks. It reveals a lack of the dominant-class tendency to view yoga as a spiritual practice, yet it can still be associated with the dominant class’s inclination to control the body and maintain health.

A tool for everyday use. (Y13)

My body is a tool for completing tasks. (Y35)

My body is what I need to walk, play, eat. (N02)

A collection of tissues and cells that work together. (N24)

Responses that linked the definition of corporeality to something unwanted or limiting were relatively rare. We grouped them into the final category “**Unwanted**”⁵, which reflects a perception of the body as a source of difficulty or limitation – something that must be changed, controlled, or reluctantly accepted. This category captures a complex relationship with the body, where appearance-based expectations and societal ideals hinder satisfaction and contribute to a view of the body as an undesirable yet inescapable reality. In some of these responses, there was a clear desire to transform the body as much as possible, suggesting that dissatisfaction

⁵ Responses that did not fit into any of the established categories were grouped under the category “Other”. These responses were very general, lacking a specific context or theme that could be further elaborated upon.

may be a consequence from external pressures rather than internal experience. However, within some narratives – particularly those from yoga participants – yoga practice appeared to offer a counterbalance. This individual described a shift toward greater self-acceptance and a more compassionate, less judgmental relationship with their bodies, suggesting that yoga may serve as a space for reconciling inner conflict and fostering bodily acceptance. Responses in this category include the following examples:

Something I don't like but try to change. (Y2)

My body is sometimes a problem for me, but after classes, I like it. (Y52)

It is a limitation. (N13)

Quantitative Results

Among participants in the non-yoga group, yoga was primarily perceived as a form of “physical exercise” (86%, $n = 37$), while in yoga group it was less than a half (47%, $n = 17$). Notably, the second most common linguistic category was “mental cleansing” (56%, $n = 24$) in non-yoga group, a response less frequently observed among yoga practitioners (33%, $n = 12$). This suggests that for those without direct experience of yoga, its symbolic meaning may seem somewhat intimidating, as it embodies qualities that diverge from their usual expectations.

In contrast, individuals who practiced yoga more often associated it with “physical relaxation” (75%, $n = 27$) compared to 51% ($n = 22$) in the non-yoga group. Moreover, yoga practitioners were more likely to describe yoga as a means of attaining “self-knowledge” (19%, $n = 7$), whereas only 9% ($n = 4$) of non-yoga participants held this view. This interpretation of yoga emphasizes its mindfulness aspect, which may evolve beyond the physical, encompassing cognitive, emotional dimensions that underscore mindfulness and personal insight.

Similar patterns emerged in the way that participants from both groups conceptualized the body. The idea of the body as an expression of identity was reported with a similar frequency in both groups, though slightly more frequently in the non-yoga group (40%, $n = 16$) than in the yoga group (33%, $n = 12$). The metaphor of the body as a sculpture, evoking the potential for shaping and transformation, also appeared with nearly equal frequency in both groups (non-yoga: 26%, $n = 11$; yoga: 25%, $n = 9$). A less common but significant category – indicating a degree of body dissatisfaction – described the body as something unwanted. This view was rare in both groups, emerging in 6% ($n = 2$) of yoga practitioners and 2% ($n = 1$) of non-practitioners.

In the yoga group, like we expected, the body was most often defined as a temple (39%, $n = 14$), while this perception was less common in the non-yoga group (23%, $n = 10$). This supports the interpretation that engaging in yoga may lead individuals to embrace less utilitarian orientation. Conversely, the body was more frequently perceived **instrumentally** as a tool in the non-yoga group (28%, $n = 12$) compared to the yoga group (17%, $n = 6$). These percentages are not the primary finding of our exploratory study. However, they do suggest hypotheses that can be tested on larger data sample.

Discussion

Socioeconomic Context and Institutional Embedding of Yoga

Yoga, introduced into the Western context several decades ago, has undergone a transformation from an exoticized practice to a process-oriented, post-sport activity emphasizing mindfulness, well-being, and internal transformation. However, its institutionalization within capitalist structures has produced commodified forms – ranging from branded classes and lifestyle products to curated social media content. These dynamics are observable in the Polish context, where the increasing visibility of yoga in both urban and digital spheres is accompanied by structural barriers to access. In the present study, participation in yoga required an additional financial contribution, even within a university setting. This requirement likely influenced group composition and reinforces the association of yoga with forms of economic and cultural capital. The economic aspect of access positions yoga as a socially coded activity, aligned more closely with the preferences and capacities of middle and upper socioeconomic groups.

Divergent Conceptualizations of Yoga and the Body

This study revealed distinct conceptualizations of yoga and the body across groups. Yoga practitioners most frequently defined yoga in terms of **physical relaxation** and **self-knowledge**. These responses align with the view of yoga as a process-oriented practice emphasizing introspection and holistic well-being. In parallel, they conceptualized the body as a **temple**, reflecting a symbolic reframing that attributes intrinsic value to bodily experience. In contrast, non-practitioners primarily described yoga as a form of **physical exercise**, and the body was more often understood in **instrumental terms**. These findings suggest that regular

engagement with yoga practice may be associated with a shift from functional to reflective and symbolic interpretations of both activity and corporeality.

Symbolic Distinctions and the Role of Cultural Capital

The observed differences in how yoga is conceptualized by practitioners and non-practitioners are consistent with Bourdieu's theory of habitus and cultural capital. According to this framework, preferences and embodied practices are shaped by internalized dispositions that reflect an individual's class position. In its contemporary, Westernized form, yoga may function as a form of embodied cultural capital, aligning with the dispositions of the middle and upper classes. Its emphasis on non-utilitarian aims – such as mindfulness, introspection, and self-care – resonates with values cultivated in socioeconomically privileged environments (Smith, Atencio 2017; Akdeniz, Kaştan 2023).

In the present study, yoga practitioners frequently identified **physical relaxation** as a central feature of their engagement. Although not immediately functional in a utilitarian sense, this framing reflects an orientation toward subjective well-being as an autonomous value. Relaxation, in this context, is not merely the absence of exertion but a resource-intensive practice of intentional restoration. It presupposes access to time, space, and material stability and reflects what Bourdieu terms a reflexive habitus – a classed disposition that enables participation in aestheticized and introspective forms of self-regulation (Atkinson 2010; Ross et al. 2013).

Similarly, the emphasis on **self-knowledge** among practitioners suggests a long-term, process-oriented engagement with yoga, one that exceeds incidental or short-term participation. As Smith and Atencio (2017) note, such higher-order goals emerge only through sustained involvement and are often recognized and valorized primarily by those with the cultural competence to interpret them as meaningful. The symbolic attributes cultivated through this engagement – mindfulness, discipline, and emotional regulation – align with dominant class values and operate as mechanisms of distinction within broader social hierarchies.

These symbolic and bodily investments are increasingly mediated by visual and commercial cultures. Simonds (2022) demonstrates how yoga is marketed through platforms like Instagram using aestheticized representations of discipline, serenity, and authenticity. This mode of presentation reinforces class-coded ideals of self-optimization and wellness, aligning closely with the lifestyle aspirations of the new petite bourgeoisie. Within such visual economies, yoga functions not only as a personal practice but also as a cultural commodity, producing and reproducing markers of distinction through bodily appearance, spatial aesthetics, and curated emotional states. These dynamics further reinforce the notion that access

to yoga – as both a practice and a cultural field – is shaped by broader processes of class stratification and symbolic boundary-making.

Embodiment and Symbolic Reframing in Yoga Practitioners

Among yoga practitioners, the body was more frequently described as a *temple* – a metaphor that conveys a sense of respect, introspection, and alignment with values associated with self-actualization. This conceptualization suggests a shift from a functional or instrumental view of the body toward one that emphasizes care, meaning, and internal coherence. Such a reframing appears to be shaped not only by individual engagement with yoga but also by broader social discourses that promote mindfulness and holistic well-being. As noted by Akdeniz and Kaştan (2023), this symbolic understanding of the body reflects the integration of spiritual, emotional, and physical dimensions within the practice of yoga. It also aligns with the autotelic values identified by Sabrina Smith and Matthew Atencio (2017), where activities are valued for their inherent meaning rather than for external or outcome-based goals. The present findings are consistent with previous research indicating that long-term yoga practice fosters a heightened sense of embodiment and a more integrated relationship between the physical and mental self, challenging utilitarian or mechanistic conceptions of the body (Addington et al. 2023; Akdeniz, Kaştan 2023).

Conceptual Framework in the Non-Practitioner Group

In the non-yoga group, yoga was predominantly described as a **physical activity**, with a secondary emphasis on its function as a form of **mental cleansing**. This latter framing may reflect generalized, culturally mediated representations of yoga – possibly shaped by popular media – that highlight its therapeutic or detoxifying effects while omitting its philosophical or introspective dimensions. The conceptualizations of the body within this group were similarly pragmatic, with frequent references to **instrumental** and expressive functions, such as the body as a **tool**. The relative absence of symbolic or spiritual framings, such as the body as a **temple**, may suggest a limited engagement with or exposure to yoga's reflective dimensions, which, as prior research indicates, tend to emerge only through sustained and process-oriented practice (Smith, Atencio 2017).

These findings may be interpreted in light of Bourdieu's theory of habitus, wherein practices and perceptions are shaped by one's class-based dispositions. Unlike traditional sport, which often prioritizes competition and performance, yoga is structured around introspection, mindfulness, and personal development

(Atkinson 2010; Ross et al. 2013). Such qualities have been associated with middle- and upper-class orientations, which emphasize aesthetic appreciation and self-care over utilitarian outcomes (Smith, Atencio 2017; Akdeniz, Kaştan 2023). The limited presence of these elements in the responses of non-practitioners may reflect both structural and symbolic distance from the dispositions typically associated with regular yoga engagement. Moreover, the additional financial costs tied to participation may serve as a mechanism of social distinction, further limiting access to those with sufficient economic capital (Smith, Atencio 2017).

Wellness, Accessibility, and Structural Constraints

Despite its documented biopsychosocial benefits – including improved stress regulation, emotional well-being, and physical health (Cartwright et al. 2020; Park et al. 2025) – yoga remains unevenly accessible. The additional costs associated with participation, the need for specific instructional environments, and the limited compatibility with institutional support programs (e.g., Benefit cards) pose structural constraints, particularly for individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. These barriers reflect broader patterns of inequality in access to wellness practices, which tend to be commodified and aligned with the preferences of socially dominant groups (Akdeniz, Kaştan 2023; Smith, Atencio 2017). Thus, while yoga offers potential for personal transformation, its uptake and meaning remain shaped by broader social structures that delimit who practices it, how it is practiced, and what it comes to signify.

Limitations

Despite the informative value of the symbolic understanding of yoga, this study has several limitations. First, the sample is relatively homogeneous, consisting of young adults in the early years of their studies, most of whom come from relatively privileged social backgrounds – especially when compared to those who did not pursue tertiary education. Their perceptions are likely to differ from those of older Poles and individuals outside the student population. Second, given the specific nature of this group – comprising individuals who either chose to participate in or opt out of yoga classes – the sample size could have been larger. Additionally, this group may have a different understanding of yoga compared to individuals who have practiced for years in traditional yoga schools, such as Ashtanga or Hatha yoga.

Another limitation is the lack of control over the socio-economic status of the participants, which could have provided a more nuanced characterization of the sample.

Controlling for socio-economic factors would have allowed for a deeper analysis of how external conditions influence the perception and experience of yoga. This can be achieved through statistical analysis or, conversely, by employing individual in-depth interviews, which would offer more context and interpretative insights.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that engagement in yoga practice significantly influences both the conceptualization of yoga itself and the perception of the body. Among practitioners, yoga is predominantly associated with **physical relaxation** and **self-knowledge**, while the body is more frequently understood through a holistic lens, and framed as a **temple**. This suggests an orientation toward introspection, embodiment, and spiritual integration. In contrast, non-practitioners tend to define yoga primarily in terms of **physical exercise** and view the body through a functional or appearance-based framework – highlighting **instrumental** or **expressive** purposes rather than symbolic or reflective meanings.

One of the study's key findings is the divergence in body-related metaphors across groups. While non-practitioners frequently interpret the body as an instrument, practitioners are more likely to describe the body as a temple, indicating a shift toward a more integrated and reverential understanding of corporeality. This contrast highlights the potential of sustained yoga practice to influence bodily awareness and self-perception. However, it remains unclear whether this transformation results from engagement with yoga itself or whether individuals who already hold such holistic views of the body are more likely to be drawn to the practice.

Moreover, the findings illustrate the dual role of yoga as both a vehicle for personal transformation and a socially coded practice. The contrasting definitions of yoga and body image between practitioners and non-practitioners reflect the embodied dimensions of social stratification and cultural orientation. Framed within Bourdieu's theory of habitus and cultural capital, yoga emerges as a practice that both reflects and reproduces class-based dispositions. Its association with non-utilitarian goals – such as self-knowledge, physical relaxation, mindfulness, self-care, and emotional regulation – aligns with the values and resources characteristic of the middle and upper classes.

Future research should further investigate the structural conditions that shape access to yoga, with particular attention to economic and cultural barriers. Enhancing the accessibility of yoga across diverse socioeconomic contexts may be essential for realizing its potential not only as a practice of holistic well-being but also as a means of fostering greater social inclusion – consistent with its foundational principles.

References

- Addington E.L., Schlundt D., Bonnet K., Birdee G., Avis N.E., Wagner L.I., Rothman R.L., Ridner S., Tooze J.A., Wheeler A., Schnur J.B., Sohl S.J., 2023, *Qualitative Similarities and Distinctions Between Participants' Experiences with a Yoga Intervention and an Attention Control*, "Supportive Care in Cancer", vol. 31, no. 3, DOI: 10.1007/s00520-023-07639-0.
- Akdeniz Ş., Kaştan Ö., 2023, *Perceived Benefit of Yoga Among Adults Who Have Practiced Yoga for a Long Time: A Qualitative Study*, "BioPsychoSocial Medicine", vol. 17, no. 19, DOI: 10.1186/s13030-023-00276-3.
- Atkinson M., 2010, *Entering Scapeland: Yoga, Fell and Post-Sport Physical Cultures*, "Sport in Society", vol. 13, no. 7–8, DOI: 10.1080/17430431003780260.
- Bourdieu P., 1999, *How Can One Be a Sports Fan?* [in:] S. During (ed.), *The Cultural Studies Reader*, London: Routledge.
- Bourdieu P., 1984, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, London: Routledge.
- Cartwright T., Mason H., Porter A., Pilkington K., 2020, *Yoga Practice in the UK: A Cross-Sectional Survey of Motivation, Health Benefits and Behaviours*, "BMJ Open", vol. 10, no. 1, DOI: 10.1136/bmjopen-2019-031848.
- CBOS, 2018, *Komunikat z badań nr 125/2018. Aktywność fizyczna Polaków*, https://cbos.pl/PL/publikacje/raporty_tekst.php?id=5821 (accessed: 4.02.2025).
- Gregoire C., 2013, *How Yoga Became a \$27 Billion Industry – And Reinvented American Spirituality*, HuffPost, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/how-the-yoga-industry-los_n_4441767 (accessed: 5.02.2025).
- GUS, 2021, *Uczestnictwo w sporcie i rekreacji ruchowej w 2021 r.*, Warszawa: Główny Urząd Statystyczny, <https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/kultura-turystyka-sport/sport/uczestnictwo-w-sporcie-i-rekreacji-ruchowej-w-2021-r-,5,2.html> (accessed: 4.02.2025).
- Jain A.R., 2012, *The Dual-Ideal of the Ascetic and Healthy Body. The Jain Terāpanth and Modern Yoga in the Context of Late Capitalism*, "Nova Religio", vol. 15, no. 3, DOI: 10.1525/nr.2012.15.3.29.
- Kern L., 2012, *Connecting Embodiment, Emotion and Gentrification: An Exploration Through the Practice of Yoga in Toronto*, "Emotion, Space and Society", vol. 5, no. 1, DOI: 10.1016/j.emospa.2011.01.003.
- Konecki K., Płaczek A., Tarasiuk D., 2024, *Experiencing the Body in Yoga Practice: Meanings and Knowledge Transfer*, New York: Routledge.
- Lamont M., 1992, *Money, Morals, and Manners. The Culture of the French and the American Upper-Middle Class*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lamont M., Pendergrass S., Pachucki M., 2015, *Symbolic Boundaries* [in:] J. Wright (ed.), *International Encyclopedia of Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Oxford: Elsevier.
- Larsen K., Hindhede A.L., Larsen M.H., Nicolaisen M.H., Henriksen F.M., 2022, *Bodies Need Yoga? No Plastic Surgery! Naturalistic versus Instrumental Bodies among Professions in the Danish Healthcare Field*, "Social Theory & Health", vol. 20, DOI: 10.1057/s41285-020-00151-z.
- Lewis C.S., 2008, *Life Chances and Wellness: Meaning and Motivation in the 'Yoga Market'*, "Sport in Society", vol. 11, no. 5, DOI: 10.1080/17430430802196538.
- Magiarotti E., 2022, *The Politics of Tending to the Body: Women Doing Yoga in Genoa (Italy)*, "European Journal of Women's Studies", vol. 30, no. 1.

- Naeem M., Ozuem W., Howell K., Ranfagni S., 2023, *A Step-by-Step Process of Thematic Analysis to Develop a Conceptual Model in Qualitative Research*, "International Journal of Qualitative Methods", vol. 22, DOI: 10.1177/16094069231205789.
- Olko D., 2021, "Tylko nie dres, bo się źle kojarzy". Rola wizerunków ciała w kształtowaniu podmiotowości w klasie ludowej, "Widok. Teorie i Praktyki Kultury Wizualnej", no. 30, DOI: 10.36854/widok/2021.30.2388.
- Organista N., Lenartowicz M., 2019, *Klasa społeczna a poziom i zróżnicowanie rodzinnej aktywności sportowo-rekreacyjnej. Wyniki badań jakościowych*, „Przegląd Socjologii Jakościowej”, vol. 15, no. 3.
- Park C.L., Braun T., Siegel T., 2025, *Who Practices Yoga? A Systematic Review of Demographic, Health-Related, and Psychosocial Factors Associated with Yoga Practice*, "Journal of Behavioral Medicine", vol. 38, no. 3, DOI: 10.1007/s10865-015-9618-5.
- Piekorz Z., Radziwińska A., Lewandowski A., Ossowski R., 2022, *Quality of Life in Yoga Practitioners – Research Conducted on a Population of Polish Yogis*, "International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health", vol. 19, no. 19, DOI: 10.3390/ijerph191912023.
- Pluto-Pradzyńska A., Pluto-Pradzyńska K., Frydrychowicz M., Lagiedo-Zelazowska M., Owoc J., Benjamin S., Yuen Au T., Jaracz K., Dworacki G., Wysocki J., Wasik J., 2022, *Are Yoga and Physical Activity Determinants of Quality of Life in Polish Adults? A Cross-Sectional Study*, "BMJ Open", vol. 12, no. 9, DOI: 10.1136/bmjopen-2021-059658.
- Ross A., Friedmann E., Bevans M., Thomas S., 2013, *National Survey of Yoga Practitioners: Mental and Physical Health Benefits*, "Complementary Therapies in Medicine", vol. 21, no. 4, DOI: 10.1016/j.ctim.2013.04.001.
- Sakellariou A., 202, *The Yoga Habitus in Contemporary Greek Society*, "Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion", vol. 14.
- Sayer A., 2005, *Class, Moral Worth and Recognition*, "Sociology", vol. 39, no. 5, DOI: 10.1177/00380385050508376.
- Schnäbele V., 2013, *The Useful Body: The Yogic Answer to Appearance Management in the Post-Fordist Workplace* [in:] B. Hauser (ed.), *Yoga Traveling: Bodily Practice in Transcultural Perspective*, Heidelberg: Springer International Publishing, DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-00315-3_6.
- Simonds C.H., 2022, *Exotic Universalism & The New Petite Bourgeoisie: An Analysis of Yoga Marketing on Instagram*, "Bodhi: An Interdisciplinary Journal", vol. 8, no. 1, DOI: 10.3126/bodhi.v8i1.46453.
- Skeggs B., 1997, *Formation of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable*, London: Sage.
- Smith S., Atencio, M., 2017, "Yoga is Yoga. Yoga is Everywhere. You Either Practice or You Don't": A Qualitative Examination of Yoga Social Dynamics, "Sport in Society", vol. 20, no. 9, DOI: 10.1080/17430437.2016.1269082.
- Types of Yoga: A Guide to the Different Style*, 2025, Yoga Medicine, <https://yogamedicine.com/guide-types-yoga-styles/> (accessed: 4.02.2025).
- Urbańska S., 2017, *Normy szacowności i płęć jako oś przekształceń klasowych w procesach migracji* [in:] M. Gdula, M. Sutowski (eds.), *Klasy w Polsce. Teorie, dyskusje, badania, konteksty*, Warszawa: Instytut Studiów Zaawansowanych.
- Yoga Journal Releases 2012 Yoga in America Market Study*, 2012, Yoga Journal, <https://www.yogajournal.com/press-releases/yoga-journal-releases-2012-yoga-in-america-market-study/> (accessed: 4.02.2025).