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NOT NOW, MAYBE NEVER: FERTILITY HESITATION, SPIRITUAL REFRAMING AND SELF-CARE CULTURES IN URBAN ROMANIA

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Abstract. *This study explores fertility hesitation as a cultural syndrome shaped by emerging self-care ideologies and spiritual practices among urban Romanian women. In a context of declining birth rates and shifting life transitions, it examines how yoga functions as more than a physical discipline - offering a framework for navigating existential uncertainty, emotional resilience, and evolving concepts of fulfillment. Drawing on seven semi-structured interviews with female yoga practitioners aged 25–40, the research highlights a move away from traditional reproductive expectations toward individualized well-being narratives. Participants often described motherhood as a source of potential disruption to personal autonomy and emotional balance. Yoga served not only as a coping mechanism, but also as a lens through which participants redefined what it means to live a meaningful life.*

Rather than treating fertility decline purely as an economic or demographic issue, the study frames it as part of a broader cultural reorientation. Spiritual self-care becomes a symbolic system that prioritizes introspection, autonomy, and holistic well-being - frequently at odds with institutional pronatalist messages. These findings contribute to understanding how demographic behaviors are embedded in deeper shifts in identity, belief, and quality of life in post-communist societies.

Keywords: *fertility hesitation, self-care ideologies, spiritual practices, yoga, emotional well-being, autonomy*

Introduction. This paper investigates fertility hesitation among urban Romanian women as a culturally embedded phenomenon shaped by self-care ideologies and spiritual practices, especially yoga. Moving beyond demographic explanations centered on economic insecurity or policy gaps, we explore how delayed or uncertain reproductive choices reflect transformations in values, identity, and emotional priorities. Fertility hesitation is not only postponement or rejection of motherhood, but an existential negotiation shaped by autonomy, introspection, and well-being.

Through interviews with women aged 25-40, we trace how spiritual self-care counters motherhood as duty, opening space for alternative meanings of maturity and connection. This study thus illuminates the symbolic reorganization of womanhood and life planning in contemporary Romania.

Literature Review. Fertility hesitation appears as existential ambivalence shaped by self-care and individualized fulfillment (Giddens, 1991; Illouz, 2007). Practices like yoga provide emotional regulation, identity work, and spiritual autonomy. Romania's history, from authoritarian pronatalism to post-1989 liberalization, situates hesitation between inherited maternal norms and contemporary narratives of self-development (Kligman, 1998). A qualitative, interpretive design (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) enables attention to these subjective experiences.

Late modernity emphasizes reflexivity in constructing life trajectories (Bauman, 2000). Fertility hesitation thus becomes a form of ethical self-fashioning, balancing motherhood against psychological coherence and existential alignment.

Research Methodology. The current paper is based on a qualitative research design aimed at understanding how women construct meaning around fertility decisions within broader cultural and spiritual frameworks. The study draws on semi-structured interviews with seven Romanian women, ages 25-40, all with higher education, regular yoga practice, and no children. The guide covered values, motherhood, yoga, and emotional well-being. Participants were purposively selected and coded (e.g., I_5_35).

Main Results. Fertility hesitation emerged as a value-laden process negotiated between inner conviction and external pressure.

Autonomy was central. Some rejected motherhood from an early age: "Even as a child, I knew I didn't want to be a mother" (I_1_40). Others reclaimed autonomy later, resisting societal timelines.

Emotional risk was another theme. Participants feared parenthood might destabilize psychological balance or reproduce trauma: "What if I hurt the child? What if I pass on unresolved trauma?" (I_2_33). Hesitation functioned as boundary-setting rather than indecision.

Yoga provided existential clarity, described as "an anchor" (I_6_37) and "a way of coming back to myself" (I_3_34). It legitimized hesitation as "an act of clarity and responsibility" (I_7_35).

Participants also distanced themselves from pronatalist discourses through avoidance or boundary-setting: "I've built a bubble where societal noise doesn't reach me" (I_2_33). Rather than paralysis, hesitation appeared as a culturally legible stance aligned with sovereignty and coherence.

Beyond reproduction, women redefined fulfillment and maturity as emotional sovereignty, meaningful work, creativity, and communities of shared values, challenging the equation of femininity with motherhood. Taken together, these narratives highlight fertility hesitation as both an individual coping strategy and a collective cultural redefinition of womanhood.

Discussion and conclusions. Findings confirm that fertility hesitation among urban Romanian women is a culturally embedded stance, not reducible to demographics. Yoga exemplifies how self-care functions as a symbolic system for interrogating normative life paths. Hesitation is framed not as selfishness but as ethically grounded and culturally coherent.

Temporality was marked by deliberate openness: some left space for motherhood “if it happens naturally,” rejecting imposed timelines. This fluid orientation challenges assumptions of urgency and positions hesitation as an active mode of inhabiting uncertainty.

Overall, fertility hesitation reflects identity and well-being transformations in post-communist societies. Yoga provides vocabulary for articulating maturity and connection beyond motherhood. Fertility choices thus appear as acts of cultural negotiation, rethinking reproduction as a site of ethical and symbolic reorientation. This research contributes to the broader understanding of how identity, belief, and well-being are reconfigured in post-communist societies. The concept of fertility hesitation as a cultural syndrome enables us to see beyond the binary of motherhood vs. childlessness, and instead attend to the ambivalence, timing, and meaning-making that animate contemporary reproductive subjectivities. Practices like yoga provide not only existential clarity, but also a counter-institutional vocabulary for articulating maturity, connection, and purpose. In this light, fertility choices are not simply demographic behaviors but acts of cultural negotiation. By highlighting the intersection of embodiment, spirituality, and autonomy, this study offers a framework for rethinking fertility not as a biological imperative, but as a site of ethical and symbolic reorientation.

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