

Research on the yoga market shows how meanings, practice changed as it was adapted by the US

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Credit: Anna Langova/public domain

Researchers in Chapman University's Argyros School of Business and Economics and their collaborators have just published a study on the

evolution of yoga in the marketplace. Assistant Professor Gokcen Coskuner-Balli, Ph.D., co-authored the study, which examined how the meaning of yoga transformed in the past three decades. The results show that yoga became decreasingly associated with spirituality and increasingly associated with medicine and fitness. The study argues that the shift in the meanings are due to the changes in how yoga gurus are trained, market contests amongst different meanings and the distinct branding practices of small and big players in the market.

The study is timely as today, 20.4 million Americans practice yoga, up from 4.3 million in 2001. They spend \$10.3 billion a year on yoga classes and products, including equipment, vacations and media; constituting an increase of 80 percent in just four years. The U.S. yoga market density has been increasing with yoga enterprises rising from 14,058 to 26,506 and the number of employers increasing from 58,525 to 112,890 during the 2004—2013 period.

"What we discovered was the U.S. yoga market delineated itself not only in the different types of yoga that emerged, but also in the logic behind why people do yoga," said Dr. Coskuner-Balli. "As multiple meanings and rule systems—or as what we refer to as 'logics'—co-exist in the marketplace, how to manage the demands from multiple constituents is a challenging task. Numerous logics exist in many fields including healthcare, finance, and education, to name a few. In our paper, we develop a managerial framework for managing conflicting demands that might exist amongst logics and conveying brand legitimacy," she continued.

Brief History of Yoga in the U.S.

The market drivers behind yoga are spirituality, medical, and fitness. Sources trace the beginning of yoga in the United States to Swami Vivekananda's speech representing Hinduism at the first World

Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. During the first half of the 20th century, yoga was construed mainly as a spiritual practice linked to mysticism, magic, and asceticism with religiophilosophical underpinnings and an emphasis on Raja yoga (the mental science) rather than Hatha yoga (physical yoga).

In the 1960s, a greater understanding of its [health benefits](#) and the diffusion of its physical component to the U.S. mainstream led to the demystification of yoga. In the 1970s, a more scientific understanding of yoga emerged, and it became a viable player in the field of mind-body medicine, particularly as a treatment method for youth gripped by the drug culture.

The spirituality approach to yoga is structured around the goal of enlightenment, with gurus (charismatic leaders that devotees look up to in their practice) as leaders. Early gurus were mainly of Indian descent, and were later followed by their U.S. disciples. The spirituality logic is translated into practice through chanting, meditation and reading of religious texts which is all aimed at enhancing self-awareness.

The medical approach is organized around the health benefits of yoga. The instructors are perceived as healers who help patients recover from injuries, manage pain and prevent chronic health problems. This is rooted in scientific study.

The fitness approach emphasizes physical benefits as the goal of yoga. Students perform yoga to condition their bodies and occasionally to improve their performance in other sports. This is rooted in kinesiology.

"Over the three decade analysis of the yoga market we found that it was decreasingly associated with the logic of spirituality and increasing associated with the medical and fitness logics," said Dr. Coskuner-Balli. "Commercialization also emerged and yoga became increasing

commoditized with the rising coverage of yoga brands, gear, clothing, and retreats."

The medical approach was amplified as medical studies started examining and publishing the health benefits of yoga. The medical approach also got institutionalized with the founding of the U.S. government's lead agency for scientific research on Complementary and Alternative Medicine in 1998. Health practitioners, insurance companies and employers began to recognize yoga as a treatment form, which extended its health benefits to a broader range of consumers. Corporations such as Nike, Apple and HBO began offering on-site [yoga classes](#) as a regular employee benefit.

The fitness approach also gained more attention as American entrepreneurs appropriated the physical elements of yoga. Most notably, in 1989, a yoga teacher named Berly Bender Birch coined the term "Power Yoga" to refer to her Ashtanga style of yoga. Her book, Power Yoga, became the best-selling book in 1999. Her intention for the book was to communicate the physicality of her yoga and make it more appealing to Americans by demarcating it from the more spiritual based practices of the 1970s.

The YogaFit brand was created in 1994 to address the challenges of teaching yoga in health clubs. By dispensing with the Sanskrit names of postures and eliminating the om-ing and chanting, YogaFit made yoga user-friendly for those interested in a secular practice. By 2002, yoga had become the third most popular class at fitness centers, following personal and group strength training.

In the 2000s, generalist brands with the mission of increasing market share via making yoga accessible to mainstream audiences emerged in the marketplace further amplifying the fitness approach in this market. CorePower Yoga, for example, began in 2002 with a goal of becoming

the first true national yoga chain. Currently, it is the market's largest studio chain with 86 studios in 12 states, and is expected to double the number of its studios in the next five years.

Research Methodology

The researchers gathered data via archival sources, netnography, in-depth interviews and participant observations. For archival research the researchers examined newspaper articles about yoga with the word "yoga" in the headline or lead paragraph from The New York Times and The Washington Post published between 1980 and 2012. They also examined books published that contained the word "yoga," including classical books on yoga and books on the history of yoga. They interviewed founders of yoga brands; as well as participated in various types of [yoga](#) classes between 2009 and 2012.

The study which was co-authored with Dr. Burcak Ertimur was published in the *Journal of Marketing*, in March 2015.

Provided by Chapman University

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