

## Disparities in the Use of Yoga: An Opportunity for Yoga Tourism Industry to Make a Triple Impact

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### Abstract

Tourism is increasing globally and is predicted to grow. There is also a noticeable change in the motivation for tourism from hedonic to eudemonic self-realization oriented spiritual pursuits. As a part of this process, 'yoga tourism' is gaining popularity. However, this development is encumbered with disparities. Yoga tourism purportedly offers to assuage the adverse effects of stress and chronic diseases partially induced by modernity. These predicaments affect everybody uniformly, rather in some ways, worse for men and the low socioeconomic groups. Yet, only 15.8% of the yoga practitioners are males and tourism is mostly out of the reach of the low socioeconomic groups. The situation provides yoga tourism industry an opportunity. How to get started with yoga is a barrier for males and financial constraint is a major barrier for the low socioeconomic groups to undertake tourism or yoga. It is known that many female yoga tourists have a happy family/personal life. Yoga tourism industry can offer attractive financial and hedonic incentives (pull) to motivate them to bring along their male counterparts. On the other hand, social tourism (financially subsidized tourism for the disadvantaged) exists but does not enjoy much support due to lack of advocacy. Yoga tourism industry can spearhead an incentive driven advocacy movement to lobby charity organizations and government welfare agencies to support social (yoga) tourism. (1) This will open up the hitherto untapped huge male and the low socioeconomic groups market and (2) The event participation might help males and the low socioeconomic groups to overcome their respective barriers and introduce them to yoga practice. Apart from market growth and growth of yoga use, in a long run these developments have the potential to translate into substantial public health benefits in terms of reduction in stress, disease burden, health costs and loss of productivity.

**Keywords:** Yoga tourism; Social tourism; yoga; Public health; Health disparities; Eudemonic; Spirituality; Low socioeconomic groups

### Introduction

Health benefits of tourism, such as relief from stress or anxiety [1], better quality of sleep [2], improvement in relationships [3], and satisfaction with life [4] are well documented. In the post-modern era of global capitalism [5], it is therefore natural that tourism should be growing sizably [6]. Similarly, it is also established that yoga offers benefits in health promotion [7] and disease mitigation [8]. Amidst the global tide of chronic diseases [9], it is therefore not surprising that yoga use is also increasing in current times [10]. Furthermore and as a result, the synergy of yoga and tourism in the form of 'yoga tourism' is garnering increasing interest among its various stakeholders like industry [11], end users [12], and scholars [13].

However, these positive trends are encumbered with a few disheartening paradoxes. The younger generation is more health conscious, but it is also the one that is more stressed out [14]; the females practice yoga more, but they have been experiencing higher stress compared to males and get more adversely affected by it [15]; yoga use is on a rise, but so is the overall stress in life [16]; interest in tourism is increasing, but violence like terrorism is dampening the tourists' enthusiasm [17].

While the causal connections among the above contradictory phenomena that generally feed into each other are complex [5]; one observation that jumps out is that whether it is yoga or tourism, both depict a picture of disparity [18,19]. It is apparent that the number of females practicing yoga is disproportionately larger than males [18], and prima facie yoga appears to be an activity of the elites [20], serving primarily the upper socioeconomic strata in the society; practiced by the well educated, apparently young and healthy, who have a decent upper middle class or higher income [18,21,22]. On the other hand, it is seen that the low socioeconomic populations engage in tourism much less than those from the upper classes [23].

While it is unfortunate that such disparities should exist, therein also lies a triple opportunity for yoga tourism industry, to target and market into hitherto untapped subpopulations of males and low socioeconomic groups, to (1) increase overall yoga use among communities to make it uniform in terms of gender and socioeconomic strata (2) increase growth of (yoga) tourism industry and, (3) indirectly assist public health efforts to reduce costs and burden of chronic diseases and to increase productivity.

### Disparity in the Practice of Yoga between Females and Males

The general reference to an increase in the practice of yoga can be easily misconstrued as being universal and applicable to all the segments of the population uniformly. A 2013 national survey of yoga practitioners showed that only 15.8% of the yoga users were males [24]. Yoga is advocated for its utility in health and disease for everybody. Nonetheless, there is evidence that compared to females; males show higher incidences of obesity [25], coronary heart disease [26], and low back pain [27]. Since yoga is known to show efficacy in helping these conditions [28,29], the small percentage of males using yoga constitutes a huge missed opportunity from a public health standpoint. Furthermore, this underuse can easily translate into higher health care costs and decreased productivity [30].

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## Disparity in the practice of tourism or yoga between high and low socioeconomic classes

It is known that the chance of engaging in touristic activities diminishes with lower socioeconomic status [31,32]. Literature also suggests that people from low socioeconomic strata, particularly based on education, participate less in yoga [18,21]. The lack of access to tourism and yoga in the low socioeconomic populations makes them miss the health benefits of both, again leading to loss of health and productivity [33].

### Opportunity for yoga tourism industry

**Males are interested in tourism as much as females, and might use yoga if they have help with one key barrier:** Though females tend to seek more escape and relaxation oriented tourism than males [34], as far as wish to collect the experiences offered by the commercial tourism industry, there appears to be homogeneity between the genders [35,36]. There is indication that lately males are showing an increasing interest in health tourism [37]. On the other hand, though no rigorous analysis has been done about why males practice yoga less, one study notes that among the barriers, not knowing 'how to get started' applies more to males than females [38]. It appears that males have no less inclination for tourism or health tourism than females, and if somehow males can be brought to yoga tourist events, those events can serve as a point of entry for males to get introduced to the practice of yoga.

**Female Yoga Tourists are Well Positioned to Serve as Facilitators to Induce Males to Undertake Yoga Tourism:** A 2006 paper dedicated to the topic of yoga tourism showed that a typical yoga tourism consumer is a highly educated, high income, middle aged, well traveled, healthy, exercising, professional, social, and intellectual woman who is already committed to yoga practice for a long time [13]. Data also showed that 47.8% of these females traveled with friends but not family, and 27.5% of them traveled solo. This was despite the fact that 34.9% of these females reported that they were happy with their family life. Similarly 22.6% enjoyed an excellent rapport with their colleagues and 33.3% had a happy relationship with their friends. Two later analyses, one in 2011 and other in 2012, portrayed a similar picture of a wellness tourist and [yoga] a retreat consumer [39,40]. The above profiles of female yoga tourists suggest that these females can be great influences or motivators for the males in their circle of influence. The 2012 paper also pointed out that 20% of the retreat visitors had never undertaken any yoga practice before and had no experience or prior exposure to retreat type of activities, and 58% consumers were also retreat naïve. The author commented that targeting the yoga or yoga tourism naïve females could provide a large potentially untapped market for the industry, an argument that can be generalized for male tourists as well.

**There is a Change in the Attitude of Health Tourism Operators:** A 2015 paper pointed to a newly emerging trend among the perception of the health tourism operators. It said that the operators believe that the focus of advertisement should shift from single females to couples and families, suggesting that the operators are sensing a change in the profile of the new tourists and are ready and willing to change their approach [41]. This changed mindset can be harnessed to promote yoga tourism in a different and more productive way.

**Social Tourism is Underutilized and there is a Gap in Its Advocacy:** Social tourism broadly is a type of tourism where those in risk of poverty can get a chance to have a vacation at prices accessible to them, usually through financial help from charities or government wel-

fare systems [42]. Studies have demonstrated that tourism has a positive impact on economically or otherwise disadvantaged groups such as low-income families, and people with health issues and disabilities [43]. There is evidence that non-participation in tourism can have adverse implications for wellbeing in later life [3]. Additionally, there are several studies that have found beneficial effects of social tourism in different groups of disadvantaged populations [19,44,45]. Furthermore and despite current economic austerity, there is an interest among charities and governments regarding economic benefits of social tourism [46,47]. However, as Jablonska, Jaremko, and Timčák expound, because of numerous complex factors, there is not sufficient advocacy for social tourism [42]. For example, because tourism is considered as discretionary activity, social tourism is hardly known in the US and only little found in the UK; and with scarce public funding [48]. Riding on the crest of popularity of yoga in the general public and taking help from yoga champions and advocates among the well-to-do people, yoga tourism industry can fill in the gap.

### A roadmap for Yoga Tourism Industry to Capitalize on the above Opportunity

**Create a Strong Pull:** Push and pull mechanisms are known in the motivation for touristic activities, where push are the internal motivators and the pulls are usually the external incentives that lead to touristic activities [49,50]. Current yoga tourists are driven by a strong push of the desire to explore one's spirituality and to seek transcendental meaning and peace in life [5]. However, if on the top of it, and as a way of a robust pull, yoga tourism industry offers lucrative financial and other semi-hedonistic incentives to these committed core consumer females clients, provided they brought along their male relations, be they spouses, boyfriends, partners, colleagues or friends, the incentives would be strong enough to motivate them to convince their male counterparts to join them. The males might also see value, if they see financial benefits and the hedonic gains. Once males come in, it is very likely that they can be persuaded to try out yoga and will be able to get over their barrier of 'how to get started'. Rather than trying to get over this barrier in their home environment, a health promoting tourist environment will serve as a better catalyst for such transformation for males. Following this exposure and introduction, one can hope that these males will continue their practice of yoga when they return home. For yoga tourism industry this will be a win-win situation. It will have expanded into hitherto untapped huge male market and it will have helped solve one big public health challenge.

**Capitalize on the Paradigm of Social Tourism:** Every tourism industry spends a good amount of their investment on advertisements. Yoga tourism industry can invest a part of their budgets to create an advocacy movement for yoga tourism among major charities that are dedicated to the wellbeing of the low socioeconomic groups, and with the welfare programs under local governments, urging those agencies to sponsor yoga tourism for the disadvantaged populations. In this endeavor, yoga tourism industry should collaborate with various yoga advocacy organizations. To get a buy-in from these charities and governments, yoga tourism industry should offer special and generous discounted yoga tourism packages for those low socioeconomic class clients who are funded by the collaborating charities and welfare programs. This will expand the client base of yoga tourism industry and at the same time help the low socioeconomic populations in improving their wellbeing.

### Discussion

Yoga has a great potential to address many major challenges faced

by the modern society. Yoga tourism is a natural extension of yoga practice. However, modern societies are riddled with disparities of different kinds, health disparities being one type of them. A recent article has discussed at length about integrative medicine and health disparities [21]. Though yoga use is rising, everybody does not currently use yoga. It is highly underused by males and by the people from low socioeconomic classes. One also notices that there are specific barriers that make these subpopulations unable to practice yoga. As the overall trend in tourists motivation shifts from hedonic pursuits to health [5,39,51] and while barriers prohibit some subpopulations from availing the health promoting modalities like yoga, yoga tourism industry has an opportunity to fill the gap to provide the unmet need. In order to do so, the industry will have to revise its targeting and marketing strategies to reach out to males and the disadvantaged, and to the charities and the government agencies that can potentially support social tourism. In this way, the yoga tourism industry will not only grow in itself, but also make a positive contribute to the larger cause of the global public health.

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