NORTH AMERICAN YOGA CULTURE:
AN INTERDISCIPLINARY VEHICLE FOR FEMALE EMPOWERMENT

By

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ABSTRACT

Despite North American consumer culture’s efforts to dominate yoga culture (as it exists in North America) and utilize it as an avenue to control and manipulation the consumer (in particular the female body), the interdisciplinary nature of yoga and its tools for personal growth and self-empowerment provide women in particular with an opportunity to own their bodies and nurture a deep connection with their body, mind and spirit. North American yoga culture is composed of components of acceptance (of self, of body and of life), connectedness (to self, to others, to time and space), and spiritual awareness (as opposed to religion but a recognition of a higher level of being, thinking and energetic essence as well as aspects of mindfulness). Using an interdisciplinary approach, including perspectives from history, psychology, cultural studies as well as embodied learning and feminist perspectives, the reader is provided with an understanding of yoga as a vehicle for empowerment and an opportunity to examine the linkages between body, mind and spirit. Using the themes from a recent grounded research study (conducted by the author) this paper examines the interdisciplinary influences upon yoga culture in a North America context. The effects of consumer culture on women’s perceptions of themselves, yoga and yoga culture that exists in North America is critically examined and provides the grounds for further discussion.
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When investigating yoga culture in North America an interdisciplinary approach provides a well-formed representation of the connections between mind, body and spirit within a modern context. History, psychology, and cultural studies, as well as embodied learning and feminism have influenced and molded the yoga culture that exists in North America today. The results of a recent unpublished grounded research study that focused on women, yoga and identity presents an argument that there are components of yoga culture in a North American context that are of particular interest to women (Nielsen, 2013). These components are acceptance (of self, of body and of life), connectedness (to self, to others, to time and space), and spiritual awareness (a recognition of a higher level of being, thinking and energetic essence as well as aspects of mindfulness); these components provide grounds for an argument that a unique sub-culture (that of a North American yoga culture) exists within the dominant North American consumer culture and that this yoga culture is particularly appealing to women. This paper will address the question: what are the unique aspects of North American yoga culture that offer an opportunity for women to own their bodies and their identity in their daily lived experience? Through an interdisciplinary approach an analysis of the yoga culture that exists in North America will be presented and the opportunities for female discovery and empowerment described.

The study and practice of yoga is by nature interdisciplinary. While North American yoga has mainly focused upon the physical asana of yoga, it is actually an integrated system of history, philosophy, psychology, and cultural studies. The practice is rooted in a system that is very much connected to a specific culture and identity (Indian Hindu and Sikh society in particular), and it can be argued that the stories from which the North American form of yoga has evolved actually
supported the caste system from which it grew and that “...while the central teachings of classical yoga sage Patanjali may have beneficial side-effects in our daily lives, they are designed for a higher purpose: to limit the accrual of karma that results in having to return after death in a new body so as to work out the unresolved consequences of our past actions” (Walker, 2012, 7-8). By examining the influences and effects of each discipline upon yoga as it exists in a North American context one can see why women in North America have embraced it and its potential for self-empowerment.

History

The history of yoga originates almost 5000 years ago in India. The history of yoga development can be divided into four broad periods or eras, the Vedic, the Pre-Classical, the Classical and Postclassical eras (Feuerstein, 2006). Within these eras the cultivation of the ancient philosophical texts, the practices and rituals, the lifestyles and cultural contexts of ancient yoga developed and grew according to the needs of the Eastern societies to which they belonged. These societies were, for the most part, devoted to a patriarchal system within which women had little power or involvement.

Traditionally, in Indian culture, yoga was not available to women; gurus (teachers) would only accept male students and it was a devotion only taught to young boys (Desai, 2004). This changed with T.K.V. Krishnamacharya who, over time, began to see the potential women had within the discipline. According to Krishnamacharya’s son, Desikachar, his father “was able to smell what was happening...my father’s views about women changed...he said that ‘I think that if we do not encourage women the great Indian tradition [of yoga] will die...women are the future, youth are
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the future, invest in women and youth.” (Desai, 2004). Indra Devi was the first foreigner and the first woman to be taught by Krishnamacharya; she brought the first yoga studio to North America (California) and continued to spread yoga’s teachings throughout southern North America and into South America. She “dissolved all cultural boundaries” and as Krishnamacharya’s first female student, she certainly exemplified the future that he had predicted (Desai, 2004).

The morphing of yoga within a North American context into the modern yoga that exists today began only in the late 19th century. While the historical, cultural and philosophical roots of yoga are well situated in the East, practitioners in North America and in particular women in North America, has adapted it to fit North American cultural needs. North American consumer culture has also had an effect on how yoga is presented and interpreted in this modern context, specifically when examining media and advertising and the portrayal of women within this medium.

Psychology

In Joy Lynn Kelley’s “Body Esteem and Psychological Well-Being in Female Yoga Practitioners,” the connections between female yoga practitioners and their body self-esteem is investigated and an assertion is presented that yoga is a tool that women can use to “positively influence body esteem” (Kelley, 2009). She also asserts that yoga “may cultivate a relationship with the body” and provide an opportunity to build a positive relationship with one’s self (Kelley, 2009). This psychological influence on women’s body image and self-worth is infused throughout consumer and body culture and is instrumental in the marketing and media industries. The linking of psychological well-being, social and cultural components are supported in Joy Lyn Kelley’s
investigation via body esteem (Kelley, 2009). A theoretical framework for yoga’s beneficial effects for women is presented as a way to “yoke” (join) multiple disciplines, and as an opportunity to increase self-esteem lessening the emphasis on women’s bodies, appearance and sexual attractiveness. This is particularly of importance in North American consumer culture where females are (and continue to be) measured according to these physical traits and controlled through their bodies and measures of attractiveness (Bordo, 2003).

**Consumer Culture**

The images that represent yoga that are perpetuated in popular consumer culture in North America are a part of a long standing gym culture as well as a patriarchal tradition within which women are measured according to a sexual ideal. In North America this ideal would be “thin, voluptuous and hot” (Markula, 2001). The business of yoga in North America, motivated by consumer culture, has altered yoga in order to be marketable and further perpetuate the consumer culture “ideal” that subordinates women through body control. This emphasis on the body is of detriment to women who could be enticed to attend, “…there’s this trend to be decked out in Lululemon, and make comparisons to others in class…it’s a question of what sells vs. what’s reality and what’s integrity”(Walton, 2012, post). When considering body esteem, consumer culture and feminist theory, it can be affirmed that women are searching for an opportunity to gain control over their bodies and the constant pressures placed upon them to meet the consumerist female ideal (Bordo, 2003). While yoga in North America can be observed as conforming to this consumer culture, within the actual physical, spiritual and mental practice of yoga there is a counter movement against the consumerism. So while the marketers work to perpetuate the subservience
of women, emphasizing their worth in body alone, women are embracing the practice and realizing that they are not defined by their bodies (Klein, 2012). Yoga as a practice actually becomes an opportunity for empowerment by enabling women to take control of their bodies.

Within the context of North American consumer culture of the 21st century yoga, a traditionally male practice from the East, is being embraced and altered by females in North America. It has been adopted by and reorganized with a new cultural context. “Intertwining the lived experience with academic theory and history is a form of scholarship that stretches the discursive limits of qualitative research and provides an alternate paradigm of inquiry” (Tate and Douglas, 2010, 9). As Melanie Klein expresses yoga offers an opportunity to appreciate one’s body, that practice offers an opportunity to shed the dominant cultural expectations of body and self:

Practicing yoga didn’t require punishment or a push to achieve a result outside the present moment. The physical postures operated as suggestions, not destinations. Yet, I came to understand that the sacred space of a yoga practice and the rapidly expanding yoga industry weren’t necessarily related. As yoga grew in popularity and was absorbed into mainstream culture, it began to reflect many of its toxic values and norms. I found the heart of yoga to be in serious contradiction to the messages perpetuated as the branding and commercialization of yoga exploded (Klein, 2012, 28).

“That femininity, as Dorothy Dinnerstein has argued, is perceived as both frighteningly powerful and, as the child comes increasingly to recognize the hierarchical nature of the sexual division of labor, utterly powerless” (Bordo, 2003, 208). The maternal power that women possess and perhaps can feel confident in as a result of higher self-esteem from practices such as yoga has
been countered by the dominant culture; this is evident in the media’s attempts to objectify the 
women used in ads and as a way to sell product. “By these standards, yoga as practiced and 
conceived of by the contemporary mainstream is actually an impediment to liberation. Today’s 
contemporary sell-out glorification of the body seems to prove this. In fact, many practitioners of 
popular yoga may have little, if any idea of Dukkha and the stereological purpose of yoga practice 
to free us from it – and equal ignorance of the Dukkha their “feel-good” celebration actually 
perpetuates and encapsulates” (Boccio, 2012, 50-51).

**Embodied Learning**

Feminist perspective insists that “…it is hard for women to feel good about themselves and 
have a good relationship with their bodies (body esteem) when they are steeped in a culture which 
has evolved into men having possession of resources and power” (Kelley, 2009, 31). Yoga 
encourages embodiment of experience and the linkages of body, mind and spirit. This 
embodiment of awareness is termed mindfulness; by being present in the moment and aware of 
the mental, physical and spiritual components of their practice, female practitioners can regain 
control over their bodies and in turn utilize yoga practice as a tool in creating a yoga culture that 
serves them rather than the media’s ideal that continues to perpetuate the dominate North 
American cultural ideal that places bodily power in the hands of males (Bordo, 2003).

North American consumer culture has attempted to codify yoga in order to conform to the 
“gender-coded signification, suffusing other meanings, overdetermines slenderness as a 
contemporary ideal of specifically female attractiveness...” and has emphasized the “dominant
Western religious and philosophical traditions, the capacity for self-management is decisively coded as male” (Bordo, 2003, 205). The sexual objectification of women is ingrained in North American consumer culture and North the media has quickly taken the spiritual practice of yoga within which women can find freedom from sexual objectification and altered it to fit these North American cultural norms. “Yoga gives women a means of self-awareness that competes with the self on the mat excluding the comparison of self with others. This leads to the idea of self-observer as opposed to another observer being needed for women to experience self-awareness” (Kelley, 2009, 30). The significant aspect in this discussion is that women in particular have started to see through this consumerist influence and have found it (yoga) a powerful tool for embodiment and empowerment.

**Feminism**

The body culture that exists in North American society has largely “othered” women by objectifying and removing them from positions of power and influence and forcing them to look for avenues of power only according to the worth of men. One only has to pick up any magazine or watch any television commercial to witness the objectification of women continuing today in our “liberated” society:

“...I turn to the social body of consumer culture in order to demonstrate how the “correct” management of desire in that culture, requiring as it does a contradictory double-bind construction of personality, inevitably produces and unstable bulimic personality-type as its norm, along with the contrasting extremes of obesity and self-starvation. These symbolize, I will argue, the contradictions of the social body-contradictions that make self-management a continual and virtually impossible task in our culture...” and
this has in turn resulted in the “...over-determined slenderness as the current ideal for women” (Bordo, 2003, 187).

By making a woman’s attractiveness their only form of power or influence women are at a distinct disadvantage; the person who determines worth is someone else, decidedly male and in effect women are made powerless.

Feminist studies have focused on the body due to its association with sexuality and gender. The body in this context provides an opportunity to “experience the body as a site from which [one] can consciously explore and alter their relationships to power, race, class and gender.” (Tate and Douglas, 2010, 3). By using Foucault’s concept of ‘biopower’ women can decentralize “points from which power is manifest, thus contesting the idea that sovereignty is the supreme expression of power...” and all of a sudden “power is everywhere” and yoga can become an opportunity to investigate one’s own relationship to power through bodily practice (Tate and Douglas, 2010, 4).

The philosophical tree of yoga focuses on the eight limb path to enlightenment. The first of these limbs contains the yamas and niyamas (restraints and observances) and they provide a place to begin to reflect during physical practice. The embodiment of the restraints and observances within the physical practice provides a context within which to measure physical sensations and utilize the power of self-observance to analyze the body/mind/spirit interaction.

This legacy of low self-esteem and self-objectification – punctuated by disordered eating, continuous exercise, and abusive fat talk – keeps most girls and women stuck in an unhealthy cycle that holds us back and prevents us from being truly empowered. As bell hooks states, these practices are ‘self-hatred in action. Female self-love begins with self-acceptance’ (Klein, 2012, 28).
The internal processes of yoga and the physical practice provide an opportunity to become attuned with the body that North American culture (beginning with our factory style school system where children are forced to stay still and learn with very few breaks) has suppressed; by embracing the body and bodily movement, by embodying learning utilizing the yamas and niyamas to begin with and then through the other seven limbs of yoga, the mind/body/spirit interaction no longer oppresses the body and instead works with it to embody the cultural and social processes of yoga (Tate and Douglas, 2010, 8). The yogic practice is an opportunity for practitioners to “learn that their embodied experience is valid and true, but that it is part of the vast trans-cultural production of yoga” (Tate and Douglas, 2010, 9).

Yoga offers an opportunity for women to gain control of their bodies, developing a connection between body, mind and spirit. Where the dominant consumer culture has psychologically, physically and spiritually made women prisoners in their own body, disconnected from their body and distanced from their mind, they may find that yoga “...is a pathway to cultivate self-love, allowing us to shift our sense of validation inward, as opposed to the standard practice of measuring one’s worth based on external definitions” (Klein, 2012, 38-39). Yoga offers women a way to break free so that they are no longer prisoners of the cultural expectation of slenderness.

**Grounded Research: Making Connections**

As an illustration of the awareness that yoga creates and the yoga culture a group of women (8 women between the ages of 24 and 47 years of age of differing ethnic background living in rural Northern Alberta, Canada) identify with, the author conducted a grounded research study
this past year (Nielsen, 2013). In that study participants were asked if they recognized a “yoga culture” and how they would define yoga culture. Their answers were predominantly yes with regards to a “yoga culture” and their answers varied in terms of the definition of and identity of and with this culture. Overwhelmingly they recognized the marketing manipulation of corporations and gender-biased advertising as superficial and manipulative. Some of the participants recognized that the culture had two dichotomized representations of yoga in North America. One representation of yoga culture is promoted by corporations, branding and media, as in the case of companies such as Lululemon. They recognized the overwhelming presence of ego in the pages of products overflowing in television and prints ads, serving the consumer culture and it’s weight related expectations of society in general, and of women in particular, “It’s almost like a trend, a trendy thing to do...Everyone is trying to do it....Lululemon, logos, organic, doing it just to do it,” and in turn sell products and creating the consumer brand loyalty (Nielsen, 2013).

In opposition to the superficial, trendy, logoed, branded yoga culture produced by consumer culture, there is the nurturing and grounding component of the actual yoga practice. This nurturing and grounding component assists in the development of the spiritual and mindful, the embodiment of yoga culture. A number of participants recognized that the actual practice of yoga provided and cultivated within them the tools and practices to assist in self-awareness, of spiritual and mental awareness. One reflective participant in the study provided the following observation about the practitioners in yoga classes, “You can find like-minded people striving to be better yogis and people who don’t do it don’t get it. Anyone who practices yoga is a yogi...striving to be better and whatever better means to them...bringing peace...not skinnier, not more flexible,
or the perfect body syndrome,” but realizing that “I am who I am” and that this was of great value to many of the participants personally as well as collectively in the yoga practice.

In addition to the awareness and acceptance of self that these study participants felt yoga culture embodied, they also stated that they observed a lack of ego within the nurturing, grounding yoga culture. The emphasis in the yoga culture that is a part of many studios throughout North America is that of self-care, body acceptance, self-love, compassion and non-judgment (Nielsen, 2013). Just as Klein reveals, “Yoga provided the practice that rooted the things feminist sociology had taught me. It is one thing to intellectualize self-love and acceptance. It’s another to embody and practice it, especially after spending decades learning, practicing, and perfecting self-loathing” (Klein, 2012, 32).

In recognizing the self-regulating capacity of yoga practice, these study participants were working to decipher between the two cultures; by not “buying into” the hype, they have intentionally or unintentionally been countering the oppressive patriarchic constructs of North American consumer culture.

The women interviewed as a part of this study overwhelmingly saw yoga as a part of their identity confirming that it was more than simply exercise, “…I inspire others through my own experience and realizing my own imperfections but that is how you know…” “…it’s a lifestyle-a journey; it’s a practice, a sense of being inside myself-it’s about me.” This journey of self-inquiry and embodied experience described by these women, the “living tradition” of yoga that has its
roots 5000 years in the past continues to change and evolve as must happen in the human experience, “Yoga is a living tradition of self-inquiry and embodied experience that has always been associated with diverse ideas, beliefs, and techniques” (Walker, 2012, 25).

Conclusion

North American consumer culture has long contributed to the objectification of the female body (Spiropoulou, 2013). An Eastern tradition that had historically been denied to women is yoga. What is most interesting in the North American tradition of yoga is the fact that women have not only been able to practice yoga, but make up the majority of practitioners of yoga and that the North American tradition of yoga has been created from a culture, history and tradition all of its own. In this analysis of North American yoga an integrated approach to the phenomenon has been used drawing on a number of discipline perspectives; from this analysis one can see how North American yoga is a very unique and powerful phenomenon that holds opportunities for women in particular to gain power over their bodies within North American consumer culture. Understanding the discipline intersecting nature of this phenomenon assists in understanding what North American yoga culture has to offer women as a tool for empowerment and embodiment. By analyzing the discipline intersecting nature of this phenomenon and the interaction of these disciplines within this context the opportunities for learning, understanding, growth and empowerment become apparent.

An analysis of yoga culture as it exists in North America from an interdisciplinary perspective is an opportunity to understand the significant tool it can provide for female empowerment. By
analyzing the influences of history, psychology, consumer culture as well as embodiment and
feminist perspectives, the unique opportunities for personal empowerment are revealed, as is
yoga’s interdisciplinary nature:

In light of this knowledge, modern trends that find common ground between asana
practice, somatic psychology, Buddhist mindfulness, and Vipassana meditation and
even ecstatic dance are more in line with the actual tradition of cross-cultural
exploration than the imagined pure and ancient lineage many pretend to be
protecting. I am all for teaching Patanjali as an important historical reference point.
But I find that what gives yoga depth, substance, transformational power, and
juiciness today is rooted in a much more eclectic and life-affirming aesthetic

It is doubtful that the ancient yogis, the authors of the Vedas, or Patanjali himself could have
foreseen the transformation of yoga as a mental practice to an embodied experience that would
reap such mental and spiritual possibilities for women. It is also surprising to realize the
possibilities yoga has in its capacity as a tool for feminist consciousness and body-image awareness
(Klein, 2012). Through this interdisciplinary approach an awareness has been presented where one
can separate the dominant consumer culture’s construction of yoga from the yoga of embodiment
and empowerment, a yoga culture that can provide opportunity for women to fully embody their
experience and empower them to take control of their daily lived experience.
References


