POTENTIAL OF YOGA RETREAT CENTERS IN ENHANCING CIVIC WELLBEING IN THE PANDEMIC TIMES

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INTRODUCTION

• During the last several decades, the increasing popularity of yoga in Western societies has become a notable manifestation of the desire to enhance health and wellbeing by nurturing mind, spirit and body (Ponder & Holladay 2013; Patterson et al. 2016; Bower and Cheer 2017).
  
  • According to the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, 94% of Americans who practice yoga do it for wellness reasons. And they say that practicing yoga makes them healthier in many ways - 55% of yoga users reported improved sleep and over 85R reported reduced stress (NCCIH 2012)

• Yoga retreats are actively sought for healing (Lea 2008; Smith and Sziva 2018). This practice has become a serious leisure pursuit and is regarded as “a panacea for the ailments of modern society— tech overload, disconnection and alienation, insomnia, stress and anxiety” (Gregorie 2013, p. 5).

• According to Desikachar (1999), yoga is one of six core systems of Indian philosophy centered on ‘Darsana’ (to see) and has been popularly touted to generate physiological and psychological benefits through pranayama (breathing methods), asana (postural exercises), and meditation (focusing on the inner consciousness).

• Despite the surging interest in therapeutic and preventive prospects of yoga programs, studies on yoga and overall wellbeing of patrons and the civic community at large are meager (Dillette, Douglas & Andrzejewski 2018). According to Hudson et al. (2015), little research has been conducted on the domestic yoga market in the United States.

• With health and lifestyle disruptions caused by covid-19, alternative pharmaceutical intervention therapies and immunity building mechanisms are receiving pronounced attention.
THE WELLBEING NOTION (HEAVILY DRAWS ON POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY AND FLOURISHING CONCEPTS)

• Positive psychology focuses on the happiness concept and is premised on a psychological framework, research and mediation practices to decipher the optimistic, acclimatizing, innovative and emotionally rewarding facets of human behavior (Seligman 1998).

• The concept of flourishing is a general assessment of wellbeing and refers to some measures that need to be met to feel good and perform effectively. These include experiencing positive emotions, high level of interest and engagement, and a sense of purpose and meaning “to score highly on one of the following features: a sense of optimism, self esteem, resilience, vitality, self-determination or positive relationships” (Hupport & So (2009), cited in Coghlan 2015, p. 384).

• According to Keyes, any national health strategy focused on mental health must supplement the existing avoidance techniques and treatment initiatives associated with mental sickness with wellness programs such as yoga and meditation to actively “promote flourishing in individuals otherwise free of mental illness but not mentally healthy” (2007, p. 95).
SIGNIFICANCE OF YOGA RETREATS

- Therapeutic landscapes are often sought where the natural and built environment, social conditions and human interactions produce an atmosphere favorable to mental cleansing and spiritual healing.

- Yoga retreats are actively sought to experience transcendence or spiritual healing (Smith and Sziva 2018) and “part of the therapeutic potential of the retreat focuses on how ‘taking the body away from the ‘everyday’ open up attention to the body itself, foregrounding its connection to the world” (Lea 2008, p. 95).

- Yoga is also used as a mechanism for spiritual growth with its restorative and therapeutic properties.

- Motivation items for practicing yoga included balance, calm-stress relief, healthier lifestyle, exercise, philosophy of yoga and spirituality, better sleeping, escape from the everyday, and community-building. Items associated with the impacts of practicing yoga included being fit, calmness, self-understanding, concentration, self-acceptance, healthier nutrition, better sleeping, spiritual experience, more optimal weight, community involvement, stronger connection to others, and less alcohol consumption. Most important motivations were noted to be balance, followed by calm/stress relief, healthier lifestyle and exercise. With regard to impact, the most important item was being fit, followed by calmness, self-understanding, concentration and self-acceptance.

- Several theories and frameworks have been suggested to examine the health outcomes of yoga experiences such as transformational frameworks (Little 2012; Smith & Szvia 2016), flourishing (Keyes 2007; Slade 2010), positive psychology (Coghlan 2015; Keyes 2007), serious leisure (Patterson, Getz & Gubb 2016; Stebbins 1992) and social world (Patterson et al. 2016; Unruh 1980).
RESEARCH PURPOSE

• To date, few studies have examined the benefits of yoga experiences using multiple dimensions of well-being and health outcomes in domestic markets, which include local community and travelers from outside the local regions and special need populations such as people with disabilities, and veterans, and the military (Cohen et al. 2017). Documented literature offers evidence that yoga events (such as attending a yoga retreat or festival) and experiences can lead to substantial improvements in multiple dimensions of health and well-being that sustain for several weeks (Cohen et al. 2017; Dillette et al. 2018; Hudson et al. 2015).

• Given the therapeutic benefits of wellness programs such as yoga retreats, it is important to scrutinize the manner in which they are promoting yoga during the pandemic times. The potential of retreat centers to boost public health and wellbeing of locals as well as tourists remains an under-researched field of inquiry. Moreover, is useful to delineate audience of focus based on target/specialty markets and scrutiny of type of yoga programs in the context of their healing and therapeutic potential.

• Another important purpose of this project was to determine if messages convey benefits of therapeutic and integrative systems on the overall wellbeing on the websites of popular yoga retreat centers situated in three geographically dispersed states: AZ, VA, and FL. To measure benefits, for the most part, the PERMA mode of wellbeing was used.
  • PERMA Profiler: Positive emotions, Engagement, Relatedness, Meaningfulness and; Accomplishment
  • Other Health dimensions are also examined
PERMA MODEL OF WELLBEING

• Seligman (2011) pioneered the PERMA theory of well-being which employs a multi-dimensional perspective to express the meaning of flourishing in life. The concept of flourishing is a general assessment of well-being and refers to some measures (such as positive emotions, elevated level of interest and engagement and a sense of purpose and meaning) to achieve a high sense of optimism, self-esteem, resilience and building strong bonds (Hupport & So 2009).

• The PERMA paradigm comprises of Positive emotion (P), Engagement (E), Relationships (R), Meaning (M), and Accomplishment (A) (Seligman 2011, p. 16-25).
  • Positive emotions refer to hedonic feelings of happiness.
  • Engagement denotes psychological bonding with activities or organizations.
  • Positive relationships embrace feeling of being social cohesion, loved and supported by others, and contentment with one’s social connections.
  • Meaning denotes believing in the value of one’s life and feeling related to something bigger than oneself.
  • Accomplishment is about progress toward aims, feeling competent to completing daily activities, and feeling a sense of achievement.
METHOD

This study uses the content analysis technique to glean information and themes based on the topics of focus.

- Content Analysis- First, a priori coding technique is used. This method focuses on previously identified themes (Weber, 1990). PERMA profiler is used in addition to health-related themes. Leads are also explored and their connection with the wellbeing dimensions is examined.
- Intercoder reliability- above 80%
- Retreat centers were found by googling “yoga retreat center in” selected states: Arizona, Florida, and Virginia,
- Retreats were selected if yoga was a major part of the retreat center. There were many wellness centers that did not offer yoga and therefore were not included in this research.
- Some of the main aspects of the other wellness retreats focused on were a societal detox, meditation, hiking, and other healing methods like massage, acupuncture, and dietary cleanses. Many of the yoga retreats also offered these services, but they were predominantly focused on yoga programs.
GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF THE RETREAT PROGRAMS
PROGRAM FORMAT & SPECIALTY MARKETS

Program Format

Special Clients

- Arizona
- Virginia
- Florida
The following charts show the various mental and psychological benefits of yoga which correspond to the states the retreats and studios are located in. The benefit that was referred to most in AZ was overall well-being, in VA was relieving stress/anxiety, and in FL was relieving stress/anxiety. According to Harvard Medical School, there are six components in overall well being: life evaluation, emotional health, work environment, physical health, healthy behaviors, and basic access (Godman, 2015).
This bar chart shows the multiple physical health benefits of yoga which correspond to the states the retreats and studios are located in. The physical health benefit mentioned the most in AZ was cardiovascular health and mobility, in VA was strength, and in FL was mobility and strength.
HEALTH-RELATED MESSAGES

• Physiological relating to biological functions – cardiovascular health (blood pressure, cholesterol, heart disease, circulation, and blood sugar), detoxification, endocrine system health (metabolism, menstruation/menopause, hormone levels, and digestion), nervous system health, and the physical healing from injury
  • Bombay Room in Fort Lauderdale, FL: “Studies have shown that practicing yoga reduces pain for people with many chronic conditions such as arthritis, sciatica, multiple sclerosis, hypertension, and chronic neck and back pain. The combination of postures, stretching, and meditation can ease pain. Most people with severe neck and back pain report substantial relief after the first or second session, and a steady decline or absence of pain with regular yoga practice. Yoga helps to improve circulation by efficiently moving oxygenated blood to the body’s cells. A warm body allows the blood to be easily delivered to the body. This means that more oxygen goes to the muscles and helps remove waste and toxins. Even a gentle yoga practice can provide cardiovascular benefits by lowering heart rate, increasing endurance, improving oxygen intake, and reducing blood pressure.”

• Physical relating to the body – flexibility, mobility, strength, balance, weight loss, and lifestyle health (forming healthy habits ex: eating, exercise, etc).
  • Yoga Nirvana in Tempe, AZ: “It is a choreographed sequence of postures that flow into one another, building strength, unwinding tight joints, and creating loose, flexible muscles.”
COPING WITH COVID-19

- The majority of Covid messages on the websites were the new policies and procedures the retreats and studios were following to ensure to safety and health of their patrons. These new policies and procedures include new cleaning routines, limits on class sizes, preregistering processes and check-ins, and mask policies.

- Many websites also had links to articles for information on the pandemic and reopening phases. Examples: links to the CDC website for hygienic practices and symptom information. Links to state government websites for reopening information and general information on states Covid policies

- There were a few websites, 9%, that had more information about tips to stay healthy during these times and some studios even offered free online classes to help support the community stay less stressed and anxious.
  - Sedona Mago Retreat offers Because We Care, “Because We Care about the well-being of our planet and all those who live upon it, the Sedona Mago Center for Well-being and Retreat offers free and moderately priced, yet powerful ONLINE instructions, videos, and live courses to help you relieve stress as well as improve your physical, mental and emotional health. Each course has been created by combining the best practices of Eastern and Western science, health and philosophy. You will learn about practical tips and techniques that can be immediately used to create a happier and healthier life, no matter what changes are happening in the World around you.”
  - Metta Yoga offered tips to stay healthy during these times, "I want to encourage all of you to use all of the techniques that you have been taught at the studio to stay calm. That is going to act as the biggest immune system booster of all." Another tip is to be asleep by 10 and wake up with or before the sun because, "living in line with circadian boosts the immune system."
DISCUSSION- PERMA DIMENSIONS

• (P) This dimension is heavily supported by the data from the retreats and studios. This element is represented as the overall wellbeing and inner peace in the Mental and Psychological Benefits graph. Overall wellbeing includes mood, a feeling of relaxation and rejuvenation, a positive outlook on life, and the ability to carry those feelings off the mat.

• (E) This can be seen more so in the centers that offer elongated retreats as attendees have more time spent at those centers. On the localized level this is shown through studios that offer programs for special clients such as expectant or new mothers.

• (R) There is mention of this on some websites. For example, a studio in Arizona, the Foundry, website states benefits as, “…a connection to a like-minded community of people.” In a Florida studio called Kula Yoga the website explains Kula means “community” in Sanskrit stating, “We hope that through sharing, learning and practicing yoga together, we can cultivate these feelings in our community to help us live healthier, more fulfilling lives.”

• (M) This dimension was seen as a big theme on a lot of these websites and is represented as the “Self awareness/connection” category on the Mental and Psychological Benefits graph. The Sedona Mago retreat in Arizona has guest testimonials where Kait S. writes “It really allows you to step into this space of spirituality and transform in a way that you could never do in a city or anywhere else. Everything is coming together; nature, wildlife, the trees, and I feel like I’m supported by all of it.” The Space Above, a studio in Virginia, states the benefits of their Breathwork and Meditation as, “In this “inner quiet,” there is a vibrancy, a quality of consciousness that is transforming. As our meditation practice becomes more consistent, these moments of silence lengthen, enhancing an expanded awareness and an inner aliveness. It is in this deep inner silence we discover an unmistakable presence of consciousness—awake, fully alert, and resting in the seat of transcendent awareness.”

• (A) Although not heavily mentioned on the websites, it can be hypothesized participants feel a sense of accomplishment after completing a weekend retreat or even a yoga class. This can be confirmed by interviewing attendees of these programs.
CONCLUSION

• The pandemic fatigue is generating a shift in consumer lifestyles and desire for wellness-based leisure pursuits.

• Contemporary trends indicate surging demand for health and wellness programs that are therapeutic, and their healing modus operandi aims at non-pharmaceutical interventions.

• The new reset is slanted towards transforming one’s lifestyle by seeking peace, self-fulfillment and niche social worlds that inculcate a sense of belonging and help advance eudaemonic health.

• As evidenced in the study results, yoga retreat centers offer a conducive platform for enhancing public health and overall wellbeing.
  • Can be argued these centers should be stepping up more as they are at the forefront of the nonmedical wellness and health.
    • Sedona Mago Retreat now offering "Post COVID Syndrome Recovery Part 2" to help people with lingering symptoms which include, "loss of taste and smell; fatigue, lethargy, and malaise; brain fog; and many more".
    • Only 37% of centers has a message on their website related to yoga as an immunity building tool.

• They are likely to see a surge in demand, during the post-covid times, because they offer a variety of yoga-based programs that can boost physiological and eudemonic benefits.
REFERENCES

- Available upon request