



Exploring economic opportunities for Yoga as a soft power Industry in the global wellness market

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Abstract

In the 21st century, yoga has transcended its traditional spiritual roots to become a global wellness practice and a symbol of India's cultural heritage. This transformation positions yoga not only as a tool for personal well-being but also as a strategic soft power asset and a burgeoning industry. The present study explores the economic opportunities associated with yoga as a soft power industry in the global wellness market, which was valued at over \$4.5 trillion in recent years. By examining trends in wellness tourism, digital health platforms, international trade, and lifestyle branding, the paper outlines how yoga contributes to India's economic diplomacy and cultural influence.

Key focus areas include the growth of yoga retreats, online teaching platforms, teacher training programs, wellness product exports, and the role of government initiatives such as the International Day of Yoga and the Ministry of AYUSH. While economic prospects are considerable, challenges like cultural appropriation, lack of regulatory frameworks, and unequal global representation raise ethical concerns.

This paper adopts an interdisciplinary framework integrating international relations, commerce, and cultural policy analysis. It argues that India can maximize the economic value of yoga without compromising its authenticity by investing in rural wellness infrastructure, standardizing global certifications, and promoting inclusive digital access.

The study concludes that yoga, when managed ethically and strategically, holds immense potential as a soft power resource that can enhance India's global influence while contributing to sustainable economic growth. It serves as a model for leveraging intangible cultural assets in international trade and diplomacy.

Keywords: Yoga industry, soft power, wellness tourism, Ayush, yoga commercialization, digital yoga platforms, India's Trade, cultural exports

Introduction

Yoga, once a deeply spiritual practice rooted in Indian philosophy, has rapidly evolved into a global economic asset, especially in wellness tourism and lifestyle branding. The global yoga industry, embedded within the \$4.5 trillion wellness market ^[1], has not only gained popularity for its health benefits but has also emerged as a significant cultural and economic force in the West. This development provides unprecedented opportunities to leverage yoga as an instrument of soft power in the global wellness economy.

Yoga as a Tool of Cultural Diplomacy: Mapping India's Soft Power Strategy in the 21st Century

In the 21st century, yoga has emerged not only as a global wellness practice but also as a strategic soft power tool for India. Cultural diplomacy involves the exchange of ideas, values, traditions, and other aspects of culture to strengthen relationships, enhance socio-cultural cooperation, and promote national interests ^[2]. India, with its rich heritage, has long embraced cultural diplomacy as part of its foreign policy.

Among its many cultural exports, yoga has taken centre stage as a uniquely Indian contribution to the world. Yoga's universal appeal, spiritual philosophy, and association with health and mindfulness make it an effective soft power instrument ^[3].

The strategic promotion of yoga by the Indian state, especially since the early 2000s, has transformed it into a significant tool of public diplomacy ^[4]. Soft power, a term coined by Joseph Nye (2004) ^[5], refers to a nation's ability to shape the preferences of others through appeal and attraction rather than coercion. Cultural assets such as cinema, cuisine, and spirituality can become conduits of influence ^[6, 7]. Yoga, rooted in India's ancient traditions, has been rebranded globally as a secular, scientific, and health-enhancing practice, expanding its accessibility and appeal ^[8]. India's approach combines statecraft with cultural outreach, making yoga an example of how intangible heritage can serve as a geopolitical tool ^[6, 9]. By using yoga as a form of cultural diplomacy, India effectively taps into its soft power potential to build international partnerships, improve its global image, and foster intercultural understanding.

Table 1: Institutional Initiatives by the Ministry of AYUSH for Global Promotion of Yoga ^[10]

S. No.	Initiative	Description and Scope
1	International Day of Yoga (IDY)	Celebrated annually on June 21, following UN recognition in 2014. Widely observed through Indian embassies and communities globally.
2	Educational Initiatives	Includes support for yoga courses and establishing AYUSH academic chairs in foreign universities.
3	Yoga Certification Board (YCB)	Provides internationally recognized certifications for yoga professionals and institutions, promoting global teaching standards.
4	Digital Resources and Campaigns	Launch of multilingual yoga apps (e.g., Y-Break), instructional videos, and digital media to increase global accessibility.
5	Embassy-led Global Yoga Events	Organization of yoga events, IDY celebrations, and workshops via Indian embassies and high commissions abroad.
6	Cultural Integration in Diplomacy	Inclusion of yoga in cultural festivals and outreach activities through Indian missions.
7	AYUSH Information Cells Abroad	Dissemination of yoga and wellness knowledge through information cells in Indian embassies and high commissions.
8	Research Project Funding	₹15.30 crore allocated to support yoga research in multiple Indian institutions and wellness centers.

Table 2: Yoga Research Centers and Collaborative Projects Funded by the Ministry of AYUSH ^[10]

S. No.	Project Type	Institutions Involved	Number of Projects
1	Collaborative Centre for Mind-Body Intervention through Yoga	AIIMS Raipur (Chhattisgarh)	5
		AIIMS Rishikesh (Uttarakhand)	5
		PGIMER, Chandigarh	5
2	Collaborative Research Centres (CRC)	NIMHANS, Bangalore	12
		Sanskriti Foundation, Mysore	12
		Kaivalyadham, Lonavala	8
3	Intra Mural Research (IMR) Projects	IIT Mandi	1
		CCRYN	16
		Savitribai Phule University	1
		PGIMER, Chandigarh	1
		Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital	2
		Safdarjung Hospital	1

Yoga and the Global Wellness Economy

In recent decades, yoga has grown from a niche interest to a mainstream wellness activity. The number of global yoga practitioners exceeds 300 million, with over 36 million in the United States alone ^[11]. The demand for wellness experiences over traditional tourism has created new economic opportunities for yoga retreats, branded studios, and wellness resorts.

According to Lehto Brown, Chen, and Morrison (2006) ^[13], yoga tourism has become a distinct subset of wellness tourism, appealing to health-conscious, affluent, and educated consumers. Their study, based on a yoga retreat in Indiana, USA, found that yoga tourists were primarily middle-aged women with high incomes, who valued mental well-being, spirituality, and emotional balance. The integration of yoga into tourism packages and lifestyle products reflects a significant shift in global travel motivations and expenditure patterns.

Yoga as a Soft Power Industry

Soft power, as defined by Nye (2004) ^[5], is the ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion. Yoga, in this context, acts as a non-political cultural export that promotes well-being, peace, and mindfulness. It is a medium through which countries (particularly India) can exert influence and foster international goodwill.

However, yoga’s soft power potential is no longer limited to its country of origin. Western countries and private enterprises have successfully adopted and adapted yoga to local contexts, embedding it into broader lifestyle and luxury experiences. This commodification offers a model

for soft power through consumer engagement, emotional branding, and experiential transformation.

Yoga and the Experience Economy

Pine and Gilmore’s (1999) ^[12] theory of the experience economy highlights a shift from selling services to selling transformative experiences. In this framework, yoga functions as a multisensory, aspirational product offering both inner fulfillment and outward social capital.

Mora *et al.* (2018) ^[14] describe the yoga industry as part of the “transformation economy,” where consumers invest in experiences that promise self-actualization, emotional healing, and ethical living.

Yoga studios in Australia and North America have embraced luxury branding, offering bespoke retreats, immersive studio environments, and eco-conscious consumer products. These services cater to the aspirations of the “conscious consumer,” who values not only wellness but also sustainability and community engagement. Branding strategies increasingly use emotional and sensory appeals borrowed from the luxury market, positioning yoga as both a spiritual journey and a status symbol.

Yoga, Tourism, and Economic Development

Tourism is a key sector where yoga’s economic and soft power converge. Lehto *et al.* (2006) ^[13] observed that yoga tourists actively seek destinations that offer holistic experiences, often preferring nature-based or tropical settings such as Costa Rica, Hawaii, or the Mediterranean. These trends present opportunities for tourism boards and private sectors worldwide to attract high-spending wellness tourists.

Moreover, yoga can serve as a development tool in rural or underdeveloped areas. Eco-resorts and wellness centres built around yoga and mindfulness practices can generate employment, promote sustainable practices, and attract international visitors.

Challenges and Ethical Considerations

Despite its economic potential, the globalization of yoga raises significant concerns about cultural appropriation, commodification, and authenticity. Scholars argue that the western commercialization of yoga often privileges white, affluent bodies and aesthetics, while marginalizing its deeper philosophical roots and excluding diverse practitioners^[14-15]. This trend detaches yoga from its original spiritual and ethical context, repackaging it as a fitness commodity in the global marketplace^[16].

Maintaining cultural sensitivity, ensuring inclusivity, and integrating yoga's ethical dimensions such as ahimsa (non-violence), satya (truthfulness), and svadhyaya (self-study) into global business models are essential to preserving its integrity as both a wellness practice and a soft power instrument^[15, 17]. Without these considerations, the risk of cultural dilution and ethical neglect becomes a real threat to the authentic transmission of yoga traditions across borders.

Conclusion

The global evolution of yoga from a spiritual discipline to a multibillion-dollar wellness phenomenon underscores its profound adaptability, economic value, and geopolitical relevance in the 21st century. As outlined throughout this paper, yoga has become a powerful soft power asset and a dynamic cultural export, allowing India to extend its global influence through attraction rather than coercion. Leveraging yoga's universal appeal, the Indian government particularly through the Ministry of AYUSH has skilfully institutionalized yoga diplomacy via global initiatives such as the International Day of Yoga, educational exchange programs, and the establishment of the Yoga Certification Board.

Simultaneously, the expansion of yoga into wellness tourism, digital teaching platforms, branded experiences, and lifestyle commodities reflects its seamless integration into the experience economy^[12] and global consumer culture. The surge in high-income yoga tourism, particularly in Western countries, illustrates the market potential for luxury retreats, rural eco-wellness centres, and therapeutic mind-body services. By capitalizing on this demand, yoga not only contributes to national branding and foreign trade but also offers tangible pathways for local economic development, sustainable tourism, and employment especially in rural and underdeveloped regions.

However, the commodification of yoga, while economically beneficial, brings with it serious ethical and cultural challenges. As noted by Mora *et al.* (2018)^[11], Jain (2015)^[17], and Strauss (2005)^[15], the global yoga industry often reproduces patterns of exclusion, favouring Western aesthetics and commercial fitness over yoga's philosophical depth and inclusive ethos. Such practices risk eroding the authenticity of yoga and marginalizing its indigenous knowledge systems.

To address these tensions, the study argues that the future of yoga as a soft power industry lies in a balanced and ethical

approach one that ensures cultural sensitivity, protects intellectual heritage, and promotes inclusivity in representation and access. Strategies such as investing in rural wellness infrastructure, standardizing global certifications through bodies like YCB, promoting digital literacy in underserved communities, and embedding ethical principles like ahimsa and satya into global branding frameworks can help preserve yoga's core values while enhancing its global appeal.

In conclusion, yoga offers a compelling model for leveraging intangible cultural assets for international diplomacy, economic growth, and societal well-being. When promoted responsibly and strategically, yoga can continue to be a bridge between tradition and innovation, economy and ethics, culture and commerce solidifying its place as a transformative force in the global wellness market and a pillar of India's soft power strategy.

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