



Yoga and body image: How do young adults practicing yoga describe its impact on their body image?

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the perceived impact of yoga on body image. Young adults ($n = 34$ female, 12 male; $M_{\text{age}} = 30.6$ [$SD = 1.6$]) practicing yoga were interviewed and data were analyzed for emerging themes across weight status. In general, participants discussed the positive impact of yoga on their body image, but some described both a positive and negative impact. Yoga was perceived as having a positive impact on body image via perceived physical changes, gratitude for one's body, a sense of accomplishment within one's yoga practice, self-confidence, and witnessing different types of bodies practicing yoga. Yoga was perceived to have a negative impact on body image via comparative critique (e.g., upward comparisons with others) and inner critique (e.g., negative self-talk). Themes were generally similar across weight status; exceptions were that participants at higher weight status were more likely than those at lower weight status to discuss accomplishment within one's yoga practice as a positive impact on body image and comparative critique as a negative impact on body image. Yoga studios and instructors can take steps to further enhance the positive impact of yoga and to provide environments that are inclusive of participants with diverse body shapes and sizes.

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1. Introduction

Body dissatisfaction is highly prevalent among young adults (Bucchianeri, Arikian, Hannan, Eisenberg, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2013; Neumark-Sztainer, Wall et al., 2018). While body dissatisfaction occurs among both female and male young adults and across all weight categories, given societal pressures emphasizing thinness, body dissatisfaction is particularly high among females and among those of higher weight status (El Ansari, Dibba, & Stock, 2014; Mintem, Gigante, & Horta, 2015; Neumark-Sztainer, Story, Hannan, Perry, & Irving, 2002; Weinberger, Kersting, Riedel-Heller, & Luck-Sikorski, 2016). Body dissatisfaction has harmful consequences for various behavioral, physical, and psychosocial outcomes. For example, body dissatisfaction has been shown to predict greater engagement in health-compromising behaviors, such as unhealthy weight control practices, and lower engagement in health-promoting behaviors, such as physical activity (Neumark-Sztainer,

Paxton, Hannan, Haines, & Story, 2006). Body dissatisfaction is a strong and consistent predictor of disordered eating behaviors and eating disorders (Bucchianeri et al., 2016; Cooley & Toray, 2001; Goldschmidt, Wall, Loth, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2015; Goldschmidt, Wall, Choo, Becker, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2016; Stice & Shaw, 2002), and also predicts weight gain over time, particularly in young women (Loth, Watts, van den Berg, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2015; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2007; van den Berg & Neumark-Sztainer, 2007). Body dissatisfaction has also been found to be associated with various measures of emotional well-being including lower levels of self-esteem and higher levels of depression (Johnson & Wardle, 2005; Paxton, Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, & Eisenberg, 2006; Sharpe et al., 2018).

While the majority of research on body image has focused on body dissatisfaction and its implications for health outcomes, there is a growing body of literature discussing the importance of positive body image and how having a positive body image is not merely the opposite of body dissatisfaction (Tylka & Piran, 2018, in press). Components of positive body image include both attitudes (of acceptance and respect) towards one's body and the adoption of healthier behaviors as part of feeling better about one's body (Avalos, Tylka, & Wood-Barcalow, 2005; Piran & Teall, 2012; Piran, 2015; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a, 2015b; Webb et al., 2015; Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, & Augustus-Horvath, 2010).

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Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015a) describe positive body image as holistic and multifaceted, including body appreciation, body acceptance and love, a broad conceptualization of beauty that may draw from inner characteristics (e.g., confidence), adaptive investment in appearance, inner positivity, and the ability to filter information in a body-protective manner. The construct of positive body image is also captured in the broader study and framework of embodiment. Embodiment is a psychological variable that describes the quality of individuals' experiences of living in their bodies as they engage with the world around them (Piran, 2017; Piran & Teall, 2012; Piran, 2016). Piran (2015, 2016) has described five dimensions of the experience of positive embodiment, including: (1) positive body comfort and connection; (2) experiences of agency and functionality; (3) attuned self-care; (4) positive experiences and expressions of bodily desires; and (5) inhabiting the body as a subjective rather than an objectified site. In her developmental theory of embodiment, Piran (2015, 2017) describes the role of both risk and protective factors within the physical, mental, and social power domains in influencing one's experience of embodiment.

Given the high prevalence of body dissatisfaction, the harms associated with having a poor body image, and the potential benefits of having a positive body image, it is crucial to explore potential strategies for improving body image. Yoga is an ancient practice that involves physical movement, focused breathing, mindfulness, and meditation (Cook-Cottone, 2015; Iyengar, 1966; Kraftsow, 2002). The practice of yoga addresses, and is aimed at integrating, the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of one's being. The underlying tenets of yoga suggest that the practice may have benefits in terms of body image (Boudette, 2006; Daubenmier, 2005; Dittmann & Freedman, 2009; Douglass, 2009; Cook-Cottone & Douglass, 2017; Mahlo & Tiggemann, 2016; Mehling et al., 2011; Neumark-Sztainer, 2014). For example, the practice of yoga encourages greater awareness of one's body in conjunction with a sense of self-compassion and self-acceptance. Yoga students are often encouraged to listen to their bodies and adapt their physical practices to their individual needs, which may vary both across persons and from moment-to-moment within person. This focus on the internal milieu of one's being is likely to contribute to an enhanced positive experience of embodiment. As previously noted, Piran (2016, 2017) describes body connection and comfort, attunement to one's bodily needs, and experiencing the body as subjective, rather than objective site (i.e., from inside-out, rather than from outside-in) as important dimensions of a positive experience of embodiment and suggests that engagement in pleasurable physical activities can enhance the experience of embodiment. Menzel and Levine (2011) have similarly proposed that the more opportunities one has for forming a close, connected, and intimate relationship with one's body, the more one will be able to know and respond to bodily needs and appreciate all aspects of one's body. They specifically propose that participation in activities such as yoga may lead to a positive body image via the processes of enhanced embodiment and a reduction in self-objectification. Mahlo and Tiggemann (2016) tested these ideas among yoga practitioners and found that the relationship between yoga participation and positive body image was indeed mediated by embodiment and reduced self-objectification.

Although findings are not consistent across studies, or across measures within studies, research suggests that yoga may have positive benefits in terms of different aspects of body image (e.g., increased body awareness, decreased self-objectification) and risk factors for eating disorders (e.g., reduced negative affect; Carei, Fyfe-Johnson, Breuner, & Brown, 2010; Cook-Cottone, Talebkhah, Guyker, & Keddie, 2017; Impett, Daubenmier, & Hirschman, 2006; Klein & Cook-Cottone, 2013; McIver, McGartland, & O'Halloran, 2009; McIver, O'Halloran, & McGartland, 2009; Pacanowski, Diers, Crosby, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2017). Of particular relevance to the

current study, prior research on young adults participating in Project EAT (Eating and Activity in Teens and Young Adults), a longitudinal, population-based study from which the current study population was drawn, found that practicing yoga was associated with positive changes in body satisfaction over a 5-year period (Neumark-Sztainer, MacLehose, Pacanowski, & Eisenberg, 2018). In particular, improvements in body satisfaction were found among young adults who had previously reported lower levels of body satisfaction, suggesting that the practice may be most beneficial for those in greatest need.

While yoga encourages greater self-awareness in conjunction with greater self-compassion, practitioners who increase the former without the latter may be at risk for increased body concerns. Although at the population level, yoga may have benefits in terms of body image, there may be individuals for whom the practice could be harmful in terms of body image, or situations that make yoga practitioners feel uncomfortable in their bodies. Piran (2015, 2017) has noted that factors within the domain of social power can influence one's experience of embodiment. While settings in which yoga is practiced may provide a healing and safe environment for many yoga practitioners, some may feel uncomfortable in such spaces due to being different in terms of functional characteristics (e.g., lower skill level in yoga), social factors (e.g., not knowing others, or being from a lower social class), or physical features (e.g., having a larger body size than others practicing yoga).

The predominant manner in which female yoga practitioners are portrayed in the media is similar to that in the larger society, in other words, in a narrow manner that promotes thinness and equates thinness with health (Webb, Vinoski, Warren-Findlow, Burrell, & Putz, 2017; Webb, Vinoski, Warren-Findlow, Padro et al., 2017). For example, in a content analysis of 139 covers of *Yoga Journal*, a leading yoga magazine for the public, just one model was coded as having a body mass index (BMI) above 25 and only 2.4% were coded as curvaceous (Webb, Vinoski, Warren-Findlow, Burrell et al., 2017; Webb, Vinoski, Warren-Findlow, Padro et al., 2017). This narrow focus could, inadvertently, decrease the benefits of practicing yoga on body image, particularly among practitioners whose body does not fit the cultural ideal for thinness or the image being portrayed most predominantly in the yoga media. A focus on a particular body shape, already viewed as a societal ideal, could also deter individuals in larger bodies from either beginning to practice yoga, or engaging in a consistent yoga practice, due to feelings of discomfort.

The practice of yoga appears to be increasing in popularity and accessibility in the United States (Birdee et al., 2008; Cramer et al., 2016; Lauche et al., 2017; Saper, Eisenberg, Davis, Culpepper, & Phillips, 2004), although there is some variation across studies. The 2016 *Yoga in America Study* found that 15% of adults in the United States participated in a yoga class in the past six months (Yoga Journal & Yoga Alliance, 2016). The 2010 National Health Interview Survey, conducted on a large population-based adult sample in the United States, reported that 8.9% of adults practiced yoga in the past year, with the highest prevalence among respondents within age groups capturing young adulthood (i.e., 18–29 and 30–39 years of age; Cramer et al., 2016). Among young adults ($M_{\text{age}} = 31$ years) participating in Project EAT-IV, 20.5% of women and 6.1% of men practiced yoga at least 30 min/week, on average, over the past year. Yoga was practiced by young adults of different weight statuses, although it was practiced by more young adults with lower BMI values ($\text{BMI} < 25 \text{ kg/m}^2$) than those with higher BMI values ($\text{BMI} \geq 25 \text{ kg/m}^2$). Specifically, yoga was practiced at least 30 min/week, over the past year, by 27.2% of women and 8.1% of men of lower weight status and 20.5% of women and 6.1% of men of higher weight status.

Further study is warranted given the high prevalence of body dissatisfaction among young adults, particularly young women and

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