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Cover Page Footnote

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Namaste in the USA: The Growing Pains that Traditional Yoga Faces in America – An International Marketing Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Yoga is a mind, body, and spiritual practice that originated nearly 5,000 years ago in India. It is known to relieve stress, enhance athletic performance, increase strength and flexibility as well as assist in achieving inner peace, focus, and improved mental wellness. In recent years, the practice of yoga has grown exponentially in the United States, with about 37 million practitioners in 2016. However, the future growth of yoga in the U.S. faces some critical challenges. American innovations in yoga techniques and the rise of the yoga accessories industry with deep linkages with consumerism are drawing the practice away from its philosophical roots, which emphasizes mental and spiritual benefits. A shortage of qualified instructors is exacerbating this problem. Further, the practice of yoga in the U.S. seems to be mainly by females and concentrated largely in urban areas and East/West coast, thus precluding its mass adoption. Also, although yoga has many health benefits across ages, and many schools have started adopting it, there has been some backlash due to its roots in Hinduism. Anti-immigrant rhetoric is also on the rise in the U.S., which could have an adverse impact on yoga, which is clearly linked to India and Hinduism. This case study examines the practice and background of yoga and its rising popularity in the United States. It delves into the many challenges that yoga faces in becoming a part of mainstream health/wellness and fitness industry. Additionally, the case study poses critical marketing questions related to the scalability of its adoption in the United States...a challenge that the Brahmans, Rishis, and Yogis who created this practice thousands of years ago in India could never have foreseen.

Keywords: yoga, religion, United States, India, wellness, fitness, mental, physical, spirituality, international marketing, marketing strategy, case study

Introduction

Yoga is the complete experience of our essential spiritual self, and the practice is done to reveal that true nature (Ramananda, 2014). Traditionally, it is a mind, body, and spiritual practice that originated nearly 5,000 years ago in India ("What is Yoga," 2019). Yoga is known to relieve stress, enhance athletic performance, and increase strength and flexibility. Additionally, yoga can assist

in achieving inner peace, focus, and mental wellness (Link, 2017).

Complementary and alternative medicines have soared in popularity in the U.S as they have a more holistic approach towards alleviating ailments, including everyday aches and pains. The increase in chronic and lifestyle-related illnesses (both mental and physical) in the United States (U.S.), along with growing skepticism about conventional medical practice, has resulted in

one in three people seeking alternative forms of medicine ranging from supplements to chiropractic techniques and even yoga (Collins, 2015). Over the last decade, yoga has become increasingly popular in the U.S., with about 37 million practitioners in 2016 (Walton, 2016). Although yoga has been growing steadily, its mass adoption and maintaining the purity of its traditional format face considerable challenges in the U.S. This case study highlights four key issues that can hamper the growth and tradition of yoga.

First, the form and format of yoga in the United States is becoming markedly different than in India. Yogis (as yoga practitioners are called) are practicing yoga largely for the perceived athletic performance benefits ("What is Yoga," 2019). Moreover, to attract yogis, unique variants have cropped up that are considerably different from traditional yoga, resulting in a loss of the philosophical and spiritual foundation of the original practice and hence many of its benefits. especially mental well-being (Gander, 2017). A shortage of qualified instructors is exacerbating this problem. Second, there has been a large growth of yoga classes and studios and sales of associated products like yoga accessories, mats, clothing, etc. (Walton, 2016). However, this trend of monetizing yoga is counter to the fundamental spiritual philosophy of yoga, which pivots away from consumerism (TNN, 2007). Third, despite its popularity, yogis remain predominantly female, affluent, and limited to certain geographies e.g., East/West coast and urban regions (Baitmangalkar, 2014). Fourth, yoga is beneficial not just to adults but also to children as it improves their prosocial and self-regulation skills. However, the growing adoption of yoga in schools is receiving pushback from parents due to yoga's roots in Hinduism (Butzer, Ebert, Telles, & Khalsa, 2015). Adding to this is the recent anti-immigrant rhetoric in the U.S., which is leading to change in perceptions of businesses and people related to India (Fuchs & Merchant, 2017; Jacobs, 2018), which could adversely impact perceptions of yoga. Thus, political developments could exacerbate the spiritual, religious, and foreign underpinnings of traditional yoga practice, which could lead to a cultural clash.

This case study examines the practice of yoga, its background, and its rising popularity in the U.S. It delves into the many challenges that yoga faces in becoming a part of the mainstream health/wellness and fitness industry. Additionally, the case study poses critical marketing questions related to the scalability of its adoption in the United States...a challenge that the Brahmans, Rishis, and Yogis who created this practice thousands of years ago in India could never have foreseen.

Yoga's Origin and its Rise in the United States

Yoga originated over 5,000 years ago in northern India as a spiritual discipline for bringing harmony between the mind and body ("What is Yoga," 2019). During the Classical period, from 500 BC - 800 AD, steps and stages of voga were developed and were aimed at achieving enlightenment. Over centuries, many varieties of yoga schools developed including Hatha yoga, the most well-known yoga practice. Hatha yoga uses the physical body to gain enlightenment by cleansing the body and mind. It involves postures that prepare the body to sustain higher levels of energy. Thus, yoga works on the mind, body, emotion, and energy (Basavaraddi, 2015).

Between the 1890s and 1920s, Hindu monks from India made their way to the United States to help promote the practice of yoga, followed by a new wave of Eastern teachers in 1965 when a quota on Indian immigrants was removed (Hammond, 2018). Spiritual gurus like Deepak Chopra, Yogi

Maharishi Mahesh, and Bikram Choudhury are credited for popularizing yoga in the West. Their rise in popularity helped television shows, such as "Lillias, Yoga and You" on PBS, to achieve great success in the U.S. (Adavi, 2016). However, it is only in the last decade that yoga has made a significant cultural and social impact in the United States even though the focus has largely been on the physical, rather than spiritual aspect of yoga.

Few traditional lifestyle habits meant to improve personal wellness have survived in the modern world of expensive juice cleanses, fitness club memberships, and complicated home workout systems. However, by 2016 the practice of yoga had become ingrained into the everyday lives of nearly 37 million Americans (Walton, 2016). There are currently 34,860 yoga studios in the U.S., growing at the rate of 10.6% ("Pilates & Yoga Studios," 2017). Due to the average income of Americans increasing from USD 51,000 in 2014 to USD 56,615 in 2017, Americans have more to spend on recreational activities ("Average Salaries for Americans," 2016), and yoga is one industry that hopes to benefit from this.

The trend towards an active lifestyle can be seen through the steady increase in health club memberships in the past decade ("Average Salaries for Americans," 2016). As of 2016, 57.25 million Americans hold health club memberships (Statista, 2017). The overall increase in awareness for the need to stay healthy is making healthier lifestyles a cultural norm. Although many people practice yoga for its physical benefits, such as increased athletic performance, some also realize that it can relieve stress and improve overall mental health (Büssing, Khalsa, Michalsen, Telles, & Sherman, 2012).

The growth of yoga practice in the U.S. reflects in the increased accessibility to yoga instruction. It has become a cultural

phenomenon not only because of the increase in standalone yoga studios, but more significantly because of the addition of yoga classes to almost all 36,500 U.S. health clubs (Walton, 2016). More than 57 million Americans who are health club members can attend a multitude of daily yoga classes. While interest in Pilates classes has remained steady over the past five years, the attendance in voga classes has soared. Significant spikes in yoga occur around June 21, International Yoga Day, as well as around the holiday season as many people attend classes to get fit for their New Year's resolutions (Statista, 2017).

The Growth Challenges for Traditional Yoga in the United States

Despite the many benefits of yoga and its recent growth in the United States, it appears that its mass adoption and inclusion into mainstream health/wellness and fitness practices may be impeded due to five key factors described below.

1. Form and Format of Yoga

Yoga is the ancient Indian science of healing and exercise and over time, many different types of yoga have evolved. Some traditional yoga styles include Hatha postures, which involve meditation and breath control. Iyengar (a sub-type of Hatha) alignment and precise body involves movements while holding breath; Ashtanga (a sub-type of Hatha) involves repetitive movements that are physically demanding; Vinyasa (an off-shoot of Ashtanga) is fast paced and physically demanding; Kundalini is more spiritual and involves meditation, chanting, and breathing exercises; hot yoga is in a heated room while Bikram yoga, also practiced in a heated room, is defined by a set of 26 poses. Although yoga has evolved over time, the core philosophy of traditional yoga in India within these variations has remained

the same - mind, body, and divine (Ghosh, 2019).

However, 36% of Americans believe that yoga is just a physical activity designed to increase flexibility (Freeman, Vladagina, Razmjou, & Brems, 2017). The key benefits that Americans seek from yoga are improved flexibility (61%), stress relief (56%), general fitness (49%), improvement of overall health (49%), and physical fitness (44%). Indeed, the Yoga Alliance, the American gold standard in yoga instruction, believes that yoga is quite personal and may differ for each practitioner and so they describe it as a system, not of beliefs, but of techniques and guidance for enriched living("What is Yoga," 2019) Accordingly, there has been a steady move away from the mental and spiritual aspect of yoga, towards just its physical aspect in the United States.

The sole focus on forms and postures has resulted in experimentation leading to some unique innovations in yoga styles that seem far removed from traditional yoga practice. For example, acro-yoga, chocolate yoga, and even goat yoga are all American adaptations to the original practice to attract a new audience and diversify. Acroyoga includes yoga, acrobatics, and Thai massage, along with partner-style positions (AcroYoga International, 2015). Goat yoga was first conceptualized by Lainey Morse in Portland, Oregon. Morse's idea of adapting a yoga class to an outdoor farm where goats on the premises can wander freely through and interact with attendees as they chose was promoted and published by The Oregonian This brought Morse's class Newspaper. waiting list to over 600-plus interested yogis (Johnson, 2016). Chocolate voga, combination of consuming chocolate and practicing yoga, is also gaining traction in niche yoga communities. Chocolate yoga focuses on the medicinal properties of ceremonial grade cacao moving throughout the body. The class even begins with a 'chocolate ceremony' to Mayan Cacao Spirit (Chocolate Yoga, 2016).

Traditional yoga incorporates both the mental and physical well-being of the yogi or yoga practitioner (National Institutes Researchers of Health, 2019). demonstrated the medical benefits of yoga for chronic pain diseases like fibromyalgia (Nall, 2017). A review of yoga and cardiovascular disease published in the European Journal of Preventive Cardiology states that yoga has been found to help lower heart disease risk as much as conventional exercise such as fast walking (Walton, 2016). In 2012, Medicare programs began to include and cover the cost of cardiac rehabilitation and yoga classes became qualified as a covered cost because of its health benefits ("Yoga Statistics and Industry Demographics," 2017).

However, although innovations like goat yoga, chocolate yoga, and acro-yoga classes increase the popularity of yoga, there is no research to demonstrate that these new formats have the same health benefits as traditional yoga techniques. In these yoga variations, practitioners are only adopting the physical aspect of yoga practice, which can degrade its traditional, all-encompassing intentions. Yogis may enjoy the physical stimulation innovative yoga adaptations provide; however, they may not derive the full health and mental well-being benefits associated with traditional yoga through meditation and guided spiritual (Gander, 2017).

Several businesses are even attempting to patent their innovative versions of yoga practice, which is problematic for many traditional yogis who believe that these businesses are directly violating yoga's core themes and philosophy. Many believe that yoga is part of humanity's shared knowledge and that no one person or group has the right to patent a particular form of yoga, inhibiting its alternative forms (TNN, 2007).

As the popularity of yoga has increased, there has been a high demand for trainers and yoga instructors. While the Yoga Alliance boasts an impressive 52,700-plus certified instructors (Hammond, 2018), a question of quality versus quantity arises. In fact, qualified instructors are in short supply, which may lead to sub-standard quality of philosophy instruction within the classroom or yoga studio. A 2016 study by the Yoga Journal found that 91% of American yoga studio owners believed it important for their teachers to have a Yoga Alliance credential. Conversely, 99% of the same yoga studio owners believed that their teachers should be more knowledgeable about yoga poses, Yoga suggesting that the Alliance certification course does not appropriately prepare an instructor (Hammond, 2018) Consequently, the majority of American yoga practitioners may not know the history of yoga or understand the true intention of the practice. Thus, not only are American yoga adaptations straying from the traditional practice, the lack of knowledgeable yoga instructors is further limiting yoga to just the physical or bodily aspect with an emphasis on physical fitness instead of also being a mental and spiritual practice. Indeed, 31% of the widely publicized Yoga Journal is devoted to the physical fitness and flexibility advances a yoga practitioner can make (Freeman et al., 2017). However, this ideal promotes the growth of American yoga adaptations, which impedes the growth of traditional yoga. It may take time to sway the American interest into the eight aspects of yoga - Yama: ethical standards; Niyama: self- discipline and Asana: spiritual observances; spiritual growth through posture; Praynayama: breath control; Pratyahara: withdrawal and sensory transcendence from the external world; Dharana: concentration; Dhyana: meditation and contemplation; Samadhi: ecstasy. These eight aspects comprise an all-encompassing practice that offers guidelines for a meaningful, purposeful, ethical centric, and self-disciplined way of life (Carrico, 2007).

2. Yoga Philosophy versus Consumerism

The core intention of yoga practice is to connect the mind, body, and spirit, and is not intended to be linked to profit. Indeed, consumerism and materialism are counter to spirituality. However, profitability is an undeniable objective for the health businesses that offer yoga classes or sell yoga-related products. The yoga industry in the United States is expanding rapidly into new niche industries and consumer bases to fit the needs of an evolving yoga accessory industry (mats, clothes, etc.). The yoga accessory market and the associated exercise industry have given rise to new brands, products, and marketing initiatives that totaled over USD 16.8 billion in sales (Walton, 2016). The yoga industry is expected to grow at 10.6% annually to USD 11.56 billion in revenue by 2020 (Statista, 2018). Americans spent nearly USD 5.8 billion on yoga classes, USD 4.6 billion on yoga apparel, and USD 3.6 billion on yoga accessories (Walton, 2016). That is an increase of USD 3 billion since 2012. Most yoga classes in the US range in price from USD 12 to 16 per class. American practitioners spent USD 2.4 billion more on their yoga clothes and accessories than they did on instructional time ("What is Yoga," 2019).

The most popular and premium American yoga brand is Lululemon, which reported revenues of USD 2.34 billion in 2017 ("Lululemon Athletica Inc," 2018). Lululemon's success has given rise to competitors, each seeking their own competitive advantage with this growing consumer base. Brands including Athleta, Under Armor, and Nike have released their own yoga lines and even have specific campaigns targeting the underrepresented male yogi. The apparel industry, fueled by

yoga's popularity and American consumerism, has given rise to a fashion trend of leading a performance lifestyle throughout the week and thus has been labeled "athleisure clothing," or wearing athletic clothing for non-athletic ventures such as going grocery shopping, going to work, or other every day activities (Sapna, 2015). Athleta, a brand of women's athletic and yoga apparel owned by The Gap and launched in 2009, has experienced sales growth of 25% each year for the past six years and is expected to cross the USD 1 billion mark in annual sales in 2018 ("Why The Gap Needs Athleta to Stay Fit," 2018).

This rapid growth of yoga and its associated industry has been met with general acceptance in the U.S. as Americans continue to purchase more athleisure clothing, attend yoga classes, and continue the trend towards an active and healthy lifestyle. However, for those who truly understand yoga, its profit orientation can seem almost antithetical to its original intent and purpose. Many traditional yogis claim that the businesses are directly violating the core themes and philosophy of yoga because yoga is focused around the idea of inner peace, balance, and personal reflection - the core ideals of Hinduism (TNN, 2007). The Bhagavata Purana, an ancient Hindu text, states that we have no right to claim more than what is required for our basic purposes (Sugirtharadjah, 2001). Thus, although monetizing adaptations of yoga might help American business owners' profit, traditional yogis, many of whom are either practicing Hindus or are guided by the principals of Hinduism, argue against this profit orientation.

3. The American Yogi

Yoga practitioners in the U.S are diverse, ranging from intellectuals seeking spiritual enlightenment to stay-at-home mothers in Lululemon active wear. Although

yoga is growing in the U.S. in terms of both practitioners and yogis, 34% of Americans say they will likely practice yoga within the next year. Amongst the 23% of nonpractitioners surveyed, there is still a gender, generational, and geographical divide. Out of the 37 million American yogis, only 28% (10.3 million) are male. The female majority consists mainly of 30 to 39-year old Caucasians who tend to be affluent and live in urban cities that are largely on the east and coasts of the United States (Baitmangalkar, 2014).

Several factors might explain yoga's geography-based popularity. First, urban areas are more ethnically diverse, which directly correlates to openness to other cultures (McCann, 2019). Second, healthcare preferences differ across generations. Millennials seem to be most receptive to yoga as compared to other generations. Millennials range in age from 24 to 41 and are characterized by their self-expression, generally liberal political views, openness to change (Pew Research Center, 2010). Increasingly, Millennials are rejecting many conventional aspects of healthcare (Baxter, 2019) and turning towards alternative medicines that offer a holistic approach to healing. This is not surprising because they have been exposed at a younger age to alternative health care methods like yoga and tai chi that use mind and body treatments (Koeppel, 2014). Millennials are the largest cohort (even larger than Baby Boomers), they are willing to try new things, and they have a propensity to live in urban areas (Sisson, 2018). Accordingly, yoga classes, traditional as well as American adaptations of it, have grown rapidly in urban areas. Third, urban areas have higher population especially on the east and west coasts, so even if only a small percent of the total population practices yoga, in terms of sheer numbers, it becomes fairly large. Wordof-mouth effects that could increase the number of people trying yoga would also be

greater in densely populated urban areas than in rural areas ("Serving the Yoga Community," 2019).

An interesting study by Professor Jacob Hirsh of the Rotman School of Management found that meditation makes people more liberal because it "lowers the rigid boundaries between self and other that people normally experience" (as cited in Schiffman, 2013, para. 6), thereby promoting egalitarianism which in turn supports liberal political attitudes. It could also be that meditation and spiritual practice calm anxieties and create more positive and attitudes (Schiffman. trusting However, these theories have not been rigorously tested. It would also be interesting to note whether prior liberal or conservative beliefs lead to greater or lesser propensity to adopt yoga.

The key issue that remains is that yoga's popularity amongst the urban and predominantly affluent Americans along the US coastal regions may not help yoga gain popularity in smaller towns and the central parts of the country. Rural areas may lack access to classes, and there may be lack of public engagement and awareness about yoga. However, this does not mean that the rural population would not benefit from practicing it. Indeed, the shortage of medical and mental health care in rural areas could be an opportunity area for the expansion of yoga because of its physical and mental benefits (Saylor Academy, 2012).

4. Women in Yoga

One perception about yoga is that it is a form of exercise naturally more suited for females and so men, who tend to prefer higher intensity and power-focused workouts, may not be willing to try it out (Gregiore, 2013). Women have dominated the American yoga industry in both class participation and spending while companies like Lululemon, Athleta, and various health clubs have capitalized on the growth. Male yogis in the U.S have grown to 10.4 million individuals; however, female practitioners still dominate at 26.5 million ("Highlights from 2016 Yoga in America Study," 2016). The yoga gender divide in the U.S. can be attributed to the same reasons traditional yoga is practiced: physical and mental stimulation.

Men can be discouraged from participating in activities like yoga that require more flexibility to be successful, feel inferior when they cannot perform the same exercises as women, and shy away from becoming involved in an intimately spiritual and emotional exercise (Gregoire, 2013), Women are more likely to adopt activities like dancing and gymnastics as physical activities as opposed to power training sports and fitness activities (Singleton, 2010). Most yoga marketing also tends to be focused on women emphasizing how this practice enhances youth, and so it is not a surprise that most yogis and yoga teachers tend to be female (Pingatore, 2015). This in turn reinforces the myth that yoga is meant or designed for women.

There is also a myth surrounding the physical benefits derived from yoga reflected in Eric Niiler's comment, "Yoga isn't a decent workout; it's too touchy-feely; you have to be flexible to do it; men's bodies just aren't built for pretzel-like poses" (Niiler, 2013, para. 5). Typically, a workout or exercise session shows physical results, and yoga does not necessarily provide the physical strain males expect from a workout. Men may also be intimidated by poses that require much more flexibility and may also be discouraged by the spiritual aspects of yoga practice, such as chanting or reciting poses in Sanskrit (Niiler, 2013).

American companies capitalized on this gender gap and introduced new lines of apparel and accessories targeted toward to the female consumer, further encouraging more women to make a purchase and other women to attempt a yoga session. These companies are also marketing their product to be used every day, not just during a yoga session (Gregiore, 2013). Sales have increased exponentially as a result. Only more recently have these companies started releasing lines of athleisure apparel to men. In 2016, Lululemon, a premium brand of yoga attire and athleisure apparel, introduced a men's clothing line with similar premium pricing to reach a new customer base. They call this a push for 'mindfulness in men' (Bain, 2019). Yoga Jack is another company that offers yoga accessories specifically for men (Held, 2013). possible that the rise of yoga-related athleisure clothing may increase men's interest in yoga, but this may be more underlined by corporate marketing of yoga accessories than for the physical and mental benefits of yoga.

5. Country of Origin Effects and Religion

The physical and mental wellness benefits of yoga are consistently found not just in adults but also in children who practice yoga. Research has found that yoga can enhance prosocial and self-regulation skills improvement leading to in performance (Gard, Noggle, Park, Vago, & Wilson, 2014). Accordingly, some school systems have attempted to introduce destressing techniques for students as part of a daily yoga routine. In the U.S., 36 organizations were identified that offer yoga programs at their schools. One study showed that over 940 schools were currently implementing a yoga program in their facilities (Butzer et al., 2015).

However, despite its known health benefits among children, some schools, such as one in Georgia, received pushback from many parents for incorporating yoga in their curriculum because of concerns about yoga's religious roots in Hinduism (Wang, 2016). They feared that yoga was a conversion method for Hinduism, the polytheistic religion around which yoga is spiritually based. Due to these concerns, many school systems had to carefully adjust their yoga study methods. For example, in Georgia's Cobb County school district, students are asked not to say "Namaste" or put their hands over their heart when opening and closing the session (Konstantinides. Students will also not be allowed to participate in activities that relate to Hinduism, such as coloring mandalas (French, 2016), which are geometric patterns that represent the cosmos metaphysically in Hinduism (Cunningham, 2010).

This debate resounds on a national level and reflects growing educational and cultural concerns. In Encinitas, California, a program called the Health and Wellness Program (HWP) was created to serve 5,400 children as a beta test for implementation outside the district. The goal of the program was to provide students with techniques, habits, and training for life-long health and wellness. Yoga on mats was one of four parts of this program, and the principles were introduced to the students as an educational positive-habit-forming However, parental concerns have resulted in lawsuits. While the legal system has ruled twice in favor of the California district that has been sued for the apparent unconstitutionality of implementing the religious aspects of yoga into the classroom, the arguments raised by these cases have increased the public perception of these school-based programs, what is taught, and what is not taught to children within this educational context (Cook-Cottone, Lemish, & Guyker, 2017).

Recent political changes in the United States seem to be increasing xenophobia (Jacobs, 2018). Since the 2016 U.S. presidential election, anti-immigrant rhetoric has resulted in several shootings targeting Indian immigrants in the U.S and threatens to strain India-U.S. relations (Fuchs & Merchant, 2017). How this may play out in terms of perceptions of people, business, and practices related to India, such as Information Technology workers, Indian restaurants, or for that matter, yoga, is something that only the future will tell.

Conclusion

This case study has examined the origin and rise in popularity of yoga in the United States and identified five key challenges to the further growth of yoga in its traditional form: (1) Yoga's form and format in the U.S is becoming markedly different from the original, ancient Indian practice that was aimed at physical and mental well-being based on spirituality. The lack of qualified instructors is exacerbating this problem; (2) Yoga is becoming too profit driven, fueling the rise of yoga-related consumption such as classes, clothing, and accessories which are counter to the spiritual and philosophical foundations of yoga; (3) Yoga is perceived as being mainly for females and the affluent and elite living in urban areas, especially on the east and west coasts; (4) The female demographic is the most prevalent practitioner and spender in the yoga industry when compared to males, which is most likely due to the physical and mental stimulation attributed to yoga. American brands have capitalized on this gender divide and driven products toward the female yogi; (5) Despite the health benefits of yoga for adults as well as children, its adoption in schools is receiving resistance from some parents due to its roots in Hinduism. Antiimmigration rhetoric can only compound the problems that yoga is likely to face in the U.S.

Case Questions

- **1.** Describe the practice of yoga and its growth in the United States.
- **2.** What key challenges does yoga face in the United States and how can they be overcome?
- 3. Create a marketing plan for a company intending to launch a line of yoga studios across the United States. Please use the marketing mix (product, price, place and promotion) to develop a marketing strategy for the company.

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