



Original Research / Özgün Araştırma

Self-Perceived Health Status and Yoga-Related Perceptions among Yoga Practitioner

Yoga Yapan Bireylerin Sağlık Durum Algısı ve Yogaya İlişkin Görüşleri

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ABSTRACT

Aim: To determine self-perceived health status among yoga practitioners and their perceptions of yoga. **Methods:** This descriptive study was conducted in an online yoga platform during the month of December 2017. A total of 1602 individuals logged into the website during the data collection period, of which 158 volunteered to participate in the online survey. Data were collected using a questionnaire that included the participants' descriptive characteristics (6 questions) and their perceptions of yoga (5 questions), and the Perceived Health Status Scale. **Results:** In the study, 92.4% of the yoga practitioners were females between the ages of 32 and 38; 36.1% had been practicing yoga for less than 6 months. Purposes for doing yoga were for sport (39.3%), spiritual development (24.0%), personal development (22.8%), and meditation (13.9%). The most popular place to practice yoga was a yoga studio (62.6%). Circumstances that prevented yoga practice were financial limitations (32.9%), lack of spare time (30.4%), fatigue (19.0%), and yoga not being a priority (17.7%). The large majority (96.2%) of respondents stated that yoga is necessary for a healthy life. Perceived physical health was "very good" for 57.0% of the individuals. Mean perceived health score was 1.47±0.32. Perceived health score was significantly associated with duration of yoga practice (F=1.53, p<0.05) and perception of yoga as essential for a healthy life (F=2.81, p<0.05). **Conclusion:** The majority of yoga practitioners in our study were well-educated females between 32 and 38 years of age. More than half of the respondents rated their physical health as "very good". Longer yoga practice was associated with greater self-perception of good physical health.

Keywords: Perception, perceived health status, yoga, yoga practitioners

ÖZET

Amaç: Yoga yapan bireylerin sağlık durum algısı ve yogaya ilişkin görüşlerini belirlemektir. **Yöntem:** Tanımlayıcı araştırma, online bir yoga platformunda 01-30 Aralık 2017 tarihleri arasında yürütülmüştür. Evreni veri toplama sürecinde internet sitesine giriş yapan 1602 kişi oluşturmaktadır. Örneklem seçimine gidilmemiş evrenin tamamına ulaşmak hedeflenmiştir. Araştırmaya online anketi dolduran 158 gönüllü katılmıştır. Veriler, katılımcıların tanıtıcı özelliklerini (6 soru), yogaya ilişkin görüşlerini (5 soru) içeren soru formu ve Sağlık Durumunu Algılama Ölçeği kullanılarak toplanmıştır. **Bulgular:** Yoga yapan bireylerin %92.4 ü kadın ve 32-38 yaş aralığındadır. Bireylerin %36.1'i 6 aydan az süredir yoga yapmaktadır. Bireylerin yoga ile ilgili görüşleri incelendiğinde; yoganın birey için anlamı sırasıyla: spor (%39.3), ruhsal gelişim (%24.0), kişisel gelişim (%22.8), meditasyon (%13.9) olarak bildirilmiştir. Bireylerin en sık yoga yaptığı yer yoga stüdyosudur (%62.6). Yoga yapmayı aksatan durumlar; ekonomik sebepler (%32.9), zaman ayıramamak (%30.4), bedensel yorgunluk (%19.0), yoganın öncelik olmayışı (%17.7) olarak saptanmıştır. Bireylerin %96.2'si sağlıklı yaşam için yoganın gerekli olduğunu ifade etmiştir. Bireylerin %57.0'ı fiziksel sağlığını "çok iyi" olarak algıladığı saptanmıştır. Sağlığı algılama puan ortalaması 1.47±0.32'dir. Bireylerin yoga yapma süresi (F=1.53 p<0.05), yogayı sağlıklı yaşam için gerekli bulma (F=2.81 p<0.05) değişkenleri ile sağlığı algılama puan ortalaması arasında anlamlı bir fark bulunmuştur. **Sonuç:** Yoga yapan bireylerin büyük bir kısmının 32-38 yaş arası, yüksek eğitilmiş kadınlardan oluştuğu belirlenmiştir. Bireylerin yarısından fazlasının fiziksel sağlığını "çok iyi" olarak algıladığı belirlenmiştir. Yoga yapma süresi arttıkça bireylerin fiziksel sağlık algısının "çok iyi" yönde arttığı gösterilmiştir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Görüş, sağlık durumunu algılama, yoga, yoga yapan bireyler

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INTRODUCTION

The term yoga is derived from the Sanskrit word 'yuj', which means to join, to unify, union.^{1,2} Described in inscriptions dating back to 400 B.C. as a set of systematic methods aimed at knowing the self, remembering our direct connection with the source, and opening the mind to higher consciousness. Yoga is considered as science and art that promotes conscious living; is not a religion or doctrine, but a philosophical system.² The philosophy and practice of yoga are based on physical postures, breath control, concentration and meditation, relaxation, ethical principles, spirituality, inner consciousness, and return to the essential.^{3,4} Yoga originated in Aryan people living on Indus Valley and evolved into a variety of forms and schools.⁵ By the end of the 1930s, women had also started to practice yoga, and it was at this time that yoga became a global phenomenon and commonly practiced form of exercise.⁶

Over the course of its 2000-year history, the practice of yoga has evolved from its focus on mental and physical self-discipline in pursuit of spiritual goals to a more globally accessible focus on general mental and physical well-being. As one of the complementary health practices, yoga not only alleviates physical discomfort but is also a key practice preferred by healthy individuals to maintain and improve health.⁷ The therapeutic benefits of yoga and meditation have been demonstrated in the literature.^{8,9} Yoga has been shown in clinical trials to positively influence various physical and mental health indicators.^{6,8} As a holistic practice, yoga helps individuals increase their quality of life.^{1,2} Yoga raises awareness of the breath and body, thereby reducing overall stress levels by helping an individual relax and cope more effectively with stress.⁹ The practice of yoga both improves physical health and promotes self-esteem, ultimately healing the soul.¹⁰

In keeping with its ancient roots, yoga integrates the mind and body and encourages self-discipline in both realms in order to achieve personal transformation. Yoga has also been associated with higher perceived self-efficacy and social standing.¹¹ In recent years, people have turned to yoga both as a method of maintaining physical health and as a way to sustain a feeling of overall well-being.^{11,12,13,14}

Although yoga has only been practiced in the West since its import from India around the turn of the 20th century¹⁵, modern yoga has become a popular practice in the US and Europe. In 2002, 10.4 million adults in the US reported having done yoga at some time¹⁶, while this number increased to 31 million in 2016.¹⁷ The popularity of yoga is also

on the rise in Turkey. Considering the health benefits of yoga, the Turkish Sport for All Federation (SFA) has been actively promoting yoga as part of its mission to support healthy lifestyles and behaviors in Turkish society. SFA closely follows international developments in the field of yoga and promotes the practice in Turkey with the slogan "Yoga for all ages, yoga for life".¹⁸ However, despite the popularity of yoga in Turkey, little is known about those who practice yoga. The aim of this study was to investigate self-reported perceptions of health status among yoga practitioners and to determine their perceptions of yoga.

METHODS

Study Design

This is a descriptive study.

Study Population and Sample

The study was conducted in an online yoga platform between the dates of December 1-30, 2017. The universe for this research consisted of 1602 individuals who logged into an online yoga platform website during the data collection period. There was no sampling and the goal was to reach the entire population. A total of 158 participants were recruited for the online survey. To use this online yoga platform, members pay a monthly subscription fee for access to expert videos about different yoga styles. This allows members to practice any style of yoga they want for as long as they want, anytime and anywhere.

Data Collection Method

The questionnaire used in the study was prepared by the researchers based on similar previous studies.^{4,11,17} The questionnaire comprises three sections. The first section includes 6 questions eliciting personal information about the yoga practitioner such as age, gender, marital status, education level, economic status, and how long they have practiced yoga.

The second section consists of 5 questions concerning subjective views about yoga, such as the individual's reason for practicing yoga, obstacles to practicing yoga, motivation to practice yoga via telephone and computer, and the necessity of yoga for a healthy life.

The third section is the Perception of Health Status Scale, developed by Davis, Avery, and Donald in 1978. The scale was validated in the Turkish population by Esin and Erdoğan in 1997 and has been used in numerous studies to measure

individuals' self-perceived health status. The scale has only one item, "How do you perceive your current health status?", which is answered by selecting "very good" (1 point), "good" (2 points), "poor" (3 points), or "very poor" (4 points). When assessing the scale, 4 is considered the lowest score, and 1 the highest. Cronbach alpha was 0.89.¹⁹

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were expressed in numbers and percentages. Between-group comparisons were made using t-test and variance analyses. Statistical calculations were evaluated with 95% confidence intervals and a significance level of $p < 0.05$. SPSS 22.0 (Statistical Program for the Social Sciences, IBM) software package was used for all statistical analyses.

Ethical Considerations

The scientific ethics committee of a university in the Aegean Region granted approval for data collection. Respondents voluntarily participated in the study by clicking a link to the survey after logging into the online yoga platform. At the beginning of the survey, respondents were informed about the purpose of the research and the confidentiality of the data.

Limitations of the Study

Although this study provided striking findings, there are some limitations. Yoga practitioners were defined in this study as individuals who had practiced yoga in the last month; however, it is not known how frequently they practiced yoga during that time. The inclusion criteria for this study included being at least 18 years of age. However, there is always the risk of recall bias and inaccurate self-reporting when gathering data via anonymous online surveys. Despite these limitations, the findings of this study provide valuable insight into the perceptions surrounding yoga and health.

RESULTS

Of the yoga practitioners included in the study, 92.4% were females between the ages of 32 and 38; 70.3% were single, and 67.1% had income equal to their expenses. Seventy-nine percent of respondents were university graduates, 20.2% were high school educated, and 3.8% held postgraduate/doctorate degrees. About 36% reported practicing yoga for less than 6 months (Table 1).

Reasons for practicing yoga included for sport (39.3%), spiritual development (24.0%), personal development (22.8%), and meditation (13.9%). The most popular places for practicing yoga were the yoga studio (62.6%), gym (19.0%),

and home (18.4%). Circumstances that prevented yoga practice were financial limitations (32.9%), lack of spare time (30.4%), fatigue (19.0%), and yoga not being a priority (17.7%). About 86% stated a desire to practice yoga by watching videos on a mobile phone or computer for the length of time and at the level of their choice, if possible. The large majority (96.2%) of the respondents stated that yoga is necessary for a healthy life (Table 2).

Perceived physical health was "very good" for 57.0% of the individuals. Mean perceived health score was 1.47 ± 0.32 (Table 3).

Fifty-seven percent of respondents perceived their physical health as very good and the remaining 43% as good. The mean perceived health status score was 1.47 ± 0.32 . Mean perceived health scores were significantly higher among those practicing yoga for 6 months or longer ($F = 1.53$ $p < 0.05$) and those who considered yoga necessary for a healthy life ($F = 2.81$ $p < 0.05$) (Table 4).

DISCUSSION

As yoga becomes increasingly common in Turkey both as an aspect of holistic health care and as a remedy for disease, it becomes necessary to investigate why and when people practice yoga and how their perceived health status relates to yoga. This information will be beneficial in planning yoga health interventions and making yoga more accessible. The present study was conducted to determine yoga practitioners' perceptions of their health status and of yoga. Most of the research participants were female (92.4%) and between the ages of 32 and 38 years. Overall, the education level was high among the participants, most of whom were university graduates (79.0%). These findings are comparable to the literature.^{8,20} A study conducted in America in 2004 determined that the majority of yoga practitioners were young, well-educated females.⁸ Ross et al. (2013)²⁰ also reported that yoga practitioners were mostly female (84.2%) and well-educated, with 90% holding an undergraduate or higher degree. However, a group of yoga practitioners aged 21-44 years in a study conducted in India by Telles et al. (2017)³ was predominantly male (67.3%) with high school education (62.5%).

More than a quarter of the respondents stated that they had been practicing yoga for less than 6 months. In 2002, Barnes et al. (2004)¹⁶ reported that 5.1% of the US population used yoga for health in the last 12 months, corresponding to 10.4 million individuals. Telles et al. (2017)³ determined that 54.4% of their 5157 participants had practiced yoga for a period of a year or less. In another study, the mean duration of yoga practice was reported to be 11.4 (± 7.5) months.⁸ According to various reports in the literature, the most common place to practice yoga is yoga studios.^{3,7,17}

Table 1. Distribution of the yoga practitioners in the study according to their socio-demographic characteristics

Characteristic	N	%
Age group		
18-24 years	22	13.9
25-31 years	38	24.0
32-38 years	62	39.3
≥39 years	36	22.8
Sex		
Female	146	92.4
Male	12	7.6
Marital status		
Married	47	29.7
Single	111	70.3
Education level		
High school	32	20.2
University	120	79.0
Postgraduate/Doctorate	6	3.8
Economic situation		
Income greater than expenses	18	11.4
Income equal to expenses	106	67.1
Income less than expenses	34	21.5
Duration of Yoga Practice		
<6 months	57	36.1
6-11 months	47	29.7
1-4 years	43	27.2
≥5 years	11	7.0
Total	158	100.0

Table 2. Yoga practitioners' perceptions of yoga

Characteristic	N	%
Reason for Practicing Yoga		
Meditation	22	13.9
Sport	62	39.3
Spiritual development	38	24.0
Personal development	36	22.8
Setting of Yoga Practice		
Home	29	18.4
Yoga studio	99	62.6
Gym	30	19.0
Reasons preventing yoga practice		
Lack of free time	48	30.4
Financial reasons	52	32.9
Physical fatigue	30	19.0
Not prioritizing yoga	28	17.7
Desire to practice yoga using phone, computer, etc.		
Yes	136	86.1
No	22	13.9
Is yoga necessary for a healthy life?		
Yes	152	96.2
No	6	3.8
Total	158	100.0

Table 3. Distribution of the yoga practitioners in the study according to their perceived health status

Perceived Health Status	N	%
Very good (VG)	90	57.0
Good (G)	68	43.0
Poor (P)	-	-
Very poor (VP)	-	-
Total	158	100.0
Mean perceived health score	1.47±0.32 (scale max=1, min=4) (VG: 1 point, VP: 4 points)	

Table 4. Distribution of yoga practitioners' mean perceived health scores according to the duration of their yoga practice and perception of yoga as necessary for a healthy life

Variable	Perceived Health			
	N	Mean SD	F	p
Duration of yoga practice				
<6 months		1.65 (0.22)	1.53	p=0.013*
6-11 months	57	1.58 (0.31)		
1-4 years	47	1.47 (0.38)		
≥5 years	43	1.45 (0.12)		
	11			
Is yoga necessary for a healthy life?				
Yes	152	1.42 (0.37)	2.81	p=0.027*
No	6	1.86 (0.33)		

*p<0.05, one-way univariate Anova (the F test) was done.

Similarly, 62.6% of the respondents in our study stated that they practiced in yoga studios. Ross et al. (2013)⁸ also reported that more yoga contact time (overall duration and/or frequency of practice) was associated with higher likelihood of belief in the health benefits of yoga.

Despite its more esoteric spiritual origins, modern yoga is now considered a conventional form of exercise.²¹ In the current study, the most common reason for practicing yoga was for the purpose of sport/exercise, followed by spiritual development, personal development, and meditation. Our finding that physical fitness was the main motivator of yoga practice is consistent with results reported from Australia²², America^{7,17}, and even India³. In another study, both yoga practitioners and instructors cited exercise and stress relief as their primary reasons for doing yoga. Secondary motives included getting into shape, improving flexibility, and alleviating depression and anxiety.²³ On the other hand, the yoga practitioners in a study by Ross et al. (2013)⁸ stated that they did yoga because it made them happier (86.5%), increased their energy levels (84.5%), and improved the quality of their sleep (68.5%) and social relationships (67%). In a study by Park et al. (2016)²³, participants practiced yoga for various reasons. The most common of these were to improve flexibility (96.7%), for relaxation (94.5%), and to promote feelings of peace (81.3%) and happiness (68.1%).²³ Other reasons included relieving depression/anxiety or pain, controlling side effects, weight control, and spirituality.²³ Moreover, healthy adults prefer yoga for reducing their stress and maintaining general well-being.⁹ In a study²⁴ conducted among participants of a yoga class in the United States (US) (n=290), reasons cited for beginning or returning to yoga also varied widely, with the most common being general wellness (81%), physical exercise (80%), and stress management (73%). Less common reasons given included seeking a spiritual experience (37%),

alleviating a health condition (28%), or preventing illness (23%).²⁴ These findings indicate that yoga is an accessible health practice that can benefit many people for many different reasons and that practitioners approach yoga with preconceived goals and expectations.

Approximately all (96.2%) of the yoga practitioners in our study expressed a belief that yoga is essential for a healthy life. Similarly, 89.5% of the participants in a study by Ross et al. (2013) believed that yoga practice had a positive impact on their general health.⁸ In a 2008 study by Birdee et al. (2008), 58% of the yoga practitioners stated that yoga was an important factor in their physical health, while 16% used yoga to treat specific medical conditions.⁷ The Press Trust of India reported in 2016 that people were becoming more aware that certain diseases could be managed through yoga and other healthy lifestyle behaviors.²⁵ Overall, the evidence suggests that yoga is primarily seen and used as a way to maintain health.

Yoga is described as a holistic system that unifies, harmonizes, and strengthens the mind, body, and spirit.²⁶ It has been proposed that the popularity of yoga may be largely attributable to its psychophysiological effects, which attenuate the stress response and improve emotional stability and regulation, leading to a greater feeling of well-being and improving quality of life.²⁷ All of the yoga practitioners included in the present study perceived their physical health as good (43%) or very good (57%). A study²⁰ conducted in the US determined that yoga practitioners tend to have better health status. Ross et al. (2013)⁸ also observed that yoga practitioners often reported their health to be very good (46.3%) or excellent (38.8%). In the same study, yoga practitioners agreed irrespective of gender that yoga improved their health.⁸

The results of our study confirm previous reports that people improve their health and feel

better by practicing yoga. Furthermore, our study demonstrated that the longer yoga is practiced, the more likely the practitioner is to perceive their physical health as very good. The perceived health scores of people who practiced yoga for more than 5 years were significantly higher than those practicing for less than 6 months. In addition, perceived health scores were higher among people who considered yoga essential for a healthy life compared to those who did not. It is an expected finding that an individuals' level of yoga participation would be correlated with how strongly they believe in its health benefits. It is clear that yoga practitioners believe that yoga improves their health, regardless of how long and where they practice. However, it has yet to be determined whether this belief precedes and promotes their yoga practice, or arises as a result of experiencing and benefiting from it. Further research elucidating this relationship could also be informative in the planning of yoga interventions.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Yoga is an ancient mind-body discipline that has evolved from an esoteric pursuit of spiritual goals to a mainstream practice that enhances psychological and physical health and well-being. The majority of yoga practitioners in the present study were highly-educated females aged 32 to 38 years. The most common reason cited for practicing yoga was for the purpose of sport/exercise. A yoga studio was the most preferred setting for practicing yoga. More than half of the yoga practitioners perceived their physical health as very good and the rest perceived it as good. Longer yoga practice was associated with a higher likelihood of very good self-perception of physical health. National surveys can be employed next to further characterize yoga practitioners in Turkey. Furthermore, future studies should determine which subpopulations may benefit the most from practicing yoga and which types of yoga are most beneficial.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest.

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