



From Guru to Algorithm: The Transformation of Authority and Legitimacy in Digital Yoga

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ABSTRACT

Digital yoga raises the problem of authority before it raises the problem of technology. Although platforms do not act as a teacher in the pedagogical sense, their system of rankings, recommendations and metrics influence which teachers and interpretations become repeatedly visible to practitioners. This article therefore examines how do digital platforms reconfigure the conditions through which pedagogical authority and legitimacy are produced, encountered and recognised in contemporary yoga. With Bourdieu's theory of field, relational perspectives of authority, platform studies, algorithmic authority and research on visibility as capital, this paper brings together scholarship on guru-shishya pedagogy and contemporary yoga. The central argument is that digital visibility increases the claims to authority more easily than it verify actual expertise. Discoverability can lead to repeated exposure, familiarity and provisional trust, and can then be converted into students, subscriptions, income, collaborations or symbolic standing. Conversion remains conditional on lineage recognition, embodied pedagogical competence, credentials, offline reputation, ethical standing and

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audience knowledge. Direct research on online yoga further shows that distance can weaken touch, correction and co-presence while increasing the importance of verbal guidance, student self-responsibility and mediated community. The article contributes a relational account of hybrid authority in which established forms of cultural and symbolic capital interact with digitally produced visibility. Algorithms possess no yogic expertise and do not determine legitimacy independently; they reorganise the circumstances in which claims to expertise are seen, compared and sometimes accepted.

Introduction

A student opening a yoga application, YouTube page or social-media feed does not meet the full range of available teachers. By making some instructors more visible than other through search results, recommendation systems, follower networks and previous user engagement, digital encounters are shaped in advance. Although expertise cannot be certified through these mechanisms, they influence which teachers and ideas become visible and can shape perceptions of competence, affinity, and trust (Bucher, 2012; Cotter, 2019; Gillespie, 2014). This problem should not be exaggerated, as algorithms cannot understand individual students, or practice yoga themselves or accept ethical responsibility for instruction, they cannot replace gurus. However, it is still misleading to treat platforms as neutral spaces, either. Platforms influence who students encounter first by ranking teachers, displaying public metrics and repeatedly exposing users to certain instructors. In a pedagogical field where much of the relevant competence is difficult to inspect before entering a relationship, the ordering of first encounters matters.

The primary research question examines how digital platforms reshape the ways pedagogical authority and legitimacy are produced, encountered and recognised in contemporary yoga. The focus is on two key issues: the first highlights the interaction of lineages, embodied expertise, professional qualification and digital visibility in establishing legitimacy. Secondly, how accountability is sustained when yoga instruction is dispersed across recorded classes, livestreams, apps, studios, and short-form content rather than a durable teacher-student relationship. The objective of this article is to develop a relational account of platform-mediated authority in contemporary yoga by examining how established forms of cultural and symbolic capital interact with digitally produced visibility. The account is deliberately hybrid. Contemporary yoga is not moving along a single line from inherited tradition to commercial culture and then to the algorithm. Modern yoga was already being remade through transnational circulation, institutions, health discourses and



markets before platformisation (De Michelis, 2004; Jain, 2014; Munir et al., 2021; Shaw & Kaytaz, 2021). Now practitioners can learn and practice yoga through digital apps and platforms as well as from studios and wellness centres, thereby continuing teacher-student relationships (Di Placido & Mangiarotti, 2026; Gidaris, 2023). The relevant question is therefore how different claims to authority meet, reinforce one another or fail to convert across these settings.

Digital mediation is historically new in its technical form, but the relation between media and yoga is not a new concept. Studies in modern yoga state that books, transnational religious exchanges and various forms of public representation have reshaped the meaning of yoga. Scholars on the commodification of yoga further illustrate that as yoga entered new societies and markets, and was introduced to new audiences, certain aspects of yoga reformulate. This longer view prevents platformisation from being mistaken for a complete break. It also makes the authority of the sharper issue that each mediation changes which teachers, practices and accounts of yoga can acquire public recognition.

The paper argues that digital visibility can easily strengthen claims to authority more than it can verify expertise. Platform ranking increases discoverability; repeated exposure may produce familiarity, and metrics such as followers and engagement may create social proof that supports trust. This attention can sometimes be converted into students, subscriptions, collaborations, income or symbolic standing. However, these outcomes are not automatic; a large audience may reflect entertainment value, marketing competence, community support, or controversy rather than teaching expertise. Lineage recognition, teacher training, embodied competence, therapeutic or professional qualifications, offline reputation, ethical standing, and audience knowledge can further shape whether visibility develops into recognised legitimacy. Using Bourdieu's concepts of field and capital platform studies, algorithmic authority and visibility as capital, this article connects research on yoga and guru-shishya pedagogy. It is a conceptual analysis rather than a comprehensive review of digital yoga research. The arguments develop through three connected moves. Firstly, authority is understood as a relation based on guidance and recognition; secondly, this relation is situated within a field where resources carry unequal and changing value. Thirdly, it examines how digital platforms organise attention and turn visibility into a form of value. Finally, the discussion considers hybrid forms of authority and how responsibility is distributed across teachers, platforms, certification bodies and the audience



Relational authority and guru- shishya pedagogy

Particularly in the context of teaching, authority should not be understood only as the legitimate power to command. Brigstocke et al. (2021) view authority as a relational process of guidance that develops when actors recognise inequality in knowledge, experience, or access to truth. Thus, to accept a teacher as an authority, status, institutional power, or certification alone is not sufficient. Authority may also emerge through embodied experience, care, and demonstrated judgment. Rather than a fixed quality possessed by an individual, authority is continuously produced and maintained through relationships.

This approach distinguishes authority from mere influence. A popular video may affect behavior without establishing sustained pedagogical authority, equally as advertising can persuade and interface design can influence choices. In a student-teacher relationship, authority involves the learner recognising the teacher as someone who, through knowledge, experience, or judgement, guides the student in areas the student does not yet know. Such recognition may be limited or change over time, rather than the teacher as a whole it is related to a particular instruction and area of practice.

The guru- shishya Parampara represents a strong form of relational authority. Through long-term personal interaction, disciplined practice, imitation, dialogue and lineage, South Asian pedagogical traditions emphasise knowledge transmission, often within a clear hierarchy (Raina,2002; Shaw, 2021). In ashtanga yoga, while a teacher's legitimacy may depend on recognition from established teachers and the wider community, lineage can shape authorised methods, sequences, and teaching credentials (Shaw,2021). Therefore, the relationship combines pedagogical, spiritual and institutional dimensions, with knowledge represented through sustained practice and correction rather than being treated as information alone (Raina,2002).

The embodied nature of this relationship is important because, through continuous interaction with students, a teacher can understand students' physical limitations, habits, confidence, and learning pace. Students also acquire practical dispositions through regular and repeated observation that may not always be expressed explicitly. Research on South Asian dance pedagogy, while not directly focused on yoga, clarifies how apprenticeship combines continuity, repetition, and adaptation as embodied tradition moves across institutions and diasporic contexts (Dalidowicz, 2015; Prickett, 2007). Thus, sustained teacher-student relationships support learning by enabling ongoing observation, personalised adjustment, and direct accountability.



Digital teaching alters this relation through distance, though it does not simply remove it. Di Placido and Mangiarotti's (2026) ethnographic research on online postural yoga is important because it observes the transition directly. Their 'body at a distance' names the practitioner's body as physically separated from teacher, fellow practitioners and the material setting of the class, while remaining virtually oriented toward teaching and community. Teachers in their study could no longer rely in the same way on touch, co-present demonstration or the sensory atmosphere of a shared room. Verbal instruction became more prominent. Teachers reported simplifying, slowing, repeating or making cues more evocative, and the teacher's voice became a main route through which practice was coordinated. Distance therefore changes what competence must look like in practice. A teacher may need to translate fine-grained embodied knowledge into language that can travel through a screen, notice students within a grid of small images and judge when verbal correction is adequate. This is not a lesser version of exactly the same task. It is a related pedagogical task with a changed sensory and technical arrangement. In Di Placido and Mangiarotti's (2026) material, teachers remained ambivalent about what was lost, especially mutual trust built through contact, bodily proximity and the atmosphere of a class. At the same time, some found that online teaching encouraged students to listen more carefully, assume greater responsibility and become less dependent on manual adjustment.

The finding complicates any claim that digitalisation destroys teacher authority. Online formats hindered authority when teachers could not see, touch or interpret bodies adequately, and when participants experienced the setting as thin or impersonal. The same formats could reinforce authority through the teacher's voice, the ability to guide at a distance and the continuing organisation of a community around a recognised teacher (Di Placido & Mangiarotti, 2026). Physical absence could even sharpen students' desire for the teacher's presence. Authority was reworked through different channels; it did not disappear and community is part of that relation. Di Placido and Mangiarotti (2026) found that online classes could sustain supportive ties and enable some geographically distant practitioners to participate more regularly. Yet access was uneven. Space at home, time, digital competence, age, care work and a safe domestic setting affected whether a person could join. Online community was often a continuation of existing school relations by digital means, rather than an open community without boundaries. These observations matter for accountability. A recurring live class attached to a school, where a teacher knows the students and students know one another, does not create the same relations as an anonymous recorded video, even though both are 'online yoga'.

Nor should the guru-shishya model be treated as the ethical benchmark against which all digital practices are judged. Its relational depth can sustain embodied learning and continuity. Its concentration of authority



can also make criticism difficult. Research on Asthanga yoga teachings suggests that the spiritual devotion and therapeutic authority associated with the teacher can sometimes normalise harmful power relations (Shaw, 2012). The guru-student relationship is based on a hierarchical structure; the teacher's authority or position is strongly connected to their spiritual reputation, and the institutional structure compels students to remain loyal to the teacher, making criticism difficult, as students find it difficult to question, criticise, or report inappropriate behaviour. On the other hand, digital platforms may provide students with alternative sources and create opportunities for students to express criticism and raise concerns. However, digital platforms have their own failures of moderation, recourse and accountability. Digital circulation may expose criticism or give students alternative sources, but platforms have their own failures of moderation, recourse and accountability.

The comparison is therefore between institutional forms, not between an authentic past and a false digital present. Guru–shishya pedagogy organises proximity, duration, correction and responsibility around a durable relationship (Raina, 2002; Shaw, 2021). Access to yoga has been broadened through digital platforms, rather than relying on a particular local institution, learners can now receive guidance from multiple sources or teacher (Di Placido & Mangiarotti, 2026; Gidaris, 2023). Each arrangement while offering different form of yoga, has there own blind spots and gaps in knowledge or practice. A lineage credential may become searchable, a lineage organisation may teach online, and a creator may present training or teacher recognition as evidence of legitimacy. These are plausible forms of hybridisation, but their prevalence and reception in yoga remain questions for direct empirical research (Bourdieu, 1986; Di Placido & Mangiarotti, 2026).

Authority, field and forms of capital

Relational authority explains why recognition is necessary. Bourdieu's field theory helps explain why some signs of competence are more readily recognised than others. A field is a structured space of positions and struggles in which actors do not possess equal resources and do not agree fully about what should count as legitimate practice (Bourdieu, 1993). Capital names resources that have value within these relations. Economic capital, cultural knowledge and dispositions, social ties and symbolic recognition can support one another, but their value and rates of conversion vary across fields (Bourdieu, 1986, 1993).

Contemporary yoga is not a single, neatly bounded field. It includes lineage organisations, local studios, retreat economies, teacher-training markets, therapeutic and healthcare settings, religious communities, lifestyle media and platforms. This plurality has a longer history in the transnational formation of modern yoga and its movement through consumer, health and institutional settings (Askegaard & Eckhardt, 2012;



De Michelis, 2004; Jain, 2014; Shaw & Kaytaz, 2021). These spaces overlap, but their judgements are not identical. Across different settings and contexts, the legitimacy and trustworthiness of yoga teachers vary. In a traditional setting, an important source of authority is recognised by knowledge of yoga scriptures or by an established lineage holder. In a health- oriented context, formal qualifications in healthcare may be considered more significant. However, other factors that contribute to the teacher's credibility include owning a yoga studio, holding a certification, having extensive teaching experience or having a physically accomplished yoga body. Nevertheless, the expectations of practitioners attached to these forms of authority differs according to the context (Jain, 2014; Munir et al., 2021; Patwardhan, 2017).

For analytical purposes, lineage recognition and embodied mastery can be treated as forms of cultural and symbolic capital. Years of disciplined practice, command of a pedagogical repertoire and the ability to observe and guide bodies are embodied cultural resources. Authorisation by an established teacher or lineage turns some of those resources into recognised standing. Professional certificates and therapeutic credentials are institutionalised signs whose force depends on who issues them and who accepts them. Social capital operates through teacher networks, studios, communities and collaborations. Economic capital enables training, travel, production equipment, staff and advertising. None of these resources is evenly distributed.

Platform participation adds media production skills, discoverability, audience relations and public metrics to this already plural economy (Abidin, 2016; Cotter, 2019). These additions do not make older capital obsolete. They change how it can be displayed and how far it can travel. A lineage credential known within a small school can be made legible to a transnational audience. An instructor's offline reputation can seed an online following. In the other direction, a creator can use visibility to attract students and may then seek certification or institutional affiliation. What changes is partly an exchange rate: the conditions under which one resource can be translated into another (Bourdieu, 1986, 1993; Lindell & Malmberg, 2026).

This way of framing the problem avoids two weak assumptions. The first is that platform visibility is external to yoga and simply imposed on it. Teachers and organisations participate in its production, sometimes strategically, by selecting formats, narratives, collaborations and schedules. The second is that visibility levels the field. It may enable entrants to reach people without first passing through established gatekeepers, yet established actors often possess reputations, money, networks and archives that make visibility easier to obtain. Whether digital circulation unsettles or reproduces hierarchy is an empirical question.

Lindell and Malmberg's (2026) study of Swedish institutionalised elite politics offers a useful comparator. They conceptualise media visibility and social-media following as capital that interacts with field-specific political capital. Their empirical result is that visibility largely tracked existing political hierarchy, while the reverse conversion from visibility into political capital was more conditional. They also stress that visibility can be lost or can damage standing, and that conversion costs differ across fields. These findings concern elite politics, not yoga. They cannot tell us how yoga students evaluate teachers. Their theoretical value lies in showing why visibility should be analysed within the receiving field and in relation to resources already recognised there.

That comparison raises a more specific question for yoga: the issue is not whether attention is universally valuable, but how different forms of visibility are recognised by a particular audience and converted into what form of legitimacy. For example, a viral performance of an advanced posture may generate reach without recognition from a lineage community, and that same visibility may be beneficial for a commercial class or brand collaboration. Similarly, an established teacher who does not generate large public engagement may strengthen their symbolic status among existing students through online content. Bourdieu's concept of misrecognition further explains how socially produced hierarchies come to appear natural. Public metrics such as followers, likes, and views also contribute to this effect. Although such metrics do not reflect a teacher's knowledge, care, or ethical credibility, they may serve as practical indicators of authority when users have limited information for comparison.

Platform-mediated visibility and algorithmic authority

The term "algorithmic authority" already has an established history and is not introduced in this article. Lustig et al. (2016) use the term "algorithms" to refer to systems that manage human action and control access to information through processes such as content curation and automated decision-making. They highlight attention related to accountability, visibility, sense-making and management. Algorithms are often opaque to those affected by them, while ranking and rating systems can reorganise rewards, sanctions and the very terms by which performance is judged.

Brigstocke et al. (2021) broaden the concept of authority by identifying algorithmic, expert, experiential and participatory forms as interconnected sources of legitimacy. They understand authority as relational, distributed and shaped by varying degrees of distance, proximity and interaction. Even when the basis of an algorithm decision is difficult to inspect, an algorithmic system can still be trusted as a source of information or advice. Expert authority may derive from formal qualifications or specialised knowledge, experiential authority is grounded in shared and embodied experience. Participatory authority emerges



when communities or the affected public are recognised as legitimate contributors to decision making. These forms are not exclusive, but they can be composed together, compete or lend support to one another.

Yoga shows how different forms of authority can overlap online. Teachers may establish their authority through training, scriptural knowledge, and therapeutic knowledge; meanwhile, the recommendation system determines which content becomes visible. A practitioner may value a teacher whose experiences resemble their own body, injury, or life situation. While lineage can provide inherited symbolic legitimacy, a perception of collective endorsement is created by comments, ratings, and community engagement. Even though the algorithmic processes determining visibility remain largely hidden, a single digital interface may present multiple forms of authority simultaneously.

Platform studies clarify that digital system rather than just presenting neutral information, actively distribute attention. Within the broader institutional and commercial system, algorithms select, classify and rank material (Gillespie, 2014; Lustig et al., 2016). By their interfaces, data practices, governance system, and business models, they also shape social and economic interactions (Srnicke, 2017; van Dijck et al., 2018). In cultural production, changing platform infrastructures, markets, and data driven feedback influence the visibility or content (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Discoverability of a yoga teacher also depends on how they adapt to, experiment with, or respond to platforms systems, whose criteria cannot be fully known, rather than just rely on their pedagogical work or practices (Bucher, 2012; Cotter, 2019).

Bucher's (2012) account of algorithmic visibility describes the disciplinary force of possible invisibility: users are encouraged to remain active because content that is not surfaced may effectively vanish from attention. Cotter's (2019) study of Instagram influencers similarly shows influence as a visibility game. Creators infer platform rules, test strategies and adapt their activity while retaining some agency. These studies are not about yoga teachers, and their participants should not be treated as substitutes for them. They do establish a mechanism by which opaque ranking becomes part of cultural work. The process starts with discoverability, as searchable titles, captions, thumbnails, content formats and network connections make yoga content available for ranking. Platforms then distribute this content unevenly, based on signals such as user behaviour and engagement. Audience actions, including viewing, saving, commenting, sharing or leaving, generate further signals. This process creates a recursive cycle in which visibility produces interaction and interaction can support further visibility.

Existing audiences and external reputation may give some actors an initial advantage.



Yoga-specific Instagram research gives a bounded view of what such visibility can contain. Lacasse et al. (2019) analysed 35,000 captions and comments associated with #yoga and coded samples of images and authors. Fitness and appearance-related material were prominent, traditional teachings formed only a small part of the coded text, and the image sample consisted mostly of women whom the researchers classified as underweight, wearing minimal clothing and demonstrating basic poses. The study does not establish that ranking algorithms caused this distribution, and one nine-day hashtag sample cannot represent digital yoga as a whole. It does show that publicly visible yoga in the sampled Instagram material differed markedly from lineage-centred accounts of knowledge and legitimacy (Lacasse et al., 2019).

Nor is platform yoga representationally uniform. Webb et al. (2019) compared 300 images from #curvyfit and #curvyvyyoga and found that the #curvyvyyoga images more often conveyed larger body sizes, shapes and body-as-process characteristics. This is a reminder that hashtags and communities can organise visible bodies differently. Direct yoga evidence therefore supports a platform- and community-specific argument; it does not support a universal claim that all online yoga privileges the same bodies or meanings. Repeated exposure is the next link, but it must be handled carefully. Familiarity can lower the practical cost of choosing whom to follow or whose class to try. Visible metrics and comments may offer social proof, especially when a user has limited information about training or teaching quality. Neither repetition nor metrics creates authority automatically. They make a claim easier to encounter and can make provisional trust less demanding. A user may still inspect credentials, seek recommendations, reject the content or treat it as entertainment.

This is the sense in which visibility amplifies authority claims more readily than it verifies expertise. Ranking increases the reach and recurrence of a claim. Verification requires other practices: observation of teaching, recognised assessment, knowledge of lineage, professional regulation, references from trusted people, or experience over time. Platforms may host some of this evidence, but visibility is not itself a test of it. The distinction is particularly important in yoga because the bodily consequences of an instruction and the ethical conduct of a teacher are poorly captured by engagement metrics.

Online yoga also contains forms of mediation that are not well described by a feed model. Livestreamed classes attached to a known school can preserve mutual recognition and ongoing correction. Recorded libraries may be embedded in memberships with teacher contact. Di Placido and Mangiarotti (2026) show that the online transposition of postural yoga made the teacher's verbal skill, mediated presence and ability to organise community newly salient. Their study does not analyse recommender systems, and it should not



be used to claim algorithmic effects. It shows instead that once contact occurs, pedagogical authority is reconstructed through the specific affordances and limitations of distance teaching.

Algorithmic authority and pedagogical authority thus act at different but connected points. Ranking systems guide access to information and people; teachers guide practice. The platform may have considerable authority over what becomes accessible without possessing authority to judge a posture or interpret a tradition. Problems arise when the first form is mistaken for the second, or when the design of an interface encourages that slippage. The contribution of this article is to apply and specify existing debates about algorithmic authority within contemporary yoga: algorithmically organised visibility interacts with lineage-based, pedagogical, professional and embodied authority, while remaining analytically distinct from them.

Visibility as capital and the conversion of recognition

Visibility has also been theorised as capital before this article. Lindell and Malmberg (2026) place visibility alongside field-specific political capital and examine their association in institutionalised elite politics. Their approach is useful because it refuses to treat social-media reach as a free-standing asset with the same value everywhere. Visibility functions as capital when it is scarce, recognised and capable of producing advantages within or across fields. The empirical evidence they provide belongs to politics. Here it serves as a theoretical comparator for specifying how visibility may operate in yoga.

In contemporary yoga, visibility can be defined provisionally as accumulated recognisability and reach produced through media and platform circulation. It becomes capital only when actors can convert it. The likely sequence is: platform ranking and discoverability; repeated exposure; familiarity and metric or social proof; provisional recognition or trust; and possible conversion into students, subscriptions, collaborations, income or symbolic standing. The arrows in this sequence describe opportunities, not guaranteed effects. Each transition can fail.

The first conversion is from exposure to recognition. An audience must interpret being visible as relevant to a decision. A teacher who appears repeatedly may become familiar without being regarded as knowledgeable. Metrics may be discounted by experienced practitioners who know that followings can arise from entertainment, advertising or platform trends. A newcomer, faced with many similar offerings and little independent information, may use popularity as a rough screening device. Audience knowledge is therefore a moderator. So are the context of the search and the kind of guidance sought.

A second conversion is from recognition to participation. Trying a free video, enrolling in a class, subscribing or travelling to a workshop are different commitments. Lineage recognition may matter strongly



to a student seeking a particular tradition. Teacher-training certificates may reassure some audiences while meaning little to others, especially where standards vary. Professional or therapeutic credentials may be decisive when practice concerns injury, pregnancy, mental health or clinical care. An offline reputation, recommendation from a trusted teacher or evidence of sustained teaching can make visible claims more credible.

Embodied pedagogical competence remains difficult to reduce to a profile. It is encountered when a teacher sequences a class, gives an instruction that a student can use, notices difficulty, responds to a question and knows when not to push. In online settings, competence also includes judging what can safely be taught at a distance and translating observation into verbal guidance. Di Placido and Mangiarotti (2026) show why the voice and the craft of instruction can reinforce authority online. These qualities may be displayed through media, but they are usually recognised across practice, not inferred securely from reach. Ethical reputation is another condition of conversion. A teacher may lose standing when conduct becomes publicly contested. Visibility can accelerate that loss as readily as it accelerates recognition. Platform attention is therefore unstable and potentially ambivalent. Bucher (2012) shows the threat of invisibility created by algorithmic ordering, while the field perspective developed by Lindell and Malmberg (2026) draws attention to depletion as well as accumulation. A platform policy change, audience migration, scandal or conflict with a lineage institution can alter the value of visibility without any corresponding change in embodied skill.

The third conversion is economic or institutional. Attention may yield paid memberships, private students, sponsorships, publishing opportunities, collaborations or invitations. Studies on influencer commerce highlight the construction of personal brands, commercial relationships with the audience and visibility work. Cotter (2019) further demonstrates how influencers understand and adapt to their perceptions of platforms' rules (Abidin, 2016; Cotter, 2019; Khamis et al., 2017). Platform-capitalist business models also make data, intermediation and control of infrastructure economically consequential (Srnicsek, 2017; van Dijck et al., 2018). These studies do not establish how yoga teachers behave as a group. They draw attention to the commercial and technological conditions that may become attached to teaching when digital platforms become an important means of reaching and engaging with students (Gidaris, 2023).

Economic capital can then feed back into visibility. Better equipment, editing, paid promotion, administrative help and time for content production may improve reach. Symbolic capital can do the same: an established teacher, school or publisher can provide an audience before platform activity begins. This feedback makes it risky to interpret online visibility as a transparent record of popular judgement. What appears as audience choice can be shaped by unequal resources accumulated elsewhere. The concept is most



useful when it remains narrow. Visibility capital is not a synonym for followers, fame, social capital or symbolic capital. Followers are one possible indicator of reach. Recognition by a relevant audience gives visibility and symbolic force. Networks contribute social resources. Monetisation produces economic returns. The distinctive feature is dependence on mediated exposure whose distribution is partly controlled by media and platform institutions. Its value is field-dependent, and its conversion costs cannot be assumed in advance.

Three implications follow. First, digital circulations do not necessarily undermine or replace lineage-based authority, as through digital platforms, traditional forms of legitimacy acquire greater public visibility. Secondly, it helps teachers who have limited recognition within established institutions to reach wider audiences and develop alternative forms of visibility, though it does not erase differences in their training, qualifications and competence. Third, pre-existing standing can be amplified by platforms, reproducing hierarchy. These possibilities can occur together. They are propositions for empirical investigation, not findings about the yoga field as a whole.

Hybrid authority, legitimacy and accountability

Hybrid authority refers here to the practical combination of several bases of guidance and recognition. A contemporary teacher may be authorised within a lineage, hold a commercial teacher-training certificate, have therapeutic knowledge, teach effectively in person, maintain a large digital audience and cultivate an intimate community online. Another may have only some of these resources. Students also assemble authority selectively: one person supplies posture instruction, another philosophy, an application structures daily practice, and peers provide experiential advice. No single source necessarily governs the whole practice.

The basis on which the legitimacy is established is also transformed. In a traditional guru- shishya system , legitimacy is often conferred from a recognized succession of teachers and maintained through participation and acceptance in the community (Raina, 2002; Shaw, 2021). Professionalisation adds credentials, institutional affiliations and, in healthcare-facing yoga, questions of policy, regulation and scope of practice (Jain, 2014; Patwardhan, 2017). Platform interfaces can display audience reactions and place many instructors within the same field of comparison (Cotter, 2019; Gidaris, 2023). The result is a crowded evidentiary environment in which credentials, bodies, narratives, metrics and testimonials appear beside one another but are not commensurable.



Hybridisation can broaden access. Digital instruction crosses geographic boundaries and can reduce travel and scheduling constraints. Di Placido and Mangiarotti (2026) found that digital yoga practices reduced the limitations of geographical barriers, as participants can now practice or learn yoga from everywhere. In addition, recorded resources and classes allow learners a self-paced learning. People who feel excluded from local studios may find teachers or communities that speak more directly to their bodies and experience. Research on body-positive yoga hashtags likewise cautions against treating all platform representation as uniform (Webb et al., 2019).

Access is also stratified. Devices, broadband, room to practise, privacy, time and digital literacy are unevenly available. Di Placido and Mangiarotti (2026) found particular difficulties connected with age, care responsibilities, precarious work and domestic space. In platform interfaces, titles, images and brief clips can become immediate cues through which content is encountered. Whether platforms systematically favour such cues over slower or less visual teaching is an empirical question. Philosophical study, slow apprenticeship and quiet competence may circulate online; their comparative discoverability should not be assumed in advance.

The accountability problem is sharper because guidance can be distributed without responsibility being distributed clearly. If a practitioner combines several videos and is injured, no teacher may know the sequence as a whole. A recorded instructor cannot always see contraindications or respond. The platform may disclaim responsibility while having organised the recommendation. Credentialling bodies may certify training but have limited control over daily practice. Audiences can rate content, though popularity and safety are different judgements.

A sustained teacher- student relationship provides a clearer line of responsibility, but it does not automatically ensure protection or accountability. Communities may prioritise established teachers or traditions; meanwhile, concentrated authority discourages complaints. Shaw's (2021) demonstrates that close teacher-student relationships, strong devotion, and healing claims can coexist with harmful power dynamics. Digital platforms may make criticism more visible and connect individuals with similar experiences.

Relational authority offers a practical test. If authority depends on recognition and trust, what information and experience allow that recognition to be revised? In a live online class, can students ask questions, disclose limitations and receive individual correction? Does the teacher state the limits of remote instruction? Are credentials and lineage claims verifiable? Is there a code of conduct and a route for complaints? Can a community criticise its leaders without losing membership? Does a platform explain why



content is recommended or how harmful material is handled? These questions locate accountability across the relation instead of placing it entirely on the student.

Brigstocke et al.'s (2021) plural framework helps here. Expert authority should not be presumed from institutional certification alone, but certificates can provide assessable standards. Experiential authority can give weight to practitioners whose bodies or histories have been marginalised, though personal testimony is not automatically generalisable. Participatory authority can let communities shape norms, but the language of community may conceal exclusion or reproduce existing leaders. Algorithmic authority can assist discovery and coordination, while its opacity makes contestation difficult. The forms need to check one another rather than collapse into one undifferentiated signal of legitimacy.

Di Placido and Mangiarotti's (2026) body at a distance sharpens the pedagogical stakes. The practitioner is physically separated and often more self-responsible, yet remains oriented by a teacher's voice and by a community that may be only partly visible. This relation can cultivate attention and autonomy. It may also privatise risks within the home and make bodily difficulty less perceptible to others. Accountability in digital yoga must therefore concern both public claims to authority and the small, practical circumstances in which a distant body tries to follow them.

The phrase 'from guru to algorithm' is best treated as a question about mediation, not a historical succession. Algorithms enter the chain through which teachers are found and evaluated. Gurus and lineage organisations can use the same systems. Creator authority may be stabilised through certification; institutional authority may seek reach through creator practices. The likely future is continued mixture, with conflict over which combinations deserve trust.

Discussion and future research

The relational account developed here changes the unit of analysis. Instead of asking whether a person or algorithm possesses authority in the abstract, it asks how guidance is produced, what inequality of knowledge is recognised, and through which material and institutional arrangement. A recommendation system has authority over access when users and organisations allow its rankings to guide attention. A teacher has pedagogical authority when students accept guidance concerning practice. A lineage, certificate or audience can authorise that teacher in different ways. These relations can support one another without becoming identical.

This distinction explains why the paper's central mechanism is deliberately asymmetrical. Visibility can amplify a claim before anyone verifies it. A claim cannot be evaluated if it is never encountered, so ranking



has prior force in crowded environments. Once encountered, however, its acceptance depends on resources and judgements that ranking does not supply by itself. Repetition and metrics may support provisional trust, but the conversion into durable legitimacy is moderated by field position, credentials, embodied teaching, ethics, offline reputation and audience knowledge.

The argument also suggests that visibility is neither inherently democratising nor inherently corrupting. It can bypass established gatekeepers and make marginal teachers or communities findable; it can also reproduce advantage when recognised schools and well-resourced actors convert existing capital into superior production and reach (Bucher, 2012; Cotter, 2019; Lindell & Malmberg, 2026). The same caution applies to yoga's wider politics. Modern practice may reinforce neoliberal forms of self-management while also providing resources with which practitioners question them (Godrej, 2017). Visibility can bring misconduct to public attention and can expose people to decontextualised accusation. Lindell and Malmberg's (2026) political study gives reason to examine how visibility interacts with existing hierarchy, but yoga-specific research is needed before the direction or strength of that relationship can be known.

Several empirical questions follow. First, platform-specific studies should trace how practitioners move from a recommendation to a class and then, if they do, to sustained recognition of a teacher. Interviews and digital ethnography could examine when users read followers, comments, credentials or lineage claims as evidence, and when they ignore them. Experimental designs could compare profiles while varying metrics and qualifications, although such designs would capture stated or short-term judgements rather than the depth of a pedagogical relationship.

Second, research should study conversion over time. Longitudinal work with teachers could examine whether increases in reach yield students, revenue, invitations or recognition from established yoga institutions. It should also look in the reverse direction: whether lineage standing, studio reputation and professional credentials predict discoverability. Platform changes would provide important moments for observing whether visibility depreciates while pedagogical standing persists.

Third, recommender-system audits could establish which yoga bodies, languages, styles and claims become visible under specified conditions. Such studies need to avoid inferring pedagogical quality from content features alone. They could be paired with class observations and interviews so that the distribution is analysed alongside teaching practice. The difference between feeds, search, subscription libraries, livestreams and school-based digital spaces should remain explicit.



Fourth, the reorganisation of accountability needs direct investigation. Comparative studies could examine complaint procedures, injury response, codes of conduct and safeguarding across lineage schools, commercial studios, teacher-training bodies and platforms. The question is not simply where abuse or injury occurs. It is who can notice a problem, who must respond, what records exist and whether students can withdraw recognition without losing their community.

Finally, research must be geographically and socially broader than the visible segments of Western commercial platforms. Studies should compare Indian and diasporic contexts, languages, lineages, commercial and non-commercial settings, and the experience of practitioners differentiated by disability, class, age, race, gender and domestic circumstance. Work on glocal yoga shows why circulation should not be reduced to one-way Western appropriation: practices can be re-appropriated and rearticulated in India within consumer and identity projects (Askegaard & Eckhardt, 2012). Di Placido and Mangiarotti's (2026) Italian fieldwork demonstrates how much can be learned by observing actual online classes and listening to teachers and students. It also shows the limits of generalising from one national and institutional setting.

The conceptual claim should remain bounded while that work is done. Algorithms organise parts of the encounter. They can guide attention and make some authority claims recurrently visible. They have no yogic expertise, and platform visibility does not settle what counts as safe, ethical or knowledgeable teaching. Legitimacy remains a social achievement, formed through recognition and open to withdrawal.

Conclusion

Digital yoga through an online medium, is more than the delivery of simple studio teaching. Platforms arrange how practitioners encounter teachers, display metrics, and accumulate attention in ways that can be converted. This is significant because students often encounter claims of expertise before they have sufficient opportunity to assess the knowledge behind them. Therefore, visibility can strengthen claims to authority more readily than it can verify expertise.

However, this process is shaped by several factors. Lineage recognition, embodied teaching, certification, professional knowledge, offline reputation, ethical conduct and audience competence can influence whether visibility develops into trust and lasting legitimacy. Rather than simply weakening traditional pedagogy, mixed outcomes has been produced by online yoga. Direct evidence from online yoga also resists a story of straightforward decline. Distance can weaken touch, co-presence and the teacher's capacity to read a body. It can make verbal guidance more precise, encourage student autonomy, and sustain a community across geographic boundaries (Di Placido & Mangiarotti, 2026).



A relational perspective therefore helps to capture these mixed outcomes. Algorithmic, expert, experiential, participatory and lineage-based forms of authority meet within platform-mediated practice. Visibility can strengthen old hierarchies, disturb them or travel alongside them. The shift from ‘guru to algorithm’ rather than the replacement of human teachers by machines can be understood as a transformation in the mediation of authority. Algorithms neither possess yogic expertise nor independently determine legitimacy; instead, they influence which teacher is encountered, how often, and with which public signs of recognition. What follows from that encounter remains a pedagogical, institutional and ethical question.

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