

# Yoga Reconstructions among Western Consumers

Study on the meanings associated to yoga among international  
consumers, located in Denmark



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# Abstract

*'Setting himself in a clean place in a steady asana (posture, seat) that is neither too high nor too low (to be comfortable), on a cloth, animal skin, or kusha grass, there fixing heart and mind on a single point, working to bring his thought and emotion along with his faculties and organs under control, let him practice yoga for self-purification.'* (Bhagavad Gita, 6.11-12)

Yoga has become a very popular practice in the Western world, but how much of its original meanings have been kept, as the practice spread globally? Looking at the quote above, how many of the Westerners that consider themselves yogis relate to that image of a yoga practitioner? The purpose of this thesis is to reveal how and why yoga is (re)constructed among consumers in the Western world, focusing on the meanings people associate to their practice. Traditionally, yoga is an Eastern practice with religious meanings, which was used to achieve complete awareness and liberation. However, these are values that resonate mostly with Eastern consumers. This is the puzzle that triggered the topic for this thesis, as it became interesting to discover how yoga is (re)constructed in order to be appealing to consumers in the West, considering the undeniable differences in culture and values between the two corners of the world.

Basing my findings on theoretical concepts related to consumption, identity and culture, this thesis has researched yoga meanings among Western consumers, focusing on international participants located in Denmark. The aim was not to find an ultimate answer to the research question, but to reveal potential reconstructions that would inspire further studies to explore this across different cultures and other consumer groups.

The study revealed that consumers are continuously (re)constructing yoga, according to their level of experience and knowledge about the practice. Starting with initial constructions based on stereotypes or images portrayed in the media, these perceptions change as the practices evolve. Although yoga proved challenging in terms of expressing one's identity to others (due to its wide variety of interpretations), the practice was nonetheless used as a tool for self-improvement and self-characterization, as it helped consumers become better versions of themselves.

What this thesis teaches about Western consumer behaviour is that practices are often more than just the activity itself. While some consumers see them as opportunities to spend time with friends or try something new, others are attaching symbolic meanings and emerge deeper into their practices in order to discover new values they could associate themselves with.

Finally, this thesis builds up on the idea that yoga in the Western world is asana-focused, by showing that consumers who are interested can find their ways towards spiritual meanings on their own. Therefore, even if the yoga promoted is focused on the physical exercise, for many consumers the practice symbolizes much more than that.

# 1. Introduction

What do we think about when we hear the word yoga? Perhaps it is the image of two housewives from Beverly Hills, meeting up in one's mansion to practice in order to spend quality time together and stay fit. It may also be a bunch of hippies burning scents and sitting in uncomfortable positions, or the bearded Indian man, practicing in solitude on the peak of a mountain. What about business people sweating together during lunch break, trying to stretch away the long sitting hours? All of the above examples could fit under the term 'yoga', thus pointing to the existence of many different associations related to this term. Due to yoga potential being something very different for different consumers it is not only challenging, but also extremely interesting, to try to understand this global phenomenon as a deeper understanding of what yoga means for western consumers may not only enable us to understand what yoga 'is', but could also provide a deeper understanding of the reasons why western consumers engage in different practices.

Many scholars (amongst others Strauss, 2004; Phillips, 2009; Singleton 2010) have researched yoga, and their perspectives differ greatly, from seeing yoga as a traditional, spiritual practice to more modern practices that may, or may not, have anything to do with spiritualism. According to Strauss (2004:33), 'yoga was a philosophically grounded set of practices designed to facilitate spiritual enlightenment, and it was mostly considered the domain of Hindu men'. Later on, the focus shifted 'towards promotion of two specific values of the modernity: health and freedom'. Strauss (2004) hereby argues that what yoga 'is' has changed over time and as an increasing number and diversity of people practicing yoga associate different values with yoga, hereby constantly constructing and re-constructing yoga as a practice. Taking this line of reasoning further, some researchers (e.g. Singleton, 2010:3) opine that in Western world, yoga is 'synonymous with the practice of asana (posture)'. This was a concern for the Hindu American Foundation, who found it necessary to develop an awareness campaigns about the Hindu origins of yoga, called 'Take Back Yoga: Bringing to Light Yoga's Hindu Roots' (2010). The purpose of this campaign was to bring to light the Hindu origins of the practice, and inform consumers that yoga is much more than an asana practice. However, does yoga need to be connected to Hinduism or its origins in order to 'be' yoga, or are there other meanings and constructions associated with yoga as a practice that are as important in the Western world?

Looking at recent pieces of research about yoga in the Western world, many of them are focusing on the linkages between health, therapy, healing and yoga (e.g. Monk-Turner & Turner, 2010; Varambally, 2012). Similarly, according to the study of Ivtzan and Jegatheeswaran (2015), promotional leaflets for yoga studios often emphasize physical benefits of yoga, such as relieving back problems, developing core strength and flexibility, and relieving stress. The amount of research made in this direction can be an argument for yoga being perceived as a form of physical exercise in a western or ‘modern’ world. But is it as simple as that? A study about American’s yoga practices, conducted by Park et al. (2014), revealed that, although much emphasis is put on the physical benefits of yoga, and a majority of their respondents started practicing because of this, spirituality was the most common motivator for continuing practicing yoga. The different opinions among scholars about how and why yoga is practiced in the Western world that are presented above suggest that there is a multitude of understandings of this phenomenon. Nonetheless, the majority of the research done is quantitative or focuses on physical benefits of yoga, thus leaving the question on what yoga actually ‘is’ to today’s consumers, at best, only partially answered. As a result, the existing literature on Westerners’ yoga practices qualifies as a departure point for this thesis, which aims to go deeper into Westerners’ perceptions of yoga and the they practice it and make it part of their everyday lives. The purpose of the paper is to dig deeper into why Westerners ‘do’ and what it ‘is’ to them and especially if yoga is something ‘special’, or just the trendy workout of the month, among many others? This thesis therefore opens up for a deeper and more faceted understanding of what yoga ‘is’ and whether it might also have other meanings that we are not aware of yet, and literature fails to provide.

Originated in India, the initial reason for practicing yoga was one deeply embedded in Indian philosophies, which is to ‘become liberated, meaning succeeding to emancipate oneself from temporality and getting to know the true and inexpressible freedom.’ (Eliade, 1958:XX) However, as the discussion above shows, not all consumers value the same things and as Westerners practice yoga for various reasons, achieving ‘ultimate liberation’ or ‘get to know true freedom’ may not be the key concern for all of them. This thesis will therefore try to refine and further our understanding of potential meanings associated with yoga in a Western context, in order to understand what this phenomenon is to them.

In order to gain a refined and fuller understanding of yoga as a modern day Western practice and Western consumers’ perceptions of yoga, this study will be of a qualitative nature. Accordingly, the purpose is not to produce results that can be generalized to a wider

population, nor does the thesis attempt to present any ‘ultimate truth’ about Westerners’ yoga practice. Instead the purpose is to deepen our understanding of yoga as practices that Western consumers not only ‘do’ but also construct, reconstruct and make sense of and therefore, the problem formulation that has guided the piece of research presented in this thesis is:

**In which ways is yoga defined and (re)constructed in a Western consumer-oriented context and which meanings do consumers associate with their yoga practices?**

Although it would be ideal to include consumers from many different Western societies in the study, for pragmatic reasons the study is conducted in a Danish context. Although Denmark might, at least to some extent, be representative of a Western European country, a deliberate choice (which will be discussed further in the methodology section) was made to try to make the study cover consumers of different national and cultural backgrounds. Accordingly, the international/intercultural element in this thesis both relates to the potential ‘westernization’ that Western consumers subject a Hindu tradition to and to the international elements of the sample.

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## **2. Methodology**

Methodology is like the recipe for a good meal. There are various options available, and it is up to the chef to identify the best ingredients and methods that, used properly, would lead to the best possible outcome. In order for it to be successful, all the ingredients should complement each other. In the same way, ontology, epistemology, methodology and methods are connected and cannot be viewed separately from one another (King & Horrocks, 2010). It is important that these aspects are clearly communicated to the reader, in order for him/her to understand how the research was conducted and how knowledge was created. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to discuss and reflect on the methodology guiding this thesis, and the methods chosen to collect and analyze the data, in order to investigate in which ways yoga is (re)constructed in a Western consumer-oriented context, and which meanings consumers associate with their practice.

### **2.1 Philosophy of Science**

The topic of this study is to gain a deeper understanding on how yoga is (re)constructed among consumers in the Western world. In order to explore this topic, I will include in this research consumers with different cultural backgrounds which are practising yoga in a Western context, and understand what meanings they attribute to their yoga practice. In order to produce this type of knowledge, it is important that I, as the researcher, present the reader with my understanding of reality, as the paradigm a study operates within guides how research is conducted (Guba, 1990).

#### **Defining the Paradigm**

‘How do we come to know what we know? What is knowledge? What is truth? What is reality?’ (Murphy, 1997:4)

These are important questions to ask when conducting research, since they guide the whole research process and the type of knowledge it produces. The paradigm reflects in the methods used in order to gather data, and the theories selected in order to better understand various phenomena and analyse the data. A paradigm can be defined as the belief system that guides researchers (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Guba et al., 1989). The paradigm thus has an effect on the ontological and epistemological considerations, which will then lead to choosing appropriate methodologies for finding answers to the research question.



As a researcher, I believe that there is not one absolute reality out there, and that each individual is building his/her personal version of a 'reality', based on his/her background, beliefs and meanings associated with the world surrounding them. This understanding of reality is categorized by Guba (1990) as constructivism. According to Murphy (1997:5), the constructivist view believes that 'knowledge and reality do not have an objective or absolute value', which means that there is not one objective reality out there, as opposed to how positivist see it. Constructivists believe in the existence of multiple realities, and that they can get access to them by interacting with different people, understanding their points of views and helping to construct their realities together with them. In the context of this study, understanding how yoga is (re)constructed can only be done by interacting with different consumers, and building interpretations of their realities during these interactions. This belief is reflected in the ontological, epistemological and methodological considerations that follow.

### **The ontological position (or what it is possible to know about the world)**

Ontology is concerned with the nature of reality (Bryman, 2012; Guba et al., 1989). In order to start a research process, it is important to define how people, and particularly researchers, exist in the world, as this helps defining what might count as relevant knowledge (King & Horrocks, 2010:9). Two opposite ontological views are often mentioned: realism and relativism (Guba, 1990; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Bryman, 2012). Realism claims that there is one reality out there, which exists independently of us and can be discovered using the appropriate methods. However, this thesis is not aiming at pointing out 'a' presentation of how yoga 'is' or what it means; the focus is, on the contrary, on understanding deeper meanings that consumers associate with their yoga practices. As my fundamental beliefs are that humans are subjective in their nature and reality is believed to be socially constructed, the ontology guiding this research is relativism.

This ontology implies that reality is constantly reconstructed by each individual, based on his/her own beliefs and understandings of the world (Murphy, 1997). The purpose of this thesis is not to provide an ultimate answer to the research question, but to understand various perspectives and discuss potential meanings of the yoga phenomenon. The interpretation and analysis of these perspectives will lead to a deeper understanding of the topic researched, by providing insightful findings of the yoga phenomenon. According to Thorne et al. (2009:1385), 'when articulated in a manner that is authentic and credible to the reader, (findings) can reflect valid descriptions of sufficient richness and depth that their products

warrant a degree of generalizability in relation to a field of understanding'. In order to reach this, the researcher would try to distinguish during the analysis between information that applies to many (or all) of the respondents, and other that is specific to particular participants (Ayers et al. 2003). Therefore, keeping in mind that reality is relative, the thesis will try to generate data-driven understandings of the yoga phenomenon that, without aiming at being generalized to wider populations, might be encountered among other consumer groups than those investigated.

### **The epistemological position (or how it is possible to find out about the world)**

The epistemological question helps identifying what knowledge is relevant and available to the researcher, in order to study the above-mentioned realities of consumers practicing yoga. Understanding this is essential for, further on, identifying what route the researcher should take to acquire the knowledge needed for finding relevant answers (King & Horrocks, 2010:8). Guba (1990) completes this by adding that epistemology is concerned with the nature between the researcher and the object of his research.

On the same lines with differentiating between realist and relativist ontologies, the epistemological stance can be positioned somewhere between objectivism and subjectivism. The belief that reality exists out there, independent from us people, is usually linked with an objective epistemology, where the researcher separates himself from the object that is being researched. As a constructivist, I do not believe that the world can be studied from afar, but by interacting with multiple actors and getting to understand their realities. This positions the study within a more subjective epistemology, as the researcher aims to get insights into the realities constructed by the subjects involved in the research. In order to understand the meanings they associate with yoga, and how the phenomenon is reconstructed for their individual realities, I, as a researcher, will be actively involved in the research process. I will be asking questions, trying to go deeper into their perception of truth, and building an interpretation of their reality together with them in the process.

With this being said, 'researchers generally do not divulge personal information about themselves during data collection and are trained to use open, non-leading questioning techniques.' (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003:21) While I can 'strive' for neutrality and objectivity, I am aware that this cannot be fully attained in social research, as the findings of this study represent an interpretation, mine as the researcher, of the participants' perspectives of reality. Reflexivity is therefore an important trait for a researcher, who should be aware of potential

personal biases and make them transparent to the readers. Critical reflections on the trustworthiness of this study will be later on elaborated, in Chapter 7.

### **The methodological question**

Methodology is concerned with ‘what are the ways of finding our knowledge’ (Guba, 1990; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). The choices of methods and the research design are based on the ontology and epistemology that define this study. Considering the previously discussed views on the nature of reality and what is there to be researched, the type of data collected and analyzed in order to find answers to what yoga means for Western consumers is of a qualitative nature.

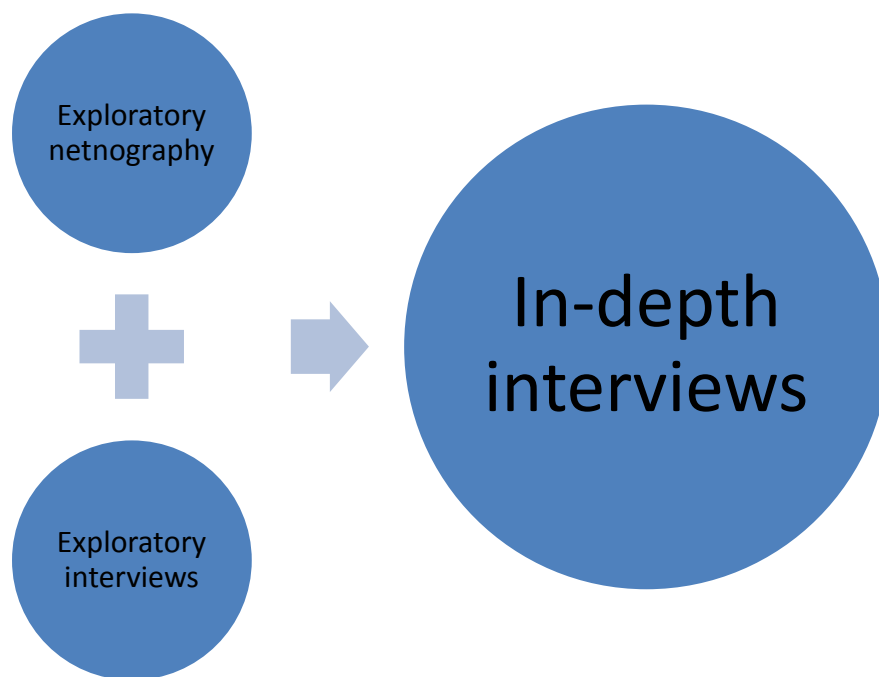
As mentioned in the introductory parts of this project, there have been many scholars conducting quantitative studies, investigating various aspects related to yoga and, among others, its physical benefits, but not nearly as many concerned with what yoga actually *means* for consumers. In order to contribute with new knowledge to this research gap, the research question of this thesis is of a qualitative nature – less concerned with precise measurements and statistics (King & Horrocks, 2010:7), but aiming at capturing aspects of the social world that lie beneath numbers and, thus, cannot be revealed and understood from pure quantitative research. The needs of this research question are better met by a qualitative study, where different voices are heard, and used to gain insight into how yoga is (re)constructed in a Western consumer-oriented context. Finally, as Bryman (2012:41) suggests, a qualitative approach is more appropriate for exploratory studies like this one, as there is not enough literature from which to draw leads on the topic.

## **2.2 Research Design**

According to Bryman (2012:46), a research design ‘provides a framework for the collection and analysis of data’. The research design should include a combination of relevant methods for generating knowledge about yoga consumption and meaning creation, in order to construct deep understandings of the yoga phenomenon in a Western context. There is no ‘better’ way for generating such knowledge (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000), as each research design has its own strengths and limitations.

In order to gain an initial understanding of the topic and potential issues relevant for the in-depth data collection, the study starts with an exploratory phase, where an exploratory netnography and several exploratory interviews will be conducted. The aim of this phase is to

understand the yoga phenomenon from a consumer perspective, and identify current debates, meanings or theoretical concepts to be further analyzed. These concepts will then be addressed during the semi-structured, in-depth interviews. An overview of the selected methods can be seen in Figure 1:



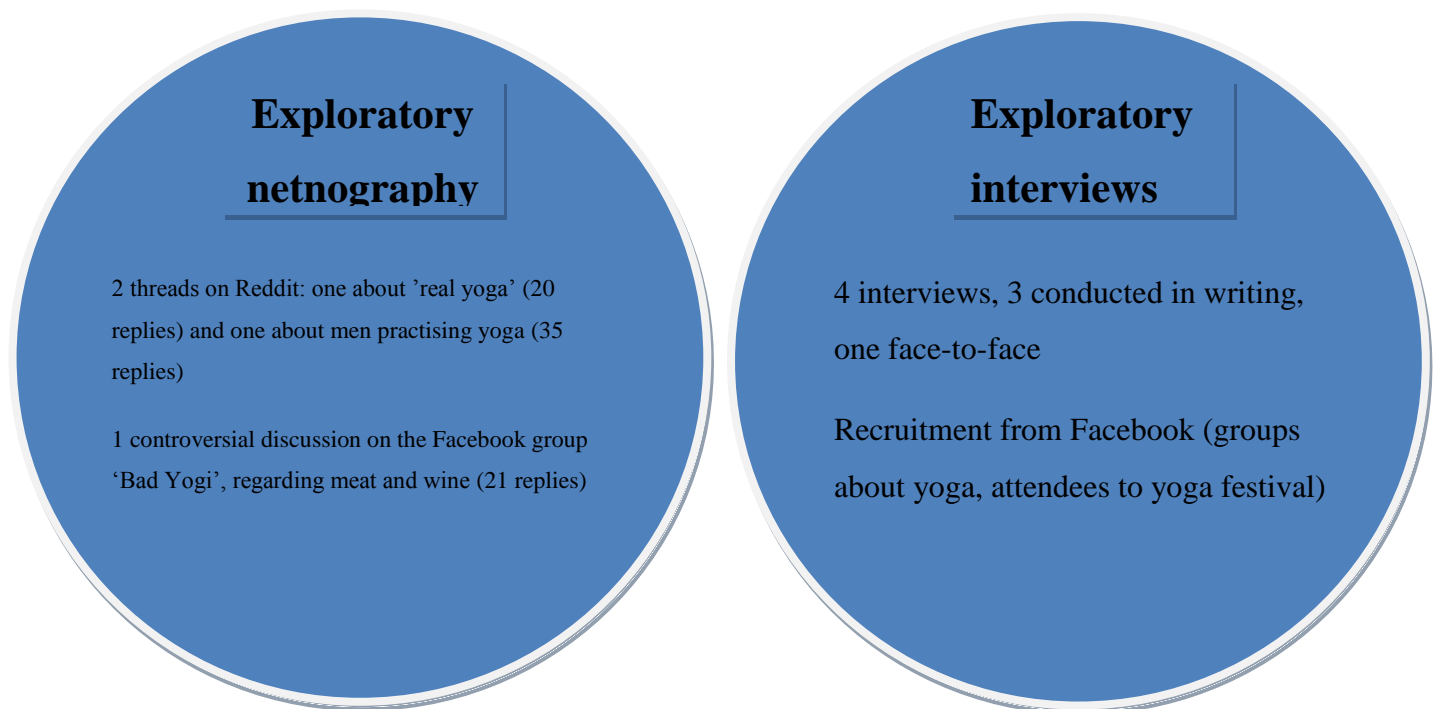
**Figure 1. Methodological Steps of the Research Process**

These steps will be discussed in the following subchapter, where their purpose and contribution to the production of knowledge will be taken into account. Finally, it is also important to note that the research design follows a hermeneutical approach, where each new interpretation contributes to a better understanding of the whole. According to Thompson et al. (1994:433), hermeneutics represents the ‘iterative [process] in which a ‘part’ of the qualitative data (or text) is interpreted and reinterpreted in relation to the developing sense of the ‘whole’’. I am aware that in the beginning of the research process, I may have personal pre-understandings of the yoga phenomenon, which can influence the first steps of the process. Being aware of this, I will minimize potential biases and, as more data will be collected and new ideas will appear, these initial beliefs will be challenged or further developed. In addition, by interacting with other people, the interpretation of each of their

realities will lead to gaining more in-depth knowledge about other perceptions and perspectives, which contribute to a richer picture of the phenomenon as a whole.

## 2.3 The Exploratory Phase

According to Stebbins (2001), researchers explore when they have little or no scientific knowledge about the activity or phenomenon they want to examine, but nevertheless have reasons to believe it contains elements worth discovering. The yoga phenomenon is very popular and, therefore, an initial exploration of relevant aspects of the practice in the Western world is important for identifying key concepts and focus for this study. Important characteristics of the exploratory study are flexibility and open-mindedness in terms of where relevant data can be found (Stebbins, 2001). Therefore, I will search for relevant data across multiple platforms, starting with Facebook groups, yoga events, communities, and personal network, in order to gather interesting information about yoga. An illustration of the exploratory data can be seen in Figure 2:



**Figure 2. Overview Exploratory Data**

### **2.3.1 Exploratory netnography**

To gain an initial overview over the topic of yoga in the Western world, and understand more about the existing debates, I started my research by conducting an unstructured netnography online, reading different forums and Facebook groups. In modern world, consumers find themselves communicating online more than ever before (Bowler, 2010), which leads to the creation of online communities: hobby groups, opinion forums and other virtual communities, where they can communicate freely around their topics of interest. This form of communication is nurturing consumers' need of belongingness to a community with similar beliefs or standards (Gangadharbhatla, 2008). These shared opinions, beliefs or reviews can be used for research purposes, and data can be collected from various sources, such as blogs, discussion groups, chat rooms, forums, newsrooms or other type of online communities (Bryman, 2012). Kozinets (2002:62) introduces the term netnography as 'a form of market-oriented ethnography, which is conducted online, studying existing online communities, often in an unobtrusive context'. He adds that it is a 'window into naturally occurring behaviours, such as searches for information by and communal word of mouth between consumers.' Relevant for this thesis are virtual communities of consumption surrounded around yoga, where consumers 'share ideas, build communities, and contact fellow consumers who are seen as more objective information sources' (Kozinets, 2002:61).

This technique has various advantages, starting from the big amount of data available, the fact that it is widely spread geographically and is cheaper and less time-consuming than other research methods (Xun & Reynolds, 2010). The data collected is available online, so it occurs naturally, as opposed to the setting created particularly for the research when using other methods (such as interviews or focus groups). However, this argument applies only when the researcher is a lurker (silent observer) (Kozinets, 2010). Disclosing one's presence may, as with other data collection methods, influence the openness of the subjects. This is known as the Hawthorne effect: 'people behaving differently because they know they are being researched.' (Gomm, 2008:74). Thus, conducting research on the internet, and especially without informing the subjects, poses certain ethical considerations, according to Bryman (2012). Sharf (1999) argues that the ethical issues one needs to consider are privacy, confidentiality, appropriation of others' personal stories, and informed consent. Bryman (2012) adds that one should research the ethical expectations provided by each venue, and their privacy policies. However, protecting subjects' anonymity is more difficult when working with data available online, as this information can be easily found by anyone with a

computer and access to the Internet (DeLorme et al., 2001). This also means that the more public the venue is, the smaller this obligation of ensuring confidentiality and anonymity becomes, as subjects deliberately and voluntarily making this information public on such venues (Hewson et al., 2003). As the netnography for this thesis is conducted on public websites, it was considered unnecessary to disclose the researcher's presence, as the information can be easily accessed by anyone, without the requirement of signing in or connecting with the community in any way. Another limitation of netnography, according to Kozinets (2002), is its narrow lack of informant identifiers present in the online context that leads to difficulty generalizing results to groups outside the online community sample. As the identity of the respondents on Reddit was hidden under a screen name, it was difficult to establish the age or nationality of the participants, in many cases even the gender. The second thread selected from Reddit focused on men's yoga practice, and therefore included more replies from men. However, as the purpose of this netnographic study is not to generalize, but more to gain an overview of relevant concepts and identify interesting points to be further developed during the in depth interviews, this was not considered an impediment for collecting relevant data.

For this explorative netnography, I have chosen two different communities, one general discussion board about yoga on Reddit, and a Facebook community called 'Bad Yogi', who is challenging some of the traditional yoga beliefs. All the extracts selected can be found in Extract 2 on the CD attached. The communities were selected based on the amount of people engaged in the conversation, based on Kozinets (2002) suggestion that interesting communities are, the ones who have a higher traffic of postings, richer data and a higher degree of member interaction. More to this, the Bad Yogi community is openly challenging traditional yoga beliefs and often has controversial posts that generate debates. It was therefore considered relevant for this study, because it generated more contradictory opinions and interactions among the members.

### **2.3.2 Exploratory Interviews**

The study conducted 4 exploratory interviews, which are used to identify potential theoretical concepts relevant for the study, together with a first understanding of the topic. Due to time limitations, and to the fact that it was considered interesting to hear from various voices, one of these interviews has been made face-to-face, while the other three were conducted through Facebook. This allowed me to reach yoga consumers from various parts of the world. The participants were selected from discussion groups on Facebook around yoga, either from the

yoga communities where they interacted, or on the page of a public yoga event happening in Copenhagen in the summer. I contacted 10 people, from which 6 answered positively. 4 of them ended up going through with the interview. The full transcriptions and the table presenting the respondents can be found in Extract 3 on the CD attached.

The exploratory interviews helped identifying potential meanings associated with yoga, or concepts that can be elaborated further, both in the theory section and in the in-depth interviews, such as social consumption, the influence of the location of the practice, physical benefits and the meaning associated with their practice. There are limitations to the fact that 3 of these interviews have been conducted through written communication, but 2 out of these 3 interviewees agreed to answer follow-up questions. The answers are obviously not as deep as the ones of an in-depth, personal interview, but the purpose of these initial exploratory interviews was just to get familiar with the topic and gather inspiration for the future research. The interview number 3 was conducted face-to-face, in a café in Copenhagen, and its length was 13 minutes. The setting was informal, and I offered to buy a coffee as a ‘thank you’ for the participant’s help. The fact that the bartender made noise from time to time may have interrupted the discussion a couple of times, but it was a minor distraction and didn’t feel as interfering with the data collection or the quality of the discussion or the sound.

Finally, the data gathered during the exploratory phase was coded together. In order to get a clear overview, post-its have been used, containing the relevant concepts discussed, and then grouped on categories which lead to themes (see Figure 3). The whole presentation of the themes which emerged in this phase can be found in Extract 4 on the CD attached.



**Figure 3. Themes Exploratory Phase**



## 2.4 In-Depth Interviews

Interviews are the most widely used method in qualitative research (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Bryman, 2012). As ‘people participate in indeterminate life-worlds, often attaching different interpretations and meanings to seemingly similar ‘facts’ and events’ (King & Horrocks, 2010:11), doing individual interviews is considered an appropriate choice for studying these different realities, as it offers participants the opportunity to present their individual meanings and understandings. As each respondent has its own perceptions of yoga and what his/her practice means, the interviews will try to dig deeper into their realities and create together with the interviewees’ constructions and reconstructions of the yoga phenomenon.

Although these different realities may also become apparent during focus groups or other qualitative methods, there is always the threat that not everyone would be heard or the depth of the answers may differ, as some participants could monopolise the conversation, or have strong opinions that might discourage other participants from speaking freely (Bryman, 2012). On the contrary, the individual interview would aim to create a safe and confidential space for the respondent to share his/her beliefs, and the whole focus of the researcher would be to help construct his/her realities, and gain a deeper understanding of individual perspectives. Ritchie & Lewis (2003:58) further argue that ‘understanding motivations and decisions, or exploring impacts and outcomes, generally require the detailed personal focus that in-depth interviews allow’. The meanings people associate with their yoga practice may be something too personal for the participants to be shared openly in a group, so interviews may create a more comfortable place to discuss this type of information. Furthermore, the individual interview might better enable the interviewees to construct and elaborate meaning during the interview. In order to do this, I have focused on establishing trust with the respondents, clearly presenting the nature of the study and how the information will be used, together with ensuring confidentiality and anonymity. I also mentioned that there are no right or wrong answers and that they can help the most by giving ‘as full an account as possible of their own views and experiences’ (Kings & Horrocks, 2010:40). Finally, they were informed that they can choose not to answer specific questions, or stop the interview at any point if considered inappropriate. This being said, the respondents seemed comfortable sharing their opinions and explaining their understandings of the yoga phenomenon, and they all agreed to be audio recorded.

In terms of the structure of the interviews, qualitative interviews tend to be more informal and flexible than the structured interviews employed in research processes of a more quantitative nature. Bryman (2012) differentiates between unstructured interviews and semi-structured interviews. The first one takes the form of a conversation, where the researcher brings up the topic, allowing the interviewees to speak freely, and interfering only when certain issues are worthy of being following-up. The semi-structured interviews, on the other hand, follow an interview guide, but they are not inflexible or deemed to follow that guide strictly. The questions can be asked in a natural order, following the replies of the participants, and extra questions can be asked when needed. It should be mentioned that the initial version of the interview guide evolved as the interviewer did the interviews, thus adapting the guide to the new knowledge and perspectives each interviewee brought to the study. Keeping in mind the key theoretical aspects that should be included, the semi-structured interview adapted to the individual stories, allowing new concepts to appear, and excluding others when considered irrelevant. An early version/ of the interview guide can be found in Appendix 1.

Further on, Kvale (1996) distinguishes between two approaches for in-depth interviewing: the ‘miner’, who digs deep in order to discover knowledge, assuming it is deeply hidden, waiting to be discovered. The second is the metaphor of a ‘traveler’, believing that knowledge is not given, but rather created and negotiated. This latter metaphor is a more constructivistic approach to ‘the’ nature of reality and how it can be ‘revealed’, as the interviewer is seen as a traveller that journeys with the interviewee (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). This implies that meanings are developed on the way, as the traveller interprets them. The traveller metaphor is appropriate for this study also because people are not always aware of the meanings they associate with a phenomenon. As Ritchie & Lewis (2003:133) put it, ‘people find it easier to talk about an experience and something they have done (a behavior) than motivations or reasons for something, or their attitude or feelings’. Therefore, the participants might have never considered ‘what yoga means to them’, and their reflections on the topic are initiated by the questions posed by the researcher. There is a challenge associated with this issue, presented by Kozinets (2002) as the ‘researcher-induced demands effects’. This stresses out the threat of the questions asked during interviews having a strong influence on the data collected. An interviewer might pose questions that the interviewee had not considered before, or might (involuntarily) lead the discussion in a direction less relevant for the individual consumer. While it is the responsibility of the interviewee not to ask un-deliberately leading questions, it is acceptable, and even needed, that the researcher shapes

the interview, making sure the questions asked or the topics addressed don't go too much out of the topic (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). These aspects have been considered when designing the interview guide and when posing the questions. My focus, as an interviewee, was to keep the conversation flow as naturally as possible, asking follow-up questions and building up on the interviewees' answers in order to get deep understandings of their yoga constructions. I tried to keep the questions as simple and open as possible, allowing the participants to interpret them according to their personal understandings.

#### **2.4.1 Interview Sample**

Choosing the right participants is an important aspect of qualitative research, as they are a key source of data for the analysis and conclusions of the study. There are various sampling methods available, and a key distinction should be made between probability and non-probability sampling (Bryman, 2012; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). The former is mostly used for statistical research, and it involves choosing the participants randomly, with each unit in a population has an equal chance of being selected (Bryman, 2012:187). The aim is to produce a statistically representative sample of the population, in order to estimate the findings to a larger population. Non-probability sampling uses characteristics of the population as a base for sampling, and it is not random or aimed at being representative for a population.

The sample selected for this thesis is not to be seen as representative of the whole Western population, but can be considered a puzzle piece in the whole research about modern yoga practices and a departure point for more extensive studies. As the aim of this study is exploratory, the goal is to gather a wider diversity of answers, which lead to richer data. Based on Ritchie & Lewis' (2003) differentiation of non-probability sampling forms, purposive sampling has been used in this project. They described this technique as: 'the sample units are chosen because they have particular features or characteristics which will enable detailed exploration and understanding of the central themes and puzzles which the researcher wishes to study' (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003:78). An advantage of this method is ensuring that some diversity is included within the key criteria.

The first step was defining the potential population from which the sample will be selected. In order to learn more about what yoga means for international consumers in Denmark, the initial criterion was that the participants should be practicing yoga. Their age, level of practice or the styles of yoga they prefer were not considered relevant for the sampling. However, in order to explore potential gender and age differences in the meanings associated

with yoga, a focus in the sampling process was trying to reach people from different age groups, and focus on recruiting several men as well. The latter has been more difficult, as the big majority of attendees of yoga classes are women. Another important feature was the nationality of the participants. In order to maximize the variety in answers and demographics, the sample consists of both Danish and international participants. Regardless of their country of origin, the participants are practising yoga in Denmark, and therefore are exposed to the ways of practice in a Western environment. Hearing opinions from international consumers leads to a deeper understanding of the meanings associated with yoga, as some of them have experienced yoga in other countries as well.

In terms of the sample size, qualitative samples are often smaller than quantitative ones, as the amount of data generated is much higher (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). However, they should not be too small: they should contain enough constituencies and diversity. The interviews have been conducted with international consumers practicing yoga in Copenhagen, either in studios or at home. The sample ended up containing 7 women and 3 men, with ages between 22 and 38 years old. Additional criteria when choosing the participants was their ability to speak English. A more in-depth presentation of the participants can be seen in Figure X. It is important to mention that pseudonyms have been used, to ensure anonymity of the participants.

| <b>Demographics</b>   | <b>Relationship with yoga</b>  |
|---|--|
| <b>1 Maggie</b> – female, 25, Denmark<br>Student and journalist/radio   | Has been practicing for a year and half, in order to become more bendy. Started because her speech teacher told it would help her. Now she practices 1-2 per week, at gym and sometimes home.  |
| <b>2 Lily</b> – female, 27, Denmark<br>Works as a consultant, with health economics. Trained as a yoga instructor | She started yoga when she was 18, with friends for fun. Practices around 2 times a week at the moment, with periods when she does it more. She is a certified yoga instructor, but doesn't teach.  |
| <b>3 Peter</b> – male, 30, Thailand<br>Looking for a job. Has been in Denmark for 4 years                         | Tried yoga in Thailand, didn't like it because it was too slow and not challenging enough. Started again in Denmark, as doctor recommended it for his sleep problems. He practices 2-3 times per week at Fitness World, and sometimes home |

|   |   |
|---|---|
|   |   |
| <b>4 Angie</b> – female, Poland student   | Her mother practices yoga, but didn't convince her, as she thought it's something for old people. Now she was persuaded by a friend in Denmark, and she started combining it with other workouts. |
| <b>5 Daisy</b> – female, 25, Romania, student   | Has practiced home, and at gyms both in her home country and in Denmark. Likes the spiritual part more, but sees yoga as effective as other workouts.   |
| <b>6 Minnie</b> – female, 25, Estonia, student  | Has been practicing yoga for several years, not so often recently. Likes the positive emotions that yoga gives.   |
| <b>7 Betty</b> – female 22, Denmark, student  | She has been practicing for a while, and the last 1.5 years regularly. She meditates every day and tries to do a lot of yoga, as a spiritual practice next to other workouts.                     |
| <b>8 Gillie</b> – female, 30, Sweden, professional violinist and freelance dance instructor | She has been practicing for many years, next to other sports and dancing. She usually practices home and at hot studios. Focused on the physical benefits and the peace of mind.                  |
| <b>9 Ken</b> – male, 28, Denmark/Italy<br>Freelance dance instructor                        | He has been practicing for 3 years, started to impress his girlfriend. Helped with his back problems and posture. Practices almost every morning, as part of workout routine.                     |
| <b>10 Brad</b> – male, 38, Denmark.<br>Engineer, unemployed                                 | Has been practicing for many years, started with a friend, then read more about it and tried a wide variety of styles.<br>He is much into meditation, and is a vegetarian                         |

**Figure 4. In-Depth Interview Participants**

The saturation point according to Ambert et al. (1995) is when major themes begin to recur and only secondary themes emerge in qualitative studies. Constructivists are aware that saturation might never happen, as each participant contributes with new knowledge according to their own realities. However, these ten interviews generated enough rich data for the analysis, as the respondents proved to have different experiences with yoga, and levels of practice. Excluding the introduction and presentation of the research, the actual interviews lasted 20-30 minutes, according to the degree of experience of the participant and the desire to share.

The sample can be considered representative for typical yoga students in gyms or studios in Copenhagen. The majority of students are Danes, female, in the age group 20-40, as I have observed during my participation in classes. In order to increase diversity, I have approached three male students present in some of the classes (as some classes consisted only of women). Including older participants could have revealed different findings, and this would be an interesting segment to approach in further studies. Another thing to consider is the location of the practice; this study has recruited participants in several gyms (Fitness World) in Copenhagen, and in one Hot Yoga Studio. Considering the wide variety of yoga styles and studios present in Copenhagen, the diversity of the sample could have been increased by including more studios in the research. This was, unfortunately, not possible for this thesis, due to financial and time limitations.

#### **2.4.2 Selecting the Participants & Conducting the Interviews**

According to Ritchie & Lewis (2003:100), qualitative studies ‘are almost invariably confined to a small number of geographical, community or organisational locations’. Copenhagen was chosen as the city to conduct the study, because, as being the capital, there is a wider variety of yoga studios, classes offered, and international diversity in terms of participants.

During spring 2016, potential participants were recruited around Copenhagen. Most of the participants were approached at the end of yoga classes, in different studios and different yoga styles. I introduced myself, as a researcher, and presented the topic of my study, followed by requesting their contact details in order to arrange a personal interview in the near future. Most of the people I approached agreed to partake in the study. Out of all the people I approached, only one didn’t answer, and another one could not attend, as she was travelling during the month when interviews were conducted. The variety in answers was considered a priority, so participants were approached in person and asked to participate. Advertising on Facebook or at the yoga locations was considered as an option, but the sample gathered like that would have been highly self-selective (King & Horrocks, 2010). The people that would have answered might have been more willing to share their experience, so in order to achieve a balance, I preferred approaching them directly.

The interviews were conducted in different locations, according to the availability of the participants. As much as possible, I tried to find private and quiet places. Some were conducted in a quiet corner of the central library, others at the interviewees’ homes, and one

in a public cafe. Cookies and/or coffee were provided to thank the participants for taking the time to help with the research study.

Having this in mind, I am aware that not all interviews were conducted in private or quiet circumstances. As many meetings took place in cafes, there were occasional interruptions due to the waiter delivering our order. The library was also not always as quiet as expected, but the respondents did not seem bothered by the noise. Furthermore, in order to make them feel as comfortable as possible, I usually put aside the recording phone, trying not to draw attention to it. The interview guide was consulted as rarely as possible, in order to allow the conversation to flow naturally. Although I was aware I should not show any judgment or approval of the things being said, this has proven difficult at times, as I felt the natural need to nod or agree to what was being said, in order to show that I am following and continue the conversation. I tried to minimize these types of interferences, but I am aware that it probably could have been done better. This did not seem to influence much the type of data collected, although it cannot be stated with absolute certainty.

Finally, one of the interviews failed to be recorded. During Brad's interview, the phone did not save the recording. In order to minimize the losses, I have written down all I could remember from the interview as soon as I got home. As it was a very rich and interesting interview, I remembered many of the things he shared, and I included these notes at the end of the transcriptions in Extract 5. Due to this limitation, I could not include any direct quotes from his interview, but I included ideas he has shared when relevant during the analysis.

## **2.5 Reflections on the choice of Research Design**

No research design is perfect, and there are limitations in relation to the methods chosen for collecting data for this study. The findings generated by this research design are highly dependable on the point in time the interviews took place; as consumers' realities are changing constantly, depending on the new experiences they partake in, it is impossible to analyse how the (re)constructions of yoga revealed in this study would evolve over time. It would be interesting to do a longitudinal study, where the same participants would be interviewed after some time in the future, in order to analyze whether and how their (re)constructions of yoga evolve, and based on what.

Secondly, as 3 of the 4 explorative interviews were conducted online, they were not as detailed as face-to-face interviews would have been. This difference was noticed when conducting the personal interview. However, considering the explorative nature of this method, the themes revealed through the exploratory interviews proved useful in the following step of the research design (i.e. the in-depth interviews).

In terms of the exploratory netnography, I collected the data as a silent observer, where I monitored several communities and Facebook groups and selected the extracts that showed richer data, with a higher degree of interactivity. Had I decided to get involved in the research and ask questions, the quality of the data might have improved. This is difficult to estimate now, but I have chosen not to interfere with the naturally occurring conversation because I did not want to influence the direction of the discussion, but rather observe what aspects of yoga consumption emerge naturally.

Finally, I am aware that the findings of this thesis cannot be generalized to all Western yoga consumers. This is due to the sampling location (limited to Copenhagen), but also to the nature of the study. Being a qualitative study, the purpose was to generate potential meanings associated with yoga among consumers in a Western context, which are possible to be encountered among consumers in other locations in the Western world. The fact that the respondents were of international background contributed to diversity in the opinions. However, Western world comprises of much more cultures and nationalities, and further studies should be made to investigate to which extent my findings are applicable in other cultures.



## **3. Data Processing**

After discussing the nature of the data and how it was collected, this section will discuss how the data has been processed and analysed, addressing the recording and transcription of the interviews, coding and categorization of data.

### **3.1 Transcription**

As previously mentioned, the conversations have been audio-recorded with the researcher's mobile phone. This has been considered appropriate, due to the fact that it is less intrusive than video-recording, and can record the entire conversation, proving to be much more effective than taking notes (Bryman, 2012). It allowed the conversation to run freely, as the phone was put aside during the interviews, and the researcher was able to make eye contact with the interviewees during the conversations.. In order to easily access and analyze the data, I have decided to manually transcribe the interviews; this also allowed me to go through the information again, and offered an initial interpretation of the interviewees' realities. According to Kvale (2008:94), 'transcribing the interviews from an oral to a writing mode structures the interview conversations in a form amenable to closer analysis, and is in itself an initial analysis'. A full-transcription was chosen as the most appropriate way, since as a constructivist I wanted to make sure that I can catch the nuances and meanings behind what the participants were saying. Pauses in the speech were presented as '...', and hesitations as 'umm'. Notes were made in case of extra expressions, such as (laughing). The respondent's answers were described exactly as they said it, even when they may be incorrect in English grammar. In order to ensure anonymity of the respondents, pseudo-names have been used instead of their real names, and only the demographics were preserved in case they prove to be relevant for the discussion of the data. Finally, when quoting any of the participants during the analysis part, his/her name is used, together with the line (symbolized L) and page of its location in Extract 5 on the CD attached (for instance, Poppy, L. 45, p. 12).

### **3.2 Coding**

After the initial interpretation conducted during transcription, I proceeded to coding, which is described by Bryman (2012) as a preliminary step and, at the same time, the essential stage while proceeding with the content analysis. I have gone again through the transcriptions, highlighting words, phrases or passages relevant for the theoretical concepts, but also new interesting information that could be used during the analysis. I have then written key words

next to these passages, in order to be able to find them later on. Further on, I went again through the concepts identified, trying to group similar ones into categories and notice how they relate to each other. This is how five main themes have emerged, and a discussion of these themes will be made in the beginning of the analysis chapter, Chapter 5.

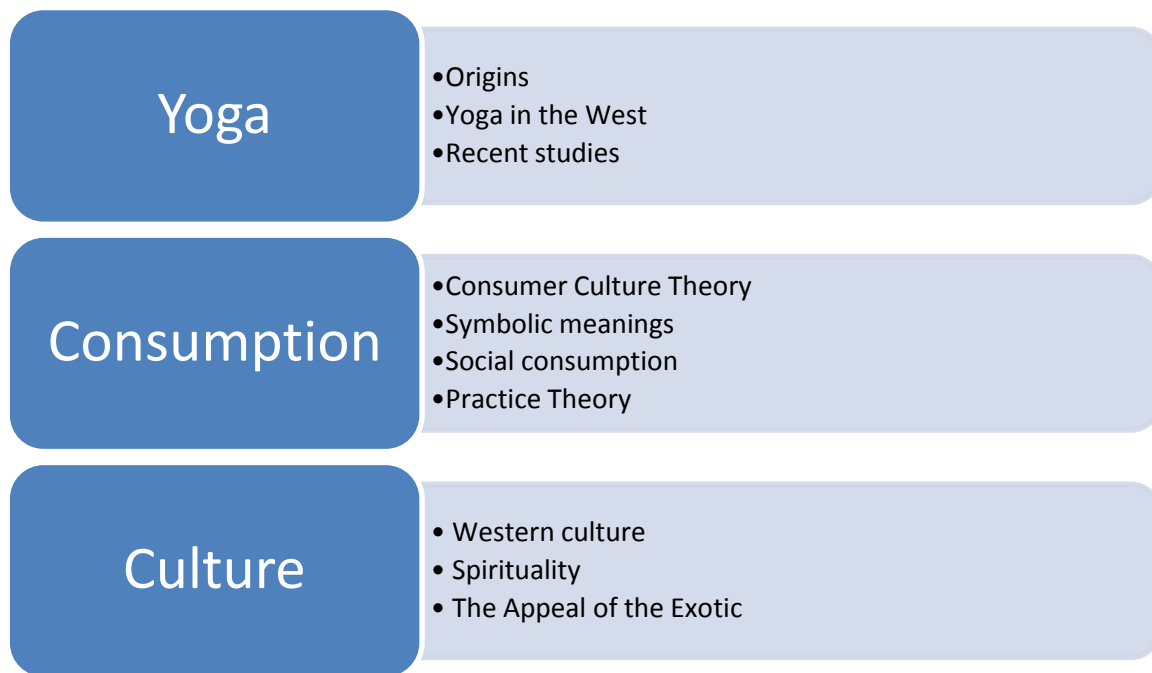
## 4. Theoretical Framework

This chapter includes a literature review of yoga, and a theoretical framework of aspects relevant for the research question. Yoga is the central focus of this thesis, and consumers' perception and interpretation of their yoga practice will be researched in order to gain new knowledge about consumption patterns in a Western consumer-oriented context. First of all, a literature review about yoga is required, including its origins, its interpretations in the Western world, and an overview of existing studies about yoga consumption. This will be used to understand better the yoga phenomenon, together with identifying gaps in research that this thesis will try to contribute to.

Furthermore, as the thesis aspires to add new knowledge to the field of (yoga) consumption in the Western world, it is important to start the research process by having a solid knowledge of relevant theories and what has already been written about these topics (Berg, 2003). The theoretical framework creates a certain focus on the empirical world, an analytical frame as to how to make sense of the data collected. Moreover, the choice of theory is closely linked to the methodology of this thesis, in order to provide a reliable interpretation of the type of data collected.

Therefore, this chapter will continue with discussing aspects of culture and consumption, which are relevant for the research question. Obviously, this thesis should not, and cannot, cover all aspects of these fundamental concepts; thus, accounts and discussions of the elements of culture and consumption that seem most important in order to provide answers to the problem formulation will be offered.

Understanding these aspects and the connections between them is vital for building a solid departure point for the analysis. Yoga consumption is the focus of this thesis, so a discussion of consumption and what forces may influence consumption patterns are important to address in order to understand better how meanings can be created. This is why theory of practice, social consumption and symbolic meanings associated with consumption will be included in this section. These aspects will be discussed in the context of yoga consumption, followed by an understanding of cultural aspects related to Western culture, which are relevant for the understanding the Western-consumer context that frames this thesis. An overview of what is included in the theoretical framework can be seen in Figure 5:



**Figure 5. Overview of Theoretical Blocks**

## 4.1 Yoga

As this project tries to grasp some of the meanings associated with yoga consumption in Denmark, it is necessary to understand the development of the yoga phenomenon, and have an overview of the existing studies related to modern yoga consumption.

### 4.1.1 Yoga Origins

The term ‘yoga’ comes from ‘yug’ in Sanskrit, which means ‘to unite, yoke, join’ (Hoyez, 2007:114). This refers to the ‘union of the individual self with the Absolute or Universal Self’ (Strauss, 2004; Phillips, 2009). The ultimate goal in all Indian philosophies is to become liberated, meaning succeeding to emancipate oneself from temporality and getting to know the true and inexpressible freedom (Eliade, 1958). Yoga was believed to be the way to reach this ultimate freedom, as holding through difficult asanas meant dominating the mind and pushing through limits to achieve liberation. However, it was not enough to practice the physical postures, since an integration of knowledge and activity was needed. One needed to know and understand the Hindu philosophies, use the physical practice to quiet the mind and focus

on meditation (Whicher, 1998). Along the same lines, Phillips (2009:2) adds that ‘practice follows thought, as well as that what we do is what we become’.

Furthermore, in India, yoga is not just a practice; it is a way of life (Verma, 2006): ‘The Hindus are well aware of their final goal: the eternal liberation’. He continues by explaining that yoga practices are much embedded in everyday practices, from cleansing of the body, to practising concentration for self-healing. The yoga way of life is based on Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, which encourage practitioners to live a life cultivates moderation and harmony (Verma, 2006).

As this thesis will research how yoga is (re)constructed in a Western consumer-oriented context, it is important to understand what meanings have originally been associated to yoga. The traditional Indian philosophies integrated yoga in their way of life from what they ate, to the practising asanas (postures), breathing and meditation (Verma, 2006). The following field research will focus on understanding to what extent yoga is perceived as a way of life among modern Western consumers, and how do they take their practice outside the mat.

#### **4.1.2 Yoga in the West**

According to Campbell (2015), yoga has not been known in the West until the 1940s, when Indra Devi opened a yoga studio in Hollywood and the practice started spreading. However, the term gained popularity as a type of physical exercise, and was not associated with the spirituality that the term entails in the East. As it began spreading in the West, its teachings transformed in order to meet the demands of the new cultures it encountered. One did not need to be Hindu in order to practice yoga, and many masters or gurus that preached in the West did not teach Hinduism, but claimed that their teachings can be used by everyone, and they should be seen as a ‘philosophy, a psychology, a science, or even health-care modality’ (Goldberg, 2010:4). Yoga was transforming in order to be appealing for the general public (Carrette & King, 2005:118,) and Iyengar, one important figure that spread the practice in the West, promoted Hatha yoga, as a ‘more physical-based system of yoga practice than classical yoga, and aims to achieve enlightenment through the transformation of one’s body’. Goldberg (2010) continues by arguing that the goal does not need to be the union with God anymore, or self-realization, but it can be related to improving stress levels or clarifying the mind, which resonate more with the modern Western consumer.

The development of yoga is, according to Newcombe (2009:993) related to ‘physical culture’, as the 19th century was full of movements towards improving human health and

glorifying God through the improvement of the human physique'. People started practising yoga for multiple reasons, which rarely emphasize the spiritual aspect. Singleton (2010) took this further, by stating that yoga in the Western world is an asana-centred practice, and Jain (2014:457) shares this view, stating that postural yoga is a 'product of consumer culture', as yoga's history does not contain anything similar to it. But are things as simple as Singleton (2010) and Jain (2014) put it, and is yoga just the popular 'workout' of the month?

#### **4.1.3 Studies on Yoga**

Among the body of research conducted on the topic of yoga, a big majority has been of a quantitative nature, and focused mostly on the health benefits that the practice brings. However, not so many researched the consumers' points of view, or tried to understand what meanings they associate to their practice. Park et al. (2014) conducted a qualitative study researching people's motives for starting to practise yoga, and for continuing their practice, in the United States. This study revealed that 'the most commonly endorsed primary reason for adopting yoga practice was exercise, followed by flexibility and stress' (Park et al., 2014:4). This study also showed that spirituality was the primary motivation for participants to continue practicing yoga. Similarly, Ivtzan & Jegatheeswaran (2015) conducted a quantitative study in the UK, where they revealed that the Western yoga practice is initiated by desires to have a thin body, flexibility and health, but that the more people practice, the more they engage in the spiritual side of yoga. These findings inspired this thesis to try to uncover how yoga is (re)constructed among consumers in a Western context, and how apparent is the spiritual aspect in their understandings of yoga.

Lastly, Lewis (2008) made a qualitative study in a private Vinyasa yoga studio in the US. She identified 'interpersonal relationships, life changes and health concerns' as the main motivations for starting yoga practice. Her study also revealed that some yogis separate themselves from the 'gym culture'. As yoga is 'part of the menu' at gyms worldwide, it is interesting to explore whether the location of the practice influences consumers' understanding of yoga. Therefore, this thesis will include both respondents attending yoga at the gym and at a studio, trying to reveal potential differences between them in terms of the meanings associated to yoga.

## **4.2 Consumption**

The term ‘consumption’ derives from the Latin verb *consumer*, which means to ‘seize or take over completely’ (Graeber, 2011). All people are consumers on various levels, starting from purchasing products that fulfil daily needs, such as food and cleaning products, to the clothes selected and the activities we take part in. However, consumption is often more than just buying a product – it is believed to be a tool used by individuals to take on different identities and differentiate themselves from others (Maffesoli, 1996; Featherstone, 2007). As an example, people buy food in order to satisfy hunger; yet the type of meal they decide to purchase in order to do so is what differentiates consumers and makes this field extremely interesting to study. Choosing to buy fruits is different than buying a hamburger, or a plate of oysters, and many scholars have investigated the symbolic meanings of consumption (among others, Belk, 1988, Dittmar, 1992; Slater, 1997; Gabriel & Lang, 2006; McCracken, 1986). In the same way, the fundamental premise leading to the problem formulated guiding this thesis is that consumers do not simply ‘do’ yoga, but might do so because yoga enables them to construct certain identities, differentiate themselves and/or pursue various, perhaps symbolic, meanings. The following pages contain selected aspects of consumption and consumer culture, which will build the theoretical framework needed for making sense of the data that will be collected.

In order to emphasize the importance of consumption in modern societies, the term *consumer culture* is used, which implies that ‘in the modern world, core social practices and cultural values, ideas, aspirations and identities are defined and oriented in relation to consumption rather than to other social dimensions such as work or citizenship religious cosmology or military role’ (Slater, 1997:24). In order to investigate the meanings consumers associate with yoga, aspects of consumer culture will be discussed and used to understand the deeper layers of consumer practices and the ideas or identities associated with yoga.

### **4.2.1 Consumer Culture Theory**

Consumer culture theory (CIT) is a set of unified theories that combines different research fields, including anthropology, sociology and media studies, in order to help better understanding human behaviour in the marketplace. It can be used to evaluate consumption in relation to cultural and social forces, as opposed to the economic and psychological theories (Joy & Li, 2012). CCT includes multiple aspects of consumer culture, and understanding it can help building a broader and deeper understanding of yoga consumption. One can

differentiate between four major subcategories of consumer culture theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Joy & Le, 2012):

### **Consumer identity projects (CIP)**

CIP discusses the relationship between the consumer and the object of consumption, and it views the consumer as an identity seeker and maker. The term 'object' does not necessarily refer to a physical object, but it can also cover people, places, brands or experiences (Noble & Walker, 1997). In the context of this thesis, the focus will be put on the relationship between consumers and their yoga practice. There are two dimensions of identity creation, covered within CIP. One is concerned with how the object of consumption is defining the self, and the other focuses on how objects become an extension of the self (Belk, 1988). As Tuan (1980:472) puts it, 'our fragile sense of self needs support, and this we get by having and possessing things because, to a large degree, we are what we have and possess', and people try to transmit what they are like through what they consume (Clarke, et al., 2003, Baudrillard, 1998). Following this, the data collection will try to understand whether the interviewed participants feel that yoga helps them show to the world parts of themselves. However, it must be noted that studying one consumption pattern cannot entirely define a person; studying yoga consumption cannot fully define the consumers; in order to get a deeper understanding of their 'selves', their complete consumption patterns should be studied, and this is not the focus of this thesis. Bahl & Milne (2010) have mentioned that individuals can have multiple selves, so it is interesting to investigate how customers might use their yoga consumption for building their identity or differentiating themselves from others.

### **Market cultures**

The market culture subcategory focuses on aspects such as brand communities, subcultures and lifestyles. Here, consumers are believed to be cultural producers, not bearers. As people form groups around the objects of their consumption, this can have an influence on how people act or interpret their realities. The groups imply consumers 'foster collective identifications grounded in shared beliefs, meanings, mythologies, rituals, social practices, and status systems' (Arnould & Thompson, 2005:874). This can be used to analyse whether the participants feel any connection to a yoga community or subgroup, and whether this influences their reconstructions of yoga.



Furthermore, as consumption can be related to specific lifestyles, this term needs to be defined. Hetherington (2011:1) pointed out that lifestyles consist of ‘the ways in which people express their identities through the practices that they are engaged in’. He believed that people communicate who they are to others, through their activities or consumption patterns. As people can have multiple selves (Bahl & Milne, 2010), based on their consumption practices, similarly they can engage in different lifestyles, according to the practices they take on, or the group of people they are associating themselves with (Maffesoli, 1996). More to this, Chaney (1996) pointed out that lifestyles are constantly changing, in the same way as fashion is, and people are following the latest trends and implementing them in their lifestyles. Having this in mind, could yoga be seen as the latest fashion, as it has become so popular in the Western world, and are consumers practising because it is the newest trend in terms of workouts?

### **Socio-historic patterning of consumption**

This domain of CCT focuses on social and institutional structures that influence consumers, such as community, ethnicity, gender, class, etc. These aspects can be used to understand what constitutes and sustains consumer society, and to analyse how consumer preferences are created. Bourdieu (1984) argued that taste is socially constructed, based on the habitus of the individual, and the background and social class he/she belongs to. This thesis collects data from consumers with different backgrounds, and similarities and differences in their constructions of yoga will be analyzed, keeping in mind potential socio-historical differences between the various consumer groups. Bourdieu (1984) argues that individuals are born and raised in a specific class, and this is difficult to change. He does, however, not oppose the idea that one could ‘upgrade’ his habitus and gain social status by changing one’s consumption patterns and associating oneself with habits of those of a higher social class. Adding to this, Belk (1992) argues that consumers have gained more autonomy in choosing the lifestyles, social ties or identities that represent them, which leads to a stronger pressure on the individual to select the ‘right’ social identity and group memberships when building their image. In the context of this thesis, one’s socio-historic background can be used to analyze the meanings consumers associate to yoga, and whether there are any connotations that influence their affiliation to specific yoga communities.

### **Mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers’ interpretive strategies (MICIS)**

Consumers’ meaning creation activities can range from embracing the representation of

ideals portrayed in advertising and mass media (Joy & Li, 2012), to deviating or even restraining from this type of popular consumption. MICIS is related to media's effect on consumers, and how they interpret and use media in their everyday practices. Giddens (1991) pointed out the powerful influence media has on perceptions of self-identity and social relations. In terms of yoga, there has been a debate in recent media regarding 'yoga porn', and the fact that the popular images of half-naked women with perfect bodies, practising yoga on the beach, do not represent the average yoga student. In an article for The Atlantic, Murphy (2014) argues that many yoga magazines show thin women, usually white, wearing slim yoga pants and tight tanks, and therefore people tend to associate yoga with white, skinny and even upper class consumers. These ideals portrayed in the media could, therefore, discourage consumers from giving yoga a try, as they may feel that they do not fit in that group, due to their weight, ethnicity, or level of flexibility. This domain of CCT is extremely relevant for studying yoga consumption; as the practice originates from a different culture than the Danish one, a big part of consumers' understanding of the phenomenon is built by media. According to Swan (2012), what consumers see in media contributes to, if not constructs, what they feel about themselves, their bodies, minds or the world around them. This is why MICIS can be used to identify consumers' perception of yoga, and whether media influences their consumption habits. As it is not likely for consumers to be aware of the messages embedded in media and their implications on their perception of yoga, the interviews will try to reveal some of their associations with the term 'yogi', in order to indirectly research this aspect.

Finally, CCT offers a comprehensive understanding of consumer culture and different aspects that might influence consumer choices. This framework will be used to guide the data collection, as the interview guide will include aspects of each of the four subcategories, in order to obtain a deeper understanding of their yoga consumption patterns.

#### **4.2.2 Identity and the symbolic meanings of consumption**

Building on the aspects presented earlier within CIP, consumers associate symbolic meanings with the objects they consume, which can contribute to constructing their identities. If what they consume symbolizes who they are or wish to become, it is important to understand the meanings they associate with yoga in order to be able to build their (re)constructions of the practice. Campbell (1987:90) emphasizes, in this context, the importance of imagination. Consumers associate specific 'dreams and pleasurable dramas' to their consumption objects, which they then transfer to themselves as they engage in consumption practices. More to this,

individuals can use products or services to show differences between genders (McCracken, 1990), to associate themselves with specific cultural groups (Holt, 2006) or express ethnic or religious belongings (Gans, 1994). In the context of this thesis, yoga has often been portrayed in the Western media as an activity practised by young and fit females; therefore it is interesting to explore whether this consumption practice is perceived by Western consumers as feminine, and to what extent are males engaging in the practise and differentiating themselves from the women.

According to Wenger (1998:53), 'living is a constant process of negotiation of meaning'. Every activity we take part in bears a specific meaning to the individual, and as one continues experiencing new things, different meanings emerge from one's practices. However, it is not just meanings that change when consumers experience something new, but it can also be their identities. Markus and Nurius (1986) pointed out that people's identities are composed of the 'now selves' and the 'possible selves', and the desire to become their positive possible selves often guides their behaviours and practices they engage in. In this context, what are the meanings associated to yoga that would make the practice be perceived as an instrument for identity construction?

Moreover, as people do not live alone in the world, meanings are created from the interaction between individuals and those surrounding him/her. According to McCracken (1986:71), 'cultural meaning flows continually between its several locations in the social world, aided by the collective and individual efforts of designers, producers, advertisers, and consumers'. Yoga has been spreading quickly through Western world in the last decades, and the way it has been portrayed in the media has an influence on how consumers perceive it. What one believes a practice or consumption object to mean often reflects the meanings attributed in media or by one's group of peers. Dittmar (1992:11) therefore argues that 'there must be socially shared beliefs in material objects as symbol manifestations of identity'. One's perceived identity is not only built by self-characterizations, but can also be constructed of reflexive characterizations (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). In other words, the extent to which a consumer identifies him/herself with a consumption object, or yoga in this case, can be dependent on the interpretation those around him/her give to the practice. In order to investigate the role of yoga for identity-creation, it would be relevant to investigate how the practice is perceived also in one's social group.

### **4.2.3 Social consumption**

Smith (2015:395) argues that ‘meanings are created by and with others’, as consumption is often a social act. Yoga is often practised in groups, in studios or gyms around the world, where 20-30 people share their practice together. Even if they most likely are experiencing differently the practice, there are benefits from sharing consumption activities, and Simmel (1949) describes this through the notion of sociability, the play-form of interaction between individuals in society. People engage in consumption not only for the activity itself but also to spend time with others, and the pleasure of the group is in this case more important than individual preferences. Maffesoli (1996) used the concept of neo-tribes to refer to these groups of consumers that share particular lifestyles and tastes. These neo-tribes can be formed around various consumption objects, for instance brand affiliations, hobbies, such as yoga, or environmental causes. This concept is relevant for this thesis, as yoga has become a complex phenomenon over the years, and the many variations now available can lead accordingly to a wide variety of neo-tribes of consumers: Vinyasa yoga, Bikram yoga (in hot temperatures), boxing yoga, rave yoga, voga (a cross between yoga and dancing), and much more. However, in its essence, yoga is not a social activity, as it represents a quiet time with oneself, including gentle physical activity and mental focus. The reasons why people prefer practicing yoga in groups, as opposed to doing it in the privacy of their home, is something this thesis will look deeper into during the field research.

Engaging in similar activities with one’s group of friends can, on the other hand, be a way of cultivating a sense of identity and belonging to a social group. Tajfel’s (1974) Social Identity Theory (SIT) can be used to understand how people adopt specific behaviours or tastes according to an affiliation to a group, even if these behaviours might contradict at times their individual habits or beliefs. Consequently, consumers can become more affined to specific consumption patterns which allow them to associate themselves to one social group, and distinguish themselves from members of other groups. Tajfel’s perspective focuses on adopting consumption patterns that build bonds with others and help with fitting in and developing a feeling of belonging to a group. Could it then be that yoga is practised not due to an individual preference, but due to desires of associating oneself with a social group?

Furthermore, Riesman et al. (1961:79) claimed that ‘the consumer today has most of his potential individuality trained out of him by his membership in the consumers’ union’. For instance, people can distinguish between metal lovers and people interested in other music genres, as they tend to dress in a specific way, therefore communicating a part of their

identity to those around them by the clothes they choose to wear. This line of thought follows the idea that consumption is influenced by the common taste of the members belonging to a social group one wants to become a part of (Tajfel, 1974; Holt, 1997). Riesman et al. (1961) defines this *other-directed* category of consumers as strongly influenced by their contemporaries, either in the form of their peer-group or mass media. This category is described as highly adaptable to the opinions and tastes of those around them, as they have a strong need to ‘fit in’, and this is how Riesman et al. (1961) believed the modern American society, in its majority, to be. Although Riesman et al.’s (1961) perspective is rather simplistic and might not grasp the complexity of consumer behaviour, it points out an undeniable aspect of modern society, respectively the strong influence of others’ opinions, mass media, and following trendsetters and opinion leaders (Solomon et al., 2013). Considering that yoga originally served as an individual journey and one’s path to liberation, the idea of practising in order to ‘fit in’ one’s group of peers, or follow a trend, does not seem to fit the yoga philosophy. However, is it undeniable that yoga happens often in a social context, and therefore it is extremely relevant to analyze in detail the social aspect of yoga practice and its influence on how this activity is (re)constructed among consumers.

#### **4.2.4 Aspects of Practice Theory**

Reckwitz (2002:250) defines practice as: *‘a routinized way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood. To say that practices are ‘social practices’ is indeed a tautology: A practice is social, as it is a ‘type’ of behaving and understanding that appears at different locales and at different points of time and is carried out by different body/minds’.*

Yoga can be analyzed using practice theory, as it is a social activity, practised in similar ways at different locations and different times, by different people. Warde (2014) mentioned four ways for recognizing a practice: the existence of a user-manual, a significant amount of people dedicating time to the activity and acknowledging it, the existence of disputes among participants about the standards of the performances, or special equipment commonly associated to the activity. According to these criteria, yoga constitutes a practice, as there are books and ‘manuals’ about how it should be performed, and what the correct alignments are. People are practicing all over the world, and many disputes appeared over the years in relation to what yoga is, what are the ‘standards’, and what qualifies or not as yoga (the documentary ‘Who owns yoga’ by X addresses some of them). Finally, there are many commercial items associated to yoga, from mats and blocks, to yoga pants. However, what is

especially interesting in this thesis is not that yoga constitutes a practice, but more how and why Western consumers (re)construct yoga.

Ortner (1996:193) suggests that ‘practice theory is a theory of how social beings, with their diverse motives and their diverse intentions, make and transform the world in which they live’. Yoga has been reinvented uncountable times across the globe: ‘*every group in every age has created its own version and vision of yoga*’ (White, 2012:2). The concept of practice is, according to Warde (2005:141), a dynamic one, as ‘people adapt, improvise and experiment’. Not only can a consumer choose from various types of yoga, but they attribute different meanings to their practice and take different things out of it. Although practices involve habits, routines, tacit knowledge or tradition, people do not engage in practices in the same way (Warde, 2005). Each practice is individual, as it depends on the person’s knowledge, available resources, past experience and so on. In the case of yoga, although engaging in a similar physical routine, one student may be fully engaged in the practice, in touch with his/her breathing and fully focused on the practice, as he/she has been researching and practising for several years, whereas another student may be at his/her second class, still confused about the asanas and not understanding the principles behind the yoga practice yet. As consumers learn in different ways, and some are more engaged with their yoga practice than others, it is extremely relevant for this research to be aware of the experience level of the participants involved, and their level of engagement with yoga; this observation is vital for gaining deep and accurate interpretations of their realities.

### **4.3 Cultural Aspects**

Understanding Western culture is important for this thesis, as the thesis focuses on yoga phenomenon, which has travelled across cultures, adapting to the needs of different consumers, sometimes losing some of its traditionally-associated concepts (such as Hinduism), but supplemented with new variations and styles and became a popular practice all around the world.

This thesis researches the yoga phenomenon in Denmark, which is a developed Western country accommodating international consumers, and therefore provides a good starting point for exploring and understanding yoga consumption in Western world. As I believe that there are multiple realities to be discovered, this thesis approaches culture as a complex concept, as it is constantly changing and recreated among individuals. Studying yoga consumption from a cultural perspective is interesting, as, according to Slater (1997:132), consumption is

always cultural: ‘the meanings involved are necessarily shared meanings. Individual preferences are themselves formed within cultures’. He continues by saying that even if naturally not all members of a culture share the same consumption patterns, the formulation of needs is social in its nature, even if individuals may reconstruct them. This is why understanding the Western culture is relevant for this thesis, in order to make sense of consumption patterns and the ways yoga is reconstructed among international consumers in Denmark.

#### **4.3.1 Western culture**

‘In common parlance, ‘the West’ means an advanced society, either in Western Europe or of Western European heritage, and with democratic institutions, a dynamic and prosperous economy and technological expertise’ (Foster, et al., 2002). Today, this definition no longer applies, as more and more countries are developing all over the globe, such as China and Japan, and geographical standards cannot justify for such a categorization.

However, literature provides specific characteristics of Western culture, which reflect on consumers’ choices and consumption patterns. Slater (1997:8) argues that consumer culture is ‘in important respects the culture of modern West – certainly central to the meaningful practice of everyday life in the modern world; and it is more generally bound up with central values, practices and institutions which define western modernity, such as choice, individualism and market relations’. McCracken (1987:145) mentioned that ‘one of the great peculiarities of the Western world’ is for individuals to ‘undergo a process of continual transformation’. In this context, consumption has a big role – in order to transform, the individual needs to experience novel things (Campbell, 1983). Consequently, Westerners have access to a wide variety of products, and are free to choose among them, based on their individual preferences, or other factors like peer groups or advertising, as discussed in the consumption section. In this context, yoga can be seen as one type of physical exercise, among other options consumers can choose from in gyms in the Western world, among Pilates, Zumba, and group cycling (Prichard and Tiggemann, 2008). Yet, why is it that people choose yoga, instead of other forms of physical exercise? Or perhaps they just alternate among the available options for variety in their workouts? Jain (2014:457) suggests that: ‘in their fear that misguided individuals are increasingly choosing yoga, opponents of postural yoga acknowledge the fact that participants in consumer culture pick and choose from a variety of practices and worldviews, choosing them much like they choose commodities.’ An important characteristic of Western society is freedom (Patterson, 1991), as consumers are

free to choose whichever items or activities they desire. Freedom of choice is strongly linked with having the knowledge and education to make qualified decisions among various available, opting for the alternative that suits the individuals best (Blockland, 1997). In Western society, it is considered essential that people have ‘the capacity to make choices, to develop authentic ideas and goals’, leading to self-determination and self-realization. (Blockland, 1997:199). These ideas, although widely-spread, are to be challenged by outside influences such as media or peer group, which may, at times, prove to be stronger than individual autonomy (Tajfel, 1974). In terms of yoga consumption, people are free to choose among various styles, teachers or locations. Denmark is a Western-European country, with modern characteristics well embedded in the culture, such as democracy, freedom and individuality. There are not many official political or religious restraints in terms of what people can consume.

In terms of yoga, there appears to be a big difference in perception between the East and the West. As mentioned above, in India yoga is embedded in people’s way of life and much connected with religion. On the other hand, Western societies (such as Denmark) tend to emphasize yoga’s physical benefits, and De Michelis (2005) argues that this is part of its cultural appeal. The field research will therefore try to reveal whether the physical aspect of it weighs as much in consumers’ choices as some researchers (e.g. Singleton, 2010; De Michelis, 2005) believe.

#### **4.3.2 Spirituality in the West**

Spirituality is an important part of traditional yoga practices, therefore the concept should be discussed here, also from a Western perspective. Myers (1990:11) defined spirituality as ‘a continuing search for meaning and purpose in life; an appreciation for the depth of life, the expanse of the universe, and natural forces which operate; a personal belief system.’, while Benner (1989:20) argued it is the ‘human response to God’s gracious call to a relationship with him-self’. Scholars have debated the interconnection between spirituality and religion, at times differentiating between ‘religion, (a social institution for social integration), or faith, (a dimension of a personality development that spans spirituality and religion), and as spirituality (transcendent meaning) (Ortiz et al. 2000:23). Zinnbauer et al. (1997) also investigated the relationship between spirituality and religion, and argued that people differentiate between the two terms, as the former is seen as a personalized type of faith, and the latter is more institutionalized aspect of faith. Considering yoga’s strong spiritual roots, it



is relevant to discuss the aspect of spirituality in the context of this thesis, as the values promoted in the West differ from the Indian philosophies yoga is based on. Seckel (1986:3) suggested that ‘with very few exceptions, the religion which a man accepts is that of the community in which he lives, which makes it obvious that the influence of the environment is what has led him to accept the religion in question’. While traditional religion is characterized by collectivism (Kale, 2004), the modern society is moving towards a more individualised spiritual quest. Individuals are therefore picking from the available religions, selecting and combining aspects that match one’s individual journey. Denmark is a country that values freedom of choice, and this applies also to religious choices. However, the role of religion in this country can be questioned, as Zuckerman (2009) claimed that Denmark is one of the least religious countries in the world. How do then yoga and its spirituality fit in the Danish context, and how do consumers perceive this aspect? This is a question that will be addressed in the field research, as it points out an important part of yoga and the meanings associated to the practice.

#### **4.3.3 The appeal of the exotic**

The West is full of results-driven consumers, which are used to always having a wide variety of choices at their disposal (Goldberg, 2010). However, Campbell (2007) points out that ‘paradoxically, it is possible that just at the point when the rest of the world seems intent on imitating the Western way of life; the West itself is actually turning away from its own historic roots and embracing an Eastern outlook’. Western consumers have started fishing for the items they need in various markets around the globe, and the East provided mystical solutions for their problems. ‘Now physicians recommend Yoga and meditation, scientists study the practices, and ordinary believers hold spiritual attitudes that were once considered foreign and threatening’ (Goldberg, 2010:16). Together with this freedom of choice and accessibility of consumption objects, various products and practices become available all around the world. Some researchers (e.g. De Michelis, 2005; Jacobsen, 2016) claimed that yoga was popularized as spiritual export, as India has a lot to teach the ‘materialistic West’. However, considering its asana-focus, the degree to which the spiritual component has been successfully implemented among Westerners is debatable.

Segalen’s (2002) made an interesting study on the appeal of the exotic, which can be applied to this thesis, as yoga is a practice with Eastern roots that has spread in the Western world. This has a geographic component, where there is a significant spatial distance between the consumer and the object consumed, usually characterized by ethnical or cultural differences.

Exoticism could also be temporal or historical, which take the form of an idealisation of the past of the future. Yoga is based on very old Eastern philosophies, and this thesis will investigate whether these exotic connotations have an impact on Western consumers and their choice of practising yoga. What the different perspectives have in common is a gaze towards 'the other', which is perceived as different or diverse, and the curiosity around experiencing it. According to Varenne (1976:187), this is not a new development, as 'the call of the East', as he puts it, has been going on for centuries, and the opening of the sea route around Africa made the contact possible and tangible. In terms of yoga and its perceived exoticism, many of its components, beliefs and even language, are foreign to Western consumers. Names of poses in Sanskrit, chants, or enforcement of Hindu values or philosophies are not something consumers are familiar with in the West (Varenne, 1976). However, there are many ways of practising yoga in the West, many of them adapted to the Western philosophy (Singleton, 2010), which implies transformation to the traditional practice in order to become more appealing, but in the same time different than what it used to mean. This is where a question arises, regarding the perception westerners have on yoga, and whether they perceive it as Eastern and exotic, something already embedded in their culture, or something else? This question will be addressed during the fieldwork, in order to analyze in depth the way yoga is constructed or reconstructed among Western consumers.

## 5. Data Analysis

In this part I will discuss in detail the previously presented themes, based on quotes from the data collections and reflections on relevant theories introduced in the theoretical framework. The focus of this part is to present the most essential aspects of yoga consumption that can be found among the stories shared by the respondents, in order to analyse their (re)constructions of yoga and meanings they attribute to their practices.

During the coding sessions, five main themes emerged, based on the data collected and the theoretical framework. The analysis part is therefore structured accordingly. The first theme, *Social Aspects of Yoga Practice*, touches a recurring theme among respondents' answers, which relates to the social influences that play a role in their yoga practice. The second theme analyses *What Does Media Have to Say?*, as market relations can be considered a pillar-stone in Western consumers' society (Slater, 1997), and the image portrayed by the media on yoga and those who practise can have a strong influence on people's consumption choices or understandings of the yoga phenomenon. This theme will shed some light on how yoga is perceived in the media and what being a yogi means to them. Some respondents also mentioned movies or books that present yoga, so that will also be taken into consideration. The third theme is focusing on the *Physical Aspects of Yoga Practices*. Most of the interviewees associated yoga with some physical benefits, such as improved flexibility, gaining muscle strength, or weight loss. This may be due to the fact that Fitness World was used as one of the locations for recruiting the interviewees, and, as it is a fitness centre, physical results may be an important factor in their choice of workout. This theme will discuss to what extent the respondents' construct yoga as a physical exercise, and how is it perceived different than other forms of workout. The fourth theme is looking at the importance of *the Location of the Yoga Practice*, trying to investigate whether the location has any influence on respondents' perceptions of yoga, or the meanings associated to their practice. Finally, the fifth theme will look into the *Spiritual Aspects of Yoga Practice*. As yoga travelled across continents and cultures, some of its original components, such as the Hindu philosophies, may have suffered transformations on the way. This theme will reflect on how familiar the respondents are with yoga's origins, and whether they reconstruct these original meanings in order to incorporate them into their lifestyles.

## 5.1 Social aspects of Yoga Practices

During the field analysis, substantial differences between participants' approaches to yoga were revealed. Very common among the respondents' stories was the fact that they started yoga because a friend took them there. Interestingly, some of them stated that they did not even like it in the beginning, which reflects the strong influence the group of peers has on one's consumption patterns, as suggested by Riesman (1961), Tajfel (1974) and Solomon et al. (2013). As an example, Ken's story (male, 28, Italian/Danish, started yoga because he met a girl he wanted to impress) showcases how important is another person influence on one's consumption, in this case consumption of yoga:

*I wanted to try it. Umm... but I, I, I didn't want to go by myself, because I had so many stigmas... men, you know, it's only a girls' thing. ... And I was more into fitness at that time, so... (Ken, L.1480-1481, p.38)*

Ken was reticent about starting yoga, arguing that that this practice did not resonate with who he was 'as a man', and with his Italian culture. When describing his culture, he continues by saying 'we're supposed to be, you know, strong and...you just hear, you have to have big muscles and nothing with feelings'. (Ken, L.1495-1496, p.38). However, as his girlfriend made Ken start doing yoga and thereby forming a new consumption pattern, Ken engaged in a practice that contradicted with his perception of masculinity (i.e. strong, big muscles, nothing to do with feelings). Differences in the meanings he associated with yoga are for him, related to both gender and culture. According to Visser & Smith, (2007), the behaviour of a man may have implications for his masculine identity, so engaging in an activity such as yoga, which in one's culture is considered feminine, contradicts Ken's perceived masculinity. Brad (38, male, Danish, has been practising different types of yoga for almost 20 years) went through similar experiences with his male friends, who wanted to engage in sports more focused on building muscles and competing against each other. Tajfel (1974) described how consumers partake in acts of consumption that associate them with one consumer group, and differentiates from others. In Ken's case, his yoga consumption 'separated' him to some extent from his male friends:

*You know, old style way of being...what a man should be like. From the society I think. Many guys are like that when you start speaking about yoga, they're like 'what, I don't want to do that'. You get strange looks many times from friends. (Ken, L.1600-1602, p.41)*

Ken refers to the way masculinity is perceived in the Italian culture as an 'old' style, as he has now changed his perspective, and sees multiple benefits to his yoga practice, which makes the opinions of others are not as important. His initial reticence towards yoga was caused by the culture where he was raised, and the perception of masculinity formed within that culture and his male friends, as taste is socially constructed (Bourdieu, 1984). Ken was interested in weight-lifting, and activities perceived as 'manly' in his culture and group of peers. However, as he became interested in doing activities together with his new girlfriend - who shared different values than his friends - he decided to give yoga a try, because he wanted to share this activity with her.

Ken started practising with his girlfriend, although yoga contradicted with his masculine ideals and his Italian 'macho' culture, which shows that social influence can persuade consumers to try an activity that they do not identify with. Moreover, fighting the prejudices of his male friends and digging deeper into yoga leads to a better understanding of one's feelings. This benefits Ken's relationship with his significant other, as he can show her that he is different: *'I should try to impress her and go with her (laughs) So that I could show her I was not the regular man'* (Ken, L.1483-1484, p.38). This idea was also supported by another male consumer, Brad (male, Danish, 38) who practices different styles of yoga and now focuses on meditation and getting in touch with his feelings. Brad mentioned that as a man, he is naturally less aware of his feelings, and yoga helps him understand his inner world better, which also has a positive impact on his relationship. Therefore, yoga can be seen as a transformative experience, allowing consumers to understand themselves better, and develop themselves by increasing awareness of the world and one's inner feelings through the practice. Moreover, developing one's understanding of this inner world can contribute to building stronger relationships with others, by sharing the practice with their significant others and getting more in touch with one's feelings.

Taking this further, sharing consumption practices with others can have deeper meanings for consumers, which go beyond individual taste. Simmel (1949) used the notion of sociability to describe the significance socializing has in people's interactions. This can be showcased by Lily's story (female, 27, practices yoga at Fitness World with her friends), as her individual preferences in terms of yoga are very different from those of her peer group, but she is joining the yoga classes that her friends attend, in order to spend time with them:

*I also go now to spend time with my friends. And like 'oh, we have an appointment, so we can have a coffee afterwards' or something like this. So for me it's not only the physical thing, it's also...cause if it were only that, I wouldn't be going to Fitness World, it's what I am trying to say. (Lily, L.192-194, p.5)*

Lily is a certified yoga instructor in Sivananda yoga, which is a slower and more focused on meditation practice, very different than the Fitness World yoga classes she is attending now. However, Lily is now joining classes in the gym where her friends are going, so that she can combine the yoga practice with spending time with her friends. Her individual tastes become less important than the joy of the group (Simmel, 1949), as sharing the yoga consumption with her friends opens up an array of other possibilities for them to enjoy time together. For instance, Lily mentioned that practising yoga with her friends means that she can also meet them for coffee after the class. This way, Lily can spend more time with those she cares about, than she would when going to a different yoga studio. She continues by saying that:

*I went a lot to these other studios, where I liked the teachers better and I liked the styles better maybe, but then I wouldn't see my friends and often I wouldn't get to go. I wouldn't go, because then I have an appointment with someone and I would rather do this. (Lily, L.198--201, p.5-6)*

As she prioritises spending time with friends over her personal yoga preferences, combining these two activities results in her practising yoga more often. This was an interesting discovery, as Lily was the only participant who was certified as a yoga instructor, which implies that she had taken her yoga consumption to a deeper level than the rest of the participants and had learned a lot more about the philosophies behind the practice. She stated that she perceives yoga as '*an individual journey*' (Lily, L.300, p.8), where each consumer should find the right path for him/her, and develop him/herself. However, when it came to her actual practice, Lily gave in to the consumption patterns of her friends, which contradicts with the degree of individuality she associates with the practice. Although she stated that she cares about more spiritual practices, she now practises mostly at Fitness World with her friends. This reflects to what extent consumption acts can be less about the practices that define the individual, in this case yoga, and more about spending quality time with those one cares about. The importance of sharing consumption activities with one's group of friends is therefore very high, as it influences the individual's relationship with the practice and the frequency him/her engages in that activity.

Moreover, Lily is not the only one who sees the benefits in intertwining consumption with social activities. Maggie (25, female, practises yoga at Fitness World, and started after her speech instructor suggested it) and Daisy (25, female, goes to various workouts at Fitness World, including yoga) also try to engage others in their practice:

*I've just got my little sister to start doing it. She is right now not so crazy about it, but I am forcing her to go. [...] this is what I do at the gym, so I think it could be a nice thing to do together. (Maggie, L.77-82, p.2-3)*

*I even convinced one of my friends to start yoga recently, because she was quite sceptical about it. (Daisy, L.721-722, p.19)*

Both Maggie and Daisy have persuaded their peers to give yoga a try, although these people did not seem interested, at least in the beginning. According to Crano & Prislin (2007), persuasion represents an active effort to change attitudes, and the resistance faced from their friends or family did not represent an obstacle. Maggie is 'forcing' her sister to join yoga classes, because she thinks her sister could use some physical activity. However, she is not encouraging her to be more active; instead, she is encouraging her to come to yoga, because that is what Maggie does when at gym. This reflects on her desire to share this consumption activity with her sister. Similarly, Daisy convinced one of her sceptical friends to give yoga a try. Her reasoning behind this was:

*I don't get as bored as I would get, if I went alone, and that way makes it something more fun to do...and, then I am more likely to go more often, probably. (Daisy, L. 729-730, p.19)*

Daisy associates social consumption with fun, and this is a motivator for her to practice sports more often. Both Daisy's and Maggie's stories prove the importance of sharing our practices with those we care about, as it represents a source of motivation for the participants, and a way of combining social activities with workouts. In this case, it is less about the type of yoga they practice, and more about spending time together.

Another question that was raised by the theoretical framework was how one's group of peers perceives yoga, and whether that has any influence on how the respondents build their identities through the practice. How others perceive the respondent was described as reflexive-characterizations (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934), and the field research tried to reveal perceptions of yoga among participants' social group.

One element that was mentioned several times was the reticence regarding spirituality among the people around some participants. For example, Betty (Danish, who really much enjoys the spirituality and meditates daily) described her friend as following:

*yeah, she'll close her eyes and like breathe when we have to meditate or set an intention, but she's like 'neah', it's not really her thing. (Betty, L.1226-1228, p.31)*

Betty's friend, although joining the same practice as Betty, does not really enjoy or understand the spiritual elements. As Zuckerman (2009) pointed out, Denmark is not a very religious country, and the public discussion of spirituality and yoga can be frowned upon, or 'scare people away'. Some of the participants discussed the relationship between yoga and spirituality or religion, mentioning that these parts of yoga can discourage people from trying it out. For instance, Lily (female, Danish, yoga instructor, who has studied yoga's traditions and philosophies) and Betty (female, Danish, enjoys the spirituality around yoga, meditates regularly) voiced that people may get afraid of the religious connotations surrounding yoga:

*It may seem, I don't know, mystical or strange, or something, and they might...not scare people away, but maybe they may think that 'you're crazy', or 'you're into something strange and spiritual cult or something like that' (Lily, L.315-317, p.8)*

*And also I think a lot of people are...if I would say that yoga is something spiritual and you have to be kind to yourself and to people... people would think it's just some kind of new-edgy, and people smoking pot, and eating vegetarian, and I think a lot of people would maybe reject yoga as just a workout, because they would think they have to become vegetarian. (Betty, L.1204-1208, p.31)*

Lily thinks that people are reticent to some of the spiritual or intangible things yoga promotes (such as balance, focus, being in touch with oneself), so she stated she would avoid mentioning them to somebody who is new to yoga. Betty believes that some of the connotations associated with yoga (veganism, spirituality) make people reject yoga, or feel they are not suited to practice it because they do not associate with these things. Furthermore, Betty added that *'I think if I came and said that I was spiritual, people would think that I was weird'* (Betty, L.1210-1211, p.31). Both Lily and Betty said that speaking about the spiritual aspects of yoga can be weird in the Danish culture, as people are not as open towards religious topics as they might be in other cultures. Religion is something that happens 'behind closed doors' and is not to be talked about, as people would consider you 'crazy'. Betty



shared also that her friend who took her to yoga class considers spirituality some '*mambo jumbo*', and therefore Betty avoids sharing with people her affinity for the spiritual side. This reticence towards religion in Danish culture explains the lack of spirituality in the classes offered, as the instructors do not want to 'scare people away'. If associating yoga with spirituality or religion discourages consumers from trying, then it is explicable that yoga needed to be reconstructed into something less spiritual and more appealing for the local cultures in the Western world, as Goldberg (2010) argued.

In terms of identity building through reflexive-characterizations, it can be difficult for the respondents valuing the spirituality behind yoga to share this with the people around, as they may not understand it and regard it as 'weird' or 'new-edgy'. In a country like Denmark, where religion or spirituality is perceived as happening 'behind closed doors', it appears that spiritual participants prefer not to emphasize the spiritual connotations of yoga, even if this is what they value most about their yoga practice.

So how do social forces influence yoga consumption? In the case of the participants in this research, Simmel's (1949) notion of sociability proved the most relevant, as the respondents seemed to engage in yoga due to their peers. Often, this does not mean that they necessarily identify with the practices of their friends, like Tajfel (1974) would argue, but they put their individual tastes aside at times, in order to spend quality time with their friends. In some other cases, consumers end up getting over their initial prejudices and start liking the practice, like it happened with Ken (male, 28, thought yoga was not manly enough, but gave it a try for his girlfriend). In his case, yoga developed from a practice he shared with his girlfriend, to a regular practice he now does almost daily, for his own benefits, and often without his girlfriend. Furthermore, as meanings are often created by or with others (Smith, 2015), the constructions of those around can have an impact on how identity is built through one's yoga practice. A challenge regarding this was noticed, as consumers who value the spiritual side of yoga seemed reticent to share this freely, considering the degree of privacy surrounding religion in Denmark (Zuckerman, 2009).

## 5.2 What Does Media Have to Say?

Media influence can persuade Western consumers to embrace consumption patterns, as it can portray appealing ideals (Joy & Li, 2012) that can influence their perceptions of self-identity or social relations (Giddens, 1991). Consequently, media appeared to raise interest among participants towards the spirituality behind yoga. For example, Daisy (female, 25, who stated she likes the more spiritual practices because it differentiates yoga from other workouts) referred to a passage from a book:

*I do remember reading the popular book 'Eat, pray, love', and that had quite a few things about yoga, [...] at some point, she described how they were supposed to sit still for like an hour, somewhere outside, in a yoga pose, while they were bitten by mosquitoes. So it kinda...yeah, it emphasized this aspect, that if you really try to focus and be really focused on your mind, and not your body, then you can actually achieve this true yoga. This is why I said that maybe I would give a chance to meditation. (Daisy, L.752-759, p.19-20)*

Daisy was impressed by the situation described in the book, and by how different the circumstances are from anything people are used to in the West. This type of mental focus is idealized by Daisy, since it is different from what Western consumers are used to (Segalen, 2002), and it represents something the East can teach the West (De Michelis, 2005). Daisy sees 'true yoga' as complete focus and control of one's mind, and achieving this is a reason for her to try out meditation. However, idealising what is presented in the media can lead to disappointments, as Daisy stated in the beginning of her story. She wanted to give yoga a try because she saw it in popular American TV series, but the results were not as expected:

*of course I wasn't capable of imitating anything that I saw (laughs), all those complicated poses and everything that, of course, movies show them like 'yeah, you do those poses, and everything is so easy, and you're gonna be fit and confident about yourself', but when you try to do it it's very much quite the opposite, because you're not capable of doing anything. (Daisy, L.646-649, p.17)*

Although on TV yoga seemed to be seamless, Daisy soon realized that practising yoga was not as simple as it was presented in the American shows. This difference between how yoga is believed to be ('a series of stretches', like Betty thought, or a slow exercise that would not give her anything, like Angie voiced) and how it actually is causing many people to avoid the

practice, or be surprised when trying it out. Brad (male, 28, Denmark, who persuaded a male friend to join him to a yoga class) also stated his friend was not prepared for the difficulty level of the class, assuming yoga is just stretches. The discrepancies between the meanings associated with yoga is caused by the wide amount of variations of the practice (White, 2012), the multiple ways in which media is presenting it and the existing stigmas regarding who should practise it. For example, Angie (female, 25, practicing yoga among other workouts in order to lose weight) shared that: *'there are some of these chic yoga girls in the class [...] it's nice to look at them, and hope that maybe one day I can be one of them.'* (Angie, L.605-607, p.16). This image has also been shown in the media for many years now, presenting extremely flexible women, doing yoga in beautiful scenery and being able to hold challenging poses. Angie's reconstruction of yoga uses this image of 'chic yoga girls' and applies it to her 'possible self'. As she hopes to become 'one of them', and yoga seems to be a way to get there (Markus & Nurius, 1986), she is likely to continue practising in order to transform into a fit 'yoga girl'.

### **On yoga, health and diet**

Another area where media has an influence on consumers' perception of yoga is one's diet, and what is perceived as 'appropriate' to consume by a yogi. During the exploratory netnography, judgement was noticed among some consumers regarding teachers who promote eating meat. This is related to one of the principles behind Eastern philosophies called ahimsa which, according to Phillips (2009), promotes non-harmfulness towards oneself and others. An article from Yoga Journal on the roots of vegetarianism (Barrett, 2007) discusses two reasons for the popularity of this type of diet among yogis: one is the non-violence against animals, and the second is related to the purification of the body, as 'bitter, salty, and sour rajasic foods (including meat, fish, and alcohol) cause pain, disease, and discomfort'. Some of these beliefs have been spread into the Western world, and were mentioned by some of the interviewees during the field research. Angie (female, Poland, practices yoga to get in shape and does not know much about yoga philosophies) and Minnie (female, Estonia, practices yoga because it makes her feel good, did not go deep into yoga philosophies), they both made references towards 'healthy' diets, when asked to reveal some of the things they associated with a yogi:

*Relaxed, peaceful, probably vegan (laughs) or vegetarian. Spiritual. [...] fit. (Angie, L.572-575, p.15)*

*They have these fruits (laughs) with them, or just different healthy snacks, you know, on the daily basis. (Minnie, L.1044-1045, p.27)*

Both Angie and Minnie laughed after they mentioned these stereotypical associations with a yogi's diet, which are based on traditional yoga principles, such as ahimsa. They do not know much about yoga philosophies, but seem to associate health and a vegetarian diet with those practising yoga. The fact that they laugh shows that they are aware that these are stereotypes, which can be situated into 'funny, but true' characterizations.

Continuing the discussion about assumptions regarding yoga, an interesting observation was made during Brad's interview (male, Danish, has been practicing for almost 20 years and knows a lot about yoga philosophies). As we sat on a table outside a cafe, and he moved the ashtray and directly assumed that I did not smoke, making a short comment about it. Further on, we were offered a sausage-snack by a promoter passing by, and after we refused, his next question was whether I am a vegetarian. It was hard not to notice the judgement in his voice when I replied that I eat meat. He then shared that he has been a vegetarian for many years and he could truly feel the benefits. As he has been reading a lot about yoga philosophies and practising for so long time, yoga was clearly a part of his way of life, and I noticed his tendency to assume that I would share those views, based on the fact that I practice yoga as well. As I recruited Brad in a yoga class at a studio, his assumptions about my way of life (e.g. vegetarianism or non-smoking) are most likely related to the fact that he perceived me as part of the same 'community', sharing the 'healthy' yogic way of life. His automated associations mean that he feels that yoga consumers (or at least those practising at the same studio with him) share similar habits. This can be associated with Maffesoli's (1996) concept of neo-tribes, as students at the same yoga studio are believed to share similar lifestyles or beliefs. However, this mentality of how yogis 'are' can discourage some consumers from going to a yoga studio. For example, Maggie (female, 25, practises yoga regularly at Fitness World) shared that she would not go to a yoga studio because:

*'it is kind of my prejudice in a way, that if you go to a real yoga centre, you need to be a little more healthy than I am.'* (Maggie, L.66-67, p.2)

Maggie stated that yoga at gym is not so pretentious and spiritual, and referred to studios as 'real yoga centres'. Practicing yoga at the gym is seen as more accessible for regular consumers, as there are fewer connotations associated to the practice in comparison to joining a yoga centre. For Maggie, yoga at the gym is asana-focused and improves her flexibility,

whereas 'real' yoga involves scents, spirituality and a healthier lifestyle. In lines with scholars who emphasize the symbolic role of consumption for identity building (e.g. Belk, 1988; McCracken, 1986), Maggie cannot attend a yoga studio because she does not identify with the values she believes are being promoted there, which makes her consume yoga inside the gym, where she feels comfortable. Also the choice of not practising in yoga studios is used to build her identity, as she detaches herself from the values and lifestyles promoted there (or at least what she assumes to be promoted there), and associates herself instead with gym-yoga, which is more relaxed and has less connotations on how she, as a yogi, should be. Betty (female, 22, practises yoga home and at Fitness World), on the other hand, does not see this issue as black and white. Although she also practises at the gym, she believes consumers have the freedom to choose which lifestyle suits them best:

*'you can be a yogi in a lot of different ways, and you can also kind of pick and choose from some...like, in my opinion, you don't have to be a vegan to be a yogi, but because of the principle like Ahimsa, non-violence, I think some people would say that you would do it. [...]I love yoga, and I meditate, and I like candles, and umm...like, I know when there's a new moon, but I'm not a vegetarian and I don't think I need to be.'* (Betty, L.1215-1221, p.31)

Betty is a yoga consumer that has done her research about yoga traditions and philosophies. However, this does not imply that she would follow blindly their teachings, but choose the ones that represent her and improve her lifestyle. As opposed to Brad, whose lifestyle choices were guided by the yoga philosophies, Betty chose her lifestyle freely, using the parts of yoga as expressions of that contribute to expressing her identity, and disregarding those who do not represent her. Kale (2004) noticed this shift in consumers' perception of spirituality and religion, moving from collective practices towards more individual spiritual quests. This means that some consumers will pick and choose from the proposed practices, keeping those that they identify with, and yoga is no exception.

The way yoga is portrayed in media has a strong influence on how consumers construct yoga, especially when they did not research the topic enough on their own. These 'picture perfect' images of healthy, skinny yogis can influence what consumers expect out of the yoga practice, and may contribute to representations of positive 'future selves' (Markus & Nurius, 1986) they would then strive to become. Furthermore, yoga is often associated with a healthy

way of life, including vegetarianism or veganism, and there is a historical and cultural reason behind it, due to the non-violence principle *ahimsa* promoted by traditional yoga philosophies. As it travelled the West, the associations remained, but consumers' attitudes towards this can be very different. There are consumers like Brad, who embraces the philosophies, integrates them into everyday life and associates them with the yoga practice and its practitioners. On the opposite side, there are consumers like Maggie, who do not identify with these values and, therefore, avoid them by not practicing in 'real' yoga centres, where they would feel inadequate for having 'unhealthy' lifestyles. And finally, there are consumers like Betty, who make the most out of the philosophies, enrich their lifestyles by adopting some of the values promoted, but only choose to follow the traditions that they identify with. Looking at the divided opinions of Western consumers' on the matter of yoga and health, it is noticeable that the freedom of choice that represents the Western society (Patterson, 1991) influences yoga practices as well, where consumers adapt their consumption patterns to the values they resonate with, and do not engage in activities that do not match their identities.

### **5.3 Physical Aspects of Yoga Practices**

The physical benefits of the yoga practice were mentioned by all the respondents, and they seemed to be highly valued by the participants. In a context where the physical side is so important, it is interesting to analyze what makes consumers choose yoga over other forms of workout. Jain (2014) argued that in the area of physical activity, consumers can choose among a variety of options that suit particular needs and desires. The interviewees voiced various physical motives for practising yoga, and stated them as a strong motivation for their yoga consumption. First of all, flexibility was often mentioned when it came to the yoga practice. Maggie (female, 25, practices 1-2 times per week at Fitness World) sees yoga as a facilitator for becoming more flexible, and this was a major reason for doing yoga. On the same lines, Betty (female, 22, former dancer who thought yoga is a series of stretches, practises few times a week) mentions flexibility as an incentive to start, but she soon discovered that it takes more than just a bendy body.

*'I am not very bendy, and I always wanted to get more bendy' (Maggie, L.14, p. 1)*

*'I guess I thought, when I started, that it was just the main point of yoga, bending, like being very flexible and doing weird poses...so I didn't have a lot of expectations besides...I was surprised that it was so hard, like physically hard. Because I thought it*

*was just...yeah, doing stretches, and yeah, I've done a lot of those in the dance class, and I thought 'well, there's no problem', just gonna stretch...so I think that was what surprised me. Also, at the start, I didn't know about the spiritual element, so I thought it's just a series of stretches. I didn't know there was this whole philosophy behind it.'* (Betty, L. 1086-1091, p.28)

Contrary to some beliefs, yoga is more than flexibility and stretches, as Betty realised after starting practising. It is not only the difficulty of the practice, but also the spiritual element that were not transparent to her before starting practising. The fact that yoga is perceived just as a series of stretches can be one of the reasons why some male consumers don't see it as appealing. Brad (male, 38, has been practising yoga for almost 20 years) mentioned that his male friends see it as an activity for girls, since stretching one arm in one direction, and looking towards the sky, is not perceived as masculine or challenging enough for them to be interested in joining a yoga class. However, due to this perception of a slow workout, many participants are surprised of how physically difficult the practice actually is. Misconceptions about a consumption activity, in this case yoga, can lead to wrong expectations, or even reluctance in engaging in the practice.

Moreover, Jain (2014) mentioned that the postural yoga is a rather new phenomenon, and partly a product of consumer culture. Even if, originally, yoga was focusing more on spirituality than on achieving difficult asanas, some respondents were very eager to increase the difficulty of their postures. Peter (male, 30, sees yoga as a workout and strives to achieve challenging positions) voiced his physical challenges related to yoga:

*I want to try to do, what is it called, head stand, and I couldn't do it. But right now, I can't do it right now, but I set my goal that I want to do that. I look at YouTube channels and I see oh, she does a good job.'* (Peter, L. 394-396, p.10)

Peter's response came in relation to a question asked regarding setting intentions. That question was used in order to inquire whether the participants were familiar with the term 'yoga intention', which is more of a mental challenge than a physical one. Peter did not seem to relate to that, as his immediate response was that he aimed to achieve a challenging asana, the head stand. When asked why he focused on achieving this challenging pose, his reply was that it was the hardest thing you can do in a yoga class. His response may be connected to the

fact that he is a man. On similar lines, Brad (male, 38, has male friends who do not consider yoga masculine enough) mentioned that men tend to be more interested in physical challenges than spiritual ones. Bourdieu's (1984) habitus concept can be used to explain why men from some cultures do not show interest in yoga. While in the East, yoga used to be a practice only for men, as they were considered suitable for enlightenment and liberation, the West has a different view on what a man should be doing. As Ken (male, half-Italian, half-Danish) mentioned, yoga is perceived as soft, not challenging enough and intended for women:

*I didn't like it the first...the first four, five times was not...something for me. [...] Because, umm...I think it clashes a lot with the way or... I mean, for me, at least, with culture of being a man...from Italy. (Ken, L.1491-1495, p.38)*

Ken felt that he does not identify with yoga, as it clashed with his perception of masculinity. As Newcombe (2009) argued, yoga is perceived as a style of exercise rather expected of women than men in Europe and the Americas. As a consumer with Italian origins, Ken was surrounded by men who viewed yoga as a feminine activity, and this had effects on his perception of the practice, as he felt it was not 'something for him'. The reason why Ken felt that he does not belong there is that the culture in Italy is very different than the one in India, for example, where men are looking for liberation through yoga, and complete awareness of oneself and one's body. For Ken, men '*have to...you have big muscles and nothing with feelings and nothing, instead of, you know... paying attention to your body and your breath*' (Ken, L.1495-1497, p.38). As yoga resonates on different levels to consumers from different cultures, presenting the same benefits across the globe would not lead to the same results. Like any marketing product, the values promoted should be adjusted to the local market, in order to resonate with the consumers. This is why the focus on the physical aspect has made it so popular around Westerners, as it is emphasizing benefits that these consumers value. Media in the Western world usually depicts yoga by showcasing the practice of skinny and flexible women (Murphy, 2014), and this can lead to men constructing yoga based on these images, which they do not identify with.

However, the focus on the physical workout should not be associated only with the male respondents, as there are also female respondents who appreciate the challenge:

*I didn't see the beneficial part of yoga before, because I thought that, because it's a slow movement, it wouldn't give you anything, and I also didn't know it was so*



*challenging, so I appreciate it more because it's not only relaxing, but it's also still working like an actual working out.'* (Angie, L. 489-491, p.13)

Angie (female, Poland, practising different sports in order to get in shape) expressed during her interview a desire to achieve a better body, so she is using yoga as one of many workouts in her weekly routine. In Angie's case, the spiritual aspect of yoga is not very relevant, as it does not contribute to her goal of getting fit. Belk (1992) suggested that consumers are free to choose what type of consumption fits their needs or identity best, and, in this case, this may lead to them deciding to stick only with the physical aspect of the yoga practice. Angie (female, 25, exercises and does yoga to get in shape), for example, is aware that there is more to yoga than what she is experiencing, but she does not feel that exploring the spiritual side would help her at this point in her life:

*I know it's also supposed to be spiritual on some level but I think I still treat it more as a relaxing, complementary exercise, than a spiritual exercise.* (Angie, L.544-545, p.14)

*I have some goals that I want to achieve, so I devote myself to do it. But I think that as soon as I get to some point that I want to be in, then I would decide which workouts I want to continue with. But I think yoga will be one of them, definitely.* (Angie, L.5582-584, p.15)

For Angie, yoga is one of the many workouts she is combining in order to get in shape. Although she did not seem interested in the spiritual side or traditions behind yoga, she feels more relaxed after the practice and intends to continue doing yoga, even after her current goals are achieved. For now, she is perceiving yoga as a relaxing, slow exercise that complements her other challenging forms of physical exercise. Following De Michelis' (2005) idea that part of yoga's cultural appeal in the West is its physical focus, Angie decided to give yoga another try because she was told by a friend that it can be as effective as a workout. Her story clearly shows that she would not have practiced yoga if it would not have been for its physical benefits; this is part of the appeal of yoga in gyms in the Western world, as it introduces the practice to all kinds of consumers, including those who are only looking for ways of working out. Furthermore, Daisy (female, 25, exercises regularly and does yoga to relax and forget about everyday's worries) is another consumer that combines forms of physical exercises, and she stated that:

*I prefer those who emphasize a bit this spiritual aspect, because that's what makes it different from the other workouts, and maybe more relaxing. Like, maybe it gets you to...umm...like, detach yourself from your thoughts and everything. (Daisy, L.679-681, p.18)*

Daisy states that she prefers the yoga classes that emphasize the spiritual aspect, and for her this means detaching from her thoughts. Both Daisy and Angie have used the word 'relaxing' to describe how yoga is different than the other exercises they are engaging in, and that yoga is a good shift from the fast and challenging workouts offered in gyms. Although their constructions of yoga revolve around the physical aspect, they still experience spiritual benefits of some kind. Even without being familiar with the yoga philosophies, they feel more relaxed and focused, which both contributes to their attachment to the practice, and differentiates yoga from other workouts. Finally, Peter (male, 30, practices because it improves his strength) and Maggie (female, 25, practices to become flexible) perceive yoga in the following ways:

*'yoga can help you a lot, can help you focus on what you're doing, help you build strength, you can be stronger, it's not just...and it's not boring, like some people might think that it's boring, like you just do nothing. It's not like lifting weight or do some other exercise, but I think the effect is the same.'* (Peter, L. 425-428, p.11)

*I like the feeling of having a more bendy body, if you can say that, but it's...now it's also a lot of other things. I gained muscle strength, and I think it's just nice, it's a quiet relaxing time, it's just nice to do.* (Maggie, L.22-24, p.1)

Both Maggie and Peter experienced an improvement in strength, and they explained how yoga helps working with the entire body, not just specific muscle groups like other workouts. They perceive these physical benefits despite the fact that yoga is slow, and they both appreciate the focus and relaxing time it provides.

As yoga's accessibility has improved and gyms are offering yoga classes in the Western world, more and more consumers start practising. Even when consumers are only practising for the physical benefits or personal goals they want to achieve, they still experience some of the mental benefits, even without knowing much about the yoga philosophies. These aspects, such as focus or the relaxing, quiet time, differentiate yoga from other workouts, and make even the consumers that practise for the workout come back to their yoga mats.

## 5.4 Location of the practice

Sometimes, it is not only the friends' influences or the individual symbols a consumer associates with his yoga practice, but it can also be the location of the practice, that shapes how yoga is constructed. The environment where the practice takes place and the duration of the practice are also aspects that have an impact on how deep one's practice is.

Many of the respondents involved in this research stated that they practice both at home, and in studios or gyms. Ken (male, 28, mostly practices yoga home) is one of the few consumers that feel better when they practice in their home:

*I just do it at home. For most of the time. I just roll down my mat when I wake up... And I have some YouTube videos that I like to follow, so I have some instruction. (Ken, L.1501-1502, p.38)*

*I think that at home it is a little bit easier for me to completely shut off, and get in a better, different state...[...] , it feels a little overwhelming with other people, it's too many inputs, so I find it difficult to focus...and sort of ground more. So I like it more at home, actually. (Ken, L.1653-1657, p.42)*

For Ken, yoga is often part of his morning routine, helping him get a good start of the day. Other times, he practices yoga as a warming up to his weight-lifting workout, and he believes it makes him more grounded, next to an improvement in his health and posture. He also mentioned that when he does not ground, he cannot truly enjoy the practice, and that can happen sometimes at gyms. Ken mentioned that he is using YouTube videos in order to get instruction, and this was a concern several other respondents mentioned when it came to home practice. The need of an instructor to guide their practice, and correct them when needed, was mentioned among the reasons for preferring a gym/studio yoga practice. Peter (male, 30, practises mostly at FitnessWorld) feels safer when joining yoga classes, as the teacher can show the correct postures and help when needed, whereas Betty (female, 22, practices both at FitnessWorld and at home) thinks that the presence of a teacher gives her confidence to try out new things:

*Because of the instructor, you can follow, the instructor, something like that. And I couldn't remember the position, something like that, so I was afraid that I'm gonna do it the wrong way. So I enjoy going to the fitness centre and practice yoga.(Peter, L.347-349, p.9)*

*I think practising at the gym is guided, so I just...I kinda, I don't think so much, I just do what the teacher says, and I also push myself a bit more, because the teacher's there, and he or she might choose to do some poses that I don't feel comfortable trying at home (Betty, L.1124-1126, p.29)*

Although the teacher can be found online, on YouTube videos, the level of interaction is not the same, as nobody is watching over the consumers' practice and adjusting their alignments when needed. And it is not only about the safety the teacher's presence brings, but also about the degree of involvement with the practice. Betty feels that she pushes herself more when she is attending classes, as new positions are being proposed and she wants to keep up with the class, even if it means going out of her comfort zone at times. Another issue that has been mentioned several times is the length of the practice, with participants like Maggie (female, 25, practices both at home and in Fitness World), Gillie (female, 28, practices mostly home and in hot yoga studios) or Daisy (female, 25, practises mostly at Fitness World) sharing that:

*I don't feel that I get the same out of it when I do it at home, and I only do it like 15 minutes a time. (Maggie, L.26-27, p.1)*

*I am more motivated (laughs) in a group. Also the class is longer, I wouldn't do an hour and a half probably at home. I would just be stretching for 20 minutes, half an hour. (Gillie, L.1296-1297, p.33)*

*I feel that at home, you get distracted. Like.. I don't know, maybe you start cleaning, or you have something to read, and things like that. (Daisy, L.746-747, p.19)*

Practising yoga together with other people, in the yoga class, can be motivating, as it is not as easy to stop the practice as it would be at home, when no one else is there. Practising together with others, and having an instructor guide them, motivates Maggie and Gillie, making them have longer yoga sessions and feeling they got more out of their practice. For consumers that normally do their workouts at the gym, like Daisy, it can be easy to get distracted when practising home, either by house chores or other activities, such as reading. Therefore, moving one's practice from home to a place designed for physical activities, such as gyms, can help consumers increase the length or quality of their practice. Even for some who are interested in more than the physical workout, practising in groups can have positive implications. For instance, Brad (male, Danish, has been practising in different studios, and at

home) thinks that connecting with the energy of those around him in a yoga class gives him much more than a solitary practice does.

Interesting for this thesis is not only whether the participants practised yoga home or not, but also which types of venues they choose when attending yoga classes. The participants involved were recruited from two places: some in Fitness World, as a representative of a gym in the Western World, and others in a yoga studio offering hot yoga classes. From the consumers attending Fitness World, the most mentioned reasons for going there were the diversity of classes, and the fact that it is less ‘pretentious’ than a yoga studio. Peter (male, 30, enjoys the whole body workout that yoga offers) and Maggie (female, 25, enjoys feeling flexible due to yoga) voiced that:

*when I moved here in Denmark, then I started to practice yoga again. Cause there are more classes, and different types of yoga (Peter, L.332-333, p.9)*

*I like to go to Fitness World because it's not so much spirituality in it, not so much incense sticks [...] it's just less pretentious to go to Fitness World. I still think that you can get some kind of relaxation for the mind, also, but it's...I just like that it's not so spiritual. (Maggie, L.58-62, p.2)*

Having diversity in one's workout routine is important for some Western consumers (Goldberg, 2010), and Fitness World manages to offer that, while keeping a low spiritual focus. This is appealing for consumers like Peter, who want a challenging, full-body workout, or like Maggie, who feel that yoga helps control breathing and be flexible. These are yoga consumers that only care about the physical or health benefits of yoga, and therefore think that the spiritual ‘mambo jumbo’ is a waste of their time. By attending yoga classes in a gym, they are not exposed to incense sticks or mantra chanting, but are just presented with the workout they are looking for. This does not necessarily make the gym-yoga less of a yoga, as it still helps consumers relaxed and more focused, but it takes away the pressure of having to be somewhere they do not feel they belong in. Maggie mentioned earlier in her interview that she would not feel comfortable in a yoga studio, due to the connotations she associates with the people going there, for example healthy lifestyle and veganism, therefore attending yoga classes at gym is more suitable for her, and she can identify more with the practice. This can be connected with the fact that consumers' choices are decisions ‘not only about how to act,

but who to be' (Giddens, 1991:81), and not all consumers want to associate themselves with the principles or connotations promoted in some yoga studios.

Finally, some of the respondents mentioned practising yoga in hot yoga studios. Most of them were recruited at a hot yoga studio, but also Minnie (female, Estonia, practises in various locations) said she gave Bikram yoga and Hot Yoga a try. Gillie (female, 30, practises home and in hot yoga studios) also was a big fan of this type of yoga:

[about yoga in the hot room] *I feel really good afterwards. It feels like you're cleansed or something. You feel really fresh. But it's a thin line between that and wanting to die (laughs). And, plus, it's good for your mental. I think that challenges me a lot, that it's very mental, you have to keep mind over matters. To not let the dizziness take over. (Gillie, L.1349-1352, p.35)*

*these hot yoga rooms... it was always like, when you enter the room, you never could like speak or something. And I really...I think that's really good thing about it, because...if like, you know, some people maybe are exactly...they want you know, meditate or get this...make the mood...then you need this like calm and quiet atmosphere (Minnie, L.918-921, p.24)*

The participants who tried the hot yoga classes mentioned the challenge this brings, mostly due to the heat, but also stressed how cleansed they feel after this type of practice. Gillie feels it is more of a mental challenge, as it teaches her to control her mind and push through the physical difficulties. She also added that now she only goes to studios to attend hot yoga classes, as the 'regular' yoga she can practise home. Gillie's choice of location is, therefore, related to the facilities offered at the hot yoga studio, which she cannot replicate at home. Minnie, on the other hand, particularly mentioned the quietness provided in the yoga studios, which are different than Fitness World. In the hot room, consumers cannot take their phone, or talk to each other after entering the class, so the environment provided is much calmer and better suited for meditation. Finally, Brad (male 38, has been practising yoga in different places for almost 20 years) mentioned the challenge posed by the hot yoga classes, and the improvement in health he experiences after the class, as the toxins are released and he feels more inclined to eat healthy meals and 'green stuff'. More than the other respondents, Brad seemed to associate specific lifestyles to consumers practising in the yoga studio (as it was

mentioned earlier), which matches Maffesoli's (1996) idea that consumers form neo-tribes around consumption activities and share common lifestyles.

Therefore, some differences were revealed between the yoga constructions of people practising at home, at Fitness World or in the studio. While yoga at home can be quiet and private for some consumers, others feel that they would get distracted when trying to exercise at home, and prefer going to a gym or a studio where they can focus solely on the practice. In terms of yoga in gyms, it is perceived less spiritual than the practice in yoga studios, which can be appealing to consumers that do not identify themselves with those aspects of yoga. Following Phillip's (2009) thought that what people do defines who they become, unspiritual yoga students feel more comfortable attending classes in gyms, where the atmosphere is less 'pretentious'.

Furthermore, the yoga studio selected for this study was not particularly perceived as spiritual. Some of the participants were attending the classes due to the opportunity to practise hot yoga, which is perceived as great for feeling healthier and controlling the mind, by holding difficult poses in the heat. The fact that spirituality was not perceived higher among the respondents selected from the hot yoga studio matches Singleton's (2010) belief that yoga offered in the West is asana-focused, but this cannot be confirmed, as this research only included participants from one yoga studio, therefore the findings cannot be generalized.

## **5.5 The Spiritual Aspects of Yoga**

Relations between yoga and spirituality are a controversial topic, and the exploratory research pointed to a variety of different opinions about such relations. While some participants believed that knowing the traditions behind yoga and applying them brings purpose to their practice. Other participants felt that the physical exercise is what gives them 'good results', so they did not see any reasons or benefits of understanding the spiritual aspects of yoga. The in-depth interviews dug deeper into this aspect, and here the opinions were quite diverse as well. Betty (female, 22, practices yoga and meditates) sees the difference between the physical and spiritual aspects of yoga, and meditates regularly to keep herself focused. Ken (male, 28, practices yoga as a part of workout routine), on the other hand, does not focus on spiritual aspects in his yoga practices, but thinks they are 'almost impossible to avoid'. Finally, Lily (female, 27, certified yoga instructor) thinks that the spiritual benefits become increasingly relevant the longer you practice. Or, as these three interviewees voiced this issue:

*One part is a physical movement, and another is that you try to connect to your breath, and yeah meditate...and also calm the mind. (Betty, L.1110-1111, p.29)*

*I am not doing yoga with that [spiritual] focus. I think it's just a side effect that it's almost impossible to avoid. That you get more in contact with yourself through yoga. (Ken, L.1611-1612, p.41)*

*I can tell you that you get balance, and you get focus, and you get more in touch with yourself and everybody else, but I mean, to me, all of that did not make sense before I had practised for some while. (Lily, L.312-314, p.8)*

Regardless whether the yoga student is looking for a spiritual side of his/her yoga practice or not, the benefits are 'out there'. Calming the mind, getting in contact with oneself or 'better one's focus' are some of the benefits that the interviewees associate with yoga. As Warde (2005) mentioned, not all consumers engage in practices in the same way or for the same reasons. The interviewees' different opinions about the more spiritual aspects of yoga certainly point to them doing yoga for different reasons, and some being more spiritual than others. Furthermore, it seems that spiritual aspects of yoga become increasingly important, the longer consumers engage in yoga. Lily suggested that a 'beginner' would not understand the spirituality behind yoga and that such understanding would only emerge, when people have practiced yoga for a while.

The fact that spirituality becomes increasingly important, the longer people do yoga relates to the asana-focused practice promoted in the Western world, as Singleton (2010) claimed, since teachers focus more on presentation of challenging poses than on the philosophies behind yoga. As an example, Betty (who has been practising yoga for a while, but got more into the spiritual aspects only recently) shares this point of view:

*because in the start it was just one workout among many. Like I would go for a run, and next day I would go to yoga. And that would be the same thing for me. While now it's kind of a spiritual practice outside of my workouts. And I think it's changed very, very gradually, it taken maybe 2 years to get to this point from when I started to learn about yoga. (Betty, L.1182-1186, p.30)*

Since yoga is so popular among gyms in the Western world, it is inevitable that some consumers, just like Betty in the beginning, would regard it as a form of workout. Although she recognizes that some teachers include spiritual elements in their teaching, she had to do a



lot of reading on her own in order to understand more about the yogic philosophies. Taking this further, another interviewee, Brad (male, 38, who read a lot about the philosophies behind yoga), notices the asana-focused yoga practice in the West, but does not see it as a setback. He believes that any type of yoga promotion is beneficial, even when it only emphasizes the physical aspect, because it brings people to yoga, and that is ‘what matters’. He also believes that the consumers who are interested in learning more about the deeper and more spiritual aspects of yoga will ‘find their way’ and read on their own, in order to enrich their practice, and Betty’s case described above is a good example of this. Consequently, the ways in which yoga is promoted and taught in the West make it easy for the practice to be understood as a form of exercise, and most of the research participants mentioned the physical and health benefits at least once during their interviews and often times more. However, the more participants practiced yoga and the more ‘experienced’ they become, the more their understandings of yoga were transformed and expanded towards spiritual aspects. This is in line with Warde’s (2005) idea that people continuously transform their practices by experimenting new things, which leads to new constructions of the yoga phenomenon as their practice evolves. While an initial construction of yoga is based on what the consumers are exposed to (a form of exercise), their practice evolves and adapts as they read more about the traditions behind it and try new things (for example, meditation, or practising kindness). This leads to continuous reconstructions of yoga, based on the new knowledge acquired.

Even if there were few participants who did not show any interest in the spiritual aspects or the philosophies behind yoga, most of the respondents stated that they feel a difference since they started, in relation to their perceived mental state. It is, therefore, important to have a closer look into what spirituality means for them, and how the concept is understood in relation to their yoga practice. Lily (female, Danish, who is also a certified yoga instructor) discussed about how she experiences the spiritual aspect of yoga in her everyday life:

*for me yoga is also more than the physical things, it’s also being kind to other people, and it’s helping people when they’re asking for something, and it’s...so yeah, the physical thing maybe once or twice a week, but for me, it’s like I try to tap into this type of mental state as often as I can, maybe through meditation or maybe through something else. (Lily, L.167-170, p.5)*

As a yoga teacher, and a participant who has read a lot about the philosophies behind yoga, Lily has a strong understanding of how yoga can be incorporated into one’s way of life,

values and beliefs. She was aware of the distinction between the asana practice and the philosophies behind yoga, and was trying to incorporate the latter into her daily activities and the way she sees the world. Myers (1990) defined spirituality as a personal 'belief system', and for Lily, being nice to herself and those around her, helping out when needed and centring into '*some universal love thing*' (Lily, L160, p.5) are all aspects she believes in, and associates with yoga. Lily is taking her yoga practice off the mat and into her life, trying to implement the philosophies behind yoga into her daily life: '*I try to tap into this type of mental state as often as I can*'. These practices have an impact on Lily's life and behaviour, as she tries to live her life based on the yogic principles. Yoga can, thus, be associated with an instrument for becoming a better version of oneself, or a 'positive future self', as Markus & Nurius (1986) defined it. As the values promoted by the yoga philosophies represent the person Lily wants to be, she uses her yoga practice and the corresponding philosophies by incorporating them in her lifestyle, in order to become, or keep being that person.

When discussing the spirituality related to yoga, some of the respondents mentioned religion. Zinnbauer et al. (1997) investigated the relationship between spirituality and religion, and argued that people differentiate between the two terms, as the former is seen as a personalized type of faith, and the latter is more institutionalized aspect of faith. Originally, yoga was connected with Hinduism, but its presence in the West does not emphasize this connection. Instead, some consumers adopted some spiritual values from the yoga philosophies, which they embrace and live their lives by. For example, Lily (female, Danish, yoga instructor) mentioned that:

*I don't see myself as religious as such, but for me yoga can feel like a sort of, a religion in the sense of giving meaning, like yeah, be kind, and be open, and be generous, and be thankful and gratitude, and all of these things, I think I get this from yoga. (Lily, L.271-273, p.7)*

Myers (1990) defined spirituality as something that gives meaning in life, and this is how Lily is reconstructing yoga. Although she does not see herself as religious, she identifies herself with these values promoted by yoga, and tries to be a kind and open person. Implementing this type of values into one's way of life makes a consumer more attached to one's practice, as it adds symbolic meanings to the consumption act and helps building one's identity. Lily furthermore mentioned that she tries to fit yoga in her everyday life: '*I try to make it fit, I try to...because it is a part of me, it is a big part of me, and I think I need it to*

*balance myself out from the other stuff I do* (Lily, L.235-236, p.6). Lily associates yoga with balance in her life, and therefore she needs to practise in order to maintain this balance. Her yoga practice also symbolises the person she wishes to be (kind, open, grateful, as mentioned earlier), and practising is what keeps her grounded and helps building her identity. Adding on the things Lily mentioned, Betty (female, Danish, who read a lot about the yoga philosophies) stated that:

*And I also think that I've been using it to not really so much as a workout, but as something spiritual and something calming in my every day, and also kind of philosophical principles, like non-violence, and I eat more organic food than I did before I started practising, and I think I react maybe a bit slower to a lot of stuff, I don't have such a short fuse in everyday situations.* (Betty, L.1173-1176, p.30)

More than the physical workout, yoga brings calmness in Betty's life, as she does not have 'such a short fuse' in her daily interactions. She also mentioned ahimsa, the principle of non-violence, and associates a change in the way she eats with yoga. Thus, yoga is becoming a way of life for Betty as well, and it means much more than a form of workout. Betty's goals are to control her eating impulses (i.e. eat less sugar) and be calmer. For her, yoga is helping to achieve these things, and therefore keep her focused on becoming a better 'self' (Markus & Nurius (1986). These findings complement Singleton's (2010) idea that yoga in the Western world is asana-focused, since there are consumers, like Betty and Lily, who get much more out of their practice, despite practising yoga in a gym in the Western world, where yoga philosophies are not taught during the classes. As discussed earlier, the longer one practices yoga, the more inclined he/she is to understand more about the spiritual aspects surrounding it. In the cases where these principles resonate with whom consumers are, or wish to become (Phillips, 2009; Markus & Nurius, 1986; McCracken, 1986), they will be adopted into one's way of life and perceived as tools for becoming better and staying true to oneself.

Finally, there are consumers for which the spiritual practices surrounding yoga are appealing or exotic (Segalen, 2002), although they do not carry any deeper meaning. Gillie's (female, 30, practices yoga for flexibility) story clearly emphasized how she finds things like chants relaxing, although she is not aware of what they stand for:

*I am not really religious [...] But I really appreciate the...spirituality, and...I like the oms and I like to kind of...when you close your practise with 'namaste'* (Gillie, L.1376-1378, p.35)

*it doesn't have anything to do with religion or...you know, it's just, when you do 'om', it's just om. [...] It's just a sound... (Gillie, L.1408-1410, p.36)*

When asked what 'om' stands for, Gillie's response was 'it's just a sound'. Originally, om is 'a mantra that represents both the unmanifest and manifest aspects of God' (Balakrishnan, 2009:113), but Gillie interprets it as a calming sound. Without connecting it to religion or anything spiritual, she gets the benefits of the mantra, just by pronouncing it in the yoga classes. For Gillie, the philosophies behind yoga are not important, as what she cares about are the physical benefits of yoga, and she can enjoy this without knowing more about the traditional meaning of the practice. Then, the spiritual aspects, like the chants, become a new and exotic aspect of the practice, which she enjoys as well. Therefore, while the spiritual connotations of yoga can seem 'mambo jumbo' for some Western consumers, there are others that just go with it, without reading too much into it.

## **Meditation**

When discussing spirituality, meditation is also a topic that has been covered. While some respondents felt that they are 'not there yet', others shared that they see yoga and meditation inseparable. Whicher (1998) pointed out that the physical practice of yoga is used to quiet the mind and prepare the body for meditation, and Betty (female, Danish, meditates daily) shared this view:

*I would feel more prepared for meditating by doing some yoga, like I have moved my body so it's easier for me to be still, and also I would feel more able to get myself to yoga if I have meditated that day, because it helps me be more in touch with what I want, rather than instant gratification (Betty, L.1111-1114, p.29)*

For Betty, yoga and meditation are interconnected, as yoga is preparing the mind to be still and ready for meditation, while meditating helps her focus on what is important for her, in this case, the yoga practice. Betty feels that she is more in control after meditating, especially in relation to her previous eating disorder, and mentioned that she can feel the difference in the days when she does not practice: '*on the days that I don't meditate, I feel less in control of what I do, especially around food... and also emotions*' (Betty, L.1102-1103, p.28). Meditation helps her control her impulses and focus on her true desires, which makes her want to engage with the practices daily. For Brad (male, Danish, tries to meditate often), yoga is a moving meditation, as one needs to be 'present' in the moment in order to be able to hold

difficult yoga positions. This links to the traditional yoga philosophies, which emphasize the importance of meditation and regard the asana practice as means to learn to control the mind and separate oneself from one's thoughts (Verma, 2006). The research therefore reveals that consumers who experience yoga as a way of life reconstruct yoga in relation to their meditation practice, in order to control their impulses for 'instant gratification', improve their focus and get more in touch with oneself.

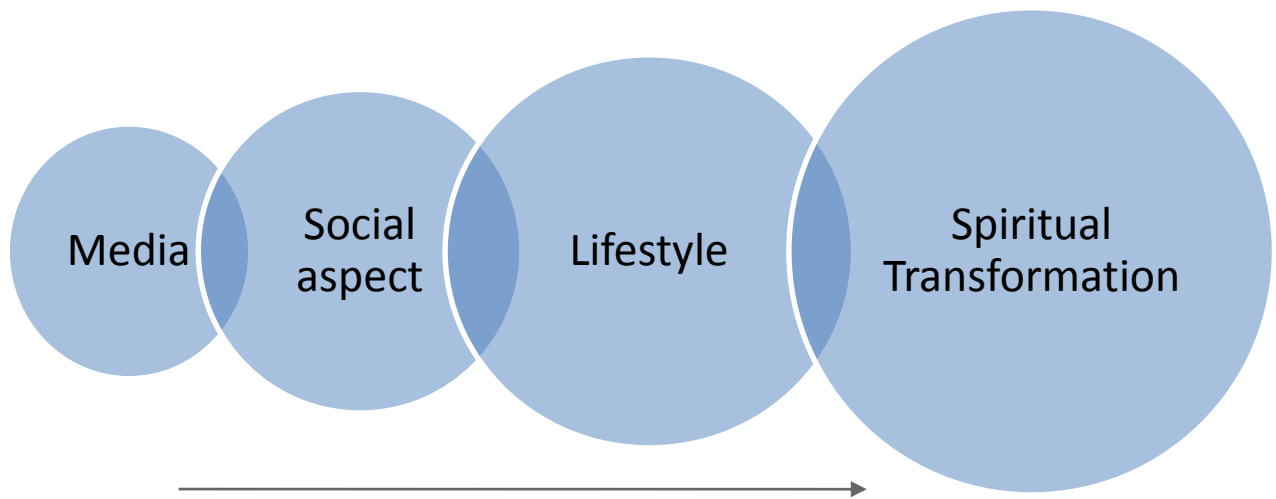
Moreover, other respondents stated that they engage in meditation in stressful situations, when they feel that they need it. Gillie (female, Swedish, not familiar with yoga philosophies) shared that:

[about meditation] *usually I do it more, and this is true to yoga as well, when I come closer to a certain audition, or something... a stressful event that requires a lot of playing and mental preparing. (Gillie, L.1319-1320, p.34)*

Gillie uses yoga and meditation to get through difficult situations, for example when she is stressed before important auditions. Even if yoga philosophies did not seem to be strongly embedded in Gillie's lifestyle or beliefs, she appreciates the help of these practices when she feels the pressure of upcoming important events. The fact that yoga makes people feel more focused and relaxed leads to reconstructions of the practice as something they do, when they need to be calm and mentally prepared for challenges in their lives.

Finally, when analyzing the perceptions and reconstructions of the spiritual aspects of yoga among the respondents, it became obvious that there is more to the yoga practice than the physical exercise. The degree of involvement or understanding of the yoga philosophies depends on the interest of the individual students, but all of the respondents perceived a change since they started practising. For some, it may have been just slowing down and becoming calmer, whereas others use yoga practice to go through difficult situations in their life. Finally, there are those consumers who took the time to study and understand the spirituality behind the yoga practice, and try to incorporate it in their daily lives. Yoga can also be reconstructed as a religion, where consumers practise outside the mat, bringing the promoted values into their ways of life, for instance by being kind and grateful, or eating more organic. The degree in which yoga is incorporated in one's life depends on the level of experience with the practice (Warde, 2005), knowledge about the yoga philosophies, or the

degree in which these philosophies match the positive ‘possible selves’ of the consumers (Markus & Nurius, 1986). The more these values align with the consumers’ identities, the more inclined they are to practice and incorporate the spiritual side of yoga and its philosophies into their way of life.



**Figure 6. Potential Yoga Journeys**

The field researched revealed a path that can illustrate participants’ yoga journeys, which can be used to investigate how meanings are created and reconstructed, as the consumers gain more experience or engage on deeper levels with their practices. It is important to mention that not all yoga practitioners are advancing through all four stages, since this development appeared to be highly dependent on understanding more about oneself, one’s practice, and studying yoga philosophies. An illustration of this path can be seen in the Figure 6 above.

Before starting yoga, consumers attribute certain stereotypes or connotations to yoga, based on what they have seen in the media, read in books or heard from others (Joy & Li, 2012; Giddens, 1991; Swan, 2012). As they did not try yoga before, they cannot attribute any personal meanings to the practice, rather their constructions of yoga are built based on what they have been told yoga is. Since they have not experienced the practice themselves yet, their perception of yoga and the values they associate with the practise can lead to imagining a potential ‘future self’ which practises yoga (Markus & Nurius, 1986). If these visualisations are something they identify with, they are more likely to engage in yoga practices, in order to

become these new versions of themselves (McCracken, 1987). In the cases when these values clash with their 'habitus' or perceived identity, consumers might be sceptical about trying (Bourdieu, 1984), unless they get new information that would make them reconsider and therefore, reconstruct yoga.

Then comes the decision to give yoga a try, and the field research has shown that in most of the cases, this decision has been influenced by other people. For most of the participants, it was a friend who took them there, as yoga seemed to be a fun activity to share together. This is best explained by Simmel's (1949) notion of sociability, as the respondents did not engage in the practice particularly because they were interested in yoga, but because their friends proposed and they were open to trying out new things. In some other cases, yoga was recommended by somebody with authority, for example a teacher or a doctor, who proposed the practice as a solution for some of the respondents' problems, for example breathing or sleeping issues. In this stage, respondents start building their own constructions of yoga, based on their initial stereotypes related to yoga, and adding up meanings as they engage in the practice. This finding completes the study made by Park et al. (2014), which did not identify the social influences as a triggering factor for starting yoga practice.

Important to note here is that, although most of the respondents appeared to be strongly influenced by social aspects, they did not remain apparent as the discussion about yoga got deeper. Although some consumers shared that they practise in order to spend time with their friends, when constructing their perceptions of yoga, other aspects proved more important. When discussing what yoga brings in their lives, or the reason why they practice, the respondents mentioned different other things, which can be related to their lifestyles. Many respondents felt the physical benefits of the practice, and, in this stage, constructed yoga as a relaxing, form of exercise engaging the entire body, that also brings mental benefits. Lifestyles are constantly changing, and so does the yoga practice (Chaney, 1996; Warde, 2005). The more they practice yoga and experience benefits, whether they are of a physical or mental nature, the more they incorporate yoga into their lifestyle, as it contributes to them achieving specific goals. These goals can be related to getting in shape, feeling healthier, calming before important events, experiencing less (back) pain or feeling more flexible. As each consumer has his/her individual journey and values, their constructions of yoga differ and cannot be categorized as easily. However, this analysis showed that when they are in the 'lifestyle' stage, they are experiencing multiple benefits from the yoga practice and are likely to practice more in order to continue doing so.

Interesting to discover was that consumers did not seem to consume yoga in order to build their identities to the outside world. Yet, they choose and pick, from the available styles and practices, those that make sense to them. They engage in different practices according to individual preferences and self-characterizations, but this proved to be less related to how others perceive them, and more to how open they were towards new and foreign philosophies. Furthermore, the consumers that passed from the 'Lifestyle' phase to the 'Spiritual Transformation' phase are the ones that have read traditional yoga philosophies and felt that they identify with them enough to try to incorporate them in their way of life. Although yoga has multiple mental benefits, which consumers can experience in the 'Lifestyle' stage, they cannot truly understand the spirituality behind yoga if they do not read about it. Due to the fact that yoga in the Western world is not promoting the spiritual journeys or values that yoga stands for, it would be almost impossible for consumers in Western context to know that there is more to yoga than the stretches and the challenging asanas, unless they do their research. The desire to learn more can be triggered by inspiring teachers, who include some spiritual elements in their classes, or by natural interests in Eastern philosophies, for example. Without any knowledge on how to incorporate spirituality into one's wellbeing, 'foreign' concepts, such as setting intentions, are not likely to make sense for the Western consumers. This is why, as long as consumers do not enrich their practice by understanding the philosophies behind the yoga practice, it is difficult for them to get more out of the practice than physical and health benefits.

The spiritual transformation also follows Markus & Nurius' (1986) concept that people are likely to engage in practices that help them come closer to whom they would like to become. As yoga promotes values like awareness, kindness, gratitude or being helpful towards others, it can be seen as a bridge towards a positive transformation, for consumers who wish to live by those values. Moreover, other yogic principles, such as ahimsa, stand for non-violence and, in some cases, vegetarianism, and some consumers also include this in their ways of life, in order to increase the benefits yoga brings. This shows that, the more one engages in a practice and learns about it, the more it defines them, influencing other aspects of their lifestyle, from what they eat to how they think or behave.



## **6. Limitations of the study**

### **Theoretical**

First of all, the researcher is aware that the choice of theories guided the analysis of the data collected, since the theoretical framework is like a ‘set of glasses’ shaping the interpretation of the respondents’ answers. The researcher has worked hermeneutically, including new theoretical concepts as new knowledge was generated, in order to increase the richness of the findings and make sense of the new concepts that have arisen during the data collection and interpretation. Some of the initial theoretical concepts did not prove as useful as anticipated, and this led to the need of new theories that can help make sense of the respondents’ realities. Consequently, using other theories might have lead to different interpretations, but the chosen theories have been considered as most relevant for the type of data collected and the concepts that emerged.

### **Research sample**

Another limitation of this study is related to the type of data collected. In order to get an accurate representation of the yoga constructions in the Western world, it would have been ideal to include respondents from a wider variety of studios, and more consumer groups. For example, Bikram yoga has been mentioned by some of the respondents, and due to its popularity in the Western world, it would be interesting to compare the findings of this study with the constructions of yoga among Bikram yoga students. Considering the price of attending those classes and the time limit, it was not possible to include more yoga studios in this study.

Moreover, one of the exploratory interviews revealed that interest in yoga can be triggered by a life crisis (cancer). Studying a consumer sample that turned to yoga during a critical stage in their lives would provide valuable data on different constructions of yoga, which could not be achieved during the current study.

Another interesting sample would consist of yoga teachers in the Western world, as they have a deeper knowledge of yoga philosophies and could present interesting perspectives on how these traditional beliefs are reconstructed in the West. Plus, they are the ones leading the yoga classes and, therefore, choosing what to include and how much spirituality is welcomed among their students.

However, considering the explorative nature of this study, the selected sample was considered as a starting point for studying the yoga phenomenon, allowing future studies to build up on the knowledge generated and investigate further consumer groups and yoga settings.

### **Potential researcher biases**

Finally, in order to assess the trustworthiness of this study, it is vital for the researcher to disclose potential biases that might have influenced the findings. As a yoga practitioner myself, I am aware that I started with my own construction of the yoga phenomenon and potential aspects that I wanted to research deeper. One example is that I wanted to investigate the commercial aspect of yoga, related the popularity of yoga clothes and the potential implications of this aspect on identity building through yoga. The initial version of the interview guide has included questions regarding this aspect, but as it did not resonate with the interviewees, I have excluded it on the way, and focused instead on the concepts that the participants mentioned. The reason for this is that I wanted to understand their constructions of yoga, and not influence the data collected with my initial preconceptions of the yoga phenomenon in the Western world.

## **7. Critical reflections**

Having in mind that humanistic studies are of a different nature than positivistic studies, I have decided to evaluate the findings of this thesis based on the following four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Hirschman, 1986; Bryman, 2012).

### **Credibility**

In order to demonstrate the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations of the respondents' realities, it would be ideal to confront the interviewees with the findings and ask them to confirm their authenticity. However, the respondents were believed to be 'as they appear to be' (Hirschman, 1986:244), considering that the topic investigated is not sensitive and the respondents had no reason to pretend to be somebody they are not. The focus during the data collection was on making the participants feel comfortable and open, by not making

assumptions or showing any judgements towards what was being said. Furthermore, the questions were open ended, allowing the respondents to depict freely their constructions of reality, and the researcher asked follow-up questions in order to make sure that she can construct an accurate interpretation of the participants' beliefs. Therefore, the efforts of the researcher were put into creating a confidential and safe environment for the participants, and in return they hopefully have shared honestly their stories and beliefs.

### **Transferability**

As opposed to positivistic studies, which aim to generate ultimate 'truths', a humanistic study like this one is focused on constructing accurate interpretations of the participants' realities at the moment when the study took place. Therefore in this case transferability is related to similar manifestations of the same phenomenon at different points in time. Considering the subjective nature of social studies, it cannot be assumed that a similar study with different participants, at a different moment in time, would be identical with the findings of this thesis. However, the data collected in this study included aspects of the yoga practice mentioned in online communities, which were explored in depth during the interviewees. This leads to the belief that the themes identified are relevant for the study of the yoga phenomenon in a Western context. Having this in mind, the researcher is aware of the 'contextual uniqueness' (Bryman, 2012:392) of the findings presented, and the fact that the importance of the concepts analyzed might differ when replicating the study in different social contexts.

### **Dependability**

As the interpretations of reality are dependent on the unique investigator and his/her interaction with the respondents, the researcher is aware that the findings of a different interviewer cannot be identical with those presented in this thesis. Ideally, the findings would be critically analyzed by multiple researchers, but this could not be applied to this study, as the thesis was written just by myself. As my supervisor has made critical comments on parts of this thesis, I have carefully reflected on them in order to increase the dependability of the findings.

### **Confirmability**

In a humanistic study, the researcher is actively involved in the interpretation of the respondents' realities, therefore the aim was not to treat the findings objectively. In this case, confirmability implies that the findings are data-based, logical and non-judgemental

(Hirschman, 1986). My focus was, therefore, to exclude my potential biases and analyze critically the data collected, focusing on understanding the respondents' perceptions and being transparent about the methods that helped me reach the conclusions presented. In order to increase confirmability, all the transcriptions and audio recordings of the data collected have been submitted to this thesis.

## 8. Conclusion

This study aimed to contribute to a gap in literature regarding yoga consumption in the Western world. The research tried to understand in which ways yoga is defined and (re)constructed in a Western consumer-oriented context, and which meanings consumers associate with their yoga practices. In order to collect relevant data about this, a qualitative research design was created, which was based on interacting with various yoga students located in Denmark, and together constructing their perceptions of yoga and their practices.

The research pointed out that often, yoga is perceived as a relaxing workout that can complement other forms of physical exercise, and provides numerous physical and health-related benefits. This was not unexpected, as there were more studies before emphasizing similar issues related to yoga consumption. However, as the discussion was taken further, several themes emerged that influence respondents' understanding of the yoga practice.

Some of the respondents constructed yoga from media (American TV shows), and are thus regarding the practice as a seamless stretching workout, showing flexible women in challenging yoga postures. There are respondents who strive to look like the girls portrayed in media, and therefore start practising yoga believing, or better yet, hoping that one day they will become one of those flexible girls. This is not a new concept, as people, especially in the Western world, often engage in practices that can be used to define who they are, or who they strive to become. However, not all media is focusing on the beauty of challenging asanas – there are consumers who constructed yoga based on more spiritual images, such as those presented in books, for instance 'Eat, pray, love'. For some Westerners, these visualisations are appealing, as they represent something foreign and different than what they are used to. For others, however, they bring religious connotations they are not always open towards, especially in countries where religion is considered a private activity (e.g. Denmark). These early constructions of yoga are based on the type of information the participant has been exposed to, and his/her own set of beliefs and values that shape their openness towards new cultures or practices.

Secondly, the research revealed that most of the participants tried yoga because a friend took them there. Starting to practice yoga allows people to reconstruct their initial understandings of yoga, as they get to try the practice on their own and make their own opinions, instead of basing them on what their peers or media have presented before. Some of the participants did

not enjoy the practice at first, due to the differences between their expectations and what the practices actually offered. As they continued practising, however, various benefits started uncovering which made them continue practising and (re)constructing yoga on the way.

For male consumers, yoga is often perceived as a feminine practice in the Western world. The research has included several male participants, in order to analyze how their constructions differ from those of the female participants. It was interesting to find out that some male participants started yoga due to their significant others, either in order to share the practice with them, or to become more aware of their feelings and, therefore, communicate better with them. Moreover, all the male participants shared that they appreciate the workout yoga offers and have admitted that they were surprised of how challenging it actually is, as opposed to their earlier understandings of the practice.

In terms of yoga and identity building, this research uncovered that, in many cases, yoga is constructed more as a way of self-expression, and less as a reflexive-characterization in the eyes of the others. As identity building implies shared meanings associated to the practice, it would be challenging, if not impossible, to correctly express to others one's identity through yoga, considering the wide variety of understandings of the yoga practice. However, the role of yoga in identity building cannot be ignored, as it was revealed that the practice had strong implications on participants' self-characterizations. Yoga has, on multiple occasions, been perceived as a tool for becoming a 'better' version of oneself, regardless of consumers' levels of practice. Some participants use yoga to become more relaxed, bring focus in their everyday lives or achieve a better physical form. Others, on the other hand, associate yoga with more spiritual values, such as kindness or gratitude, and feel that yoga helps them incorporate these values in their lives.

Finally, the findings show that participants reconstruct yoga constantly, depending on their new experiences with the practice, or new information they collect about the philosophies behind it. Some of them may never identify with or understand the spiritual aspects of yoga, but others embrace them and live their lives by some of the philosophies they relate with. As opposed to the India, where yoga is a way of life and deeply religious, consumers in Western world pick and choose from what yoga practices have to offer, in order to find what suits them best. Although the circumstances for spiritual practices are less favourable in the West, since the yoga classes offered do not focus on this aspect, the study revealed that consumers who are open to learn more can find their spiritual path on their own.

## 9. References

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