



EKONOMIHÖGSKOLAN
Lunds universitet

Lund University
School of Economics and Management
Master Thesis
May, 2006
12716

Yoga; spiritual balance of contemporary consumers

A Critical Inquiry on contemporary consumers

Authors

Helene Christensen
Joost de Groot

Supervisors

Peter Svensson J
Jacob Östberg

Abstract

This research study constitutes a critical stand, which departure from the increase in welfare, and decrease in quality of life, and is further directed to the sphere of consumption. Contemporary consumers appear to seek for components to construct their self with through consumption, consumerism has become a sphere of life, and has consequently also become a victimizing force steering the identity and self construction of consumers. The alarm bells however are echoing in Western society, and consumers are experiencing dilemmas such as fragmentation, powerlessness, uncertainty and meaninglessness.

In this respect we have presented spiritualism as an applicable path of escape or alternative to the scheme of the material oriented consumption sphere. We intend to broaden the scope of the interplay between spiritualism and consumerism in the act of yoga, and we have therefore been researching: what yoga is doing to consumers, and what consumers are doing to yoga.

The study is based on an existential epistemology paradigm, which emphasis on the meaning of the yoga experience attained from the subjects of research; the yoga practitioners, and therefore we have carried out three focus group discussions. The empirical work was conducted in San Francisco due to its applicable nature, as being the Western city with probably the broadest representation of yoga and *westernized spirituality*, as well as a Californian hot spot of capital and business transactions constituting an extensive level of consumption.

Keywords: Yoga, meaning, spiritualism, westernized spirituality, consumerism, contemporary consumer society, self, materialism, quality of life.

Preface

This thesis could not have been written without the kind participation of instructors, managers, and employees at the three Yoga studios; Yoga Tree, Funky Door, and a last anonymous studio in San Francisco where our empirical data was collected. We are further thankful for the great input and inspiration from other significant people in San Francisco and New York. Thank you. Finally, we would like to take the opportunity to thank our advisors; Peter Svensson and Jacob Östberg for the insightful and inspirational meetings.

Lund, May 2006

Helene Christensen & Joost de Groot

Table of contents

<i>Table of contents</i>	1
<i>1. Introduction</i>	6
1.1 Background	6
1.2 Contemporary consumer society echoing alarm bells	6
1.2.1 Meaning of Self & Social symbolism	7
1.2.2 Self-actualization & Consumer Body	8
1.2.3 Consumer Experience	8
1.2.4 Individuality & control.....	9
1.3 Victimization of the contemporary consumers	10
1.4 Materialism or spiritualism	11
1.5 Redefine or escape the alarm bells.....	13
1.5.1 Westernised spirituality.....	15
1.6 Escape from contemporary consumer society?.....	15
1.7 Research problem.....	16
1.8 Research questions	16
1.9 Research Purpose	16
1.10 Possible contributions of the research.....	17
1.11 Delimitations.....	17
<i>2. Theoretical perspective</i>	18
2.1 Theoretical standpoint.....	18
2.2 Existential Phenomenology.....	18
2.3 Meaning	19
2.4 The self.....	20
2.5 Meaning attained from yoga	20
2.6 Methodology	21
2.7 Research proceeding	21
2.7 Choice of research area	22
2.8 Discussion of philosophical perspectives	22
2.9 Qualitative research.....	24
2.10 Case study	25
2.11 Empirical study	26
2.12 Focus Groups	26
2.13 Participant as an observer	28
2.14 Critical discussion & conclusion.....	30
<i>3. This is yoga</i>	33
3.1 Body & mind adventure	33
<i>4. Analysis</i>	35
4.1 Analysis of body & mind adventure	35
4.2 Gift of yoga	35
4.2 Strive for envisioned meaning or strive in the aura of meaning	39
4.3 Is yoga a brake block of the wheel of consumption?.....	41
4.3 Chauffeur of desire.....	43

4.4 Blurry land of Nirvana	44
4.5 Control the body & mind adventure	46
4.6 Union of spiritualism and consumerism	48
4.7 Yogic balance of the scheme of things	49
5 <i>Discussion & conclusion</i>	52
5. 1 Discussion	52
5.1.1 Awareness of the "real self"	52
5.1.2 Mysticism of westernized spirituality	53
5.1.3 Self-actualizing act of Shivasana	54
5.2 Conclusion	55
5.3 implications.....	56
5.4 future research areas.....	56
6. <i>Reference</i>	58
<i>Appendix 1: Interview guide</i>	63
<i>Appendix 2: Topic agenda for focus group</i>	65
<i>Appendix 3 : Participant observations</i>	67

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

“Breath, breath and breath, I am breathing away to a distant and transcendent universe, my body seems to disappear in the act of concentrating, stretching and balancing, I am reaching inward, reaching a part of myself beyond my prior capabilities. It is a mind adventure; the more inward I place my focus the more sacred and displaced flux passes me by, I consume it all, the divine experience is blowing me away, and I loose my grasp of the reality around me.”

Is this echoing an act of consumption? Are the same experiences usually running through us when we enter a regular practice of consumption? Is it a corner the sphere of consumerism? Or perhaps an escape from the contemporary consumption race which appears to influence the Western world today? It is yoga, it is popular, and the experience and meaning of it is debated and constructed distinctively among consumers. This is only one narrative, one representation of the yoga experience, and through this research study we attempt to illuminate other possible representation of the spiritual practice in order to scrutinize the role it fulfills for the contemporary consumer.

1.2 Contemporary consumer society echoing alarm bells

We live on a planet full of paradoxes, one of them being that welfare is increasing and quality of life is decreasing across the Western world today. The escalating welfare is constituted in long working hours, fast paced and stressful ways of living, and further reflected in a high importance attached to material possessions (Sirgy,1998 p.244). The overwhelming presence of materialism is according to Belk (2001), positively correlated with a progressively higher level of consumption, which appears to be the culminating consequence of the outrageous wealth (Sirgy,1998 p.244). Consumerism has become a sphere of life, a contemporary ideology which appears to steer the lives of consumers, and engage them in a constant race of consumption, driven by numerous of forces in play (Rindfleish, 2005 p.344). The wheels of consumption are primarily steered by branding and marketing activities providing consumers with supposedly meaningful components to make sense of their lives with (Elliot, 1994 p. 161). The rapid stream of innovations and creations of novel consumer goods, services, and experiences is extensively displayed, which provide consumers with a burdensome number of possibilities to choose among (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000 p.270). According to Belk (2001), the mass media’s increasing influence on the contemporary context assists in a

bombardment of electronic images, meanings, knowledge, information, advertisements, signs, and messages, which further shake the personal senses and make the consumers' choices rather complex. Several scholars have in that respect, claimed that the role of consumers as their own interpretative agents of meaning construction is challenged due to the dominant representation of lifestyles and self's portrayed in the media and advertisement (Corrigan 1997; Cova 1997; Woodward 2003).

1.2.1 Meaning of Self & Social symbolism

In the light of the overwhelming presence of materialism within Western consumer society, it is crucial to underline that the contemporary consumers primarily are concerned with the instrumental materialism focusing on the context and the meaning of particular consumer goods (Corrigan, 1997). Meaning today is attained through acquisition (O'shaughnessy, 2002 p.540), however consumers' pattern of consumption is largely based on the signifying value of consumer goods (Corrigan, 1997 p.34). This reality applies when goods operate as social or self symbols adding self-expressive attributes to consumers' lives; both in relation to social interaction and to construction of a self (Corrigan, 1997). In this respect, Bourdieu (1994) states that; "we use consumption as a source of distinguishing ourselves in our social world and strive for reproducing our individuality and personal meaning in the goods we purchase".

However, the threat involved in consumers' reliance on the consumption sphere in attaining self and social attributes, is related to the fact that the wheel of consumption runs rapidly, take turns, and follow trendy paths, which consequently assist in either authentic, genuine nor realistic goods in the light of constructing a self, which steer consumers into disturbing and uncertain blind alleys.

Bauman (1997), does in this context stress that, a never completed self-construction haunts the contemporary consumers. Another force in play, which appear to mislead the contemporary consumers is 'imaginative hedonism' (O'shaughnessy, 2002 p.530), which refers to the symbolism involved in the envision of an ideal version of life attained through seeking for pleasure in the emotions related to consumption, rather than in the actual goods they consume (Corrigan 1997, p.20).

Paradoxically, consumers seem to attain meaning from the imaginative emotions attached to consumer goods. This mechanism does somehow bridge the lived reality of consumers with some displaced meaning or envisioned life (Corrigan 1997, p.46). Consequently, consumers become

enrolled in a roller coaster experience of continuously striving to reach displaced illusion or ideal versions of a self through consumption (Moreva, 2005 p.47).

1.2.2 Self-actualization & Consumer Body

In respect to consumers widely reliance on the sphere of consumerism in the process of constructing and realizing a self (Thompson and Hirschman 1995), we intend to draw the attention to the views of the humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow, who in 1954 introduced the first measurement of well-being, which appeared to assess self-actualization exclusively in regards to this matter, as the fifth and final human need on the pyramid of needs. Maslow (1954), views self-actualization as the pinnacle of psychological health, as a state of being motivated by growth, meaning and aesthetics, rather than the apparent fragmentation and uncertainty involved in constructing a self through the symbolism of consumer goods. He divides the process of self-actualization into: relaxation, reenergization, recentering, awareness expansion, interpersonal effectiveness, personal change, self-transcendence and occultism (Kotler & Borzak, 1987 p.292), which stand in extreme contrast to the tendencies within society today, in the sense of the states of being a large number of contemporary consumers face. In this context, we intend to point to the extreme emphasis on the body, as a paradox in the light of Maslow's (1954) inclination of self-actualization as the pinnacle of psychological health, since the body appears as a socialized subject through which consumers construct their self (Thompson and Hirschman 1995). Standard conceptions of the "mind", "body", and "self" are today regarded as social constructions formed by social discourses (Thompson and Hirschman 1995). Whereas the inner body previously provided a glow to the outer body, the outer body appearance in contemporary consumer society appears as just another self symbol and indicator reflecting who we are, and further our psychological health (Glassner, 1989 p.182). As an outcome of the contemporary socialization of the body, consumers are almost enforced and reinforced to control and normalize the body accordingly (Thompson and Hirschman 1995). In this context, does Glassner (1990) refer to how consumption patterns can be used to control the desired appearance of the body, which in that way constitutes the paradox of the narrative of the self; hence including the body and thereby becoming embodied (Thompson and Hirschman 1995).

1.2.3 Consumer Experience

In alignment with the increasing welfare, and certain consumers' outrageous level of capital, meaning attained from consumption in fact becomes rather relative. Consumer research has in this

respect, focused on the experiential aspect of the mind, which across contemporary consumer society directs consumption patterns (Gould, 1994 p.30), and where the general force steering consumers' experiential aspect of mind appears to be "a desire to desire", which is a process constituting meaning in itself, rather than desiring particular goods (Belk et.al., 2003 p. 333). In this respect, Gould (1991) points out that the reproduction of desire is in itself desirable in Western society, and the aim of transcending material desire is in that perspective considered to be an enlightening of being. Foucault (1985), further contributes to the aspect of desire, by stressing that it, within the sphere of consumption, occurs as a continual negotiation of consumers' "self". In tune with this, the broad spectrum of consumers are constantly faced with higher heights to climb, and new versions of social or self "phantasmagoria" to desire (Benjamin 1993). The Western consumer is claimed to be seduced (Corrigan, 1997), by 'sensational experiences' (Belk et.al., 2003 p.335) and encouraged by forces within the consumption sphere to bridge their actual life with an ideal version of it. Pine and Gilmore (2001), do in this respect draw the attention to the "experience stager", which constitutes an experience rich with sensation, and seem to be at the core of contemporary consumption patterns.

1.2.4 Individuality & control

The tendencies within Western consumer society further take a direction towards a reality where the extensive proliferation of choices appear as a mechanism of control (Belk et.al.,2003 p.329). We cannot not consume anymore, consumers are in that respect continuously being "forced" to consume even more, steered by mass media and attractive branding or marketing by large profit oriented corporations (Belk et.al., 2003 p.346). However, scholars claim that the rise of extreme individualism within the Western world has left its paradoxical footprint in the issue of control; consumers might be "forced" to consume, but advertising does at the same time illusionary emphasize on leaving them with a feeling of holding the autonomous control and steering their own choice of consumption. For example, do consumers appear to be conditioned and socialized to control and discipline their body appearance through consumption in order to construct a self, the self is being embodied as touched upon earlier (Thompson and Hirschman 1995), however one can, in that sense, ponder upon the nature of individuality regarding the socialized body.

The contemporary consumers' reliance on the sphere of consumerism in constructing and actualizing their self does in this perspective appear rather critical (Moreva, 2005 p.42). Giddens

(1991) also stresses that the construction of self is today relying upon a “plurality of choices”. The fact that the general perhaps unconscious idea across consumer society is that: “We are what we consume” or that we, in fact, are “consuming a self” (Rindfleish, 2005 p.358), is according to us, echoing a serious alarm bell ringing over the Western world.

1.3 Victimization of the contemporary consumers

Critical stand

In the light, of our gained insights regarding the paradoxes and complexities within the sphere of consumerism, as illustrated in the above discussion, we have developed a critical stand. The objectives of our critique is to undo the structural and ideological roots of frozen meaning in contemporary society (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000 p.144), which seem to steer the population of consumers into blind alleys of constructing their self and their lives. In this respect, Alvesson (1994) supports our critical ideology by suggesting that a critical theory should concern an interest in emancipation; “the freeing of individuals from social forces that dominates self-understanding and ways of relating to the social world”.

(Weedon, 1987), does in this respect state that: “social meanings affect how we live our daily lives within social institutions”, and other previous researchers have in relation to this discovered, that consumers’ reliance on consumption in constructing a self and a lifestyle, have assisted in an experience of dilemmas such as fragmentation, powerlessness, uncertainty and meaninglessness (Cova 1997; Giddens 1991, Kellner 1992). In that sense, the self of the consumers appears to be the victim of the forces within the sphere of consumerism. Our critical stand does in that perspective aim at disrupting this ongoing social reality for the sake of providing impulses to the liberation of consumers from their apparent resistance to what dominates and steers their human decision-making (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000, p.3).

In terms of providing a broader scope of our critical stand we intend to refer to Foucault (1985), who underlines that the strategies of modern governance within consumer society appear to constrain the consumers’ freedom of choice in consumption (Belk et.al., 2003 p.330), which solely justifies our critique further. In relation, Firat and Venkatesh (1995) touch upon the limitation of the creativity and individuality of consumers when being steered to consume, and they further refer the complexities involved in consumers’ emancipation from the sphere of consumption (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995 p.255). There appears to be a gap in research concerning the conceptualization and

assessment of the limitations of consumer emancipation, also in terms of, to what extent it can be achieved and what particular social practices can distance consumers from the consumption sphere (Kozinetz, 2002 p.20).

In addition, several scholars have in respect to the positive correlation between consumer society and the victimization of consumers, paradoxically found that materialism related to contemporary consumption in fact correlates negatively with overall quality of life (Belk, 1985; Cole et al., 1991; Dawson & Bamossy, 1990, 1991; Richins, 1987; Richins & Dawson, 1992; Sirgy et al., 1993; Wright & Larsen, 1993). Kasser (2002) also rejects consumption of material possessions as a source of quality of life, and in that respect he even constitutes materialism as a threat. These points do once more underline the paradox of consumers becoming wealthier, however without improving their quality and meaning of life, stated by Campbell (1987) and Belk (2001).

In this perspective, we sense that the domination of consumers by contemporary consumer society perhaps is replaced with an extent of manipulation, or false promise, which steer consumers into blind alleys. In tune with this scholars claim that: “even more people today have the mean to live, but no meaning to live for” (Baker, 2002 p.55), which stresses that the alarm bells are ringing over contemporary consumer society. They are not solely echoing a threat to consumers’ quality of life, contemporary consumer society also appears as a victimizer of their “self” in the way the consumption sphere bombard them with massive symbols of who and how to be. Consumers then appear consequently to loose themselves in the “race of becoming” through consumption (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998 p.134).

1.4 Materialism or spiritualism

To broaden the critical scope on contemporary consumer society, it is crucial to recognize that a material value orientation ties self-actualization and identification to material possessions, which thereby squeezes other value orientations out, such as inward values (Belk 2001, p.7). In this context, consumption of material possessions is further stated to be value destroying (O’shaughnessy, 2002 p.536), partly due to the fact, that the relationship with the goods being consumed alienates consumers from relationships with people (Swagler, 1994 p.349).

Another paradoxical point involved in the increasing wealth, is made by Kasser (2002), who touches upon the complications involved in solely reaching outward for the meaning of material possessions. His study, does in this respect uncover a correlation between materialistic pursuits and

an undermining effect on consumers internal experience and development; he stresses symptoms as feeling of insecurity, uncertainty, depression, anxiety and less free, in his reasoning for downplaying the material value orientation.

In addition, Gould (1991) strongly challenges the overwhelming presence of materialism in the Western world, and accentuates that it makes the consumers impotent in envisioning alternatives. In tune with our critical stand in this research, we intend to constitute an intellectual role by enabling an open discourse regarding contemporary consumer society among social stakeholders rather than establishing a superior and set insight (Alvesson & Deetz 2000 p.144). This intellectual role has three phases composed by our primary insight, followed by our critical stand, and ultimately involving a potential re-definition of the phenomenon of critique (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000 p.139). In this respect, we do propose spiritualism to be an appropriate oppositional source of meaning to materialism due to its origin in a supposedly larger concept focusing on bringing people purpose, meaning and direction, which in that way might appear as instruments for consumers to unite and attain meaning of their lives (Baker, 2002 p.51). In that way, we intend to broaden our scope of the phenomenon of critique by exploring the interplay between spiritualism and consumerism as an opposition to materialism contra consumerism, and a alternative for consumers to attain quality of life from, and perhaps escape the victimization by Western society.

Existing research has revealed a strong correlation between spiritualism and quality of life, which presents spiritualism as an applicable alternative or potential path of escape for the lives of contemporary consumers (Baker, 2002 p.56). Empirical work by other researchers has further stressed the relationship between spirituality, psychological and physical well-being (Keng, et al. 2000 p.323). In that light, spiritualism is yet again supported in its opposition to the material value orientation related to contemporary consumption patterns, and it further appears to hold the potential of reducing tensions in the lives of the materialistic oriented consumers. Another, indication of the contradicting nature of spiritualism and materialism, which further support our critical stand in this research, is spiritualism's alignment with the Eastern worldview of reaching inward. Reaching inward for well-being and quality of life through a transcendent state of being (Sointu, 2005 p.262) contradicts the ideology fostering the Western consumer society emphasizing on attaining an equal state of being by reaching outward for consumer goods, services or experiences (Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1998 p. 132).

1.5 Redefine or escape the alarm bells

Spiritualism

Thus, spiritualism constitutes an applicable path of escape or alternative to the material driven Western consumer in their search for quality of life, there is an ongoing debate among scholars in regards to the interplay between spiritualism and consumerism, and the conceptualization of spirituality in the Western world today (Murray and Ozanne, 1994 p. 134). In this respect, Baker (2002) points out that spirituality solely has been viewed as a research variable the past 30 years, which therefore leaves it with widely blurry and complex definitions, forms and representations across consumer society.

Gould (2006), further stresses that the commercialization and re-definition of spiritualism in the Western world make it a rather scattered research phenomenon, he does additionally refer to how the various constructions of spiritualism across consumer society signify a certain shortcoming in knowledge about the roles and the meaning spirituality attains in the lives of consumers (Gould 2006, p.68). In this context, we therefore find it relevant to investigate the interplay between consumerism and spiritualism and thereby broaden the scope of our critical stand on contemporary consumer society in terms of illuminating to what extent the emancipation or escape from the domination of the sphere of consumerism is achievable through spiritualism. The limited research of spiritualism's interplay with consumerism, frames the ongoing debate among scholars.

Rindfleish (2005) defines the consumption of spiritual goods and activities as spiritual materialism, since she considers it to be motivated identically as the consumption of other goods today (Gould, 2006 p. 69). Her point is being supported by Elliot and Wattanasuwan (1998), who stress that consumers, in tune with the general contemporary consumption pattern, also when consuming spiritual object or activities, are motivated by the self and social symbolism attached.

Another contribution to this debate is brought to the fore by Apikos (1992), who underlines the particular desires involved in consumption of spirituality; which she claims are the experience of being alternative; referred to an extent of self symbol, and the experience of being oppositional, which reflects a rather social symbol. Above points being made draw the attention to the fact that consumers, on the surface, appear to attain meaning from consuming spiritual experiences based on the symbolism attached to them. In this context, Gould (2006) further states that consumers' desire for spirituality is rooted in a need for newness, and an insistence upon authenticity. Other scholars support his point, and do additionally refer to consumers' interest in inner development and their need of expanding their horizon of the traditional religious beliefs, as a reason for the rise of

spiritualism in the Western world (Hunter, 1987; Roof & Gesch, 1995; Simmel, 1976; Taylor 1991). Rindfleish (2005) refer to the fact that versions of the Eastern worldview seem to operate as compensators in a “free religious marketplace” and potentially fill in the gap of inner development and self-actualization for the consumers.

Belk (1989) does in addition, broadens the scope on the authenticity issue by claiming that consumers’ desire of remaining an authentic outlook to a great extent is rooted in the rise of individuality and in the emphasis on autonomous control, also regarding consuming spirituality. The spiritual marketplace is providing consumers with multiple goods to base their free choice, and construct their own spiritual individuality through (Moreva, 2005, p.46). However, Trungpa (1973) raises in contrast, his concern to the subject of consumers’ attraction to spiritual object as components to actualize themselves through, he claims that they most frequently will end up falling into pitfalls. In this context, Apikos (1992) further supports his point by advocating that it ultimately might have a dramatic impact on consumers’ construction of a self.

In the light of this debate regarding spiritualism, and the fact that it is considered as a source of self-actualization across consumer society today, we sense that the same forces steering consumers in purchasing goods of symbols representing their self or social self, also appear to be in play in consumption of spiritual goods. However, we find it crucial to broaden the scope of the meaning attained from spiritual goods or experiences, in order to explore this paradox further. In our view, is the interesting complex involved in spiritualism rooted in the actual meanings attained from it by consumers, and to what extent that relative spiritual meaning is being constructed by consumers or steered by marketers. We therefore presuppose that an exploration of the spiritual meaning evidently will illuminate what forces steer the wheels of spiritual consumption.

Firat and Venkatesh (1993), point at marketing as the conscious and planned practice of signification and representation of goods, which adds an interesting perspective to the interplay between spiritualism and consumerism. Due to the fact that either the commercialized market of spiritualism can allow equilibrium in human desire (Apikos, 1992 p.68), we find it applicable to ponder upon whether spiritualism perhaps then is another fresh spoke on the wheel of consumption and capitalism? Is it another passing fad or contemporary trend steering consumers into new blind alleys? Or is the Western representation of spiritualism awakening a higher sacred state of consciousness and spiritual meaning in consumers beyond the material state?

The fact is that the flow of new representations of spiritualism is extensive, Maffesoli (1996) frames it as an “Orientalization of the Western world” and it remains to be researched whether the bombardment of these various forms of Eastern spirituality being blended into the Western world, in fact appear as passing fads or blind alleys in consumers’ continuous search of existence or whether the *popular oriental culture* is here to stay.

1.5.1 Westernised spirituality

Due to the variety of constructions and representations of spiritualism in Western consumer society, meanings and experiences are attained differently across consumers, and therefore we intend to remain open about this phenomenon, without presuppose a restricted and determined definition. In that sense we will, as a starting point for this research and in alignment with our proposed open discourse to our critical stand (Alvesson & Deetz 2000), solely recognize that spiritualism is brought into the contemporary Western consumer society. As an outcome of this stance, we therefore intend to introduce our own definition of the phenomenon as ‘*westernized spirituality*’. In the light of our open discourse to our critical stand, we still intend to show consciousness of the fact that *westernized spirituality* needs to a certain extent, to be located in relation to spiritualism in order for both phenomena to attain meaning (Maffesoli, 1996, Gould 2006 p.67).

1.6 Escape from contemporary consumer society?

Definition of escape

To what extent spiritualism can be considered as a path of escape or emancipation from contemporary consumer society remains to be researched and explored in-depth. As it is typical for critical research studies to position a particular phenomenon in a wider, cultural, economic and political context (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000 p.1), we have chosen yoga as our phenomenon of interest originated in spiritualism and Eastern philosophies, hence also commercialized and westernized, to apply to contemporary consumer society. In that sense, yoga is an applicable outcome of the interplay between consumerism and spiritualism. We therefore, exclusively consider yoga as a social phenomenon, as a product of that interplay, independent of the nature of the specific style, time of practice, yoga studio, yoga instructor or prescribed outcomes attached to the practice. We base our argumentation behind this view of yoga on the nature of our research; since our point of departure is arising from a critical stand on contemporary consumer society, we find it appropriate to view the phenomenon of yoga holistically in respect to explore the meaning and experiences consumers add or attain from it.

1.7 Research problem

Based on the nature of the discussion in the introduction, the research problem of this study is to be found in yoga, as an outcome of the interplay between spiritualism and consumerism. Yoga is a product of spiritualism, and on the contrary, it has been commercialized, and psyches into the consumption sphere as one new popular culture, which has captured today's consumers by providing an experience or a state of transcends emotions and meanings, potentially beyond the materialistic consumer society. The core of our research problem has its origin in a critical stand on contemporary consumer society, and is concerned with what meaning practitioners attain from the yoga experience and whether the practice can be considered as a potential escape from the identified consumption race we face today. I escape when entering my "mind adventure" in a yoga pose, however we, in the light of the steering contemporary consumer society and its evident victimization of consumers, still intend to explore the meaning attained from yoga across the population of consumers in order to illuminate whether other consumers are using yoga as a path of escape too?

In the light of the wealth of California representing one of the highest levels of consumptions in the world, we have chosen San Francisco as the location for our research, dually also because it is the home of the most spiritual city on the West coast of United States, and most likely even in the Western world. We consider this city, to be an applicable research location because it holds the most extreme forms of the two backbones of our phenomenon of study interest; spiritualism and consumerism.

1.8 Research questions

In order to further explore and illuminate our research problem, we intend to investigate what constitutes the interplay between spiritualism and consumerism in the act of yoga. Our objectives are in that context to broaden our critical scope on contemporary consumer society, and through our following research questions to explore the meaning attained from the Eastern practice: what are consumers doing to yoga? and what is yoga doing to consumers?

1.9 Research Purpose

This study, therefore aims at enhancing the understanding of the interplay between spiritualism and consumerism played out in the practice of yoga, and thereby explore implications in regards to the role of yoga within contemporary consumer society in the light of what meaning yoga practitioners

attain from it. Based on our critical stand on contemporary consumer society, the purpose of exploring the role of yoga further is, in the light of our research questions; what is yoga doing to consumers, and what are consumers doing to yoga, to illuminate and gain an extensive understanding of whether the Eastern practice functions as a potential escape for the contemporary consumers.

1.10 Possible contributions of the research

Due to the complex nature of the research study, we presuppose to contribute to a variety of fields, however largely in the scope of research on contemporary consumers. In alignment with our critical stand on contemporary consumer society (Alvesson & Deetz 2000), we intend to broaden the scope of the critique towards the domination of consumer society (Belk, 1985, 2001; Kasser 2002; Keng et.al.2000; Wright & Val, 1993). In this respect, we aim at providing a deeper understanding of consumers' potential emancipation or escape (Kozinets, 2002), from the sphere of consumption by exploring issues as self-actualization, the self, control, individuality in the light of the yoga experience (Collier 1997; Gould 1991, 2006; Rindfleish 2005). We further predict to contribute to the popular culture of yoga, which seemingly lack research of the actual meaning attained from the experience across consumer culture (Apikos 1991, Gould 1994). Due to the meager and complex conceptualization of spiritualism, we ultimately believe that we can contribute to broaden the scope of the nature of the westernized spirituality as it appears in our corner of the world.

1.11 Delimitations

Due to the continuously changing nature of contemporary consumer society, and that consumer behavior, perception and meaning construction evolve and alter, we are conscious of the fact that the meaning attained from yoga is of relative and diverse nature, which consequently evidently influence the conceptualization of escape. Therefore are we in the light of our intellectual role, enabling an open discourse, as critical researcher not aiming at making any set conclusion or perhaps wide insights in this research, thus rather illuminating eye opening explorations and prompt insights about our phenomenon of interest; maybe prospectively contribute with something new or lead the way to future research

2. Theoretical perspective

2.1 Theoretical standpoint

In this chapter we intend to present our theoretical standpoint of this research which constitutes an existential phenomenology paradigm, and is further built on a framework of; meaning, self, and meaning attained from yoga.

2.2 Existential Phenomenology

In the light of our critical stand on contemporary consumer society, and due to our purpose of the research to further explore the meaning attained from the yoga experience we have chosen a phenomenological approach in the form of an existential phenomenology paradigm, which aims at studying consumer experience, and understanding the meaning of a given experience (Thompson, 2004, p.134). This approach is stressing: “that reality has a meaning for human beings, and therefore is human action meaningful; it has meaning for them and they act on the basis of the meanings that they attribute to their acts, and the acts of others” (Bryman & Bell, 2003, p. 17). We find this approach relevant for our study since the meaning attained from the yoga experience seems most transparently revealed through the participants’ own subjective experiences and reflections. Existential phenomenology, seeks to illustrate experiences as they emerge in some context, where it is lived and in this respect the mind is viewed as an entity that manipulates symbols representing the external world, which are being brought into internal consciousness by the consumers experiencing (Thompson, 2004, p.135). We intend to show consciousness about the fact that the methodology behind this research does vary to some extent from the core of existential phenomenology. Based on our critical stand, we are not solely interested in understanding consumers’ descriptive narratives of their yoga experiences, as indicated in existential phenomenology we additionally intend to draw the attention to the “why” question in order to explore the backbones of yoga composing the interplay between spiritualism and consumerism even further. In relation to our study of yoga, our critical stand on consumer society actually arises from how yoga is experienced and attained meaning from in consumers’ internal consciousness, being positioned the way it has in the Western society. The impact of the experience of the yoga practitioners determines whether to consider the practice as an escape from the consumption sphere or not. The meanings they attain from yoga are at the core in exploring the practice’s influence on mind, the body or the interaction between the two.

By applying the existential phenomenological approach, we are conscious of the fact that we might contribute to scholars attempt to fill in the gaps in consumer research on the actual experience of consumption (Thompson, 2004 p.135) – in that way we might develop new insights or add something to an increased understanding of the phenomenon of yoga.

2.3 Meaning

Due to the fact that the meaning the yoga practitioners attain from the experience is a core indication of the nature of the interplay between consumerism and spiritualism, and whether yoga can be considered as a path of potential escape from contemporary consumer society, we found it crucial to provide the reader with a thorough definition of the concept of meaning. Meaning construction is a distinctive human activity reflecting how the human brain is making sense of reality and the world. (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998 p.137). The distinctive ways in which human beings conceptualize and construct meaning has become a recent focus of behavioral science research on quality of life and subjective well-being (Sirgy 1998). In consumer research, it still remain to be researched what actually is sought by human beings when they seek what they call ‘meaning’ (Moreva, 2002), which situate the concept of meaning as rather applicable for our research.

In the light of consumption, goods operate as instruments through which consumers construct meanings in their lives, whereby meaning is attained relational when goods operate as social or self symbols adding self-expressive attributes to consumers’ lives; both in relation to social interaction and identity construction (Arvidsson, 2005 p.251). In respect to this, it is being claimed that meaning of a situation or an experience emerges through its symbol (Apikos, 1992 p. 72).

Becoming aware of the constitutive function of symbolism, does further imply that the meaning of a symbol is tied to the situation and that the meaning of that situation emerges through the symbol” (Stromberg, 1991 p. 122). Meaning is therefore relative, and constructed in various fashions among consumers (Apikos, 1992 p.70), which makes the concept rather free floating; consumers are in that way the ones steering the ascription of meaning to certain consumer goods (Cova, 1997 p.301).

The idea and the context of consumer goods, services or experiences are at the core of the meaning construction involved in contemporary consumption (Arvidsson, 2005 p.239). Therefore, it is vital to explore the meaning attained from yoga, in the light of the yoga experience being subjective to the practitioners, in order to understand their idea of the practice and its contemporary representation shaped by consumerism and spiritualism. We further intend to show consciousness

of the fact that, our ultimate purpose of this research to explore whether yoga appears as a potential path of escape possibly can lead to a re-definition of meanings constructed in contemporary consumer society as an outcome of the yoga practitioners' subjective perception of an "escape".

2.4 The self

The self is at the core of yoga practitioners' process of attaining meaning of their yoga experience. In this respect it is further applicable to understand the role of the self in the perspective of the interplay between consumerism and spiritualism, in order to pinpoint how and what meaning is being attained. As touched upon in the introduction discussion, the mind is positioned as a consuming organ, the pleasure centre where our streams of consciousness are projected into various "object relations" with people and goods and experiences; in order to construct a meaningful self (Gould, 1994 p.306). Within contemporary consumer society though the "self" appears to be rather scattered and empty of an evident self-existence as an outcome of the flux and fragmented consumption sphere bombarding consumers with multiple of choices in terms of "self" (Gould, 1994 p.308). Additionally, the consumption sphere seems to be building a gap between the actual self and an ideal self, and the actual social self and ideal social self, which consequently constrain and distract the role of the consumers as being their own creators of a "self" (Govers & Schoormans, 2005 p.190). It has been claimed by scholars that consumers will never attain fulfillment and satisfaction with their "self" since the capital of contemporary consumer society cannot allow equilibrium in human desire (Rindfleish, 2005 p.348). Other researchers support this point, by arguing that the "free will" within the consumption sphere is non existing, and that consumers as a consequence of that monitor their inner pleasure centre in order to become the "self" available to be consumed at the marketplace (Collier, 1997 p.25). Due to the fact that meaning, subjectively is attained from reality based on activities in the individual consumers' brain, it is rather critical to steer the "self" into controlled choices of what is meaningful to them (Bryman & Bell, 2003 p. 17). Consumers are consequently left feeling incomplete, uncertain, fragmented and powerless (Cova, 1997; Kellner, 1992)

2.5 Meaning attained from yoga

As an outcome of the broad representation of yoga across contemporary consumer society, which reflects the time of practice, the different yoga studios and styles, and the nature of the instructors, yoga practitioners evidently attain a variety of meanings from their yoga experience. This

standpoint is being supported by Gilmore & Pine (2001), who state: “that the consumer experience is emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual and therefore needs to be interpreted differently across individuals”. Regardless of our critical stand, we therefore find it crucial to remain open to this social phenomenon, and although we presuppose that the meaning attained from yoga possible can enhance their lives, we intend to stress that yoga in this research is considered as an outcome of *westernized spirituality*, and therefore to be remained open about, and to research for further exploration.

2.6 Methodology

This chapter at first presents our research proceeding and a justification for our choice of research area. Secondly, we provide an argumentation of chosen research design and methods of data collection for this research study based on appropriate philosophical perspectives.

General approach

2.7 Research proceeding

We have conducted our empirical data in San Francisco, California during the months of spring 2006. The main reasons for conducting our research in San Francisco is evolving from one author’s prior lived experience and interest in the practice of yoga in this city. Due to this, we manage to gain access to our research location through established personal connections. The widespread popularity and broad representation of yoga at this location, and the fact that the interplay between consumerism and spiritualism seem to appear in its most extreme form also impact our choice. Due to the purpose of this research to investigate the meaning and experience attained from yoga, and in that way illuminate what the two forces spiritualism and consumerism is doing to yoga, we found San Francisco to be highly pertinent. We base our argumentation on its nature of being a big city in United States, the number one country of consumption and wealth, however the city is at the same time the home of alternative living in the forms of organic food, alternative medicine, vegan and vegetarian choices, extensive awareness of health and nutrition, and an emphasized fitness orientation.

When we primarily selected the city by the bay to be our research location, we were not aware of its perfect applicable nature, however during the development of our critical stand we came to realize its valid representation of our research area. Due to our limited time, and in order to narrow down our focus of this study, we intend to stress that we will not consider the nature of the specific styles,

forms, time of practice and related outcomes of the yoga practice. We will rather, in order to answer our research questions, view it as a social phenomenon and explore consumers meaning and experience of it in terms of it being commercialized and market within contemporary consumer society. In that sense, we will base our focus group discussions, at three yoga studios, on the meaning attained and the participants' experience of yoga. Even though our findings will be specific to three Yoga studios, they are meant to broadening the scope of our data and give us an understanding of how consumers attain meaning and experience the yoga practice within a contemporary society. Although, we realize that this study is far from sufficient to give a definite answer on how yoga is perceived, experienced and carried out in a contemporary society, we believe that we do not have to know everything to know something.

2.7 Choice of research area

Being at the end of Lund University's master program in International Marketing and Brand Management, we have come to ponder upon our acquired knowledge and further come to reflect upon the complex discourse of the consumption playground in terms of the actual outcomes of marketing and branding activities. Our critical stand departures from the increase in welfare, and decrease in quality of life, and are directed to the sphere of consumption. In the light of our own reflexivity and skepticism towards knowledge production related to this sphere, we found it contributing to challenge the popular culture of yoga being a product of the interplay between contemporary consumerism and Eastern spiritualism. In respect to this, we therefore intend to explore what experience and meaning actually arise from this meet. Due to one author's lived experiences of yoga, we believe that we have acquired applicable perspectives and insights on the contemporary consumer society, both from an inside and an outside role at the consumption playground, which in that way constitutes a justification of our critical stand. It is further our opinion that the skepticism and resistance towards existing social phenomena or domination will lead to progress and development of the human kind.

2.8 Discussion of philosophical perspectives

When engaging in research within social science it is foremost essential to enter a critical and open-minded reasoning regarding our assumptions of reality (Easterby & Smith et.al., 2002, p.31). The way we view reality reflects the philosophical positions we decide to departure from when approaching the phenomena of interest (E-S et.al., 2002, p. 28). The phenomenon of interest of this

research is evolving from our critical stand on contemporary consumer society, and it is directed towards the meaning and context of the yoga experience being a product of the interplay between consumerism and spiritualism. The meaning consumers construct through yoga, and the effect it has on the practitioners' lives diverge across consumer society, and therefore is the point of departure of this research to be found in the ontological position claiming that the world as it appears to us is inter-subjectively produced or constructed in everyday life (E-S et.al., 2002, p. 29). We base our argumentation on the fact that this ontological position views reality as a social phenomena given meaning by people, and as a social construction distinctively created based on the meaning people place upon their experiences of it (E-S et.al., 2002, p. 29). Yoga, as we view it in this research, is a social phenomenon constructed by forces of both spiritualism and consumerism, and people are in their everyday lives constructing their subjective meaning of it through their practice. Due to our purpose of exploring and illuminating what yoga does to consumers and what consumers in opposition do to yoga, we find the paradigm of social constructionism suitable for this research, because yoga appears to be an act of meaningful reality construction where the practitioners, individually and collectively, make sense of the world through sharing experiences and communicating verbally- and non-verbally (E-S et.al., 2002, p. 29). The view of social constructionism is concerned with the broad representation of the social phenomenon (Bryman & Bell, 2003 p. 17), and in this respect, it views the yoga participants as knowledge producers and the meaning constructed around the phenomena of interest, is to be understood only from their point of view (B-B, 2003 p. 18).

In the light of our assumption of reality, it is relevant to touch upon the power relations involved in where we position ourselves in the process of knowledge production within the social world. Are we passive receivers of knowledge? Or are we enquiring and interpreting knowledge actively? What meaning do we add to knowledge? These epistemological positions are crucial to consider when developing suitable methodology as well (B-B, 2003, p. 151). In this study, the epistemological position is rather subjective and arising from an emancipatory knowledge interest of what kind of meaning is being constructed in everyday yoga practices (Habermas 1984). What defined meaning, experience and state of being evolving from yoga diverge across consumer society; yoga can therefore be considered as a social construction in itself, a social phenomenon constantly reproduced and interpreted distinctively across the social world, acceptable knowledge about this social phenomena is, in that way, defined subjectively and interpretatively by each

individual (B-B, 2003 p. 13). In social constructionistic research, it is crucial to be conscious of the fact that a social constructionist is one narrative among many, one knowledge producer of reality; not because it is false or to be denied, thus because we perceive, construct meaning and interpret reality in distinct ways (B-B, 2003, p. 20).

The construction of reality presented here can therefore not be regarded as definitive knowledge (B-B, 2003, p. 21). In this respect, we find it relevant to bring the gender aspect to the fore; it is a social construction constantly produced and reproduced within society, which assist in gendered norms, values, processes, and structures (B-B, 2003, p. 308). In terms of research methodology, the gender has been claimed to influence the process of knowledge production (B-B, 2003, p. 309). Gender differentiation distinguishes activities, interest and places as either female or male (B-B, 2002, p. 308), and in this respect we have therefore chosen to take an open-minded and reflexive stand on the gendered data we might receive from the practitioners of the yoga practice due to the fact that yoga comes from the Eastern perspective of physical activity “yin” focus on concentration and flexibility, whereas the Western perspective on fitness is more “yang” oriented and concerned with strength and endurance. In this sense, we presuppose that yoga practitioners might experience the practice in distinctive ways based on gender (Condron, 2005).

2.9 Qualitative research

Based on our ontological standpoint which views reality as a social construction derived from interaction and sharing of experiences between individuals (B-B, 2003, p.280), we find the qualitative research appropriate for this research. Qualitative research is based on an inductive view of the relationship between theory and research proposing that theories can generate discovery and new contextual understanding of social phenomena (B-B, 2003, p. 289). The qualitative research approach is furthermore rooted in our epistemological position underlining the subjective interpretation of social phenomena as a knowledge source. Human beings are of interest for the qualitative study, the yoga practitioners are attributing meaning to the yoga practice in a subjective way, and therefore we must interpret the phenomenon of interest from their perspective (B-B, 2003, p.293).

Yoga has many faces; the commercialization of the practice has positioned it as a capitalistic instrument at the market in contradiction to its Eastern origin emphasizing on the transcendent and spiritual meaning, and therefore it appears to be a rather complex and multi-sided phenomenon. Due to this nature of our phenomenon of interest, we claim that the qualitative research’s concern with

attaining a detailed account of the context in which peoples' behavior takes place, in this research the yoga studios, is appropriate (B-B, 2003, p. 295). In this respect, Alvesson (2002) argues that "social research is supposed to be about finding out how things are 'out there' in society through empirical inquiry", and therefore are we basing our research on the assumption that there is a reality around yoga to be discovered and explored through a qualitative research methods (B-B, 2003, p.14). We moreover, favor the qualitative research's emphasis on the significance of a thorough contextual understanding, which in respect to yoga might provide us with relevant insights about its affect and meaning in the practitioners' lives (B-B, 2003, p. 295).

The collection of data in this research is based on cross sectional case studies conducted through three focus groups interviews and a complementary micro ethnography in the form of participant-as-observer, which is the framework for our empirical work and contribution to existing studies in the research field.

2.10 Case study

We have chosen a cross-sectional design, which is characterized by the use of a set of multiple sets of cases conducted at a singular point in time (B-B, 2003 p.48). The cross sectional research generalizes a larger group of yoga practitioners than those actually forming part of the investigation. There is a heavy on-going debate about case studies among scholars, and therefore we found it appropriate to define the concept as it appears in our research. Due to the confusion and the variety of definitions of a case study (Stake, 2000 p.436); we intend to draw attention to an extended explanation and clarification of the case study design in regards to the context of our research. In this respect, a case study is not a methodological choice but rather a choice of what is to be studied (Stake, 2000 p.435). It is imperative, that a case is specified and in that way a bounded systems, in which behavioral patterns are concepts to specify the case (Stake, 2000 p. 436). The case, in our research is a social bounded system and an assemblage of interacting people, characterized as a group of yoga practitioners on whom we undertake an examination of a single instance. In that respect, we will interview three groups (cases) of yoga practitioners at three different studios in San Francisco. The intrinsic interest of our cases focuses on the practitioners experience and meaning attained from the yoga experience. We engage in a collective case study or what Herriot and Firestone (1983) define as a "multisided qualitative research", since we simultaneously carry out more than one case study, in order to investigate the social phenomenon. However, each case study is a concentrated inquiry into a single case and is concentrated on trying to understand its

complexities since we are interested in the broadened scope of the social phenomenon rather than an individual case. Case studies emphasize on a detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions and their relationships (Stake,2000 p.438). We have chosen a case study method as many social scientists have, to examine contemporary real-life situations and encapsulate complex meanings. Yin (1994), defines the case study research method as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in-depth within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used (Yin, 1994, p. 13). It needs to be kept in mind that, the case is of secondary interest but plays a supportive role, and it facilitates the understanding of the meaning and experience attained from yoga studio. In that respect, we as researchers let the case tell its own story (Stake, 2000 p.441). We however interpret the story of the cases, since we in the process of analyzing the outcomes of the cases consequently will draw the attention to outcomes that correspond with our critical stand and research questions.

2.11 Empirical study

Due to the rather complex and broad representation of our social phenomenon of study, we considered focus groups to be an applicable method of collecting data in the research. However, we have decided to add a complementary micro ethnography to the framework of our empirical work, since we believe that it will counterbalance the outcomes of the focus groups and ultimately broaden our scope of the meaning practitioners attain from the yoga experience.

2.12 Focus Groups

A focus group is an interview emphasizing on the questioning about a particular rather tightly defined topic; additionally the accent is upon the interaction within the group and the joint construction of meaning (B-B, 2003, p. 369). The Eastern practice of yoga, in this respect is represented as the topic of our three focus groups interviews in which yoga practitioners will be the subjects of study. The construction of meaning and the experiences that yoga practitioners share and have in common with each other will be explored in depth during the focus group sessions. The interviews are aiming to reveal how the respondents experience and and what meaning they attain from their yoga practices. This is in alignment and supports the study's existential phenomenology approach. Thompson (2004) in this respect, defines the interview as the most powerful mean for attaining an in-depth understanding of peoples' experiences, which underlines the focus groups' suitability for this research (Thompson, 2004 p.135). Due to the complex and critical nature of our

research problem, we propose that we will be exposed to insightful and revolutionary responses when the participants not only respond individually, but also in the context of interaction.

Responding to each other's views will potentially further build up and stimulate new creative ideas and reflections. The respondents will most likely come to realize that their experiences can both be reflected, and non-reflected, which indicates that some experiences they might not be aware of, and that will further assist in eye opening outcomes of the focus group (Thompson, 2004 p.139).

We further believe that the unstructured setting of a focus group fits the yoga culture, and that this technique allows us to develop an understanding of why and how the practitioners come to feel the way they do about the practice and what it does to them. In that respect, focus groups interviews reflect and register the processes through which meaning is constructed in everyday lives, which supports the ontological stance of this study. Another advantage of the unstructured way of interviewing allows the participants to bring new and insightful aspects to the fore, which initially was not expected to be topic for discussions. Therefore, we consider the focus group approach more suitable for our research project than individual interviews, which are more structured and controlled.

As touched upon earlier, the group discussion will take place at three different yoga studios in San Francisco in groups of 4-8 yoga practitioners. In this respect, Blackburn and Stokes (2000) found that discussions in groups of more than eight are difficult to manage. Due to the large distance between Lund and San Fransisco we have contacted the studios in advance by one author's personal connections established at two of the studios. The representatives at the yoga studios will further support us with the selection of participants and provide us with a suitable and quiet room in order the focus groups to be carried out.

A female researcher will take the role as moderator and guide the discussions of all three focus groups. She will be generally flexible in her approach, in order to keep the interviews unstructured and provide participants with confidence to elaborate and reconsider their answers. In respect to our epistemological approach, Thompson (2004) argues, that the power relation between researcher and practitioners is reduced, due to the fact that the latter are the knowledgeable ones providing us with their meanings and experiences attained through yoga (Thompson, 2004 p.142).

In order to avoid an intrusive role of the moderator, the interviews will be based on a small number of general topics (see appendix 1). The moderator will lead the discussions open-minded and take

an overt role, in which she will balance between the fine line of guidance and latitude during the interviews, in order to prevent too diverse outcomes.

Taken our critical stand into consideration we will present the focus group participants for some rather provocative and potentially discomfoting questions at end of the interviews. Bryman & Bell (2003) argue that the closing moments of the interview is an opportunity to include the “catch all” question. In the light of our existential phenomenological paradigm, we will unusually draw the attention to the “why” question, which enables us to explore the backbones of yoga composing the interplay between spiritualism and consumerism even further, and thereby illuminate our research questions. Another practical concern is the issue of recording or documenting the responses of the interview discussion. The three focus group sessions will be documented through tape recording and consequently be transcribed and analyzed. Tape recording is necessary since the participants can get caught up in lively discussions in which the moderator needs pay close attention to what is being said in order to ask appropriate following up questions, and therefore will not be able to focus on note taking (B-B, 2003 p.371). However, the moderator will additionally take notes when something is communicated non-verbally which cannot be recorded on tape.

Before the transcription of the interviews, the recordings will first be evaluated closely by listening to them once or possibly two times. In the process of transcription, we will carefully distinguish the voices of the respondents, which appear to as a rather time-consuming and difficult practice due to the fact that some voices might be alike and respondents might interrupt each other. They might overlap each other, and potentially speak at a passionate and exited pace, which may have negative impact on quality of the sound. Therefore, in the light of our time limitation we will only transcribe the parts of the interview that we consider to be beneficial and relevant for the analysis of our research. The interviews will be recorded digitally, which enables us to process and transcript the data faster.

2.13 Participant as an observer

Social constructionism is emphasizing on the differentiated representation of the phenomena of interest constructed by people (B-B, 2003, p. 21) In the light of our preconceptions regarding yoga’s distinctive representation and meaning among consumers, we have therefore chosen to carry out a complementary micro ethnographic study in the form of a participant-as-observer (B-B, 2003, p. 317). We believe that I, as a researcher, through engaging in an extended and interactive involvement in a naturalistic version of a yoga class might be able to explore or uncover additional

“beneath the surface experiences” and hidden context applying what yoga actually is doing to consumers in its “real” westernized form, that the focus groups will not reveal (B-B, 2003, p. 294). As proposed by qualitative research, the social world is revealed through processes (B-B, 2003 p.281), and we believe that the same revelation of yoga might occur at yoga studios, which make the participant-as-observer research appropriate here in order to obtain as thick description (B-B, 2003,p. 289) of yoga as possible. By observing how the specific yoga classes are build up, joining the process of it and listening to what is being said and not said, the probability of gaining a thorough understanding of the practice seems more likely to occur (B-B, 2003, p.281). In this respect, we find it crucial that I, as the researcher, pursues an insider status, (B-B, 2003, p.362) and for this research, we will underline the advantage involved in my pre-knowledge and lived experiences of yoga. On this behalf, we predict that I will have an easier time pursuing an insider status in the yoga class, and further breaking down the barriers with the other participants in the classes (B-B, 2003, p. 336). Another advantage related to my insider position, is the familiarity and understanding of the specific language being used, both verbally and non-verbally. The language of the social phenomenon under research has been characterized as the absolute core of social science (Fairclough 2004, p.214), and the backbone of understanding the reality of human beings, in this research the yoga participants. In that way my pre-knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon of interest might make me capable of interpreting meanings out of the context that I am a part of, or observe (B-B, 2003, p. 362). We further base our argumentation of the use of a participant-as-observer, on the ethnographic study’s emphasis on context (B-B, 2003, p. 330). The context or meaning constructed prior to a yoga class, during the yoga class or at some point within the after hour of the practice, might bring fore relevant aspect in terms of how yoga is represented. Therefore I will, as a female researcher intend to engage in conversational interviewing during my observation, set up as a series of broken, informal and unstructured conversation or overheard exchanges between people which at the end are tied together and have meaning for our research (B-B, 2003, p.353)

In this respect, we consider my role being an overt female researcher to be an advantage in terms of my feminine sensitivity’s potential in grasping relevant meanings from these conversational interactive or interviewing scenarios (B-B, 2003, p. 308). It is also applicable to bring fore that my bachelor degree in communication and culture might appear as strengths at the research locations due to the fact that attention to cultural context, local norms, values or gender aspect can be important to consider when carrying out an ethnography.

As an outcome of the limited time frame for this research, we have chosen to carry out a micro ethnography at the three yoga studios where we hold our focus groups at, and we are in this respect conscious about the fact that the limited time might not uncover any detailed knowledge about the phenomena of interest (B-B, 2003, p. 17). Giving that the framework of this type of research is of rather unstructured nature (B-B, 2003, p. 334), and the complementary nature we decided on, we will further use convenience sampling with a certain degree of flexibility to adjust the sampling procedure as the ethnography progresses (B-B, 2003, p. 325). In regard to this, we intend to underline that we do not presuppose to continue my participant-as-observer data collection till we gain repetitive results, partly due to our time frame, thus also in the light of that these observations are complementary to the responses from the focus groups. Therefore, we are not looking for a large sample, rather to gain insightful qualitative aspects of significance for exploring the yoga experience of the practitioners.

2.14 Critical discussion & conclusion

Given the restricted time frame, we are conscious of the limitation of this research involved in the relative small number of cases being researched. According to Bryman & Bell (2003), “A researcher should attempt to achieve a saturation point were results become repetitive”, which we cannot pursue in either the focus groups nor in the micro ethnography, due to the limited time available. We forecast that this study requires more cases in order to come up with repetitive results, yet we consider this study as a point of departure and will provide extensive theoretical knowledge to existing theories. The small number of cases further creates a lack of generalizability, since the cases only represents the yoga practitioners at three particular studios. In that way, we intend to stress that the results of three cases do not appear as reliable indicators of the wider population of yoga practitioners. We further reflect upon the fact that respondents who agreed to participate in our focus groups have most likely positive experiences of their practice. The practitioners with positive experiences of yoga tend to be more eager to share their views in a group discussion than the ones less devoted. Therefore, is the probability that respondents of our group interviews attain a profound meaning from the practice more likely. Furthermore, will we base our selection of participants on our own judgments of how friendly or cooperative they are. In other words, we base our sampling on personal judgments guided by prospective respondents’ availability, and by our implicit criteria for inclusion (B-B, 2003 p.93). We are, in that respect, conscious about the fact that our sample will be biased and not representative for the wider population, however, we believe we can justify for

the selection of three cases in the light of the study's purpose, which is to explore and gain an understanding of the meaning and experience the consumers attain from yoga. In that way, we believe we can argue for this research being a contribution to existing research, in how it can be taken as a point of departure to meaning construction in yoga studios.

The restricted time frame further adds certain limitations in regards to the process of interviewing, transcription of interviews and analysis of transcripts of the focus groups. We are however confident that, we can grasp significant insights about yoga consumers in a contemporary society and its role as a potential escape, and in this sense we find the complementary participant observation rather contributing in broadening the scope of yoga. The prior lived experience of the researcher further gives us the possibility to optimize our empirical outcomes at three yoga studios in a restricted time frame. Whereas, participant observation normally is seen as time consuming, the method in this study is intended to counterbalance and complement the focus group outcomes and prospectively add new insights or support already expressed meanings.

We further find it appropriate to be conscious about the fact that the moderator of the focus group and the observer in the micro ethnography has been part of the yoga culture in San Francisco before carrying out this research. In that way, she has acquired certain pre-conceptions, pre-understanding of yoga, which will play a prominent role in this research. Since the participant observer engaged in the representation of the social environment of yoga it can be presumed that the researcher constructed a preconception about the yoga practice. In that respect, participant observations and group interviews are inherently subjective exercises, yet highly relevant for our research since the 'insider' perspective is an appropriate way to research the construction of meaning and supports our epistemological stance. However, her role can be discussed; to what extent her insider status influences the interpretations of our empirical data, and probably make her "blind" to grasp certain meanings because they have become obvious to her. Fern (2001), suggests that: "greater reliability can be gained by using different moderators with different backgrounds and the results of the focus groups can be compared for consistency of interpretation". Due to time limitations and the aspect of cost of this research we cannot make use of several moderators with different gender or backgrounds.

We further criticize the fact that our group interviews are conducted in an artificial environment, which in that sense lacks ecological validity (B-B, 2003 p.34), due to the difficulties in creating the same type of environmental and contextual characteristics at all three studios. Therefore, we highly

value the contribution of our ethnographic research that are in contrast to our interviews conducted in a natural environment and provides this study a naturalistic account of how meaning is constructed within yoga studios. Considering, the critical perspective of this research project at the closing stages of the interview the researcher intend to ask rather critical and provocative questions, which could give the respondents a discomforting feeling, and create certain tensions.

Additionally, the discomforting aspect of a microphone, the moderator uses while interviewing, might frustrate the outcome and the well-being of the participants, and results may become disappointing. We however, argue that the moderator will create social bounds and mutual trust with the respondents, since she is comfortable in the yoga culture, and has engaged in the yoga practice. As earlier indicated, we show consciousness of the fact that the convenience sampling jeopardizes the generalizability of our study, however, Bryman and Bell (2003) state that issues of representativeness are less important in qualitative research than they are in quantitative research. We therefore, base our choice of convenience sampling on practical considerations such as established contacts, lived experiences at the studios, and on the limited time frame of our research. Stake (2000), further elaborates on this argument and claims that in complex qualitative research with too many typologies influencing a research object it is impossible to obtain complete generalizability. Taken the diversity between yoga studios, styles and research environment into account, any best possible selection of cases could not give us a compelling representation of yoga studios in San Francisco and in that way not support a statistical basis for generalization. Therefore, this study will not necessarily strive for generalizability but rather focuses on yoga studios that were most accessible. Stake (2000) describes this priority of objectives delicate and claims that: “balance and variety are important but the opportunity to learn is of primary importance”.

3. This is yoga

3.1 Body & mind adventure

In comparison with the existence of distinctive forms of *westernized spirituality* in contemporary consumer society, the representation of yoga as well appears in broad and multiple westernized forms, and has gone through different phases, from spiritual cleaning and rebirth, to being a preventive medicine that helps manage and reduce stress, to the blooming fitness wave we face today (Afanador, 2001 p.8). The broad representation reflects the variation in yoga styles, time of practice, yoga studios, and the nature of the instructor, and can therefore be tailored to fit the unique needs and life of the broad population of consumer. Due to the multiple variables to consider in researching the practice of yoga (Craig, 2005 p.23), we solely intend to consider it as a social phenomenon, and explore the supposed distinction of meaning attained from the yoga experience regardless of the above variables. In this respect, existing research has only paid meager attention to the actual meaning attained through yoga, and why consumers turn to this Eastern practice (Apikos, 1991; Gould 1991, 2006; Rindfleish 2005). Largely, the representation of yoga across existing literature is of diverse nature (Adams & Cowen, 2005 p.211), and the significance of the umbrella term evolves in complexities and implication in drawing comparisons and generalizations across research studies (Adams & Cowen, 2005 p.213).

The Eastern practice has paradoxically become a popular culture, a way of life within contemporary consumer society, where consumers in general tend to reach outward for well-being and meaning obtained through the possessions they consume (Pine & Gilmore, 2001 p. 79), they now seem to be caught up in the presupposed “non-consuming” spiritual act of yoga.

Our reasoning behind applying the practice of yoga as an applicable path of escape from the sphere of consumption is rooted in the proposal of Eastern worldview to reach inward for meaning and well-being, aiming at a higher spiritual consciousness and state of being. (Srinivasan, 2005 p.153). In this respect, we consider the contrasting nature of yoga to potentially provide consumers with alternative components to shape their lives around, than the ones attached to other consumer goods within contemporary society.

The ultimate aim of yoga is to strike a balance between mind and body through breathing, balancing relaxation in the poses and a varying extent of spiritual meditation in order to finally attain a healthy

and lively approach to life (Afanador, 2001p.2). By balancing the physical, spiritual, psychological, social aspect of an individual (Afanador, 2001 p.7), yoga is further claimed to enable individuals to reach self-enlightenment and a higher inner and divine consciousness (Srinivasan, 2005 p.158), which consequently can lead to greater self-awareness and prerequisite for self-actualization.

Thus, yoga's applicable path of escape the representation of the practice does in some corners of consumer society paradoxically appear as another wheel of consumption by taking a form as just another consumer good, promoted by celebrities and rock stars, highlighted as an exercise to make us stay slim and fit, and finally used by consumers as a social symbol of differentiation (Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1998 p. 133). In connection, yoga has in United States entered the mainstream society as a recognized social phenomenon proving Americans with well-being and quality of life, the practice has been positioned in the fashion world as well as new trendy fitness apparel and Americans spend 3 billion annually on yoga and yoga equipment (Craig, 2005 p.23).

The meet between consumerism and spiritualism in the act of yoga appears to be rather complex and paradoxical. One major puzzle is whether yoga, being another spiritual activity, has turned out to be another blind alley of today's race of consumption? Another favored popular culture shaped to steer the wheels of consumption? Are consumers entering a prescribed non-consuming act "in the name of consumption" in order to actually escape the rush of the consumption sphere? Does the Eastern touch of yoga symbolize an applicable path of escape or what meaning are consumers attaining from the yoga experience? Is yoga an authentic and genuine experience or advertised, re-defined and commercialized as another alienated consumer experience?

We foresee, that our critical stand can facilitate an understanding of some of the hidden structures and undefined cultural and societal meanings of contemporary consumer society (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000p.151), by exploring yoga as an outcome of the interplay between consumerism and spiritualism, and through further investigating the meaning yoga practitioners attain from the experience ultimately broaden the scope on our subject of critique. In this context, we intend to stress that our critical stand is motivated by objectives of challenging and perhaps redefine the nature of contemporary consumer society, rather than confirming set insights in regards to its domination. In that sense, we anticipate that this research potentially will reveal whether yoga practitioners redefine, re-experience or perhaps escape the domination and manipulation of contemporary consumer society (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000p.151).

4. Analysis

“My pure intentions of life arise from the horizon of my inner ocean, the waves disclose reality to me as it is, I inhale the blowing wind, exhale in the light of the sun, and in my act of balancing the ocean frames my life to me in a dancing rainbow consuming my entire universe right in this moment”

4.1 Analysis of body & mind adventure

The rich empirical work gathered in our three focus group interviews resulted in a variety of complex and paradoxical themes, which we present in the following in the light of our own subjective interpretations. The variation of themes arising in the focus groups reflects the proposal of the existential phenomenology paradigm for this research which, in the light of its qualitative nature, stresses: “that reality has a meaning for human beings, and therefore is human action meaningful, it has meaning for them and they act on the basis of the meanings they attribute to their acts, and the acts of others”(Bryman & Bell, 2003, p. 17). Therefore did we, thus our six topics for discussion (see appendix 1), receive new insights and revolutionary, complex and eye-opening testimonials from the discussions, which consequently broadened the scope of the first intended focus of our questions. The objective of our analysis is to provide the reader with a thorough interpretation of our rich empirical work about yoga, in order to reveal the paradoxes involved, and show awareness of the complexities concerning our research problems in the light of our critical stand. In this respect, we recognize the fact that qualitative research and our epistemological approach underline the subjective interpretation of social phenomena as a knowledge source (Bryman & Bell, 2003, p.293). We further intend to show consciousness of the fact that we based on our critical stand in this research, is in the final phase of our intellectual role facing a potential re-definition of the phenomenon of critique (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000 p.139). Finally, we intend to make the focus group responses and the participant observations counterbalance and complement each other, in order to illustrate the paradoxical themes in the most vivid and applicable way.

4.2 Gift of yoga

Due the relative nature of meaning, this part of the analysis is intended to broaden the scope of the distinctive meanings attained from the yoga experience, and in the light of that, it partially answers our research question; what is yoga doing to consumers? However, we intend to draw the attention

to the fact that, due to our main purpose of this research, to explore the meaning of yoga, the paradoxes illustrated in the other themes will further touch upon this concept.

“...Yoga is a powerful practice, during my breathing practices I feel like flying. I get so high, it’s like a drug to me, it becomes addictive” [Gina]

“...Yoga is my mind cleaning practice” [Peter]

“...Yoga brings me enlightenment and makes me crave enlightenment” [Martin]

“My general energy level has gone up during my time practicing yoga” [Tim]

In these four prompt responses to the meaning attained from yoga, it is illuminated that they experience some state of reenergization in the practice, which based on their enlightened faces when answering, constitutes rather sensational experiences. In the light, of this enhanced energy level, the participant observations further revealed an arousal of the energies when the yoga practitioners deeply inhaled with a smitten concentration on their faces. In a sense, it further witnessed, that they were somewhere in their own universe, and in a short moment after they exhaled with all they had making a loud noisy sound of relief in an echo, which somehow consumed the entire room. Another aspect of the energy issue raised, in relation to the meaning attained from yoga, refers to the process of reaching inward and benefiting from it, which brings the mind part of the practice to the fore. This is illustrated here:

“...yoga is mental energy to me...In, yoga I am free from suffering” [Laura]

“...yoga changed my mind” [Gina]

Another meaning attained from yoga does, in alignment with the enhanced energy level, refer to the core of the mind as the organ of consuming in the yoga experience. In the light of the focus group discussions, it became evident that the mind and the experiential aspect of it, is at core of the

Eastern practice, and we will in that respect stress the spiritual mysticism involved at this point, since solely few practitioners seem to be able to explain their body/ mind adventure. However, the meaning attained was expressed as a general feeling of well-being:

“...It helps me with my posture, breathing and stress...I relax more in the moment, it’s like a focus and it enhances my general feeling of well-being” [Maggie]

“Through my yoga practice I just have a happier existence... I just feel happier and I have better sense of well-being...I am in a better mood all the time”. [Abel]

One participant shared his own testimonials trip to well-being with us:

“..A year ago, in 2005, I was ready to make a change in my life. I wasn’t fulfilled by the life I was leading...Luckily, I ran into Lotta Alsén at the right time and in the right mood...Lotta offered to coach me toward realizing my potential. I combined life coaching with yoga classes.” [Martin]

“It lost my attention fast though!” [Martin]

“However, at the beginning of 2006 I was motivated to continue ascending toward my potential. Lotta and I agreed having a yoga practice of some sort was essential. I wasn’t sure yoga was the answer” [Martin]

“ I followed through this time though!” [Marin]

“The amazing part of my experience is how easy it has been for me to ramp up my commitment...It took a few tries but my practice is a very high priority in my life. It’s one of the few things in life where I have experienced such breakthroughs” [Martin]

“My practice is part of my quest to realize my potential. My potential is a gift. Through yoga, I get a glimpse at my potential, in my practice and in the sacrifice my teacher makes for me. After practice, I’m thankful for the feeling of my feet touching the ground with each step on the way to work. I love life. I see beauty all around me. I’m at peace” [Martin]

In the light of the above, we have come to interpret the yoga practice in itself as a subjective and personal experience, where the interactions in class can be observed as rather limited and individual. The practitioners seem to consume the experience in their own unique way, in their own set pace, at their own possible level and with their own prescribed aim for the practice;

“When entering the hot yoga room a little earlier this morning, some participants already showed up, and are preparing for the class in their own personal way; some are stretching, some are lying on their mat with closed eyes, some seem to be meditating and others simply taking in the silent rather spiritual atmosphere waiting for the show to go on” [Participant observations, Appendix 3]

However, the outcomes of the focus group discussions in fact reveal a great emphasis on the socialization aspect of the Eastern practice, and awareness of the fact that thus the participants add distinctive meanings to their yoga experience, they are still a part of the same yoga community.

“...It’s like a whole community evolves in class...the expectations and social roles suddenly disappears.” [Peter]

“We are in the battle together, it’s like we speak the same language, we bound in a way” [Abel]

“The social aspect has become a major attraction to me too, I made several friends here at the studio” [Maggie]

“I always meet everyone with a smile, I normally greet everyone, even if I don’t know them, I guess that makes it a community somehow” [Serena]

One issue we pondered upon when interacting at the different yoga studios, was the lack of dominating or mainstream norms, we sensed no symbolism of expectations ruling the frame of the yoga practice; there seemed to be room for everyone, room for all outfits, all fashion, and all levels of incomes. This reality stood in strong opposition to other corners of the consumption sphere, where consumers evidently appear to be striving for individuality, authenticity or alternativeness. The atmosphere reflected an open arena for everyone to consume their yoga adventure in, as they preferred:

“In the yoga studio we are all equal.... we are all in a sweating yoga marathon at our own level, as ugly as we can be, in our own personal spiritual moment.... attaining our own subjective meaning of this experience” [Peter]

“ The social clock is so big in our lives. I am 22 I have not done this.... I am 35 I have not done this. In yoga you are who you are... not worrying about the burden of the social life, or the judgment of your neighbor” [Paula]

4.2 Strive for envisioned meaning or strive in the aura of meaning

The yoga practitioners presented us for complex discussions revealing certain paradoxes in how meaning is attained from the yoga experience, which is illustrated in the following:

“I know that I have limits...I still have trouble stretching my legs and touching my toes.... learning about myself is what I gain from the process, I recognize my limits... and I am pushing them a little further each time... always reaching for this little extra, but it is about the inside... and me pursuing the advancements of my self” [Serena]

One of our core interpretations of the yoga practice is, that it appears as a process-oriented form of exercise, which refers back to the above interpretation about “yoga is for everyone” in terms of the constant room to grow in that process, regardless of levels. The paradoxical aspect of Sarah’s illustration is that, thus she physically is struggling with reaching her toes at a quiet basic level, she somehow transfers her focus of that process from her body to her mind. In a way that further assists in a deeper spiritual reflection upon her general advancement of herself, which in a way align the body with the mind. The fact that the meaning is attained from the processes in yoga, further broadens the scope of how relatively meaning actually is realized in the practice, when reaching for ones toes can disclose some higher meaning. Another illustration contributing to the relativity of how meaning is attained, is presented here:

”When I zone out in the yoga poses is when I attain meaning: Those moments when I zone out in a stretching or balancing pose...then all of sudden things happen...I totally space out...I forget what I am doing that is were I attain meaning!” [Tim]

Our participant observations further caught the focal point of the yoga process; the practitioners were observed struggling with their balance, suddenly leaving the pose for a few seconds and relaxing in a time-out, whereas they shortly after took up the balancing struggle again. However, the critical observer could ponder upon why the most suffering and struggling practitioners actually continued pursuing the painful poses; some had to leave the class, others took a dramatic break gasping after their breath while lying on the mat. Is that healthy? Where is the meaning attained from in this scenario? One participant partly explained this:

“The more I practise yoga, the more I master it and attain from it... I get more out of yoga now than in the beginning” [Laura]

However a paradoxical discussion arose from this,:

“When you feel good in the moment of doing yoga, you come to reflect upon why and how. You somehow feel your body and your mind at the same time” [Gina]

“Yes and in that way is yoga the same as getting back to your centre.....I have to be focused and need to feel where my real centre is in order to manage the tough poses” [Tim]

The phrasing of the “real self” challenged another respondent to reflect upon yoga’s opposition to how meaning in other corners of the sphere of consumerism, is attained, and he brings a crucial point to the fore:

“We are in general so negative to ourselves today.... we live in a classic and normative dream directed in the same directions by society, which do not celebrate or allow us to focus on the real self.... you can do that in yoga”. [Linda]

In the light of this statement, another participant draws the attention to the process orientation of yoga discussed above, however he actually contradicts and rejects it by underlining that:

“No take for example the idea of Nirvana...you will never get there, get to the real Nirvana...it is the same in yoga as in society today” [Tim]

Thus, his prompt response, he himself had earlier on in the discussion expressed his own personal benefits from the process-oriented practice of yoga. However, this discussion brought some interesting and complex insights to the fore, and we have come to distinguish the envisioned meaning of Nirvana from the envisioned meaning of the symbolism added to consumer goods today. We base our reasoning behind this on the fact that the process of striving for that replaced universe of meaning, seems to justify itself in yoga due to the practitioners' authentic and genuine nature of the experience.

4.3 Is yoga a brake block of the wheel of consumption?

This part concerns another part of the paradoxical nature of yoga, being perhaps both one driver of the wheel of contemporary consumption, and at the same time a brake block. This theme further explores both the question of: what yoga is doing to consumers and what consumers are doing to yoga. The following quotes discuss the issue of consumerism:

“Taking the consumerism idea of yoga, I attain the exact opposite meaning of it!” [Tim]

”I just don't think yoga can be brought out of consumerism”
[Laura]

“Of course yoga is being commercialised, it belongs to the sphere of consumption. However, that's not an inherent problem with yoga...For me, yoga is my own practice...It's similar to religion; I was raised Catholic but have my own set of beliefs and values which are independent of the teachings of the church” [Martin]

In the light of our critical stand on contemporary consumer society, we launched a rather fierce discussion on this matter, by challenging yoga's nature as a social phenomenon in relation to the wheel of consumption. In respect to the above contradictions, yoga appears to be represented rather paradoxical in terms of, on one hand being driving the wheel of consumption, and on the other hand providing the practitioners with a large spectrum of positive subjective meanings and experiences, which we interpreted as a core strength in their lives within the fast paced and stressful contemporary society. In that way, “what consumers are doing to yoga”, as well varies across the yoga culture, coherently with the distinctive meanings they attain from it. One practitioner provided us with an applicable illustration of yoga by comparing it to religion, which people within the

framework of the phenomenon come to shape it their own way, as it appears to be with yoga too. This paradox however, further broadens the scope of the interplay between consumerism and spiritualism, and shows its complexities assisting in a clash occurring in yoga. In the following, consumerism's influence on the practice of yoga is discussed:

“...more people get into it, some people just do it because a lot of other people are doing it...and their main thing about it is their \$200 dollar outfit” [Peter]

“...I am too sacrificing a good amount of money for my relaxed lifestyle in which yoga takes an important part of”. [Tim]

“In my case, I decided to get into a yoga teaching program due to the fierce competitions among studios, and the high price here in San Francisco...I simply couldn't afford it in any other way” [Laura]

Our interpretations of the marketing and promotion of yoga in the yoga studios in San Francisco, in newspaper advertising, in local magazines, in fitness clubs, in yoga apparel stores and on the billboards of healthy & organic grocery stores as Whole Foods and Real Foods further shows how yoga is driving the capital wheels of consumerism. However, the mean is in a way justified by the enormous gift of yoga, which the practitioners have expressed about the meaning they attain from it. The following statement further reveals that yoga has provided this female with an interpersonal effectiveness and components to actually slow down her life a bit:

“...when I all of sudden felt my feet when walking outside after a yoga class....it made me realise how stuck I was in all kinds of social expectations... that I almost had lost myself” [Gina]

Her response evolved in a male participant's reflection:

“I feel that almost the same thing happened to me, through my yoga practice.... I have come to experience a reconnection with myself somehow, and it makes me constantly reveal new sides of my self.... I respect myself more” [Tim]

The reconnection with the self, appear to have resulted in varying outcomes across the participants, however we recognize the emphasis on the feelings of slowing down:

“My reconnection with myself in yoga is slowing down things...My father told me:“ I go fishing to escape from the fast pace society, The human body is not supposed to go this fast, nature goes in a much slower pace....and you need to slow down once in a while” “yoga has given me a similar feeling.....It is like to control your breathing....and to slow down, which makes time more sincere. [Tim]

4.3 Chauffeur of desire

Our interpretations of the discussions among the yoga practitioners constituted a shift in the role of the driver of desire in regards to the yoga practice, which we intend to illustrate in the following.

“...I think somehow Yoga practitioners come to be aware of their real needs and desires, and learn to follow through with them, it is happening to me at least” [Linda]

“I agree, and I have noticed that my response to everyday situations changed positively and I reflect upon my responses toward people and situations”. [Laura]

“To me, it is like my brain is a whole new beast... that I have to battle and work with on a daily basis....where did all these thought processes about myself come from?...yoga makes you realize what you really need....So the desire to desire is going away and your own awareness drives what you want.....Not like, the outside of what the self wants” [Tim]

The above discussion illustrates how yoga has constituted some extent of awareness expansion in the mind of the practitioners about themselves, they appear to block out external vibrations influencing them, and they have exclusively come to focus on the desires and needs of their “real self”. At some point, they are recognizing a more true, pure and authentic existence, where they appear to listen to their own inner voice of their mind instead of the external and sometimes disturbing voice echoing Western consumer society. We interpret this new insight about yoga as if the experiential aspect of the mind, through yoga, is being released and free from other sources of domination and manipulation, than from the mind itself.

Some of them seem to master a certain interpersonal effectiveness, as touched upon earlier, whereas others who had not been practicing yoga for a long time naively expressed how all the reflections and thoughts about themselves were rather new and revolutionary to them. In the following, several

participants expressed to us how the interpersonal effectiveness has lead them on the path of their “real self”, which consequently has contributed to distinctive forms of personal change:

“I have noticed that I’m now more aware of my soul, my self and what I want, I don’t consume just for the sake of consuming, for example like going out for dinner with friends if I don’t feel like it, it used to be that way” [Tim]

“ I recognize that as well, I just became better at listening to what I actually want, I sometimes don’t feel for going out for drinks on a Saturday night, and I simply stay home” [Linda]

“Without really planning to I have become a vegetarian during the past 6 months where yoga has been a part of my life” [Gina]

4.4 Blurry land of Nirvana

We have interpreted the spiritual aspect to be at the core of most practitioners’ yoga practice, however some do not appear to acknowledge it as spiritual, and in general they illustrate the spiritual aspect in distinctive and complex ways, which make us ponder upon the paradoxes involved in the scope of spiritualism in Western society. However, we intend to show consciousness of the fact that, as meaning is relative and distinctively attained from yoga, spiritualism is too and due to our interpretation of the blurry term, it has throughout the focus group discussions been exchanged with words as: happiness, satisfaction, being happy, well-being, and a quality of life component.

“ What is more spiritual than being happy” [Abel]

“For me it is just peace...you don’t have to be anywhere....you could be in chaos...holding yourself in a certain way is quality of life...I could be going through all these difficult things, at my core I am ok...I found my core in yoga, I feel like peace...that is quality of life”. [Gina]

“...my happiness is attained from the stuff around me....I like the wind hitting my body....I am so blessed....I am thankful for

everything around me.....I am graced to have rain in my life. I think people are happy in general, they just don't realize it. I might as well pretend that a horse never existed and pretend that I see it for the first time, how amazing would that be" [Tim]

"In my case, the quality time of my life lies in the beautiful feeling of actually knowing how this time feels... and what it means to me. The spiritual aspect of yoga has brought me a lighter and more pure way of existence.... through yoga I'm releasing frustrations and negative elements from my life" [Maggie]

In the light of the steering force of contemporary consumer society, the core significant insight gained from above reflections is that the yoga practitioners widely have come to an understanding of some subjective positive existence through yoga - regardless of the words they define it with, or the meaning they attached it to. In yoga, the practitioners have managed to squeeze out the societal framework of self and social symbolism, where the spiritual aspect rightfully seem to have made them reach inward, respecting and focusing the mind as the core of human decision-making. As examples of this focus on the mind, a few participants share what spirituality does to them:

"My practice is part of my quest to realize my potential... My potential is a gift. Through yoga, I get a glimpse at my potential. After my yoga practice... I'm thankful for the feeling of my feet touching the ground with each step on the way to work... I love life... I see beauty all around me. I'm at peace." [Martin]

"I think the largest part of spirituality is outside of the classroom and when I interact with people....I think it is all about focus... when you go out and the world goes crazy around you and being able to remain calm and maintain your composure within that society....that is the spiritual aspect of Yoga" [Serena]

"A peacefulness has come over me.....I am ok with things, which somehow turns out to be an empowering feeling for me when I leave the studio" [Maggie]

4.5 Control the body/ mind adventure

The concept of control assisted in eye-opening insights about how the yoga practitioners attain meaning from their mastery of control in their yoga poses. It further broadens the complex scope of the concept in the light of the consumption sphere, which we intend to analyze in the following.

“...there is integration between my body and mind in yoga...that is what you benefit from”. [Laura]

“...I value my mind more than my body...no it is actually both, some kind of union of the two”. [Paula]

“...nobody does really do yoga for only the exercise and if they do...they will find the spiritual aspect of it as well” [Tim]

“I started with yoga for the physical aspect...Three years later I practice yoga merely for my mind...it makes me happier person” [Peter]

The paradoxes involved in the body/mind adventure of yoga is, as touched upon in the above, the balance of the union between the two parts; controlling your body becomes an instrument of awakening and expanding your awareness of the real pure mind, or self. It further explains, why one participant underlined that if solely exercising the body is the core objective of the yoga, then the spiritual aspect will appear eventually, when they master controlling their body. In this respect, we found it relevant to bring the teacher's preaching to the fore, which attempts to steer the practitioners into a transcendent state, where they control their own body/mind adventure:

“ Where is your mind now? Where is your focus? Before you start your yoga practice today I want you to direct all your intentions and motives for this class, transfer it into your intentions for this day, it is a new day and by taking a moment now to think about in what directions you want this day to take, this practice to take, I want you to focus on your mind and follow its directions” [Participant observation, Appendix 3]

The issue of control in yoga clashes dramatically with control in the large sphere of consumer society. The contemporary consumer firstly values the control of the body higher than the control of

the mind due to the fact that the body has become a socialized subject. Our bodily appearance functions as an instrument to reveal our self through, whereas in yoga the control of the body assists in a union between the body and the mind, which consequently reveals the “real self” to ourselves and thereby results in a more pure existence. The objectives of controlling the body within contemporary society appears to be to fill in a desired self or social symbolism representing a version of a self, whereas the control of the body in the yoga poses make the yoga practitioners become aware of their “real self” The complex nature of control further draws the attention to how a “real control” is attainable in yoga, whereas contemporary consumer society solely is claimed to give us a feeling of a real autonomous control of our consumption patterns. The participants engaged in a rather fierce discussion about this matter:

“...yes, I think consumer society controls us...I have friends who work hard to buy brand products just to show the world that they have them” [Serena]

“...correct me if I am wrong...I am a little too old to be directed by consumer trends and rock stars...telling me to wear certain shoes, I do not have a cell phone, a TV, an IPOD, a car and I come here to do yoga because I want to come here...I am not controlled!” [Peter]

“...I do not know if that is control, but I find myself wanting a new yoga mat these days, new outfits maybe.... and my friend and I are also looking into this expensive yoga retreat in India” [Gina]

“In my opinion we certainly aren’t controlled but society does it’s best to convince us that material things and money bring us happiness and fulfilment” [Martin]

“About the whole control issue: “You are not in control” or actually not either being controlled!...You don’t need to have an answer to everything, or to follow certain standards in society... just accept that life is uncertain...it is what it is... That was a whole new thing to me, I am open to this, it makes me live more sincerely and pure because just as in yoga... everything happens when you let go in the moment” [Tim]

4.6 Union of spiritualism and consumerism

The interplay between spiritualism and consumerism is of complex nature, however our interpretations of the yoga experience of the respondents revealed some level of union arising from the primary clash. In the perspective of how consumerism is proposed to be a contemporary sphere of life, we base our reasoning behind the union between consumerism and spiritualism on the participants' examples of how they have managed to incorporate the spirituality attained from yoga into the rest of their life outside the studios. This theme occurs as the peak of answers to our research questions: What is yoga doing to consumers and what are consumers doing to yoga?

“...yoga twists my approach to life” [Paula]

“I just feel so connected” [Serena]

“...yoga gives me this feeling of fulfillment... I come to focus on my real intentions and motives of my movements in the poses.... I somehow transfer that to my life” [Gina]

“...I want to compare the pain I feel struggling in my yoga poses with the conflicts and problems I face in my everyday life. I know now I can overcome them” [Linda]

As illustrated in the above, yoga has provided the practitioners with meaningful components to incorporate in their everyday practices. The peak of the answers to our research is concentrated around how the “gift of yoga” (what yoga does to us) in various ways across the yoga culture is being transferred into meaningful context in the practitioners' spheres of life, which constitutes what consumers do to yoga. In the following the participants further present their own unique version of their “gift of yoga:

“...When taking this outside...I am more relaxed about things...such as when my boss is mad at me....I relax about it.....He is just pigeonposed right now....I am not trying to direct it...I just see what happens” [Paula]

“ I need structure in my life and yoga is one of the primary structures in my life today...It influences what I eat and what I do at night, it is how I begin my weekdays; it makes me feel good because I m doing something for myself...it makes me feel strong,

healthy and balanced.. Also, dare I say it...yoga is the new golf in some corporate environments” [Martin]

“...actually I have found things in my life, that I find intolerable, I just don’t want to have that kind of stress in my life anymore, and Yoga makes me capable of changing that” [Abel]

“...I am less judgmental...I had a negative inner self before” [Gina]

“...I also became less judgmental towards my self, I am so relieved by that. I could play stupid social games with other people and with myself.....There is a whole family inside my head with inner critiques. The inner critical perspective comes from outside expectations of all kinds” [Linda]

“I found my self being caught up in a materialistic game of collecting action figures...competing against my co-workers...when I started doing yoga...I became more aware of myself...and it hit me one day “why are you doing this?” [Tim]

“I used to work 100 hours a week in a hard core corporate finance job...I now volunteer part-time here at the studio...I also work part time...yoga empowered me...somehow I became aware of my true motives of life...I had to change career path” [Rachel]

4.7 Yogic balance of the scheme of things

We finally intend to present the reader for a framework for yoga as a potential escape in the light of its nature as a spoke on the wheel of consumption, which constitutes one of the insights we have gained from our research. In this respect, we intend to show consciousness of the fact that the relativity of the meaning attained from yoga, the variations of meanings obtained from our focus group discussions, and consequently, consumers’ distinctive conceptualizations and desires of escape, make the “path of escape” rather relative too. At one end of the spectrum there might be other critical consumers, as us, aspiring emancipation from the sphere of consumption. At the other end though there might appear consumers perfectly content with the scheme of things within the Western world today, and therefore will the path of escape be interpreted accordingly in the following. Below we intend to illustrate, what we have interpreted as distinctive versions of escape to some extent constituted by the practice of yoga, however we want to underline that the motivations, the source of the escape and the intentions apparently vary across the responses:

“...My reconnection with myself in yoga is slowing down things...My father told me:“I go fishing to escape from the fast pace society, The human body is not supposed to go this fast, nature goes in a much slower pace...and you need to slow down once in a while” “Yoga has given me a similar feeling...It is like to control your breathing...and to slow down, which makes time more sincere.” [Tim]

”I do yoga to escape my chaotic life. I come here to have an sacred and spiritual time with my self” [Peter]

“...yoga is a quite experience for me, a big contrast to my everyday life. I am an ER nurse, and I am often in huge crisis situations... and my co-workers are always commenting about how I am so calm, or have become so calm after started doing yoga...inside I am so crazy...but it does not come out on the outside anymore...well, I am feeling like that, I don't realize I am not exhibiting the stress”. [Abel]

“At first yoga was an escape from my tough and stressful life, now I try to implement it as a part of my lifestyle. Instead of it being an escape from the rest of my life, I want it to be a part of the rest of my life” [Linda]

“...when I realize how thankful I am for everything around me...I drive with the windows down because I like the air....I like the feeling of the air hitting my body....I do like when the rain is pouring down on me as well, then I get wet....I am graced to have rain in my life”. [Tim]

Due to yoga's multidimensional role in the conceptualization of escape, the above testimonials prove that regardless of yoga; enlightening the path of escape, being the path of escape, making the yoga practitioners aware of the path, leading them on the way to find a path of escape or providing tools composing the escape, it appears to shake the practitioners' senses to at least choosing a more beneficial life path. Our participant observations further supports yoga's positions in the scheme of escape, at least the yoga classroom somehow formed an arena for escape in its spiritual and transcendent setting;

“The light is tuned down, the heat is on, small candles light up the room a little, the walls have Eastern like decorations, spiritual tunes are silently sounding, and the

instructor preaches quietly followed by a Hindu shanting” (Participant observations, Appendix 3).

From our observations of the appearances of the yoga practitioners in this spiritual setting, their concentrated faces and divine state of being witnessed that they were somewhere else, either in an escape from something, somewhere, someone, however certainly in a “free choice” of being at whatever omnipresent destination they were at.

5 Discussion & conclusion

5.1 Discussion

In this chapter we will further discuss and reflect upon the themes presented in our analysis in order to present a framework for our final conclusion of this master thesis.

At this final phase of our intellectual role as critical researchers, we intend to reflexively present yoga as a crucial component in re-defining the phenomenon of critique, being contemporary consumer society. It is our opinion, that the Eastern practice appears to provide impulses of such nature to potentially contribute to the emancipation and liberation of the contemporary consumers.

From a broad perspective yoga appears as another exercise option in the catalog of consumption within Western society today, solely a new superficial component to construct a self with, or another memorable sensational experience capturing the eyes of mainstream consumers (Pine and Gilmore, 2001 p. 78). Dry capitalistic facts in fact proves that it is, our outcomes of the focus groups do, to a certain extent, support that point too, and several other contemporary contexts indicate, on the surface, that yoga is just another exercising boom. However we have through this research study gathered insights illustrating that the symbolism and meaning constituting the yoga experience potentially leave the consumers not only with a memory, a work-out or a moment of sensation, rather with a pilgrimage underneath their skin expanding their awareness of themselves tremendously and consequently their path in life.

5.1.1 Awareness of the "real self"

We consider the increased awareness of their self as a vital answer to what yoga is doing to consumers, and in the light of the fact that the "self" within contemporary consumer society seems to be of rather fragmented, victimized, and uncertain nature, we find these insights revolutionary. It appears evident from the quotes in the "gift of yoga" theme that the yoga practitioners, through reaching inward and recentering around their "real self" in yoga, consequently have come to reconnect with themselves and their own true desires and motives, which make them squeeze *out* external bombardment of influencing vibrations. By, somehow opening their own personal Pandora box of their mind, their discussions around this matter, show how they have managed to transfer

their achieved self-awareness into an extent of interpersonal effectiveness. In respect to being at peace and in balance, the interpersonal effectiveness has assisted in releasing or liberating of the “experiential aspect of mind” from societal triggered manipulation or domination of who to be, or what desired self to strive for. By controlling the body in the yoga poses, they have awakened their mind, awakened the “real self”, which further has enhanced their individuality in the choices of the “consuming self”. As a consequence of the increased awareness of themselves, they have come to control the scheme of things according to the intentions and motives of the “real self”. In this context, we believe that yoga, to some degree, has freed and released the practitioners from the contemporary “race of becoming” through consumption, and further brought them a much lighter, acceptant and more meaningful way of living. In this context, does Kathleen Versino, manager for the Yoga Tree studios in San Francisco stress that:”

“Yoga slows them down - gives them a moment to come into contact with there true nature- who they are underneath all the titles, mom, worker, boss - it gives them a chance to connect with there breath and with the moment, and they leave with a greater awareness of that which is real and lasting”

5.1.2 Mysticism of *westernized spirituality*

In our opinion, self-awareness is one outcome of the “blurry land of Nirvana”, also conceptualized as spiritualism. As proposed by scholars within the field of, what we earlier in this thesis have defined as, *westernized spirituality* it is a rather blurry and scattered concept, however still the core of the distinctive meanings practitioners attain from the yoga experience. As brought to fore in the analysis, one of the vital answer to our research question: what is yoga doing to consumers, is bringing their lives a spiritual meaning. In this context, we intend to stress the mysticism related to the concept of *westernized spirituality* reflected in yoga. Due to the fact that meaning is a relative term, ascribed and attained subjectively across contemporary consumer society, likewise is *westernized spirituality* and thereby yoga. In that way the yoga practitioners add differentiated spiritual meanings to their subjective yoga experience. During our focus group discussions, only a few participants in fact referred to the term spiritualism in their explanations of how yoga has enlightened and elevated their minds, which support the mysterious nature of the concept. Regardless, the peak of answers to; what yoga is doing to consumers, is more distinctively that the

Eastern practice elevates the mind of contemporary consumers, and provide them with components to quality of life. We have come to realize, by exploring the concept of *westernized spirituality* further, during our focus group discussions, that it is relative and widely superfluous how in fact to conceptualize the term. The core of this is, that yoga practitioners in general attain meaning from the spiritual aspect of the practice. Additionally, we have discovered that spiritualism evidently provide the yoga practitioners with mean or components to live for, which we therefore, in correlation to quality of life will present as a pertinent source of overruling the material value orientation. Since it is our convincing interpretation that reaching inward appears as a source of balancing and uniting flux components in the lives of the contemporary consumers. We base this interpretation on the revolutionary and insightful testimonials in the theme “union of spiritualism and consumerism”, which illustrate how personal changes have occurred in their lives as outcomes of their connection with a transcendent and spiritual state of being through awakening their mind.

5.1.3 Self-actualizing act of Shivasana

As we in the above discussion, presented the practice of yoga as a component of quality of life, we further intend to broaden the scope of this inclination, by stressing that self-awareness attained from yoga potentially constitutes the actualization of what rightfully quality of life is to the practitioners. The relative term of quality of life, as well refers back to how meaning is attained distinctively, and how the spectrum of, to what extent quality of life is actualized, also vary across the practitioners. In the context of our research question; what are consumers doing to yoga? We once again intend to point at consumers’ incorporation of yoga in their lives, as a pinnacle of balance and a personal mind mirror as the core answers, which assist in a more genuine and true way of living.

In this context does Kathleen Vesino touch upon why yoga practitioners appear to return to her yoga studios, refer to:

“The realization of coming into the sweetness of the present moment”

In support of her point, we find it appropriate to refer to Maslow’s (1954) launch of self-actualization as a core contributor to psychological health, since we see two simultaneously progressing scenarios occurring. The first one in the yoga practitioners’ strive for actualizing the potential of their body in the yoga poses, and the second one in its reflection in their minds, where increasing self-awareness appears to assist in interpersonal effectiveness and thereby wide open

possibilities of actualizing their self too. In our focus group discussions, we have in fact detected the majority of the impulses Maslow (1954) constitutes as the backbones of self-actualization, such as the aspects of; relaxation, reenergization, recentering, awareness expansion, interpersonal effectiveness, personal change, self-transcendence. By being on the path of true self-actualization, the yoga practitioners seem to be equipped with a certain extent of empowerment of control of things around them, gained through the control of the yoga poses, which we consider as an advantage in the fast paced Western world. We further intend to point at the shift in self-actualization, from consumers large being socialized to actualize their self through an embodied self, the body in yoga now appears to be the mean to actualize the “real self”, which we consider as a source of reflection on the contemporary victimization of consumers.

5.2 Conclusion

Yoga as a damper of the alarm bells

Yoga is a subjective experience, and meaning is attained from the Eastern practice in relative and rather distinctive ways. Therefore, is the discussion concerning yoga being a potential escape from the consumption sphere also of complex and paradoxical nature, further in terms of the individual constitution of an actual escape. However, as touched upon in our analysis, we believe that we have illuminated justifications in our empirical work stressing that yoga plays a role in the scheme of escaping the wheel of consumption. Although, we intend to point at spiritualism and the spiritual elevation of self-awareness, and consequently a level of self-actualization, as the core spiritual components of framing a potential liberation or emancipation of the sphere of consumption. The spiritual mind adventure involved in yoga is at the core here, and appears to some extent, to free and release the practitioners from the domination of external influences, which in our opinion situated the mind as the steering force of an escape. When actualizing their “self” on their own terms, yoga practitioners evidently come to squeeze out other components steering their choices of self, which frames meaningfulness and quality of life.

In the light of meaning attained from yoga being relative and subjective, we are conscious of the fact that yoga cannot be concluded as a set path of escape, however we are certain that it, for the lives of a limited population of yoga practitioners, functions as a balancer or damper of the fast paced contemporary consumer society, and some even use it as a path of escape. Where ever yoga practitioners’ transcendent pilgrimage takes them in their balancing act of yoga, whether it is an escape or not, we have, in our opinion, in this master thesis broaden the scope of, on one hand the

diverse meanings attained from this experience, which on the other hand further has brought us insights and an extensive understanding of the fact that emancipation from the domination of the sphere of consumption is possible, and might be actualized in a yoga studio in San Francisco.

5.3 implications

During our sample selection and collection of our empirical work in a broad range of yoga studios in San Francisco, we have discovered a desire in the yoga practitioners to discuss and share the meaning and revolutionary outcomes attained from their yoga experience. It became evident to us that they lacked sharing their unique testimonials from yoga with fellow practitioners. Due to the somehow mysterious and blurry nature of yoga's in the scheme of things, respondents revealed a wish to us, to also in the future discuss these issues in a similar setting:

“...I wish, this kind of group discussion would happen frequently... I want to talk to people about yoga...because I cannot talk with my friends about this yoga experience...the more you get into the spiritual practise, the more difficult it gets to share the practise with others...I have had a part of myself which I could not share with people...that is why I was so thrilled when you asked me to participate” [Tim]

There was a wide agreement across all three focus group discussions that conversation and discussion like this were preferred in order to become more self-reflexive upon their subjective meaning of the experience, and perhaps even trigger the mind to get a deeper spiritual meaning out of Yoga. In this context, we believe we might have found a new niche, or at least demand within the yoga culture for launching discussion groups related to the yoga classes in the yoga studios.

5.4 future research areas

As an outcome of the extensive illumination and new insights achieved within our research area in this study, we find it applicable that similar research will be carried out in the future, however at a larger scale and within a longer time frame. We would like to see a research study comparable with ours conducted down the road, due to the probability of drawing more set conclusions. We further propose the interesting nature of comparing different representation of yoga; our phenomenon of interest through cases studies, in various corners of the Western consumption sphere.

We further place a high relevance on exploring spiritualism's nature being a source of consumer emancipation from the dominating forces of the contemporary consumption sphere, by for example illuminating whether other spiritual subjects or experiences than yoga possibly can provide components of a higher meaning or self-actualization. We base our argumentation behind the relevance of spiritualism being a future field of research on the shortcomings both in literature, among scholars and across the population of consumers in general in regards to the mysterious and complex term.

As both previous research and our own empirical findings revealed to us, there is solely limited investigation done on the meaning attained from the yoga experience. Due to relativity of meaning construction, we encourage future researcher to carry out similar studies with two intentions in mind; both literature is scattered and blurred regarding this fields, however the yoga practitioners themselves appear to be hold a narrow scope on their own meaning attained from the spiritual experience.

6. Reference

Books:

Alvesson, M. (2002), *Postmodern and Social Research*, Open University Press, Philadelphia.

Alvesson M. & Deetz S. (2000), *Doing Critical Management studies*, Thousand Oaks, Sage publications

Alvesson, M., Sköldberg, K. (1994), *Tolkning och reflektion*, Studentlitteratur.

Bauman, Z. (1997), *Postmodernity and its discontents*, Cambridge, Polity Press

Benjamin, W., (1999), *The Arcades Project, translation with notes and introduction*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press

Blackburn, R. & Stokes D. (2000) Breaking down the barriers: Using Focus Groups to Research Small and Medium Enterprises, cited in Bryman, A. & Bell, E. (2003), *Business Research Methods*, Oxford University Press, p.374

Bryman, A. & Bell, E. (2003), *Business Research Methods*, Oxford University Press.

Condron F. (2005), *How to go further: A guide to simple organic living with Woody Harrelson & Friends*, Client Distribution Services

Corrigan, P. (1997), *The Sociology of Consumption*, Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications

Csikszentmihalyi, M. and Rochberg-Halton E. (1981), *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Easterby-Smith, M., Thorpe, R., Lowe, A. (2002), *Management Research an Introduction*, Thousand Oaks, Sage Publication. 2nded.

Foucault, M. (1985), *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon.

Giddens, A. (1991), *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Cambridge, Polity Press

Habermas, J. (1984), *The theory of communicative action : Reason and the rationalization of society*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press

Herriot, R. E., & Firestone, W. A. (1983), *Multisite qualitative policy research: optimizing description and generalizability*, Educational researcher

Kasser, T. (2002), *The high price of materialism*, Cambridge, MIT press

Kellner, D. (1992), "Popular culture and the construction of postmodern identities", cited in Bocoock, R. (Ed.) (1993), *Consumption*, Routledge, London.

Kincheloe, J. L, McLaren P. (2000), *Rethinking critical theory and qualitative research*. In. Denzin N. K., Lincoln Y. S. *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousands Oaks, London: Sage Publications

Maslow, A. (1970), *Religions, values and peak experiences*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Maffesoli, M. (1996) *The contemplation of the world*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.

Stake, R. A, (2000). *Strategy of inquiry: case study*. In. Denzin N. K., Lincoln Y. S. *Handbook of qualitative research*, Thousands Oaks, Sage Publications. Cop.

Trungpa, C. 1973. *Cutting through spiritual materialism*. Berkeley: Shambala.

Weedon, C. (1987), *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, Blackwell.

Yin, R., K. (1994), *Case study research: design and methods*. Thousands Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

Articles and publications:

Adams, T. B., Cowen, V. S. (2005) "Physical and perceptual benefits of yoga asana practice: results of a pilot study", *Journal of Bodywork and Movement Therapies*, Vol. 9, pp. 211-219.

Afanador, R. (2001), The power of Yoga, *Magazine: Time Canada*, pp.1-14

Apikos, M., (1992), "Buying the doughnut to experience the hole: a study of diversity in "New Age" marketplace", *Meaning, Measure, and Morality of Materialism*", pp. 63-76.

Arvidsson, A. (2005), 'Brands a critical perspective', *Journal of consumer marketing*, University of Copenhagen, pp. 235-258

Baker, D. C., (2002), "Studies of the inner life: The impact of spirituality on quality of life", *Quality of Life Research*, Vol. 12, pp. 51-57

Belk, R. W.: (1985), "Materialism: Trait aspects of living in the material world", *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 12, pp. 265-280.

Belk, R. W., (2001), "Materialism and you", *Journal of Research for Consumers*, Iss.. 1, pp. 1-15

Belk, R. W., Guliz G., and Askegaard S., (2003), "The Fire of Desire: A Multisited Inquiry into Consumer Passion," *Journal of Consumer Research*, pp. 326-52.

Belk, R. W., Wallendorf, M., Sherry, J. F. (1989), "The sacred and the profane in consumer behavior: Theodicy on the Odyssey", *The Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 16, pp. 1-38.

Chin, S. S., (2006) "I am a human being, and I belong to the world narrating the intersection of spirituality and social identity", *Journal of Transformative Education*, Vol. 4 No. 1, pp. 27-42.

Collier, J. F. (1997), "From Duty to Desire: Remaking Families in a Spanish Village, Princeton", NJ: Princeton University Press

Cova, B. (1997), "Community and consumption; towards a definition of the "linking value" of product or services", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 31, pp. 297-316.

Craig T.,(2005) "Yoga style stretching into fashion world", *DSN Retailing Today*; pg. 23

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000), "The Costs and Benefits of Consuming", *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 27, pp. 267-272.

Dawson, S. & Bamossy G. (1990), "Isolating the effect of non-economic factors on the development of consumer culture: A comparison of materialism in the Netherlands and the United States", *Advances in Consumer Research*, pp. 182-185.

Dawson, S. & Bamossy G. (1991), "If , we are what we have, What are we when we don't have? To have possessions: A handbook of ownership and property", Special Issue, *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality* 6(6), pp. 363-384.

Elliot. R & Wattanusuwan K. (1998) Brands as Symbolic Resources for the Construction of Identity, *International Journal of Advertising*, University of Oxford,17 (2), 131-144

Firat, A.F. and Venkatesh, A. (1993), "Postmodernity: the age of marketing", *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, No. 10, pp. 227-49.

Glassner, B. (1989), "Fitness and the Postmodern Self," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, pp. 180-191.

Gould, S. J., (1991) "The self.manipulation of my pervasive perceived vital energy through product use: an introspective-praxis perspective", *The Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 18, pp. 194-207.

Gould, S. J. (1994), "An Asian-based perspective on postmodern consumer culture and consciousness: the nature of mind" *Asia Pacific Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 1, pp. 306-310.

Gould, S. J., (2006), "Spiritual materialism is not the same as spirituality", *Consumption, Markets and Culture*, Vol. 9, pp. 63-78.

Govers, P.C.M. and Schoonmans, J.P.L., (2005) Product personality and its influence on consumer preference, *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, pp. 189-197

Hunter, J. 1987. *Evangelicalism. The coming generation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Keng, K. A., Jung, K., Jiuan, T. S., Wirtz, J. (2000), "The influence of materialistic inclination on values, life satisfaction, and aspirations: an empirical analysis", *Social Indicators Research*, Vol. 49, pp. 317-333.
- Kozinets, R. V. (2002), "Can consumers escape the market? Emancipatory illuminations from burning man", *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 29.
- Luckmann, T. (1990), "Shrinking transcendence, expanding religion?" *Sociological Analysis*, vol.2: 127– 38.
- Murray, J.B., Ozanne, J.L.,(1994) "The critical imagination: Emancipatory Interest in Consumer Research", *The Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 18, No. 2, pp. 129-144.
- Richins, M. L., (1987), 'Media,materialism, and human happiness', *Advances in Consumer Research*, vol. 14, pp. 352–356.
- Rindfleish, J. (2005), "Consuming the Self: New Age Spirituality as "Social Product" in Consumer Society", *Consumption, Markets and Culture*, Vol. 8, pp. 343-360.
- Roof, W. G., L. Gesch. 1995. Boomers and the culture of choice. Changing patterns of work, family and religion. In *Work, family, and religion in contemporary America*, edited by N.Ammerman W. C. Roof. New York: Routledge.
- Simmel, G. (1976). The future of our culture. In *Georg Simmel: Sociologist and European*, by P. Lawrence. Middlesex: Nelson.
- Sirgy, M. J., (1998), "Materialism and quality of life", *Social Indicators Research*, Vol. 43, pp. 227-260.
- Srinivasan, M. S., (2005) "Organizational development: A yogic vision", *Journal of Human Values*, Vol. 11, No. 2.
- Stromberg, P. (1991) "Symbols into Experience: A Case Study in the Generation of Commitment," *ETHOS*, Vol.19, pp. 102-126.
- Thompson, C.J., & Hirschman.E.C. (1995). Understanding the socialized body: A poststructuralist analysis of consumers' self-conceptions, body images, and self-care practices. *Journal of Consumer Research* vol.22, pp. 139–53.
- Taylor, C. 1991. *The ethics of authenticity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Thompson, C. J., (2004) "Marketplace Mythology and Discourses of Power", *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 31
- Woodward I. (1993), "Divergent narratives in the imagining of the home amongst middle-class consumers", *Journal of sociology*, The Australian Sociological Association, Vol. 39, pp. 391–412

Wright, N. and Val. N. (1993), "Materialism and life satisfaction: A metaanalysis", *Journal of Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction, and Complaining Behavior* vol. 6, pp. 158–165.

Appendix 1: Interview guide

The interview question for the focus groups are formed in the perspective of our research problem and related literature, and are to provide us with more in-depth insights and understanding of the respondents' subjective experience of yoga, and further to explore it being a possible escape. The questions for structured into the following main areas:

Yoga

Our intentions with the question regarding yoga are to gain an increased and thorough understanding of the practitioners' yoga experience, what meaning they attain from it, and what position yoga has in their lives in order to grasp and explore what consumers are doing to yoga and what the Indian practice is doing to them.

Self

The questions about the self are aimed at exploring what yoga does to the "self" construction of the participants in order to detect how the interplay between spiritualism and consumerism is reflected in the self and the social symbols of the practitioners. We further intend to investigate whether they rely on their consumption of yoga similar to consumers' general reliance on consumer goods in constructing a self.

Consumer society

The questions regarding consumer society are of rather critical nature and they are meant to broaden the scope of whether yoga simply is a new popular culture or trend, whether consumers are controlled to consume the Eastern practice for the sake of making the capitalistic wheels run around, and whether yoga operates as a path of escape from the forces within the sphere of consumption.

Spiritualism

The questions in regards to spiritualism are aimed at exploring how the *westernised spirituality* is played out in the practice of yoga. In order to explore this, we intend to investigate how the yoga practitioners experience the spiritual aspect of yoga, and what spiritual meaning they attain from the practice.

Materialism

Materialism being the dark sky hanging over contemporary consumer society, we intend to explore what meaning the yoga practitioners appear to attain from materialistic goods, and how they ponder upon it versus the experience of yoga.

Quality of life

The questions related to quality of life are meant to investigate what value orientation the yoga practitioners have, and the role of yoga in regards to their scheme of quality of life, in order to further understand what they do to yoga, and what meaning it is yoga provides them with.

Appendix 2: Topic agenda for focus group

1) *Welcome*

2) *Introduction*

Presentation of research study

Guidelines regarding our approach to yoga as a social phenomenon

3) *Practical issues*

Guidelines for the focus group procedure

Confidentiality issue

Tape recording issues

Encouragement of an open discussion

The role of the moderator

4) *Introduce the research group participants*

Name

Time of practice?

Define what yoga is to you?

5) *Discussion aspects*

Yoga

Why are you doing yoga?

What meaning do you attain from it?

How does your yoga practice influence the rest of your life?

Can you describe your yoga experience?

Express the feelings or emotions that run through your body during a yoga class?

Spiritualism

How do you experience the spiritual aspect of yoga?

How would you describe the spiritual meaning attained from yoga?

Except from the great impact you get from stretching and balancing, what does the spiritual aspect of yoga do to you and your life?

Self

What attributes can you add to your self as a yoga practitioner (self symbol)?

How does your social world perceive you (social symbol)?

Can you describe the socializing aspect of doing yoga?

What meaning do you attain from the social interaction here at the studio?

Quality of life

How would you define quality of life?

What role does yoga play in attaining quality of life?

Final discussion topic:

- a) Is yoga “just” a current trend promoted by celebrities and rock stars? Or is it here to stay?
 - b) Are you controlled by contemporary consumer society to believe that certain possessions such as yoga will bring you a meaningful life? Or do you still have a choice?
 - c) One could ponder on whether or not yoga is “just” being commercialized as any other consumer good and represented in a way that makes us feel they way we do about it?
 - d) Critical questioning based on the earlier discussions
- 6)Summing up

Appendix 3 : Participant observations

Observations at Funky Door April 29th 2006 at 3 pm

The heated room is full as I walk in, the practitioners seem already to have entered their own world focusing on themselves in the mirror. The heat seems to have a calming effect on the participants of this class. They did not chit chat and socialize as such before the class, some people seem to know each other, and that group were hanging out at the front desk with the different instructors that were present, whereas others “only” appeared to be here for the purpose of the yoga class. Funky door is a funky place, they are all kind of people here, they don’t have to impress, distinguish, or show any symbols of whom they are. There is room for everyone in a way, there are no mainstream fashion or trend in clothing to spot among the class participants – again approximately 15% men are presented! As the class begins, the spiritual vibe seems to disappear in a way, the poses are tough and therefore can one observe a room full of struggling, and extremely focused people, some have given up, and are sitting down trying to breathe normally again, a couple of beginners are lying down, it almost looks unhealthy...and other are just sweating as ever before in order to keep up with the high level of the bikram poses. The instructor Maria almost talks like she is at a promotion event, she constantly encourage her students to go through with the class even it hurts, and it feel horrible, she promise them an increased life as they continue in pain. She promotes it in catchy and attractive ways, talk about what it will do to their lives, encourage the practitioners to always smile and breathe, then life will be like a dance, it seems a little fake, and too easy...there is no correction going on, she just runs through the instruction to each pose rapidly, it is almost disturbing for the transcendence state people seem to be in, it is like a mass productions experience, she cracks jokes as she were told to, and use the word “funky” for the experience, which also seems a bit promotion oriented.

Yogatree Valencia May 2nd 2006 at 4.30 pm

It is Monday afternoon, there is a relaxed and informal atmosphere at the studio which keeps on getting more crowded up until the popular instructor Tiffany’s class begins. The yoga practitioners seem to be returning to this class over and over again, they know each other, they socialize, they exchange yoga experiences & everyday life experiences as well. There is a open-minded vibe at the studio, people come as they are, no certain trend or fashion seem to influence the practitioners. The class begins, everybody enters the room at once, it seems like a “must” to be there on time, which reveal itself as the class starts. Because Tiffany tunes down the light, the heat is put on, and the

candles at the end of the room by the wall with the Buddha on are lighted. It creates a spiritual atmosphere, which also reflects the introduction to the class; everybody sits in a “Buddha position” on their yoga mat with their eyes closed, and Tiffany preaches quietly, and rather spiritually a guiding notion about following ones intentions, and inner voice in order to find the truth of one self and the truth of ones life, she encourage her students to find it today, find the peace inside themselves, focus on it and being it out in real life too! She continues doing her shanting song for the practitioners to repeat after her, and she does it in a way that seems to catch and hold the concentration and attention of the practitioners, very special and unique setting she primarily is building up! It feels like an escape!

The Vinyasa class continues to silent, but forceful and spiritual music appropriate for this practice, she guides her practitioners with her tuned down voice while she walks around among the concentrated and extremely focused men and women, only 20 % are men in this class! They are all very into themselves in order to perform the directed poses to their very best, people are struggling, sweating, and stretching as they pursue the next pose. The frequent water breaks seem welcomed. There are practitioners at all levels, there is an assistant walking around correcting the small mistakes beginners might make... There are no promotional remarks made by Tiffany, nothing about come back next week and I will improve your life, its like they define the experience themselves....the practitioners are frequently making sounds as they inhale and exhale, the focus on the breathing seem to come the practitioners down and make them perform even better at the next pose... The class ends in a very spiritual way as well, everyone is lying down on their mat stretching out while Tiffany again sings her “song” for the practitioners to repeat after her. Afterwards at the locker room the practitioners seem again to share the experience with one another, discussion the poses and the effect of it – and in the light of that one girl stresses that yoga has become a lifestyle for her, the core of the everyday operations.

Funky Door May 2nd 2006 at 8 am

It is an early morning at the Funky Door yoga studio on Polk Street, people are coming in from all corners of the city to begin their day with a section of bikram yoga. The studio is still crowded thus the early morning hour, I get into a conversation with one of the practitioners who tells me that his life would have been more harmonious and balanced if he would have started doing yoga earlier. Another practitioners stresses that he is happy to talk about his yoga experience because he just got

hooked on it a few months ago, and non of his friends find it “cool” to talk about, which makes me ponder upon the gender aspect of the practice. In that respect another man adds that the men that have not experienced the benefits of yoga find it rather soft and feminine.

The class begins, the participants are concentrated and focused, although it again feels like the classes here are mass produced and that the instructor by talking continuously kills some of the spiritual and inward focus, it seems to focus more on the exercise part of yoga, and the obvious eastern aspect left seems to be the Indian names of the poses which the instructor introduces every new pose with.

Funky Door May 4th 2006 at 8 am

When entering the hot bikram room a little earlier this time, some participants already showed up, and are preparing for the class in their own personal way; some are stretching, some seem to be meditating and others simple taking in the silent rather spiritual atmosphere.

Yoga is a struggle this morning, the participants are yarning, they are in pain and seem to fight even harder than normal to do the poses. The pain combined with an intensive focus and concentration reflects their faces while they stare deeply into the mirror in front of them. It appears to me this time that there is a certain extent of socialization going on among the yoga practitioners; two girls were chatting before class began, two guy friends seemed to share their own morning story, and an older man happen to flirt a little with one of the new female participants in the class.

Funky Door May 5th 2006 at 12 pm

This morning one of the practitioners tells me how she found it wrong that people were even paying money for their yoga experience, she found it contradicting its eastern origin, which I found very interesting. She also told me that she along with her job in finance, volunteered at this Funky Door yoga studio. In class she was very devoted to the experience, she was standing as closed to the mirror as possible, to reach an intensive level of focus. The bikram poses are all about balance and doing it right, and as Darren, the male instructor puts it; it is the final phase of the poses that give you something. It catches my attention how extremely painful it looks at that final phase of a pose from the practitioners face expressions. They might gain increased balance, control and concentration, however it takes 1 ½ hour struggle. At the end of the class, when the lying poses are being practiced, the yoga practitioners seem to be given more time to relax and inhale it all in, other

than that each instructor has clear restrictions on when the water breaks can take place. In a way that seem to give the students less freedom and space to do their bikram at their own individual level. After class several practitioners chose to stay and meditate and kind of swallow the entire experience, they get to sweat it all out, calm down their breathing and focus inward on themselves before entering the reality outside the yoga studio again.

Yogatree May 8th 2006 4.30 pm

The yoga practitioners are lined up outside the room ready to enter their daily dose of body and mind exercise, they are mingling, catching up and exchanging everyday life stories with their fellow yoga lovers. The light in the room is tuned down and the candles are lightened, which along with the eastern drawings on the wall creates a spiritual atmosphere. Tiffany, the instructor starts with her shanty song, and her preaching and encouraging to the practitioners about choosing where to direct their intentions today, it's a new day and new challenge, and a new epoch of their lives, which they can decide and control where to take, she says. The whole class sits in a Buddha position with their eyes closed, and they looked completely concentrated focusing inward, as they left this actual reality for somewhere else for a while. It's spiritual Tiffany allows her students to take breaks, and enter the relaxing child pose as often as they want to, which assist in very diverse activities through out the class, because the yoga practitioners are at different levels. The class stays focused, their faces prove that they need to concentrate and struggle in order to be able to do the poses. Through out the class is music being played, eastern spiritual tones, which in a way calms down the tensions and hardness of the tough poses, it's relaxing and oriental. The way Tiffany speaks does furthermore have an impact on the atmosphere in the studio this afternoon, she is not promoting anything only the core of the next pose the students are to engage fully in.

Funky Door May 15th 2006 at 8 am

It is 25 minutes prior to the class begins, the yoga practitioners are hanging out by the front desk, greeting each other by name, which illustrates that they are returning customers and have emphasized on a certain level of socialization related to their yoga experience. I hear comments such as "what a beautiful day", "see you in class", "good to see you again" and "I haven't seen you for a while" which seem to work as icebreakers and ways to connect to other fellow yoga practitioners. I observe a level of community at this point, the yoga practitioners seem to strive for relating and create social bounds with the others in class whom they struggle, sweat and balance

side by side with. Others though go directly to the classroom, some are devoting their lunch break to this bikram class, and seem to want to get the whole experience and benefit out of it – they enter the heat, lie down on their mat, close their eyes and it seems as an outbreak and major contrast to the people in their business suits who enter this studio. The community feelings keep up being carried out, also by Darren, the instructor, who call the yoga practitioners by name, ask them about certain issues in their life, which proves that he knows his students and want to emphasize on these bounds. Two students are here for the first time today, and he makes an effort to welcome them, ask for their names and at the end of the class he celebrates their performance, in the way he encourages the whole class the applause them. The community feeling appears to run through all activities in the studio, which in a way downplay the fact that it is being paid for and consumed.

One incident crossed my mind when joining the tough bikram poses, because when entering the bathroom half way through class, one lady had left and were struggling finding her breath and feeling dizzy, which makes you ponder upon why she lets herself go through this kind of pain. She said: “it’s just so hot in there” as she wanted to explain and defend her pain, well everyone seems to have their reasons to be there, everyone is sweating as never before, struggling as never before, and somehow in pain as never before. After class most students seem to hurry to head back to the office, replace the yoga clothing with their business suit ready to go back into the corporate world – one guy does interestingly express that he is “not back in reality yet”, which can make one reflect upon what yoga then is if it’s not reality?

Funky Door May 16th 2006 at 12 pm

Today I enter a conversation with a yoga practitioners who defines his devotion to yoga as a quality-of-life issue, he explain how he finds inner peace by realizing that he can do anything you want to through controlling the body and mind in the yoga practice. He further elaborates on how he transfers this realization to other aspects of his life; in work related situations, when pursuing dreams, in a family setting etc. He emphasizes on that he cannot imagine his life without yoga, the evoked spiritual consciousness, as he defines it, has made him more aware of what’s going on inside him, which in his life has made him more engaged in the world around him and made him live life more fully. Before entering the classroom I get a chance to chat with another interesting yoga practitioner, who is volunteering at the Funky Door yoga studio because, as she explains yoga has made her see that the long working hours in the corporate world of finance didn’t give her any

satisfaction with herself or with life. She expressed how she has come to realize another truth about herself and what she actually wants to spend her precious time on, and what not. She also brought to the fore that yoga actually should not be consumed as in the Western world, but rather appears as a more pure and spiritual practice of Eastern origin.

Yogatree May 17th 2006 9.30 am

Hatha yoga is being taught this Wednesday morning, and the first 25 minutes are being devoted to the yin aspect of yoga in the form of reaching inward through meditation. It is a very spiritual scene, the Buddhist music is on, the candles are lightened, the entire room starts out repeating Diana's shanting. Everybody sits up in a Buddha pose with their eyes closed and define the words of Diana in their own mind exercise; she preaches to focus on their motives and purpose of life, that respect for ones own choices and life directions are something we should be at peace with, that we it is important to be honest with ourselves, celebrate ourselves and in this act of yoga find the peace inside us. One started crying, her preaching goes under their skin obviously, it seems to reveal hidden emotions and secrets from their deepest inner self to confrontation this morning in San Francisco, it touched me too and makes me notice new thoughts in my mind.