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Yoga and Identity

A research on the influence of yoga on identity

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Abstract

My interest in the field of yoga stems from my personal background of practicing. The combination of the topic of yoga that is naturally very removed from any scientific context to the one of identity, which constitutes a point of discussion to a great extent, especially in cultural sciences.

There is plenty of literature on identity formation and yoga as two separate topics, but the combination of both is rare. Therefore, this research shall function as a first step in order to fill this gap.

The aim of this study is to analyse how yoga influences identity and therefore seeks to examine the following research question:

How does the practice of yoga influence identity formation?

In order to support the investigation regarding the research question, the following sub-questions were used:

How does the practice of yoga influence people's perceived health?

How does yoga influence people's attitudes?

How does the practice of yoga influence people's behaviour?

Ten semi-structured interviews have been conducted with participants that actively practice yoga. Due to restrictions regarding COVID-19, these interviews have been conducted via video call. They were afterwards recorded, transcribed, and analysed. In order to examine the data, transcripts were thematically coded and analysed on the basis of narrative analysis. Narrative analysis was chosen in order to emphasise each participants' individual story. The analysis is supported by a previously chosen theoretical framework as well as secondary data from reviewed literature.

The results show that the practice of yoga influences the identity of the participants of this research. It found that, based on their perceptions, the practice of yoga has an effect on their physical and mental health. Furthermore, it was found that practicing yoga has an influence on their attitudes as well as their behaviour. Therefore, the practice was integrated into the participants' life to such an extent, that it has become part of their identity.

The present study can be viewed as a foundation for future research in the field. In order to be able to make more general statements, it would be necessary to conduct similar studies on a larger scale or over a longer period of time on the basis of participant observation.

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1. Introduction

The topic of yoga has been a part of my life for a while now and I noticed that it is taking up so much time and affects the way I think and act more and more every day. It is something that I perceive as constantly improving my general well-being and it is getting more difficult for me to imagine living without it.

I practice yoga myself almost every day, as yoga does not only consist of the *āsanas*, the exercise part, but also of many other aspects that can be incorporated into life, such as breathing techniques or meditation. This is how I came to even think about yoga in an academic and scientific way. For me, the practice is not just an exercise, but also a way to balance my mind and my body. I do feel the effects of yoga both physically and mentally, as I usually perceive that the practice positively affects my well-being. These positive effects range from elevated mood to feeling stronger in my body after the practice.

This positive influence on one's well-being is supported by a previous study that compared beginners and advanced Hatha yoga practitioners regarding mindfulness and levels of stress (Brisbon & Lowery, 2011). In this study, practitioners with under five years of experience formed the group of beginners, while those with experience over five years formed the group of advanced practitioners (2011: 931). It was found that Hatha yoga could be valuable in terms of increasing mindfulness while decreasing stress levels in practitioners (2011: 931), as advanced practitioners of Hatha Yoga showed higher levels of mindfulness and lower levels of stress than the group of beginners (2011: 939).

Since I experienced the impact yoga has on my life first-hand, I wondered about the implications for my personal identity. In my experience, the word yoga is associated with different thoughts within people. This ranges from a certain form of spirituality and mindful living connected to it to the perceived opposite of the importance of a great body and fancy yoga pants. Because of my own involvement with the matter, I found it interesting to see if people of different ages create meaning through the practice of yoga and find out, if and how it influences their identity. Of course, with this in mind, it will have to be discussed further, if my own involvement with yoga is going to interfere with the research in any way, may it be positively or negatively. This will be outlined in the methodology part of this research.

Regarding my involvement in studies of culture, communication, and globalisation, I found that it is very compatible to connect yoga and identity. The concept of identity can often be found within cultural studies and it will most likely always be of great interest in academia, since it is so difficult to grasp, as it is neither tangible, audible nor visible.

Stuart Hall, whose works often surround the concept of identity, argues that institutions engaged in the deconstruction of identity are critical of it being integral, ordinary and unified as well as of the ethnic, racial and national interpretations of it (Hall, 2011: 15). He then poses the questions why it is still relevant to talk about identity. He admits that there are no 'truer' concepts of identity with which those inadequate ones could be replaced with, so we have to continue to work with those (2011: 15). For this, Hall uses the expression of a concept 'operating under erasure', as it is no longer useful to think about identity in its previous ways but it has to exist in order to discuss certain issues (2011: 16). He then argues that the importance of identity further lies in its relationship to agency and politics and refers to the notion of identification (2011: 6).

In a different publication, Hall draws on the notion of representation, when he explains that identity should always be viewed as constituted within, rather than outside of representations (Hall, 1990: 222). Therefore, the subject of representation was deemed as an interesting aspect in this research, especially in this century where the social media platform Instagram is used by nearly 1000 million people worldwide (*Global Instagram Users 2019*, n.d.)

There have been many studies on identity formation, but only a few investigating if and how practicing yoga contributes to that. Therefore, I am making an effort to contribute to further academic sources for this topic. The formation of identity is a topic that will probably always be relevant, as it is a vital part within ourselves.

Connecting identity to yoga is without any doubt an intercultural matter. Yoga once came from India and is now widely practiced throughout the world (Strauss, 2005: 1). Because of this, it can be considered an intercultural practice that was only brought to us due to globalisation, which then fits perfectly into the frame of the studies of culture, communication, and globalisation.

I further believe that this research can be of importance to cultural institutions, but also to people who want to pick up yoga in general, or even in a therapeutic context, as I am hoping to show how yoga influences the lives of the people practicing.

Some background information on the topics of yoga and Instagram is introduced in chapter 2. Articles related to identity and yoga are presented in the Literature Review in chapter 3. Identity theories like *Social Identity Theory* by Tajfel and *Cultural Identity* as outlined by Hall are discussed in chapter 4, as they provide valuable implications and serve as a basis for this research. For the data gathering concerning this matter, semi-structured interviews were conducted as a measure of qualitative research. The interviews were conducted with no special requirement regarding demographics or other restrictions, except for the participants having practiced yoga on a regular basis

for at least two years. The interviews were then transcribed, coded, and analysed by using narrative analysis. This procedure is outlined in chapter 5 of this research. Narrative analysis was chosen in order to truly put emphasis on each narrative and emphasize the fact that these are individual stories with unique outcomes.

The findings of the interviews are analysed in chapter 6 by applying the chosen theoretical framework, followed by the discussion in chapter 7. The final conclusions are presented in chapter 8, which, in addition, offers recommendations for future research.

1.1 Problem Formulation

The *yoga sūtras*, written by Patañjali, an important yoga teacher, can be considered as a guide on the practice of yoga or, essentially, a guide on how to live your life while aiming at absolute freedom (Sriram, 2006: 223). This might already hold some implications for one's identity. These already existing implications which yoga holds in connection to identity eventually made me think about the topic in academic terms.

The growing popularity of yoga has led to it being ever-more present, even in the lives of people not practicing it. From my own experience, I noticed when the word yoga is used, a certain lifestyle is associated with it, especially when talking to people that do not practice it themselves.

This is what I found interesting and where my chain of thoughts started regarding any connection between yoga and identity. I found that research on both topics, namely yoga and identity, combined is not represented very often within academic publications. Therefore, my intention is to fill this gap and contribute to the lack of research on the topic.

When I first approached the topic, my aim was to find out how practicing yoga is connected to identity formation and investigate how the process of self-representation on social media is performed in the Western world. For this, I wanted to examine the identity the interviewees would present on their respective social media accounts. The former part was abandoned due to the fact that the majority of participants were not as active on social media, so there was not enough data to work with. Of course, this is an aspect that needs to be reflected on. However, the examination of an Instagram account of popular German yoga teacher Mady Morrison was used as supplementary data for the analysis. Due to this lack of data, I ultimately changed my focus on examining how practicing yoga influences a person's identity. Therefore, my research question is as follows:

How does the practice of yoga influence identity?

The following sub-questions are supposed to support the process of answering the research question: How does the practice of yoga influence people's perceived health? Second, how does yoga influence people's attitudes? And lastly, how does the practice of yoga influence people's behaviour?

The following chapters will be dedicated to answering these questions. For this purpose, different sources of information are used, which include data from interviews, academic articles, and books as well as online resources such as Instagram.

2. Background

In order to understand yoga, the following section will outline the concept, as the teachings itself might hold some implications for the notion of identity. Furthermore, for the purpose of giving the reader some context, the social media platform Instagram will shortly be introduced.

2.1 The concept of yoga

When talking about yoga in the Western world, it is usually associated with the physical practice and possibly even some kind of spirituality connected to it. The word itself is derived from the Sanskrit root *yui*, which means "to join" or "to yoke" and is most commonly related to "union" (Strauss, 2005: 3, Iyengar, 2001: 14).

In this chapter, the concept of yoga will be discussed primarily on the basis of the *yoga sūtras*, which outline the practice and philosophy of yoga and were written down by the sage Patañjali around 300 BC and AD 300 (Iyengar, 2001: 11). The *yoga sūtras* were chosen as the primary source as they constitute the best-known written documentation of yoga practice (Strauss, 2005: 3).

For a better understanding, most of the words were translated from Sanskrit to English. As some words remained untouched, the following table was included for a better overview of the terms.

Sanskrit term	Meaning
<i>yoga sūtra</i>	Written down by the sage Patañjali, outlines the practice and philosophy of yoga

<i>Samādhi-Pāda</i>	Chapter about the condition of yoga
<i>citta</i>	The state of the mind
<i>Abhyāsa</i>	Consistent and focused engagement with one and the same topic over a long period of time
<i>Vairāgya</i>	Anything that does not benefit the process of <i>Abhyāsa</i>
<i>Śrāddha</i>	Trust or faith in oneself
<i>Kleśas</i>	Debilitating forces that influence our thoughts and actions
<i>Yama</i>	Rules about our behaviour towards nature, animals, and other people
<i>Niyama</i>	Rules that define the interaction with ourselves
<i>āsanas</i>	The physical practice of yoga
<i>Prāṇāyāma</i>	Control of the breath
<i>Pratyāhāra</i>	Withdrawal of the senses
<i>dhāraṇā</i>	Persistent concentration of the mind
<i>dhyānaṃ</i>	Quiet meditation or contemplation
<i>samādhi</i>	Oneness with the practice
<i>saṃyama</i>	Perfect concentration of the mind which brings truest knowledge about an object or a topic
<i>draṣṭā</i>	The viewing self

2.1.1 The 8 limbs of yoga

The *yoga sūtras*, consisting of only 195 sentences, are divided into four chapters that all contribute to demonstrating the way how to explore and understand the Self (Sriram, 2006: 12).

The first chapter is called *Samādhi-Pāda*, which means the chapter about the condition of yoga, which is here defined as knowledge about the human essence based on experience, as the *yoga sūtras* do not claim to be scientific (Sriram, 2006: 20). This chapter tries to grasp the state of the mind (*citta*) and the activities associated with it (2006: 20). One purpose of yoga is to quieten the mind, which

according to the *yoga sūtras* can be obtained by consistent and focused engagement with one and the same topic over a long period of time (*Abhyāsa*) (2006: 23), but to be aware of anything that does not benefit the process (*Vairāgya*) (2006: 22).

It is illustrated in the *yoga sūtras* that when considering *Abhyāsa* and *Vairāgya* while practicing something or getting involved with a specific topic, deep knowledge will be obtained. When this practice is maintained, it will lead to inner happiness as well as complete comprehension and unity with the chosen topic (2006: 47). When practicing, through constant alignment on the topic, deeply imprinted experiences are not going to have an influence on perception anymore (2006: 48). This can be seen as an important implication in regard to identity formation through the perspective of a yogic lens. The chapter further deals with *Śrāddha*, which can be translated to trust or faith in oneself (2006: 24). According to the *yoga sūtras*, if there is a lack of trust or faith in oneself, certain obstacles will emerge which will reveal themselves in form of sickness, mental lethargy, doubts, heedlessness, physical laziness, absence of renunciation, false perception, non-attainment of yogic states and straying away from yogic states when attained (2006: 25-26). These obstacles bring on pain, which should be prevented. The prevention of this pain is also outlined in the chapter (2006: 27). One idea is to turn to people with more life experience than we have and are ahead of us in terms of psychological, mental, and emotional regards (2006: 27). Other suggestions include turning to the breath, imagining a source of light in oneself, meditating, reflection about our fondness or aversion towards things, reflection about dreams or turning to the quality of feelings like love, empathy, enthusiasm and forgiveness (2006: 28-29).

The second chapter focuses on the exercise of yoga. It is illustrated how almost any activity we engage in can be considered as yoga as long as this activity is executed with three essential qualities - passion, reason, and devotion (2006: 84). The chapter further elaborates five *Kleśas*, debilitating forces that influence our thoughts and actions (2006: 85). These *Kleśas* consist of ignorance in terms of confusion which then leads to egoism, (wrong) attachment, aversion, and fear (2006: 85-86). It is discussed that in stable condition and with a good yoga practice, one will not be affected by *Kleśas* for a while but whenever one experiences emotional turmoil, *Kleśas* can come into effect easily (2006: 85). Another take on identity is seemingly made in the second chapter, as it is talked about how the *Kleśas* affect all of our actions in such a way that they are internalized within us and form the basis of all our actions (2006: 86), which can be related to identity formation.

It is further suggested how to avoid the influence of the *Kleśas*, as it is stated that “keeping suffering away from you is one of the most important motivations for all human activity” (2006: 87). The first step is to acknowledge the problem, not only the current and pressing pain, but the ever-present possibility of pain (2006: 87). The second step is to recognise the source or origin of the problem (2006: 89). Besides this, the eight limbs of yoga are illustrated as they are supposed to help those who practice free themselves from any instinctive and internalized behaviour at all levels - on the physical, organic, emotional and mental level (2006: 90).

Those eight limbs are *yama*, *niyama*, *āsana*, *prāṇāyāma*, *pratyāhāra*, *dhāraṇā*, *dhyānaṃ* and *samādhi* (2006: 91). *Yama* tends to our behaviour towards nature and other people as social interaction plays a vital role inasmuch as it will not be possible to practice yoga in a peaceful way while having bad relationships with anyone around us (2006: 91). The rules of *yama* include non-violence, truthfulness, no stealing, continence, and non-coveting (2006: 91-92). *Niyama* includes five more rules that define the interaction with ourselves (2006: 92). These rules are cleanliness, contentment, self-discipline, self-study, and surrender (2006: 92). The *āsanas* are what most people I know associate with yoga - the interaction with the body, the physical practice of yoga (2006: 93). *Prāṇāyāma* tends to the breath or the control of the breath in order to elongate in- and exhale (2006: 93). *Pratyāhāra* literally means withdrawal of the senses and is about not being driven and controlled by them (2006: 94). The *yoga sūtra points out* that differences in constitution, place and time should be acknowledged (2006: 90). This means that it might sometimes not be possible for someone to obey these rules or practice the exercises because of their culture or personal situation (2006: 90). Taking the recommendation of non-coveting for example: for a merchant this will not be possible, as their whole existence relies on the possession of material things (2006: 90).

The third chapter illustrates the remaining three limbs, which are those that tend to the mind and require advanced skills as it is not possible to dedicate to these three limbs without the foundation of the first five (2006: 152). *Dhāraṇā*, the persistent concentration of the mind, *dhyānaṃ*, the quiet meditation or contemplation and *samādhi*, the oneness with the practice, constitute *saṃyama*, the perfect concentration of the mind which brings truest knowledge about an object or a topic (2006: 152-153). The practice of all these limbs can achieve a change in our *citta*, which happens gradually and is prone to regression (2006: 153).

The practitioner should constantly reflect on their ambitions for the practice and ask him- or herself “who am I and who am I not”, as this is considered to be the truest topic of it all (2006: 156).

The chapter also suggests topics and themes that qualify for *saṃyama*, whereby the election of a topic cannot happen arbitrary, but should either be assigned by a qualified person or should be discovered while practicing (2006: 157). There are topics that refer to the body, human traits, nature, and the state of our minds (2006: 157-158).

The fourth chapter determines characteristics that mark a steady positive alteration of the personality (2006: 217). For achieving mental balance, a change on different levels of the personality is required (2006: 217). Moreover, in order to actually achieve a positive alteration, one cannot solely gain knowledge, one has to practice all eight limbs of yoga, because only then absolute knowledge and liberation can be achieved (2006: 218).

As mentioned in the first chapter, the *Kleśas* pose obstacles on this way, therefore it is necessary to be alert of these and make sure our mind is calm as it is not possible to eliminate them but to make them appear in a different state that will not affect us in a negative way (2006: 219). Depending on the alignment of our mind, objects, topics, or any conditions will present themselves in a certain way or will even be invisible - our perception is relative (2006: 220).

According to this chapter, despite many changes in our lives, we see ourselves and our character being relatively consistent, no matter at what specific moment in time of our life story we are and this perception of continuity is not affected by the course of time or the transience of all things (2006: 221). The *yoga sūtras* assume that there is an everlasting Self within us, the *draṣṭā*, the viewing self whereas the *citta*, the state of the mind, can and should be subject to change (2006: 221-222).

Ultimately, irrevocable enlightenment is described as the state within someone when all human achievements are reached, in other words, all eight stages are mastered, and there are no further aspirations (2006: 223). Changeability is reduced to a minimum and the inner self shines without any restrictions - this is considered to be true liberty (2006: 223).

2.1.2 Types of yoga

There are many different kinds of yoga, from *Yin Yoga*, *Ashtanga Vinyāsa Yoga*, *Bikram Yoga* *Hatha Yoga* to *Kundalini* and so many more. To really go deep into the history and its origins could fill a whole book, but a quick overview should be given about what exactly are the different types of yoga.

Hatha Yoga, Ashtanga Vinyāsa Yoga, Yin Yoga and Bikram Yoga are mentioned the most during the interviews conducted for this study. Therefore, these types will be explained in the following in order to give the reader some context.

Ashtanga Vinyāsa Yoga: Astanga means eight limbs, therefore the obvious assumption would be that this is a type of yoga that refers to Patañjalis *yoga sūtras* and is practiced accordingly. However, the type of yoga that refers to the *yoga sūtras* is called *Raja yoga* (Byrne, 2013: 2). Ashtanga Vinyāsa Yoga (also known as simply Ashtanga Yoga), whereby the focus is on the flow, is a rather modern invention of the 20th century by Krishna Pattabhi Jois who is considered to be Ashtanga's founder (2013: 2). Ashtanga Yoga draws on the traditional yoga philosophy while the Vinyāsa part entails the repetition of dynamic movements between each posture while synchronizing with the breath (2013: 1).

Hatha Yoga: The branch of Hatha Yoga, which is said to be developed in the 15th century by the sage Svātma Rama (Iyengar, 2001: 24), deals with the care, the well-being, the health and the strength of the physical body (Ramacharaka, 2010: 8). The practice is regarded as being close to nature and values the importance of the return to natural methods in regard to our living habits (2010: 11). In Hatha yoga, the sighting of the soul or the enlightenment happens through the restraint of energy, the *prana* (Iyengar, 2001: 24). Prana flows through the breath; therefore, the breath should be controlled (2001: 25). In short, Hatha yoga is supposed to “discipline the body and mind through physical postures” (Strauss, 2005).

Yin Yoga: Yin yoga is a soothing and calming form of yoga (Grilley, 2012: xi), where poses are usually held up to five minutes (2012: xxi). The aim is not only greater flexibility, but also relaxation for the body and the mind (2012: xxi).

Bikram Yoga: Bikram yoga is a relatively new yoga practice that was developed by Bikram Choudhury. It consists of an instructor-guided series of 26 postures in a heated and humidified environment, which is why it is also called hot yoga (Tracy & Hart, 2013: 823). It is standardized in a way that it is performed in the same manner in every studio (2013: 823).

2.1.3 Yoga in Germany

In the 1940s, Boris Sacharow, who is of great importance for the development of yoga in Europe, started the first yoga school in Germany (Strauss, 2005: 40). Still, there were not many yoga instructors in Germany during that time, which is why all ideas connected to yoga could only be passed on via written material (2005: 110). Therefore, all interpretation of those materials was made by people who were familiar with the English language or in contact with an actual yoga teacher (2005: 110). Because of

these circumstances, and the absence of the direct “*guru-shishya* (teacher-student) relationship”, yoga in Germany varied in interpretation (2005: 110). The significant distinction between Hatha yoga and more spiritual practices of yoga that is often made in Germany can be attributed to either this disconnection of the teacher and the student and the general aversion against cults (2005: 109). It is therefore hardly surprising that the most practiced yoga style in Germany is Hatha yoga (Statista, 2016).

Today, based on a survey by the *Bundesverband der Yogalehrenden in Deutschland e.V. (BDY)* from 2018, 5 % of the German population practices yoga (BDY, 2018). These 5 % are composed of 9 % female practitioners and only 1 % male practitioners (BDY, 2018).

2.2 Instagram

Since my first take on this research was supposed to include the examination of the participant’s Instagram accounts, it was deemed necessary to introduce the social media platform. However, since Instagram is eventually solely used as supplementary data in the case of Mady Morrison, a popular German yoga teacher, this section will only touch on the basic foundations in order to understand Instagram.

Instagram is a social media platform with almost 1000 million users worldwide (*Global Instagram Users 2019*, n.d.) that allows people who have an account to upload photos or videos to their respective account or “stories”, which are photos or videos that are visible for only 24 hours. It is possible to “follow” other accounts and to be followed by other accounts. According to Instagram, they are “bringing you closer to the people and things you love” (*About Instagram’s Official Site*, n.d.).

Instagram was chosen for this research, as it is one of the most prominent social media platforms around. In Germany, Instagram is the third most used social media platform after Facebook and YouTube (Loose et al., 2020: 5) and most of its users are between the ages of 18 and 29 (Loose et al., 2020: 3). It is possible for users who have a professional account to feature advertisements in their posts, which need to be signalized by using the hashtag symbol (*Annoncering på Instagram | Instagram Business*, n.d.).

2.2.1 Mady Morrison

Mady Morrison is a popular German yoga teacher with over 700K subscribers on YouTube (Morrison, n.d.-a) and 370K on Instagram (Morrison, n.d.-b). Her Instagram Her usual posts mainly consist of pictures of herself doing yoga poses, supported by a text, in which her own YouTube channel

is advertised as well as a calendar she brought out (Morrison, n.d.). She often makes use of long inspirational texts in the caption of her posts that include tips for the yoga practice (Morrison, 2020d). Her account will be inspected further in terms of self-representation in the analysis in chapter 6.2.3.

3. Literature Review

The research on identity is extensive and many different approaches and theories can be found regarding this topic. Nevertheless, the connection between identity and yoga cannot be found often. In this chapter, the existing studies that engage with yoga and identity will be further discussed. Since my previous focus was not only on identity and yoga, but also sought to examine both topics in the context of self-representation, a few studies regarding this topic have been included. This is due to the fact that even though (self)-representation will not be part of the theoretical framework, the presentation of a topic might still hold valuable indications in connection to the examination of said topic.

In terms of representation in connection with yoga, a few studies have been done. A very recent publication examines how the representation of yoga portrays images of female objectification that affirm values of commodity, consumerism, and divisive exclusionary identity (Bhalla & Moscovitz, 2020: 90). This was done by analysing the portrayal of yoga in leading women's magazines in the U.S. and coding was used in order to analyse the data (2020: 96). It was found that framing of articles happened in leading magazines through using themes that "encourage commodification, a narrow standard of identity for women who practice yoga and, in parallel fashion, a narrow ideal of women's beauty" (2020: 101). In these magazines, the objectification of women's bodies is encouraged, and the women associated with yoga practice are mostly white, slim, and wealthy, even though the practice originally stems from men in India (2020: 101-102). Besides this, the fact that expensive products including apparel and lifestyle products are being sold by using yoga images contributes to the notion of non-wealthy members of society being unable to afford these products and therefore getting excluded from the benefits of the practice itself (2020: 101).

Bhalla and Moscovitz found that this creates a division between the wealthier and the non-wealthy members of the society, which ultimately "perpetuates the growing association of Western yoga with societal exclusion" (2020: 102). Adding to that, these magazines depict yoga as "a vehicle for beauty and a certain body ideal" (2020: 102). It ultimately shows that Yoga in the U.S. "bears little

resemblance to its historical and geographical origins, and it has been appropriated and commodified by American media” (2020: 102).

It is worth noting that yoga can still easily be practiced without any equipment. In this context, the research by Bhalla and Moscovitz needs to be critically reviewed. Yoga practice can be seen as a practice that is accessible for all people, no matter their financial or societal background. It needs to be emphasized that these magazines often tend to their target audience (Chandra & Kaiser, 2015: 409). The composition of each of the magazine’s audience is presented in the research (Bhalla & Moscovitz, 2020: 96). If most of the magazine’s readers are wealthy white women, they will most likely show these kinds of women on their cover. Adding to that, the term wealthy or affluent is not further defined.

Another research that was done in 2012 aims at a similar direction as the aforementioned. The research was conducted on the role of yoga in health and race and class identities in New York. It was further examined how gentrification contributes to the commodification of yoga and links the practice with a specific class and racial identity (Biswas, 2012: 97). For the purpose of collecting data, ethnographic research was used by examining yoga studios in Brooklyn, New York City, a neighbourhood known for gentrification (2012: 100) and conducting interviews with yoga teachers and other people involved (2012: 101).

The findings of this study show how the teacher is identified as a community healer promoting good health while at the same time functioning in a capitalist context (2012: 108-109). The identity of the yoga students is twofold. There is one group of students that value both the physical as well as the meditating and breathing activities of yoga and therefore encounter mental and physical benefits from the practice (2012: 108). Within this group a feeling of belonging in the studio as well as a sense of community with other students and teachers is established (2012: 108). The other group, which is made up of gentrifiers, is regarded as consumers in this particular environment, as they first and foremost value the physical benefits of yoga (2012: 109). It is further stated that this is reinforced by a certain level of intolerance towards the different ethnicities of the yoga teachers as well as materialistic choices made by this second group such as buying name-brand yoga clothing (2012: 109).

Similar to the first mentioned study by Bhalla and Moscovitz, this research is focused on the role of yoga in an American context, more specifically in gentrified neighbourhoods. The identity of the people practicing yoga is not explored in-depth but rather categorized into pre-existing assumptions. Unlike my research, the focus here is not so much on the individual identity formation. Still, it holds valuable information in terms of the importance of benefits of yoga.

In 1995, an article about the study of public self-presentations and self-conceptions was published by Berzonsky. This study focuses on the effects public self-presentations pose on personal self-views (Berzonsky, 1995: 737). Berzonsky aimed to examine whether a relation between individual differences in identity development and the internalization of self-representation exists (1995: 737). The participants, who were undergraduate students, completed identity status measurements prior to the testing sessions (1995: 739). Identity status was measured in accordance with Marcia's identity status paradigm (1995: 738). Four different stages for the identity status could be defined: *identity diffusion*, *moratorium*, *foreclosure*, and *identity achievement* (1995: 738). Identity diffusion is connected to a lack of strong self-views and limited self-reflection, moratorium holds a lack of strong self-views but active self-reflection, foreclosure is associated with strong self-views but missing self-reflection and identity achievement entails both strong self-views and self-reflection (1995: 738). Berzonsky's hypothesis that public self-representations have an impact on private self-conceptions but that this impact varies depending on identity status, could somewhat be supported by the findings (1995: 742). Adolescents in the moratorium stage would have an increased level of internalizations when connected with negative self-representation (1995: 742). Participants belonging to the stage of foreclosure would preserve their self-views in positive conditions but were not significantly affected within negative conditions (1995: 742).

This research implies how certain stages of identity development can give information on how self-views are impacted by public self-presentations. Due to the fact that interviews will be conducted, self-representation will naturally take place as the participants have to present themselves to the interviewer (Bryman, 2012: 496). As my sub-questions engage in topics like attitudes and behaviour, which can be referred back to one's self-view, this study might help to understand my data. However, since my participants did not engage in testing their identity status, this research holds a peripheral role.

Another study that should be mentioned has been conducted in Turku, Finland and is exploring the relationship people practicing yoga are having with regard to the practice itself and towards what they are gaining from it (Broo, 2012: 24). This was done by conducting in-depth interviews with yoga teachers and applying the theoretical framework of Identity Capital by James E. Côte and Charles G. Levine (2012: 24).

The preliminary findings conclude that the yoga teachers that were interviewed use both classic and modern yoga texts in the process of creating their yogic identity (2012: 32). Their identity capital is

built upon mental and physical flexibility, strength, freedom, and a balanced, successful life including social relationships (2012: 32). It was further found that the interviewees do not refrain from employing other identities besides their yogic one (2012: 30).

The approach in this paper has more similarities to what will be examined in my research, yet these findings only comprise ten pages in total as they serve as preliminary notes for a bigger research project, “devoted to qualitative and ethnographic investigations of the changing religious landscape in Finland” (2012: 24), in which the research focus was shifted and could therefore not be used in my research. The identity capital was talked about in terms of tangible and intangible (2012: 24). When doing the analysis of my data, it will be important to keep in mind that not only tangible outcomes may influence the identity, it could as well be intangible.

In 2015, a dissertation about the creative identity of American yoga was published. In this dissertation, the author notes how yoga in America can be referred back to its roots in India but underwent a drastic transformation due to the American context (Schwind, 2015: 248). Even though this study concentrates on the identity of an “American yoga” and not on the identity of the people practicing yoga, it does have some valuable implications for this research. I argue that whenever there can be found an identity of a subject, in this case yoga, the people practicing it will take up parts of this identity. This assumption is supported by Tajfel’s group identification. According to the researcher, as people identify with a group, they internalize attributes associated with said group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979: 41)

Especially during the early stages of this research, where I wanted to focus on self-representation on social media platforms, this research seemed valuable as it examines the American notions of consumerism and capitalism. It was found that American yoga highlights the consumptive aspect of a yoga lifestyle and that profit and personal purpose often merge (Schwind, 2015: 249). This supports the idea of yoga being about self-representation. Kegan (2009: 208) states that there is a tendency of Western cultures valuing assets like independence, self-assertion, and personal achievement whereas within Eastern cultures the value is rather the opposite.

Of course, the above-mentioned study by Schwind was conducted in the US, but it can be argued that these implications can be applied to a German context as well. Especially in times of globalisation, there is an overall perception that cultural differences seem to be reduced, as all commodities are available anywhere in the world. In his 2018 book edition of *The McDonaldization of*

Society, George Ritzer supports this impression, as he states that “on a global scale, travellers are finding more familiarity and less diversity” (Ritzer, 2018: 171).

4. Theoretical Framework

In this paper, the theoretical framework is built upon and rooted in concepts of identity. For this purpose, different concepts of identity will be laid out in this chapter. Another focus will be the practice of yoga, which will be examined in more detail in this chapter as well, as it provides the knowledge relevant for reading and understanding this paper.

4.1 The concept of identity

What even is identity? Erikson, an important contributor in the field of psychoanalysis and human development, defines identity as something that provides “the ability to experience one’s self as something that has continuity and sameness, and to act accordingly” (Erikson, 1950: 36). This definition agrees with what was written in an article about identity by Lauren Leve. In this article, she defines identity as “a reflexive construct or experiential modality through which one knows oneself and claims recognition” (Leve, 2011: 513)

In order to understand the concept of identity in a deeper sense, the book *The Sane Society* by Erich Fromm was used (Fromm & Ingleby, 2008). In the book, it is suggested that people are animals that see themselves separate from nature and that are able to say “I”, in contrast to animals that are still within nature that have no awareness of themselves and also no need for that (2008: 59). This means that people are aware of a concept of themselves as a separate entity, in contrast to other animals (2008: 59). This awareness of an individual identity developed from peoples’ ties to their mother and nature (2008: 59). Infants are not able to express themselves and use the word I to identify themselves as they are still feeling one with their mother until they conceive the outer world as separate and different from themselves (2008: 59). This process describes how identity is something that has to be developed.

So how does identity formation actually take place? There are a few theories that are useful in order to see how this happens. One of the most prominent theories on identity formation is included in *Childhood and Society* written by Erikson. He describes the *Eight Ages of Man* that characterise conflicts that emerge in a person within different stages of their development (Erikson, 1950: 221).

Another important contributor to the research field of identity formation is Robert Kegan, an US-American psychologist. I will dwell upon his thoughts in the following section, in order to give the reader some insight into how identity formation is built up.

4.1.1 Kegan on identity development

In *the Evolving Self*, Kegan, similar to Erikson, describes different stages of development (Kegan, 2009: 86). Kegan draws on the idea of development being a series of internalizations when referring back to infants moving from them *being* their action-sensations to *having* them, which creates subjectivity (2009: 31). He agrees with Fromm when he describes new born babies living in a world without objects as they cannot distinguish between themselves and an object, which can be seen as the start of personality development (2009: 78-79). In later stages of infancy there is a shift from seeing the world through perceptions, to being able to see perceptions - being perceptions to having them (2009: 32).

With children getting older, these stages of perceptions again are subject to change. When approaching adolescence, the ability to reflect on perceptions is added - to allow "one to think about thought" (2009: 37). It adds proposition, hypothesis, inferential process and abstract to the world and it goes from "what is" to "what might be" (2009: 38). He poses the question of identity as follows: "To what extent does the organism differentiate itself from (and so relate itself to) the world?" (2009: 44). He continues describing this process as being the source of thought and feeling, a process that is not bound over sex, class, culture or historical context: "It is an activity we have always shared and always will share" (2009: 44).

Kegan further writes about the differentiation between the subject and the object and states that one notices that another person not only differs from them because of a certain distinctiveness, but most importantly also by what one makes of these different ways they see that person differ from them (2009: 77). In the third stage, which is called the interpersonal balance stage, Kegan describes that the personal feelings of an individual are drawn into the centre of attention (2009: 95). The question is how to position oneself in the reality one lives in (2009: 96). This results in stage four, where identity is brought into discussion for the first time. It comprises a move from "I am my relationships" to "I have relationships" (2009: 100). Kegan further stresses the influence the institutional pillar has on a person's feelings and acknowledges that in this stage, independence is found (2009: 101). However, he admits that in this stage, the recognition of a group is required, either institutional or in form of social class, gender, or race (2009: 102).

In the last stage, the self and the institution are separated again and as a result, the self-reflecting “individual” is created (2009: 103). In this stage, other people are perceived as individuals for the first time within the five stages - as “value-originating, system-generating, history-making individuals” (2009: 104). The self is not derived from outer objects anymore and it is now possible to endure negative mentions about the self’s activities without being overly irritated by them (2009: 105).

Kegan describes a lifelong ambivalence between inclusion and distinctness and further explains that all of these stages can be seen as a momentary solution to tension between those two concepts (2009: 108). He explains that in order to understand a person, it is important to know the state of their personal evolution, because by defining “what is ‘self’ and what is ‘other’”, the composition of a person’s own reality is defined (2009: 113).

Kegan goes on by describing how subject-object relations emerge in human relations and social context and are subject to motion rather than being static (2009: 114). This becomes apparent when applying this theory onto real life scenarios. People cannot just be categorized and analysed solely based on theory. Rather, theory can help understand certain processes. Kegan stresses that people might not stay in one particular stage, as these are fragile balances and subject to change (2009: 114). He further underlines the importance of understanding not only the way a “person creates the world” but also “the way the world creates the person” (2009: 114).

Another topic covered in this book is the influence of a person’s environment on their development of the self. Kegan states that there is not just one environment but a series of them, which have or do not have an influence on us in different points of our lives (2009: 116). He says that there is never “just a person”, a person is always embedded in their current culture, their surroundings (2009: 116).

Even though in this book, Kegan draws from a constructivist point of view, he acknowledges the biological reality (2009: 42). He recognizes an inherited code within us that influences and predetermines our path in life (2009: 43) and views evolutionary activity as a foundation of our personality (2009: 81). Still, he clarifies that he sees both the cognitive and affectivity as valid entities in the process of development of the self (2009: 83). Here, a connection can be made to the yoga sūtra. The existence of an everlasting Self within us that is not subject to change is described, whereas the citta, the state of the mind, is subject to change (2006: 221-222).

Explaining the development of identity by going back to childhood and adolescence may seem like going far afield but was deemed appropriate in order to fully grasp the concept. Kegan’s view of identity as being malleable and not static and people seen as active participants in their lives holds

valuable implications for this study. Because this study is of qualitative nature, the focus is on how the participants make meaning of their social surroundings. Therefore, I too will view identity as something that can be transformed rather than something fixed, as I am taking on a constructivist position, which will be further discussed in chapter 5.1.

Kegan touches on the subject of inclusion and distinctness and the definition of “self” and “other”, which indicates that a certain belonging to and comparison with some kind of collective number of individuals holds significant implications for the development of identity.

Fromm too writes about identity based on a group. He illustrates how René Descartes’ famous *Cogito, ergo sum* came up when the feudal hierarchy broke down in medieval times back when people completely identified with their belonging to a social role (Fromm & Ingleby, 2008). Fromm suggests that during the development of society, instead of a clan identity, substitutes for an individual sense of identity were adopted, such as nation religion, class, and occupation (2008: 60).

Fromm indicates that this sense of identity might not always be a genuine one, as it rests on uniformity and conformity and belonging to a certain crowd (2008: 61). According to Fromm, the feeling of identity is guaranteed when an individual counts themselves as a member of a well-functioning group, which can be a family, a clan, a nation, or class (2008: 190-191).

Fromm further describes a shift in this development in modern society, as sane and healthy people are nowadays able to “achieve a sense of identity only by developing the unique and particular entity” which are ‘them’ (2008: 191). However, an alienated person might not be able to do so, as they feel secure when confirming to a group and feel a need for receiving approval from others (2008: 191). So, identification with a group can be a substitution for forming a real identity of the self.

In this paper, the influence of yoga on identity will be examined. When talking further about identity through the sense of belonging to a group, the implications mentioned by Fromm are valuable as they show on the one hand how important belonging to a group can be to individuals, whereas on the other hand, he considers it to be healthier when people are forming a personal identity outside of a group setting.

Practicing yoga can certainly make you feel as part of a group. A group can be defined as “a collection of individuals who perceive themselves to be members of the same social category, share some emotional involvement in this common definition of themselves, and achieve some degree of social consensus about the evaluation of their group and of their membership of it” (Tajfel & Turner, 1979: 40).

Furthermore, groups can be either defined by external or internal criteria: External criteria are classifications that describe a group in the literal way, whereas internal criteria consist of the “group identification” (Tajfel, 1982: 2). Identification with a group can be achieved through being aware of the membership in a particular group, relating this awareness to values and emotional investment within both of the aforementioned (1982: 2).

The mentioning of group behaviour leads us to Social Identity Theory, which will be the topic of the following section.

4.1.2 Social Identity Theory

The Social Identity Theory by Tajfel was developed in 1979 and is a well-known theory that encompasses the study of social behaviour within and in relation to groups. According to the theory, groups, as in social categorizations, not only serve as orientation for the social environment we are in, but also orientation for the self (Tajfel & Turner, 1979: 40). People define their (social) identity through their belonging to a group and categorize between “them” and “us” (McLeod, 2019). Based on this categorization, stereotypes are assigned to people and their respective groups (2019). This identification happens on the basis of differences from and similarities to other people (Tajfel & Turner, 1979: 40).

Three assumptions are further made based on these observations. The first is that people generally aim for a positive self-concept and therefore a positive social identity (1979: 40). The second assumption is that those social groups are assigned either positively or negatively associated attributes and the alignment of the social identity is in accordance with the respective association (1979: 40). Thirdly, one’s own group’s evaluation is based on the comparison with other groups which results in either leaving the existing group or enhancing its prestige (1979: 40). Therefore, people assign negative aspects to the group external to them (*out-group*) in order to boost their self-image and self-esteem (McLeod, 2019).

This evaluation takes place in three stages: *Social Categorization*, *Social Identification* and *Social Comparison* (McLeod, 2019). *Social Categorization* takes place when other people are assigned to certain social categories by ourselves, based on how we see them (2019). These categorizations can be based on their gender, their religion, ethnicity, profession, or others (2019). With *Social Identification*, a group member needs to recognize themselves as belonging to this particular group (*in-group*) and internalize this as part of their self-concept, as solely being identified as a member of this group by others, is only sufficient when looking at a long period of time (Tajfel & Turner, 1979: 41). *Social Comparison* happens when comparing the group, one belongs to with the external group (McLeod,

2019). In order to maintain self-esteem, it is crucial that the comparison turns out positively for the in-group (2019). When comparing to the out-group, it is important that this group is seen as relevant and worth the comparison (1979: 41). The differentiation happens on the purpose of maintaining or gaining superiority over the out-group (1979: 41).

This goes hand in hand with Fromm, when he suggests that the average man nowadays forms his sense of identity through his belonging to a nation instead of being a “son of man” (Fromm & Ingleby, 2008: 56). People who are not familiar are therefore seen as strangers who are judged with different criteria than that applied to their own clan and are viewed with suspicion (2008: 57). This familiarity is characterized by categories like common language, customs, food, or songs (2008: 57), therefore mainly cultural aspects.

Kegan too touches on the subject of in-group and out-group when he describes the notion of a lifelong ambivalence between inclusion and distinctiveness (see 4.1.1).

4.1.3 Hall on identity

In terms of a cultural identity, Stuart Hall found that there are two ways of thinking about identity and the formation of it. He states that “who speaks, and the subject who is spoken of, are never identical” (Hall, 1990: 222), so it is assumed that there is a difference of perceptions of one’s identity. Therefore, it should always be viewed as constituted within, rather than outside of representations (1990: 222). Similar to Kegan, he suggests we should think of identity more as something that is always in progress, rather than it being static and made of fixed attributes (1990: 222).

According to Hall, there are at least two ways of thinking about cultural identity. One is taking the position of seeing cultural identity as one shared culture, which forms a collective true self of people who have a shared history and ancestry (1990: 223). He states that within this definition, we are seen as ‘one people’ based on our historical experiences and cultural codes (1990: 223).

The other one, which is more interesting for this research, includes the idea that identity is constituted not only through shared attributes, but also through difference and the notion of identity being more about ‘what we have become’ rather than ‘what we are’ (1990: 225). Within this approach, it is about transformation and the process that has turned someone into something, so the past, present, and future all play a significant role in this view of identity (1990: 226). Constant transformation influenced by history, culture and power is emphasized within this approach (1990: 226). Identity is seen as a positioning rather than an essence (1990: 226).

When viewing yoga within a cultural context, it could have an impact on identity formation, which is why this theory is valuable for my research. For most people, yoga is not something they have picked up right after they were born but rather a practice that can be picked up even in old age. Viewing identity as something that is not static means that even in this older age, yoga might have an influence on identity.

5. Methodology

In this chapter the methodological considerations of approaching the problem formulation are discussed. The ontological and epistemological stances used for the purpose of this research are explained as well as choices in terms of research design, methods, type of analysis, data collection and limitations.

5.1 Epistemological & Ontological Stances

The ontological stance of this thesis is based on constructivist principles, whereas the epistemological stance is built upon interpretivism. Within these approaches, knowledge production happens through exploring and understanding the social world of the people being studied (Al-Saadi, 2014: 4). The focus here is on meaning and interpretation, as they are socially constructed by the actors in a particular context (2014: 4).

Bryman (2012: 33) says that within constructionism or constructivism, as he uses the words interchangeably, “social phenomena and categories are not only produced through social interaction but that they are in a constant state of revision”. Constructionism opposes the idea of culture as a pre-given concept within which social actors are seen as passive actors (2012: 33). This makes sense when relating constructionism to a social phenomenon like identity, which cannot be considered something static. Moreover, the choice of a constructivist view of identity is supported by Berzonsky in his article “Discovery Versus Constructivist Interpretations of Identity Formation” (Berzonsky, 2016) as well as by Kegan in *The Evolving Self* (Kegan, 2009).

As mentioned above, the epistemological stance of this research is based on interpretivism, as interpretivism tries to comprehend the subjectiveness of social action (2012: 30) including their understandings and motivations (Della Porta & Keating, 2008: 13). This epistemological stance is supported by hermeneutic standpoints, which again focus on subjective interpretation rather than

preconditioned understandings (2008: 351). Attention should be paid to “the social and historical context within which the text was produced” (Bryman, 2012: 560). In this research, the data from the interviews serves as primary data, thus the focus lies on the personal experiences of the participants. Adding to that, my personal ties to and knowledge about the practice of yoga should be taken into consideration in order to recognize the socio-historical context.

5.2 Research Design & Methods

The aim of this thesis is to explore the connection between identity and the practice of yoga. For this purpose, the concept of identity is outlined in order to understand how identity is constructed. The research conducted in this paper is of qualitative nature meaning the aim is to gain an in-depth understanding of the matter. Moreover, an inductive approach is used, which means that theory is generated out of the research (Bryman, 2012: 712). A general research question as well as sub-questions were created and serve as a guideline for the data collection. Interviews were then conducted on the basis of the research question as well as the sub-questions.

5.3 Data Collection

The collection of data is carried out through the use of the semi-structured, 15-45 minutes long qualitative interviews via Skype, Whatsapp and Instagram video, which were conducted in April 2020. These procedures were chosen due to the restrictions during the spread of COVID-19. Instead of meeting personally, the interviews were conducted exclusively via video call through different platforms, depending on the preference and availability of the participants. Video call platforms proved to be the best possible alternative to face-to-face meetings, as it is the closest to face-to-face contact. Locations of the interviewees varied, with some residing outside of Germany. For the recording of the interviews the recording programme of an iPhone 6S was used, since it provided a good sound quality.

An interview guide that constituted the base for the interviews was drafted in accordance with the research question and the sub-questions, as well as the theoretical framework. The questions were formed while having means and topics in mind that referred to the theoretical framework of this research. The interview guide was semi-structured, with set questions but still room for improvisation.

It was decided to keep the questions as open and neutral as possible with regard to the topic of yoga and identity. After conducting the first interview, I rearranged the order of the questions, as I noticed that some transitions came naturally through previous questions. After the fourth interview, I

was finally content with the order of the questions, but I was still flexible and would favour one question before another if the topic came up earlier. This reflects the characteristics of a semi-structured interview, as one adapts to the natural flow of the conversation, rather than sticking to a rigid interview guide. The content of the interviews is analysed and searched for common or differing themes.

The interviews were conducted with German citizens, for whom English is not their mother tongue. Therefore, the interviews were carried out in German, in order not to risk any lost content due to the language barrier. To serve the language of this paper, all used quotes were translated from German to English.

The aspired sampling size consisted of ten interviews. In order to obtain that, the first idea was going to Yoga studios and directly approaching the people who are participating in the classes. As mentioned before, this procedure could not be followed through due to COVID-19 and the lockdown of public life. Therefore, instead of reaching out personally, the interviewees were contacted through the internet on different platforms. One of these platforms was *Jodel*, which is a German app that enables its users to publish anonymized articles (*yodel*) that are visible to other users within a radius of ten kilometres. These articles may be commented on by other users and conversations can be held this way. Another platform used was *Instagram*, where people who were sharing yoga content on their account were directly asked if they would want to participate. A third way of approaching people was via *Facebook*, where I published a short post into groups dedicated to yoga, which asked members of said group if they were open to participate in research for a master thesis on yoga and identity.

The approach was kept very open, giving only away the information that the interview will be about the connection between yoga and identity. The participants were assured that all information they would provide would be treated confidentially. The amount of ten interviewees was deemed necessary in order to receive a good outlook on the findings. There were no specific requirements to the people that were interviewed, except for them having practiced yoga regularly for at least a year and them being German citizens. Regularly means in a way that yoga is not necessarily practiced every day, but in a recurring rhythm at least four times a month.

5.4 Analysis

The interview transcripts serve as the primary data. They were obtained through using an internet service focused on academic subscriptions. Still, the transcribed data had to be revised, as the programme was not able to grasp most of the words correctly. After finishing the transcriptions

manually by listening to the audio files, they were analysed by looking for similar topics/themes throughout the text while simultaneously aligning them to my theoretical framework. For this, I used a thematic approach combined with narrative analysis.

For secondary data, existing literature regarding the concepts and theories that concern the research question were taken into consideration as well as the Instagram account of popular German yoga teacher Mady Morrison. Her account and several of her posts were examined in order to support the analysis of this paper. This data will further contribute to a greater understanding of this matter.

For the theoretical framework, Tajfel, Hall and Kegan served as the main sources. Using Tajfel's Social Identity Theory was an obvious choice, as I have engaged in identity before and have come to know this particular theory in other contexts of my studies. The theory provides valuable insights for understanding group behaviour, stereotyping and identity.

I was introduced to Hall during my semester abroad in Canada where a few different publications of him were discussed. Nevertheless, he did not come into my mind as a possible source for identity until my supervisor for this thesis suggested a text by him. This made me look further into possible sources that could be useful for this research.

My initial source for identity formation was dropped in favour of Kegan, who I got to know through one of the participants of the interviews I did for this research. After the interview had ended, the participant suggested Kegan as a great source for identity development. After I had looked into his works, I decided his publications constitute a valuable source for my purpose.

Supplementary information to the aforementioned was based on Fromm's *the sane society*, which I was reading at the time I picked up this research. I was reading it for personal purposes and found the part on identity, which I then incorporated into this research.

5.4.1 Thematic Analysis and Coding

Thematic analysis is used in order to capture the relevant overall topics of the interviews. As Bryman (2012: 717) defines it, thematic analysis is used within qualitative data in order to extract key themes in one's data. There are no specifically defined rules for this approach, therefore it is possible to easily adapt this approach to any research material.

Coding was used to identify themes within the transcripts and interpret them in respect to the research question and the sub-questions. According to Bryman (2012: 13), coding is a method where the transcript is broken down into different parts, which are then categorized. Recurrences of those

categorizations are looked out for across all transcripts, so that any possible connections can be detected and highlighted (2012:13).

In qualitative research, a code is considered to be a word or phrase which assigns attributes that capture its essence to data (Saldaña, 2009: 3). This data can consist of different nature like interview transcripts, field notes from participant observation, literature, but also photographs or videos (2009: 3).

Coding should not be considered a precise science but rather an act that is open to interpretation (2009: 4) and without an exact formula that should be followed (2009: 8). Coding consists of *encoding* and *decoding*. *Encoding* means finding an appropriate code and labelling it, whereas *decoding* means reflecting on the available data to find out its core meaning (2009: 4).

The main goal of using a coding technique is to find repetitive patterns, commonalities or cohesion in human activity within the data (2009: 5) in order to then sort this data into categories based on their shared characteristics (2009: 8). All data that is deemed relevant should be coded, which, when referring back to this research, means all relevant statements made by the participants but also perceptions the interviewer had and took notes on (2009: 15).

As coding is considered to be cyclical rather than linear (2009: 45), several cycles can be necessary in order to obtain the desired outcome. The first cycle of coding is most often followed by a second cycle and even more (2009: 8). First cycle methods include processes like initial coding, descriptive coding and more, but also narrative coding (2009: 45), which was used in this research and it is likely that not just one of these processes is used, but rather two or more in order to really grasp the phenomena the data entails (2009: 47).

With narrative coding the focus is on the individual story of the participant and is therefore mainly used for the investigation of participant experiences and practices (2009: 109). Moreover, it is especially suited for examining identity development (2009: 109), which is exactly what the focus is on in this research and which is why it was ultimately chosen to be applied here. However, this was not a rigid process of only following the guidelines of narrative coding, but rather an open approach of loosely being orientated by it, while still also considering other coding processes.

Second cycle methods include processes like classifying, prioritizing, integrating, synthesizing, abstracting, conceptualizing and theory building (2009: 45). Focused coding, whereby the focus lies on the exploration of the most important or most repeated codes (2009: 155), was used in the second coding cycle. Again, this approach was not followed strictly, as the main goal was simply to reduce the

codes to the most core themes, which seemed most effective in order to grasp the most important themes and not get distracted with data that can be disregarded.

In this research, it was decided to use a very open approach for coding and abstain from the use of a coding program. Here, coding is applied through dividing the recorded and transcribed data in terms of categories and subcategories after visually scanning it for common themes and manually writing them down in a coding table. This data will then be analytically elaborated and interpreted with in regard to the research question and the sub-questions. The coding tables are included in the appendix.

5.4.2 Narrative Analysis

For the purpose of not guiding the participants too much in a specific direction, semi-structured interviews were used for the collection of data. The intention behind this was also to let the interviewees speak openly and find out what is important to them, of course always in the context of the research question as well as the sub-questions. In order to keep the same openness during the analytical part, narrative analysis seemed to be a reasonable choice, as the personal narratives of the individuals are supposed to be prioritised.

Awareness should be raised to the fact that the findings of the analysis of the interviews do not represent views and attitudes of a whole society but rather provide an insight into the perception of a few and let this contribute as mental stimulus to the bigger picture.

According to Bryman (2012: 491), narrative analysis puts the focus on people's stories and certain events in their lives. The purpose of narrative analysis is not to find out what the exact reality is, but what people make of it (Bryman, 2012: 582). This complements the focus of this research on identity. Because identity is not something you can really grasp. A person's identity is always a thing of perception, as other people might see a person completely different than to what the person themselves see them. Therefore, the main focus of this research is not to merely compare the collected data to already existing literature, but to reflect carefully on the narratives presented by the participants. According to Bamberg (2012: 85) one of the instances of a narrative is the "realm of experience, where speakers lay out how they as individuals experience certain events and confer their subjective meaning onto those experiences", which is exactly what this research will focus on.

Another important element, outlined by Bryman (2012: 582), is the fact that stories are usually told with a purpose in mind. Therefore, he suggests that there is an intention behind it, which responds well to another concept discussed in this research paper, self-representation. Furthermore, the participants are aware of the interviewer's role as well as their role in the research, which could affect

the creation of the narratives. An answer could differ depending on the person who is asking the question, as well as the environment the person is in. This could be something to keep in mind, because ironically, in a research about self-representation, of course self-representation does play a role, too.

5.5 Limitations

In this chapter any limitations regarding the methodological approach in this research will be specified. The subject of generalization is one often discussed when implementing qualitative research, as the sample size is, compared to quantitative research, rather small. Of course, the findings of a research with a sample size of ten interviewees cannot be generalized. However, as Bryman argues, the people who are interviewed in qualitative research are not supposed to represent the population, but rather the theory that is applied (2012: 406).

Another criticism of qualitative research is the subjectivity of it, as findings mostly rely on the researcher's subjective choices of what is important and what is not (2012: 405). And since the epistemological stance of this research is supported by hermeneutics, a preconditioned understanding as well as subjectivity cannot be avoided. Nevertheless, the findings do give an impression of the opinions and impressions of certain individuals who might have valuable points that should be considered and given a platform. Given the fact that social phenomena are seen as constructed and constantly being revised, each version of it will be unique.

A further point of critique could be the use of coding for deconstructing the content of the interviews, as it could be argued that coding contributes to data fragmentation (Bryman, 2012: 565). As the approach in this research does not merely rely on coding, but rather a combination of narrative analysis and a thematic approach, this critique does not need to be considered.

The implementation of the research was influenced by the spread of COVID-19, as mobility between different countries, as well as within a country was heavily restricted. Interviews could exclusively take place via video call, which could be seen as an invisible barrier, as people might not feel as comfortable to share information, as they would during a face-to-face interview.

Moreover, it is necessary to reflect upon the current situation regarding COVID-19. The findings could noticeably differ from a situation in which the virus was not currently occupying everyone's mind. This will be considered in the discussion as well.

Another crucial element in this research is to reflect on the role as a researcher, as it might affect the participant's answer. Not only on socio-economic information but also on personality and

attitudes. As Stuart Hall suggests, “what we say is always in ‘context’” (Hall, 1990: 222) and “all discourse is ‘placed’, and the heart has its reasons” (1990: 223), because we have a certain background, which comprises our history, our culture and our place and time in life (1990: 222).

I am a 28-year-old female of Caucasian background. The participants' answers might differ depending on the person they are talking to. Furthermore, they are aware of the scientific background of this research and that their answers will be used in an academic context. Adding to that, most of the participants knew that I am practicing yoga myself, so they might talk in a different way to a person who practices yoga themselves in contrast to someone who is not very familiar with the practice. Regarding my personality, I would say that I am a rather calm person. This could be either encouraging to people, as I will most likely not interrupt them, so they can use all the imaginative space they need to express themselves, but with other more introverted people, this might be a blocker.

As mentioned above, I practice yoga myself, which affects my work on this research, since I carry previous knowledge on the topic. This will be further discussed in chapter 7 of this paper.

5.5.1 Ethical Considerations

Regarding ethical considerations and their importance when conducting interviews, it is necessary to emphasize that each participant has given oral consent for recording the interview as well as using the data in this research. The purpose of the data gathering was explained to them. Furthermore, they were assured that any information that concerned their personal data would be handled confidentially.

6. Analysis

This chapter is devoted to the analysis of the transcribed interviews on the basis of the existing literature and the theoretical framework provided. The analysis is segmented into different parts not only for a better reading experience, but also for the purpose of capturing certain themes and therefore gaining a better overview. These segments include “participant overview” (6.1), “representation” (6.2), “group identification” (6.3) and “development” (6.4). In 6.1, the participants will be shortly introduced, in 6.2, the analysis will focus on the representation of the participants themselves, 6.3 is dedicated to group identification the participants might express and 6.4 will concentrate on the development of the candidates regarding changes in their behaviour or lifestyle.

6.1 Participant overview

In order to give some context to the participants, each one of them will be introduced shortly based on some fundamental background information. The participants were assigned pseudonyms, in order to preserve their privacy and protect their anonymity. Pseudonyms were chosen overusing numbers or letters, as this research is of qualitative nature and focuses on the individuals' narratives, which is represented more effectively by names than numbers.

Alina

Alina is a 28-year-old female who is a yoga teacher for living and practices yoga since she was 15 (Appx. A). She got into yoga because of her mother, who she lovingly describes as being "a little esoteric witch", but only started practicing after having injuries from dancing (Appx. A). She preferably practices Vinyasa Yoga and says she likes her practice being powerful while having these almost dance-like, flowing components to it. (Appx. A). However, she teaches a more therapeutic yoga, too, where the emphasis is on holding the postures over a longer time (Appx. A). Besides yoga, she practices Acro yoga, which combines yoga and acrobatics, and states travelling as one of her main hobbies (Appx. A).

Bea

Bea is 47 years old, female, works in an elementary school in a socially troubled area and does some yoga teaching on the side (Appx. B). She started practicing yoga when she was 30, after what she called having a real crisis following a breakup (Appx. B). After this breakup, she started seeing a therapist who got her into yoga (Appx. B). She found that Hatha Yoga is her favourite type of yoga after trying various other types (Appx. B). She, too, names travelling as one of her hobbies and enjoys being around animals and spending time in nature (Appx. B). She states that she has cut all ties to her family, since they did not have a positive impact on her life (Appx. B).

Christian

Christian is a 54-year-old male who is a yoga teacher for living and works as a chief operator in his brother's company that does logistics for catering companies (Appx. C). He has been practicing yoga for 14 years after getting introduced to it on a holiday and immediately liking it (Appx. C). When being asked what type of yoga he practices or teaches, he says that he does not like to refer to one specific type, as he does not agree with feeling restricted in any way (Appx. C). Just like Alina and Bea, one of his

passions besides yoga, is travelling (Appx C). Again, like Bea, he previously cut all ties to his family (parents and five siblings) due to his parents being “alcoholics, very aggressive, (...) emotional cripples”, but has since made some amends with some of them and has one daughter himself, with whom he seemingly has a good relationship (Appx C).

Dora

Dora is 57, female and mother of seven adult children (Appx. D). She has the most experience in practicing, as she already practices more than 30 years (Appx. D). She started practicing after serving as a “guinea pig” for a friend of hers (Appx. D) In her over 30 years of experience, she says she has done all kinds of yoga (Appx. D). Dora teaches yoga, but is also a social worker, who works with mentally ill people (Appx. D). Her hobbies include fitness, especially martial arts, and weightlifting, reading, and painting, as she has studied art (Appx. D).

Ella

Ella is a 27-year-old female flight attendant who teaches yoga on the side and is training to be an alternative practitioner (Appx. E). She has been practicing yoga for seven years now after initially starting in order to become more flexible and calm down during stressful times as a student at university (Appx. E). Ella states that she has mostly done Vinyasa Yoga (Appx. E). She likes cooking, reading, and working out (Appx E). She did not explicitly mention travelling as a hobby, but due to her profession, some affinity for the subject can be assumed.

Felix

Felix is 34 years old and male (Appx. F). He started practicing yoga two years ago after experiencing bad headaches and therefore seeing an osteopath who introduced him to the practice (Appx. F). Felix says he is open to almost any type of yoga and especially enjoys Yin Yoga and Hatha Yoga (Appx. F). He works as an account manager for a product, which is used in the restaurant industry (Appx. F). He mentions that one of his goals for this year is to start training for becoming a yoga teacher (Appx. F). His hobbies include being in nature and taking care of his dog as well as reading (Appx. F).

Georg

Georg is a 45-year-old male who has a son and a female partner and works as a lawyer (Appx. G). He started practicing yoga six and a half years ago, after experiencing a difficult time with the loss of

his father and his own sickness (Appx. G). He prefers to practice Vinyasa Yoga and has furthermore explored Yin Yoga to a greater extent (Appx. G). Georg states that he is a sportsperson who has done everything from martial arts to ball sports and fitness and is a hobby pilot, which was one of his dreams as a child (Appx G). He also likes reading about yoga and is interested in political and social issues (Appx. G).

Henrik

Henrik is a 39 old male who owns an EMS (electrical muscle stimulation) training studio in Hamburg (Appx. H). He started practicing yoga in 2016, when a yoga teacher came to his studio and left a pamphlet about yoga at the place (Appx. H). He would consider his favourite yoga type as "in the direction of Vinyasa" (Appx. H). Besides yoga and EMS, he likes to cook, do sports like playing football and running and go skydiving (Appx. H).

Ingo

Ingo is 42 years old, male, works on software solutions and teaches yoga on the side (Appx. I). He states he started doing yoga "ten or twelve years ago" after thinking he should take up sports and as a result attending a Bikram yoga class (Appx. I). He does not practice Bikram yoga anymore, instead he likes to practice and teach Vinyasa (Appx. I). He sometimes fills in as a teacher at his company's yoga classes (Appx. I). Music is very important to him and he is participating in a musical choir (Appx. I). He also states reading as one of his hobbies and admits he is "not really an athletic person" (Appx. I).

Jana

Jana is a 26-year-old female who studies communication for her master's degree (Appx. J). Besides that, she works in a hospital's department of corporate communications (Appx. J). When asked how long she has been practicing, she says "For three years now - I think" (Appx. J). She got into yoga after having done Pilates before and making use of a special offer at a hot yoga studio (Appx. J). Jana started doing hot yoga when living in Kiel but has since picked up Vinyasa due to the fact that there is no hot yoga studio in Münster, where she lives (Appx. J). She considers herself to be a social and active person who likes to be outside, meet friends and do sports, for example surfing (Appx. J).

6.2 Representation

The following section engages in both the participants' self-representations as well as the representation of yoga. For this purpose, characteristics of the participants and values important to them were examined as well as their take on yoga. These characteristics and values were either voiced through themselves when being asked or observed by myself during different stages in the interview. But not only were the participants asked about what they think is characteristic to them, but also how they see their role within their friends or family and how these people might perceive them. Furthermore, their involvement in social media will be discussed in this section, as well as their take on a growing popularity of yoga, as these answers hold relevant implications for representation. In order to abide by the numbers of maximum pages of this research, only a few examples were used for the respective sections, even though all participants might have had some implications regarding the matter.

6.2.1 Participant Representation

According to Hall, identity should always be viewed as something that is constituted within representations (Hall, 1990: 220). Hall says: "identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (1990: 225), therefore it is important to explore how the participants represent themselves as well how they think others would present them.

Openness and curiosity

Openness and curiosity, which can be related to openness, were characteristics that were mentioned a lot within most candidates (Appx. A, C, D, E, G, H, J). For example, Henrik explains that "with the physical practice, sometimes it does not work out the way I want", but concludes it is not about mastering but more about openness for trying (Appx. H). Referring to his other hobby, skydiving, he says it is the same openness you need when you jump out of a plane out of 4000m altitude (Appx. H). He wishes the same openness needed for these activities for the society to have, "so they would stop with this black-and-white thinking and fight each other all the time" (Appx. H). Alina shows her curiosity and eagerness to learn when talking about exploring new yoga poses or Acro yoga poses and adds that she loves to see her pupils making progress in their practice (Appx. A). When talking about yoga, she says the saying "the more you learn the less you know" is perfectly fitting (Appx. A).

Christian's openness shows when he talks about his hobby of travelling: "Getting to know people and getting to know their views. I think that's fun" (Appx. C). He is very open and exposes many difficulties he faced during his life, dealing with a brother with down-syndrome, aggressive parents and death of his mother and his daughter's mother, the former happening from one day to the next without a foregoing sickness (Appx. C).

Dora saying "I just see where it takes me" when talking about a new type of yoga she recently picked up, also shows a certain degree of openness (Appx. D). She can also be viewed as curious and open again when she talks about how she always tries to incorporate new exercises into her yoga practice that she did not dare to try before, such as headstand (Appx. D).

Henrik says that he is very open for people, not only due to the fact that he is gay and therefore faces intolerance as well, but also due to his childhood, where he visited many countries and his family hosted exchange students (Appx. H).

Authenticity

Authenticity proved to be another important characteristic for a few participants (Appx. A, C, D, F). Alina mentions authenticity as one of the first things when being asked about their character and values (Appx. A). Christian also mentions his honesty and how sometimes people feel snubbed because of him addressing certain topics (Appx. C). Adding to that, he mentions authenticity "and everything it encompasses" (Appx. C). Dora touches on the subject too and gives the example of always speaking the truth and mentions that she mostly resides in between of both extremes, as she states "if you only say what you think you will eventually have no friends" (Appx. D).

Authenticity can be referred to as truthfulness, which is one of the *yamas* of the eight limbs in the *yoga sūtras* (Sriram: 2006: 91-92). Therefore, them mentioning authenticity corresponds to the practice of yoga very well.

Loyalty and responsibility

Being loyal and responsible was mentioned a few times by the candidates (Appx. A, D, E, F, I). Alina states the example of Acro yoga and she mentions how important it is to be able to rely on your partner and that the partner is able to rely on yourself, so that you "take up a certain responsibility" (Appx. A). This shows that this is something she has internalized herself. She further describes how whenever she teaches, she tries to give herself breaks in order to create a more sustainable

environment for her own body (Appx. A). This shows again her responsibility, not only towards other people, but also towards herself.

Dora says that with her friends, she acts like a rock, who is loyal, reliable, and always there to listen (Appx. D). When Ella was asked about the way others might perceive her, she states that she likes to help people (Appx. E). She explains how friends and family often approach her in order to talk about deeper matters: “I am very loyal and just always there” (Appx. E). Ingo says: “I don't need 1000 people, but I need a few people and I need to know that I can rely on them” (Appx. I).

Gratefulness

Another characteristic that was mentioned a lot is being grateful (Appx. A, C, D). Alina notes that being grateful for what she has is a valuable element in her life and goes on talking about how being happy about the little things is substantial to her (Appx. A). This can be supported by her saying being able to travel a lot and practice yoga is something she sees as a privilege (Appx. A). Similarly, to Alina, Christian reports a deep gratefulness for life in general, as well as awareness for life when talking about how he acknowledges the moment and gives thanks every morning and evening (Appx. C). He also talks about being grateful for life as a result of seeing his daughter's mother unexpectedly die (Appx. C). Dora states how grateful she is for having this great life and “an uber-awesome family” (Appx. D). In the yoga sūtras, being grateful belongs to being content, which is on one of the *niyamas*, contentment (Sriram, 2006: 92).

Humour

The majority of the participants described themselves as being funny and humorous (Appx. A, D, D, F, J). Alina describes herself as being humorous, especially sarcastic, as she thinks this is really important when teaching yoga (Appx. A). She adds that she hopes that her saying she is humorous does not sound too vain but would still like to hold on to what she said (Appx. A), which shows that she is conscious about her image and how others perceive her but is able to stand her ground. Dora also states that she laughs a lot, which she proves during the interview (Appx. D).

Mindfulness

Mindfulness and awareness came up a few times during the interviews (Appx. A, B, C, D). When asked about her daily routine, Alina mentions that she likes to take her time and enjoy a good tea (Appx. A). This shows a general sense of mindfulness, as she actively takes her time for this routine. Alina

further explains that it is very important to her that whenever she is with people, there are no distractions like a running TV, instead she wants people to interact with each other (Appx. A). Christian seems very mindful, which becomes apparent when he talks about his morning routine that includes him pausing for a moment before starting the day in order to have a conscious start of the day (Appx. C). Bea is very experienced in the field and participated in many workshops, but admits that at one point, she felt like she needed to practice more for herself rather than others (Appx. B). This can be attributed to her mindfulness, as the *niyama* cleanliness should not only be referred to body hygiene but also mental hygiene (Sriram, 2006: 92).

Trust

Having a basic trust in life seemed important to the participants (Appx. A, C, H, I). Alina mentions the importance of a basic sense of trust in life and yourself (Appx. A). She says:

Everything will be fine in the end. Everything comes, everything goes. And as long as you are happy and have trust in the fact that no matter which way you go, it will be the right one.

Keeping this attitude is half the battle (Appx. A)

She further says:

No matter how shitty the day ends for you, that you still have this inner attitude and basic trust to say, okay this is a hard lesson I've learned today. It's really shitty right now. But tomorrow will look a little different (Appx. A)

Henrik mentions the ability to be happy on your own without the happiness relying on external factors is important to him - "just to be at peace with yourself" (Appx. H), which too can be referred to having a basic trust within yourself. When talking to Christian, he acknowledges the fact that there is no security from the outside: "There is nothing we can do. There is just the moment. And you don't know what will happen in an hour" (Appx. C).

This is similar to what Alina mentions in terms of basic trust, even though he did not explicitly mention basic trust, it aims for the same. The only one who seems to have a rather organized take on life is Ingo, who stresses the importance of having an outlook, a perspective and not having to take life as it comes (Appx. I). Further, Ingo stresses the importance of financial security and social security (Appx. I). Ingo says he is very well organized, determined, and focused (Appx. I). This basic trust could be related to the *nyama* of surrender, which means the surrender to a higher source (Sriram, 2006: 92).

The surrender here happens through the participant surrendering to this trust in “something” which they cannot grasp.

Empathy and harmony

The topic of empathy and harmonious coexistence seems of great importance to the participants (Appx. A, B, C, E, F, H, J). Bea mentions community and public welfare being really important to her and implies that lack of both will make her unhappy (Appx. B). She adds that this is something she is able to act out in her role as a teacher very well (Appx. B). Christian is very vocal about the topic of Corona. He does not like how politicians did not care about old people along the years “and all of a sudden they start to protect them now” (Appx. C). By that, he says he feels irritated because that should always be the norm: “All people are worth protecting. Whether they are children dying of hunger every year, or the elderly, who are vegetating alone in the - so-called - retirement homes. I don't need no Coronavirus to know that” (Appx. C). Jana notes that happiness of herself and the people around her is crucial and adds “just standard things, right?” (Appx. J). It should be questioned, if this is really standard, or if this is just her perception because of certain prerequisites she is exposed to. Jana is the eldest of three daughters, which often makes her take up the part of the “big sister” and within her circle of friends she considers herself to be a person who likes to give advice and who listens (Appx. J). This draws on the notion of the *yama* of non-violence (Sriram, 2006: 91).

Calm vs. active

While some participants reported to be rather calm (Appx. D, E), some stated quite the opposite and described themselves as very active or even restless (A, B) and others said it would vary depending on the situation (H, J). Alina says: “Whenever I enter the room, I charge the people in this room, I am actually always motivating” and “I always need the opportunity to blow off some steam a little bit like a little puppy” (Appx. A). According to her, doing yoga and Acro yoga is the perfect balance, as in Acro yoga charges her - there is “lots of screaming and laughing and interaction” while in yoga acts grounding on her and the emphasis is mostly on calming the mind and the body (Appx. A).

“I am a doer. I like to do things. I like to create. I like to start things” (Appx. B). This is how Bea describes herself. She adds that she likes to be active and in nature, which is something she thinks her friends would agree on (Appx. B): “They always say: You need to take this time to just be, I know you're always doing something” (Appx. B). This can be supported by the fact that she did not like yoga when she first got into it, as she found it to be too slow for her (Appx. B). Bea feels very much affected by

Corona as she usually is very restless and sees this characteristic even more when it is not possible to “do” things (Appx. B). She notices that it is very difficult for her to “just be” and acknowledges that due to Corona “you think about what is important in life” (Appx. B).

Contentment and Confidence

The participants seemed to have a positive outlook on life (Appx. A, D, I). Dora says she does not fear for her existence due to Corona like other people do: “I know it is going to work out for me one way or the other” (Appx. D). This could be due to her strong confidence but also due to her privilege of not having any financial troubles. Also, this could be related to the aforementioned basic trust. She is interested in seeing what will change because of Corona and likes how she started to practice more consistently (Appx. D), so she has a very positive outlook on the situation. She does acknowledge the fact that she is most probably going to return to her old ways but hopes not to (Appx. D). She objects that she has not always been that positive and knows the dark side of life very well but has learned to enjoy life now that she is 57 years old (Appx. D).

Ingo thinks it is very interesting how well practicing yoga in virtual places works now with Corona (Appx. I). He sees the positive side of people having more time and saving time as they do not need to commute to their classes (Appx. I). He adds that when practicing online, the inhibition level is not existent, as it can be hard for beginners to enter a room full of people and then start to compare to them (Appx. I). He acknowledges that on the other side it could be a problem not having a teacher being able to correct and instruct in person (Appx. I). Like gratefulness, this draws on one of the *niyamas*, contentment (Sriram, 2006: 92).

Freedom

Freedom is another aspect that was stressed by the participants (Appx. C, E). Christian mentions the importance of not getting confined in whatever he does, especially in relation to moving freely but also clothing that you possibly have to wear in certain jobs, so freedom seems to be important to him (Appx. C). This becomes apparent again when he says as mentioned before, that he does not adhere to a certain kind of yoga style. He talks about how he left his parent’s home very early and moved 600km away in order to escape the bad environment but how he now made his peace with his family (Appx. C). This might have led to the strong sense of independence that I observed with him. He says, “I am not dependent on anyone” (Appx. C). As freedom is considered to be the ultimate goal within yoga, this aspect is consistent with the yoga sūtras (Sriram, 2006: 223).

Other

Some mentioned variety as being very important to them (Appx. E, J). Some participants described their closeness to nature and importance of the environment (Appx. A, B, C, G, J) and animal welfare (App. A, B, J). This can be traced back to the *yama* principle of non-violence (Sriram, 2006: 91-92). Furthermore, it was deemed necessary by the participants to think outside the box and question things (Appx. C, I, J). Dora says of herself that she is not the person “who likes to be on the big stage - shimmering and shiny” (Appx. D).

The only one who ascribed himself a negative attribute was Henrik. He calls himself “bitchy sometimes” but tries to work on that and says admires people who “always have this relaxed mind” (Appx. H). Also, in contrast to the other participants, his outlook does not seem as positive. He talks about how Corona can help society possibly get more active, buy regional products at local stores, which is an outcome he would like to see (Appx. H). He then concedes that as soon as everyday life will be back, everyone will get back to their old ways but likes to think that there will be changes (Appx. H). He implies that he has been bored since Corona measures were applied and says “you’re living alone, you fall into bad ways. Sometimes it gets very cliché like an unemployed person who just vegetates” (Appx. H).

Many of the characteristics and attitudes that were mentioned by the participants, could be attributed to the teachings of the yoga sūtras. Therefore, it could either be argued that the participants have internalized the teaching or that they, with or without purpose have represented what is expected from them based on their yogic experiences.

6.2.2 Yoga Representation

Regarding the representation of yoga, some participants criticised the notion of gurus and dependency on them (Appx. C, D, G) as well as consumerism and commodification connected to it (Appx. E, J). All participants agree on the fact that yoga should become even more popular (Appx. A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J) with a few of them having some objections (B, E, G, J).

Bea agrees on the rising popularity being positive but has some objections (Appx. B). In her opinion, it is necessary to adapt the practice to the Western world (Appx. B). She talks about how yoga

in the Western world is very oriented towards the physical aspects and wishes for a tilt in the direction of meditational practices, breathing practices and awareness about nutrition (Appx. B).

Christian thinks it is important that yoga becomes more popular, as he sees it as a great tool for everyone and he would not be a teacher if he were not supporting this (Appx. C). Christian criticises hypocrites in yoga that “preach the philosophy while wearing a Rolex” as well as those that create dependency (Appx. C). He states that he does not want to be that person to create dependency and is absolutely happy with people moving on from practicing with him (Appx. C). Dora, like Christian, criticises the notion of some rather rigorous practices in yoga:

I don't need to fall at someone's feet in order to deserve something. I am worth being loved and living a good life (...) You have to obey the guru, then you have to follow rules again and you have to earn enlightenment. I'm not up for this anymore. (...) There has to be an easier way. Why do people always have to torture themselves like this? That can't be in the interests of the inventor. We're all worth it, aren't we? (Appx. D)

She further talks about the eight limbs as defined by Patañjali and how it is usually not possible to completely live by those rules as they cannot properly be applied to our modern lives (Appx. D). She reflects on the fact that everyone who engages in yoga somehow contributes to the popularization and refers to the interview and this research (Appx. D).

Ella generally likes the idea of yoga getting more popular, but criticises the notion of it being commercialised, especially in the Western world (Appx. E). She feels like it is about looks a lot and mentions the ‘yoga body’ and advertised by big companies in order to make a profit (Appx. E). She says it is a shame when, because of this, other valuable topics are lost (Appx. E). This draws on the article by Bhalla and Moscowitz, who mention yoga magazines as being “a vehicle for beauty and a certain body ideal” (see chapter 3).

Georg thinks the world needs more yoga (Appx. G). He concedes: “yoga does not always really mean yoga” and explains how there are many people out there selling something that in his opinion is very far from yoga (Appx. G). He cites fitness studios as an example where he thinks yoga classes are often offered that have nothing to do with yoga itself and where the focus lies solely on the physical

aspects without any mindfulness (Appx. G). Besides this, he says there is a very small number of people that misuse the spiritual concept for their cult-like activities (Appx. G). He concludes that when someone is firm in their character or really gets deep into the topic, “they will know” (Appx. G). As mentioned in chapter 3.2.3, it can be observed that there is a tendency in Germany to connect spirituality to cults.

Henrik thinks fondly of the popularization and would like to see more classes aimed at men (Appx. H). Henrik links identity to sexual identity and talks about how yoga is “this women-thing” and that it will take a while until it will appeal to men too (Appx. H). He says this is due to it being marketed very stereotyped and women-oriented (Appx. H), which is supported by Bhalla and Moscovitz’ study (see chapter 3). He criticizes the notion of yoga studios to mainly tending to women and talks about how studios sometimes not even have changing rooms for men (Appx. H). Henrik sees yoga being more appealing to older men, as they are more centred in their lives and open to new things that might not seem “hip” (Appx. H). For Henrik, human kindness is part of a yogic identity and he cites an example of not knowing of a yogi “who would vote for the AFD¹” (Appx. H).

When talking about his other hobby skydiving, he explains how people always say that both practices are very contrasting, whereas he thinks it is very similar: “You are alone up there, you’re deciding to jump out of a plane and fall down with a speed of 130 km/h. So, this idea of being totally within yourself...” (Appx. H). He adds that he does not know anyone “who is a real daredevil, they are normal people” (Appx. H). He reflects on the fact that whenever he is upset about something, people answer “but you do yoga”, which for him does not mean to always be calm when something upsetting happens (Appx. H). According to the yoga sutra, Kleśas come into effect whenever one experiences emotional turmoil (Sriram, 2006: 85).

Ingo sees the benefits of yoga on many different levels and therefore supports the popularization of it (Appx. I). He thinks it makes sense for everyone to extract whatever is helpful for them from the practice: “I don’t think it’s reprehensible if people say they do yoga for the athletic aspects. That’s totally fine. And I am also glad if people do it for the meditative aspects” (Appx. I). Due to the fact that no equipment, bodily prerequisites, space, or money is necessary to practice yoga, he thinks that yoga is “just a great thing (...) I think it can do us good” (Appx. I). This goes in contrast to what Bhalla and Moscovitz claim in their study about yoga seeming exclusionary towards certain groups

¹ German right-wing party

(see chapter 3). Still, all of the participants match their classification of being white, slim and, at least to some extent, wealthy, as they seem to have a well working career.

Jana supports the notion of yoga becoming more popular but is critical of the commodification that happens “when some US-American superstar yoga teachers are making these crazy profits out of it” (Appx. J). She further notes that she thinks yoga usually has a rather positive connotation to it, which is why she is open talking about it (Appx. J).

Most of the participants see yoga being represented in a positive way. Some voice objections regarding cult-like activities but clearly distance themselves from such narratives. By doing so, according to Tajfel, they will boost their own self-esteem if they identify with yoga as their group (McLeod: 2019).

6.2.3 Social Media

Out of all participants, Alina is one of the more active social media users, as she states using mostly Instagram, less Facebook and lately TikTok (Appx. A). She highlights the positive impact of social media of connecting people and exchanging thoughts (Appx. A). However, she is critical of social media use in general when describing the notion of “this everlasting scrolling and watching one story after another” as something no one really needs (Appx. A). She states that she would always try to keep her usage down and how she just wants to delete all platforms sometimes, as she feels overwhelmed (Appx. A).

She further explains that she is constantly trying to bring more of her own personality into her accounts and is not sure whether her accounts represent her well (Appx. A). Again, she stresses the importance of authenticity, something that she wants to be represented in her social media accounts, too (Appx. A). A typical post of her might be giving tips on how to be a self-employed yoga instructor or yoga and Acro yoga poses and not so much about her private life (Appx. A).

She says “not everybody needs to know, needs to see where I am, what I am wearing, what I am eating” and adds that posting a picture of a green smoothie every day is just not her (Appx. A). But she does like to put some part of her personality into the posts, as she states that she likes to keep those posts funny and ironic (Appx. A), which draws back to her humorous personality. She likes to add some inspirational quotes or poems to pictures and says that she still needs to figure out whether the audience likes it (Appx. A), so it seems like the opinion of others is very important to her. This could be due to the fact that her Instagram channel is part of her work and she needs the audience to like her post in order to be successful in her career, or it could be a personal impulse of wanting to be liked.

She explains that the reason for her to join Instagram was in fact to get some inspiration on

what to post regarding yoga content (Appx A). Most people she follows on Instagram are other people that practice or teach yoga, which she met in workshops or on her travels and that inspire her to try out new things (Appx. A). This again shows her openness towards anything unknown.

The other participant active on social media is Christian, who I approached through Instagram, which he frequently uses (Appx. C) He also uses Facebook, YouTube and vimeo (Appx. C). He is sure that his accounts represent him well (Appx. C). He does not manage these accounts himself, as he “can’t be bothered to do it”, instead he discusses the content with his 24-year-old daughter, who then takes care of the maintenance (Appx. C). He says the content is usually something, a thought possibly, that is written down and attached to a picture (Appx. C). He likes the possibility of being connected to the outer world through social media and getting inspiration from other yoga-practicing people (Appx. C). He explains that even if he does not like the content, it can still help him somehow in knowing what he wants to post (Appx. C).

Dora recently started using social media, especially Instagram, more often to post sequences (Appx. D). She does not think about whether the content represents her well, as she just started using the medium at all, she just wants to inspire people for now: “I post, whatever comes to my mind” (Appx. D).

Ella uses mostly Instagram where she usually does not post pictures of yoga poses, but rather about other topics surrounding yoga (Appx. E). When asked whether her account represents her well, she says “I believe so” (Appx. E), which shows that she might not be sure of what would even represent her will (Appx. E). When talking about accounts she follows, she explains that she mostly follows other accounts that post motivational and inspiring texts as well as accounts that post sequences of movement (Appx. E).

Felix does not post on social media yet but is planning to create a blog in order to write about his experience during the teacher training (Appx. F). He tries to stay up-to-date with other yoga accounts or blogs on the internet, on Facebook or YouTube as he compares it to reading a newspaper: “it’s stuff you read, but you don’t get inspired” (Appx. F). Felix mostly follows content that shows sequences or includes spiritual matters (Appx. F). He says “whenever you type in yoga into YouTube, you get bombarded with content and feel overwhelmed by the selection”, that is why he likes to listen to recommendations by yoga teachers he knows personally (Appx. F). He believes “not everyone who posts stuff has great content” (Appx. F).

The remaining participants are not active users of their social media accounts (Appx. B, G, H, I,

J). Ingo states that he does not like “this whole story of showing the most remarkable and difficult pose” for the purpose of generating likes and likes to rely on word on mouth advertising for his classes (Appx. I). The same distaste for “this showing off” was mentioned by Georg, although he understands that people need to post this content in order to make money as influencers (Appx. G).

The inactive social media users would usually watch YouTube videos in order to get some inspiration for their own practice (Appx. B, G, H, I, J). Mady Morrison was mentioned by three of the participants. Dora calls Mady Morrison “gorgeously refreshing „and not “fake and polished” (Appx. D), while the others mention her in a neutral context (Appx. C, Appx. J).

In the study by Bhalla & Moscovitz about the representation of yoga in women’s magazines, they mention how values of commodity, consumerism, and divisive exclusionary identity are promoted (see chapter 3). This is supported by another study by Schwind, in which it was found that in an American context, emphasis is put on the consumptive aspects of a yoga lifestyle, merging profit and personal purpose (2015: 249). In the following, this statement will be related to another platform where advertisements are made, namely Instagram while using the example of popular German yoga teacher Mady Morrison. As mentioned in 6.2.2, some of the participants voice their discontent with consumerism and commodification in relation to yoga. Since Mady Morrison seemed popular within the participants’ perception, her Instagram profile was further examined in terms of content she posts.

As mentioned in chapter 2.2.1, her usual posts usually show her in different but mostly acrobatic yoga poses, accompanied by a long text that advertises her YouTube channel or other products she sells. Now, to go a little more into detail and to understand what her posts entail, different posts of her are analysed in terms of content.

In order to promote her 30-day-yoga-challenges the captions, she uses phrases like “Bye Bye Winterblues. Good Vibes Only. Hey Summerbody!” (Morrison, 2020a), which focus on the physical “benefit” of becoming fit. Still, this post is a rather rare find, as she usually focuses on asking reflecting questions and giving some advice on them like “what made you smile today?” (Morrison, 2019a) or “what could you do in order to create more peace around yourself?”, while still making sure to promote her products (Morrison, 2020c).

Even though she is advertising her own product by referencing it in almost every post, advertisements for other products are comparatively less represented (Morrison, n.d.). Advertisements for other provider’s products like a seller of audiobooks (Morrison, 2019b) or sports apparel (Morrison,

2020b) can be found at irregular intervals of approximately 20-30 posts in between (Morrison, n.d).

With her posts, she tries to not just bluntly market her product, but to tend to some philosophical and inspirational background as well. This supports the study from Schwind as Mady is merging profit and personal purpose (2015: 249).

Her audience will not only have the feeling of buying or consuming, since her YouTube videos are for free, her product, but they will additionally receive philosophical advice. It could be argued whether she tries to market her products by disguising the marketing behind something that seems more meaningful, or whether she does care about those questions and answers. Of course, it could be a combination of both. By offering consumer products as well as promoting mental and physical health, she takes up the position of the yoga teachers mentioned in Biswas' research on yoga in gentrified New York neighbourhoods (see chapter 3). The findings of the study were that the yoga teachers act as a community healer while at the same time functioning in a capitalist context (Biswas, 2012: 108-109).

6.3 Group identification

Within this section, possible identification of the participants with their in-group will be examined in order to find possible implications that support the use of Social Identity Theory. For this purpose, the participants' importance of the practice was demonstrated as well as the level of involvement. The level of involvement deemed important to see, in order to determine how important their practice is to them. Furthermore, they were asked about their social surroundings and how they interact with people with non-yogic backgrounds.

6.3.1 Involvement

Alina talks about yoga being very important to her (Appx. A). Alina says that for her practicing yoga means to have a break from everyday life but at the same time it is a process: "Yoga is a path. When you don't practice yoga, your body, your mind, they will let you feel that" (Appx. A).

Bea says she does yoga on an everyday basis, whether it is mediation, breath practice or sun salutations (Appx. B). It is very important to her now, after initially not liking it (Appx. B). She prefers a mix of the physical practice and meditation and breathing practices and advocates for the spiritual part of yoga (Appx. B).

Christian practices meditation and pranayama every day, āsanas between four and seven times a week as he says meditation and breathing is more important to him (Appx. C). For him, yoga is a

lifestyle that he has incorporated in his life, suitable for his own personal needs (Appx. C).

Similar to Bea, Dora did not enjoy yoga when she first tried it but has since changed her mind and misses it, whenever she does not practice (Appx. D). She practices yoga in order to find inner calmness (Appx. D). Dora advocates for going into classes and getting instructions from a teacher whenever the practice gets very complex but usually relies on memories of her old teachers on certain sequences: “His words are etched in my mind, as if my teacher is standing right next to me (...) He is built in, like a navigation system” (Appx. D).

For Dora, yoga does not only happen on the mat and it is not right to ‘practice’ yoga, but rather it is a characterization of consciousness or connectedness (Appx. D). She continues: “It happens in everyday life, without the word being used. In order to push a car, you have to be in the warrior pose. When you go to the bakery and buy something, you breathe and then you’ve done your pranayama” (Appx. D). This can be supported by the yoga sūtra where it is discussed that almost any activity, we engage in can be considered as yoga when executed with passion, reason, and devotion (2006: 84).

Ella stresses the importance of yoga in the context of her work several times, as due to her work, she does not have much of a routine and therefore yoga is the right tool to ground her and sort her feelings and thoughts (Appx. E). To her, yoga means “connecting the outside to the inside, to form a unity and put everything into balance” (Appx. E). She likes to do physical practices, meditation or breathing practices every day, whenever she has time for it, no matter if it is just for a few minutes (Appx. E).

Felix states he practices yoga every other day, preferably in a studio but also by himself or watching YouTube videos (Appx. F). He says yoga is very important to him, to an extent he never suspected to be possible when he first started (Appx. F). He recalls leaving his first yoga class that was accompanied by a mantra singing thinking “oh no, this is too much. I can’t do this” (Appx. F). Now he even wants to go deeper by doing the teacher training in order to be able to share his experience with others (Appx. F).

He usually practices for 90 minutes and states that these are his 90 minutes, that really are just dedicated to himself (Appx. F). He likes that there is no right or wrong in yoga: “Every person is different and not every day is the same. The warrior pose that was standing strong yesterday can be totally different tomorrow and maybe not strong enough” (Appx. F). He poses that as something he can learn from: “maybe today I should not focus on strength and power, but rather what I need today is the practice to be lighter” (Appx. F).

Georg practices yoga 2-3 times in a studio, but more often on his own and almost never on

YouTube (Appx. G). Henrik practices 1-2 times a week and some more during summertime, when there are some yoga events outside (Appx. H). Henrik says that he needs those grounding elements in yoga, as they are really important to him (Appx. H). Yoga is very important to him and he tries to arrange his work around the practice even if there is a lot to do (Appx. H). He says it is wonderful to arrive on the mat after an exhausting day and “your head starts to fade out the world around you and you’re really by yourself” (Appx. H).

Ingo likes to practice three times a week, be it classes or using the internet at home, while his preference is attending classes in person (Appx. I). The mental aspect of yoga is very important to him in order to calm down and turn the mind off, but he also likes to tend to the physical part balancing out him sitting all day at his job (Appx. I).

Similar to some other participants, Jana did not like yoga when she first started, as she felt like it was “pretty boring” (Appx. J). Now, she practices every other day to every day, either by herself on YouTube or in a studio (Appx. J). She says yoga has started to become a fundamental part of her life she could not imagine living without: After not practicing one or two weeks, for whatever reasons, I’ll notice there’s something missing” (Appx. J).

All participants seem to show strong levels of involvement. This was derived from the frequency in which they practice as well as the importance they ascribed the practice. The least involvement could be found in Henrik, who practices 1-2, which is still not significantly less than the rest of the participants. It could be due to the fact that his work life is very stressful, as he is self-employed.

6.3.2 Social surroundings

As Kegan says, a person’s environment will have an influence on the development of the self (see chapter 4.1.1). According to him, it is not just one environment, but a series of them with different intensities of influence. Therefore, the participants’ personal environments should be regarded.

Alina says most of her friends in Berlin practice yoga or Acro yoga and mentions her mother introducing her to yoga (Appx. A), so she has this environment, where what she does is widely accepted, she is part of a group (see chapter 3.1.1). She talks about how people often need this thinking in boxes and admits to needing it too sometimes but is actively trying to break this pattern (Appx. A).

When asked about whether she actively contributes to yoga becoming more popular, Alina acknowledges that she takes a rather passive part in this: “I’m opening the door, but everyone needs to

walk through on their own” (Appx. A). She explains that she cannot force anyone to go to classes or engage in the philosophy, but she can offer a platform, answer questions and be there for anyone (Appx. A). This shows her tolerance and openness for variant opinions. Still, Alina talks about being the main motivator for her friends to try yoga and that she made friends through her teaching yoga (Appx. A).

She believes in vegetarianism being very important and says that everyone should know about the responsibility they have when making certain choices but says “I still think that everyone should do as they please” (Appx. A), so a certain level of tolerance for other lifestyles can be detected here but also again her responsibility towards others. When reflecting on her current situation living under the circumstances of COVID-19, Alina draws on the demand of people wanting to eat meat in excess amounts (Appx. A). She says we are in this situation because people do not want to cut back and live in excess, which is something that according to her, yoga preaches the opposite of (Appx. A). Here, she draws on the notion of non-coveting as described in the *yoga sūtras* (see chapter 2.1.1). Furthermore, by talking about COVID-19 and linking people eating meat in excessive amounts to be the origin of the virus, she makes a distinction between her as a vegetarian and others, the out-group, who eat meat excessively. Hereby, she identifies as belonging to the group of vegetarians. When talking about the benefits of yoga, Bea mentions the physical benefits of almost never getting sick:

I always see a lot of people with their little problems, and I don't have them at all, or I have a way of making them go away. When I've been sitting for a long time, I notice it too. But I can do something actively. I don't have to run to the doctor (Appx. B)

This could be an indication for her strong identification with yoga, as she makes up a good example of ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ (see chapter 4.1.2). She puts people that are not doing yoga in a specific group, which is different to hers and ascribes certain negative characteristics to this group in order to, according to Tajfel's theory, improve her self-image (McLeod, 2019).

However, Bea explains that she does not have many friends practicing yoga nowadays but said that this is something that has changed over the years (Appx. B). After all she seems to be very open for people outside any yoga circles. Like Alina, she decides on taking a rather passive part in the popularization, for example by providing tips when her friends complain about physical discomfort or cooking vegetarian food with friends (Appx. B).

Christian says he especially enjoys working with men, as they are authentic and honest as he describes it (Appx. C). When saying about working with men that “with men, there is not this hypocrisy” (Appx. C), he seems to imply that there is hypocrisy with the other sex, namely women. He acknowledges that with teaching men, “I am facing a very critical jury every day”, while saying women rather pay attention to his looks (Appx. C). With this he opens up a new categorization within the yoga group by talking in stereotypes about men and women and defining women as an out-group (see chapter 3.1.2)

Dora talks about how her oldest daughter started coming to her classes before Corona, even though she never demanded her children doing yoga in any way (Appx. D). She thinks it only makes sense to practice when you really want to practice, but know she is “thrilled that she’s coming and super proud. I think it’s amazing”. (Appx. D). Also, she is part of a circle of women who meet and talk about what yoga does to them but says she has a lot of friends outside of yoga with whom she does not talk about it at all: “And that’s totally fine” (Appx. D). Dora does not seem to heavily rely on any in-group/out-group dynamics, even though she stresses her delight about her daughter picking up the practice. It shows her positive connection towards her in-group.

Ella mentions she has a few friends who are into yoga and also inspired some people to start, for example her mother (Appx. E). She explains how she does not mind when other people do not show interest in yoga and feels the need to be careful to not go too deep into the subject of yoga with those people (Appx. E). She seems very tolerant and open to other opinions but is at the same time concerned about other people's feelings.

Felix likes to think he is an active part of making yoga more popular, not only through being a teacher, but also through speaking with people and thereby planting a thought in their minds (Appx. F). Felix says he does not have too many friends or family that are really engaged in yoga (Appx. F). Still, he often finds himself talking about it and feels like people usually show genuine interest in the subject (Appx. F). He refers this back to it being rather unusual in the Western world that men practice yoga, in contrast to India (Appx. F).

Georg likes talking about yoga only if people want to hear about it, but he has the feeling that people are interested because him being a lawyer and practicing yoga does not fit the picture they have in mind (Appx. G). Georg talks about how since he finished the yoga teacher training, he has a lot more people in his life that practice yoga: “You meet people and those people become your friends” (Appx. G).

Henrik says that unfortunately he could not persuade any of his friends, especially male friends,

to start practicing yoga but has some female friends he knows from doing yoga (Appx. H). Again, he stresses how very communicative goes about the topic of yoga and thereby concentrates on the positive topics rather than anything that did not go well (Appx. H).

Although he says he knows all these stereotypes and prejudices as a gay man, he still uses them throughout the interview noticeably more than the other participants. For example, when he says that men are usually rather reserved and have problems showing their feelings from what he excludes himself (Appx. H). Or when he talks about how some girls lack self-irony or "male traits" (Appx. H). He says he advocates for thinking in grey nuances rather than black or white (Appx. H), but then does just that with stereotypes of men and women. He would like to see himself taking an active part in making yoga more popular as "I'm never getting tired of talking about it" (Appx. H).

Ingo says that he does not have a lot of friends in yoga (Appx. I). He likes talking about it, as he thinks it can help a lot of people but says he can only do the offer and is not there to preach (Appx. I). He talks about how friends of his say that they do not want "to sit in a room full of size zero girls staring at my tummy" (Appx. I). This supports the notion of yoga being mainly sold as something skinny white girls will do (Bhalla & Moscovitz, 2020: 101-102).

Jana talks about her mother and stepmother being into yoga even back when she was a child (Appx. J). She admits to being an active part of making yoga more popular by talking about it with her friends and motivating them to visit a class (Appx. J).

According to Fromm, sane and healthy people should be able to develop their own unique identity and not have the need for approval from and completely identify with the group they are associated with (2008: 191). Since none of the participants report mainly having friends practicing yoga, it can be found that none of the participants need to rely on any approval be it of their in-group or other people.

6.4 Development

In this section, possible development of the participants will be discussed either based on their health, their attitudes, their behaviour and finally, their identity. It should be mentioned that all of these factors often merge, as they are interconnected, but it was attempted to separate them as reasonably as possible. Questions regarding the importance and meaning of the yoga practice and if they experienced any changes in their lives since picking up the practice were taken into consideration.

6.4.1 Health

Bea talks about how she never gets sick anymore (Appx. B). and Christian acknowledges that since yoga came into his life, he does not need a therapist anymore, as yoga takes up this role: Whenever he notices some kind of imbalance, he tries to solve it by practicing meditation and breathing techniques rather than practicing asanas (Appx. C). This can be related back to the *yoga sūtras*. It is said there that deeply imprinted experiences are not going to have an influence on perception anymore when constant alignment on the topic is practiced (see chapter 2.1.1). Those experiences could be composed of internalised behaviour one would usually seek a therapist for.

Dora explains how it all started for her with the physical aspect, to release tension, relieve stress and get better sleep (Appx. D). She adds that it keeps you young and mentally active and that the practice can release hormones that help you not to fall into a depression (Appx. D). Ella explains: “I always feel better after the practice” (Appx. E).

Felix contributes the reason for him overcoming his sickness to the practice of yoga (Appx. F). Georg says that of all the sports he has done, never has anything ever been so effective as yoga in terms of physical impact, even though he concedes that yoga is not sports (Appx. G). He credits yoga and mindfulness for overcoming his sickness (Appx. G).

Jana mentions the mental and physical benefits of yoga and says “I just feel better (...) You’ll never feel worse than you’ve felt before after a practice, always better. No matter how annoying the practice seemed” (Appx. J). Henrik too noticed changes in his mental health after picking up yoga, as he previously suffered from panic attacks and burnout (Appx. H) Ingo emphasises the benefit of the body getting more flexible and malleable as well as the mental aspects of just being with yourself (Appx. I).

Three of the participants mentioned their sickness or injuries as a starting point of their yoga journey (see chapter 6.1). According to the second chapter of the *yoga sūtras*, the first step to keep suffering away is acknowledging the problem, which the participants seemed to have done (see chapter 4.2.1).

6.4.2 Attitudes

Alina highlights that yoga did not only teach her many things on a mental level, but also on a professional level: “I never thought that I would get so far with yoga, that I could earn my money by sharing it with so many people.” She talks about how she was able to meet so many people and see so

many places in the world due to her job as a yoga teacher: “That is the main reason that I am where I am at all” (Appx. A).

She says that she wants to engage even more in the spiritual part of yoga (Appx. A). She says even though she does not think she “found herself”, as she believes this is a lifelong process, she would still like to live as authentic as possible - being 100 % herself in any given situation with any kind of person (Appx. A). To her, yoga means to keep good company with yourself and your environment, which also entails nutrition, nature, and conscious living (Appx. A). She says that she likes about her job that she is able to actually hug people without it being unprofessional: “You really connect with people and there are so many benefits to that, I could write a book” (Appx. A).

When talking about the influence yoga had on her life, Bea states that nutrition is a big topic, as she is a vegetarian, as well as her professional life (Appx. B). She explains how she would always be contemplating whether she was in the right profession and has since arrived at a place where she feels secure with her decisions (Appx. B). For Bea animals are important, “because for me it has something yogic somehow. Love of animals. It is a connection between nature and animals and humans and also makes me very calm” (Appx. B).

Moreover, she talks about the mental and emotional benefits and how she is able to calm herself through breathing techniques (Appx. B). She recalls being a very impulsive person before doing yoga, so it has impacted her way of handling things (Appx. B). Another thing that is of great importance to her is having time for her hobbies and her social life, as she has experienced this being neglected before in favour of her job when she was working abroad (Appx. B). Bea talks about how overidentifying with work is not what makes her happy: She recounts the experience of working abroad and working overtime a lot, which is not worth it to her, even though the job is well paid and the people she worked with were great (Appx. B).

For her, yoga makes it possible to “be very close to myself” (Appx. B). She describes how she is one with herself on the mat and afterwards tries to bring this into her day (Appx. B). She further talks about how her self-perception has gotten much better since picking up yoga and how she takes better care of herself, especially in relationships (Appx. B). She says she likes that she is not depending her own luck on anyone else anymore (Appx. B). It could be discussed whether this stems from her yoga practice, or if this would have been her natural development without yoga. But for her, there is a lot that has changed: “I would say I came from the dark into the light. From darkness to light” (Appx. B).

For Dora, the greatest benefit yoga brings to her is being able to sort her feelings: “It cleans my

soul. It brings subjects into my life that are close to my heart's desire and has the ability of dissolving things that are not good for me" (Appx. D) Felix says yoga grounds him, makes him calm down and has changed his view on what matters to him in life (Appx. F). He says that his focus has shifted from wanting a successful career to the importance of cohesion in the partnership and generally good relationships with friends and family (Appx. F).

When talking about how he got into yoga, Georg first describes it as a coincidence but corrects himself and says "since I consider myself an advanced yogi, I don't believe in coincidences anymore. It must have somehow been meant for me" (Appx. G). He says that yoga brought him on a journey and changed him in a way he did not think would be possible (Appx. G). He explains that he was already a very calm person, but yoga has helped him be an even better version of himself (Appx. G). He further describes the importance of this triad of balancing body, soul, and mind, as he stresses that yoga does not only consist of the asanas and refers back to Patañjali (Appx. G).

He says he does not like to use the word spirituality, because he feels like it has some negative connotations to it in Germany as people immediately begin to think about cults and sects, but for him spiritual rather means that something is directed inwards (Appx. G). This goes hand in hand with what is described in chapter 3.2.3 about the view of cults in Germany. He agrees with Dora on the notion of yoga being ever-present during everyday life and tries to incorporate all eight limbs of Patañjali in his life (Appx. G). He describes yoga as being a journey, a path: "you don't practice and then you're enlightened the next day" (Appx. G).

For Henrik, yoga not only gets him into high spirits but helps him to acknowledge certain patterns within his behaviour and subsequently work on them (Appx. H). Still, he says, it should not be about being perfect, but rather about being on a journey (Appx. H). He says it is a great balance to unwind from the stress of being self-employed (Appx. H).

Ingo says he has been getting feedback about being calmer and adds how he feels more empathetic and how his inner world is less influenced by external factors (Appx. I).

Jana credits yoga for being able to ground her and to balance mind and body (Appx. J). She says that without yoga, there would hardly be a moment to pause, feel your inner world and breath consciously (Appx. J). Jana explains that consciousness is something she learned through yoga, as it is not only about the physical practice (Appx. J). She ascribes becoming a better person, being more open and friendly to the yoga practice (Appx. J).

Christian talks about how men are taught not to cry and show when they are in pain and how he

saw men crying in his arms in connection to the yoga practice: “You don’t believe the intensity of these moments. It’s just...and this is what yoga brings out in people” (Appx. C). Christian states:

Because I have incorporated yoga into my life similar to brushing my teeth or breathing, it has a meaning, but also not. I would like to compare it to breathing. It is ultimately a tool we have. The only tool we can steer our well-being with. We have the possibility to get out of something by breathing consciously and this is what yoga is to me. It is natural, a natural state (Appx. C)

He adds:

Actually, it means to be in this natural state, to create, to have this possibility of being connected with yourself, taking yourself seriously, being aware of yourself, to absorb and feel. All these things. It isn’t something big, All-holy or something. It is a natural state. It’s not a religion. Sometimes people forget about that. (Appx. C)

6.4.3 Behaviour

Alina talks about being vegetarian for over ten years and is now starting to live more consciously regarding the environment as she does not take flights within Germany anymore whenever she has to travel for her job (Appx. A). She calls for living in harmony with yourself, with other people, nature and animals and acknowledges that this consequently means to cut down on things, which not everybody is open for (Appx. A). Jana thinks yoga fits very well into her lifestyle, as she has been vegan since “like a hundred years” and cares about the environment (Appx. J). She says:

This is not the reason I started (yoga), though. But I do think that whenever there is already an increased awareness towards certain things, the next step does not seem too big to take. So, you’ll start looking for fairly produced yoga mats (Appx. J)

Jana says being vegan or environmentally conscious represents herself “in a way”, but explains that it is not these attributes themselves, but rather the action that follows these attributes (Appx. J). She describes that being vegan or environmentally conscious can be the result of being more reflective on

certain topics and being empathetic but she admits that she is privileged enough to have the time and resources to engage in these topics, a privilege other people might not have (Appx. J).

According to Tajfel, she engages in Social Comparison here while making herself part of the “good” group of vegans and environmentally conscious people, as she is able to reflect on certain topics and shows empathy, in contrast to those, who are not vegan and environmentally conscious (see chapter 4.1.2). However, she admits being in a privileged position where she is able to engage in these topics in the first place. It could be argued that by acknowledging this, she again puts herself in the better position and therefore has a positive outcome of the Social Comparison.

Towards the notion of yoga teachers being vegan or vegetarian, Felix says: “A lot of yoga teachers are vegan and stuff. I don’t think you need to be that excessive” (Appx. F). Henrik talks about being a good yogi without having to eat vegan and criticizes the notion of black-and-white thinking (Appx. H). Here, it can be argued whether they too engage in Social Comparison and try to achieve positive results. Even though Jana and Alina as well as Felix and Henrik belong to the same group in terms of yoga, they assign themselves to a different group when it comes to their eating habits.

Christian describes that he is not as quick-tempered anymore and rather takes his time to pause for a moment before reacting (Appx. C). He further talks about how not only yoga has had an impact on his life, but also the birth of his daughter: “So, so, so many big questions came to my mind back then. Like who am I? Why am I who I am? Why do I think that I am this person?” (Appx. C). Yoga has helped him on a physical and emotional level to feel himself, to sense himself and to make him more relaxed (Appx. C). He reminisces about how he used to be very aggressive and angry and got into physical fights on a regular basis (Appx. C). He acknowledges that him being calmer started with the birth of his daughter, rather than yoga (Appx. C). He credits yoga for making him overthink his consumer behaviour, as he gave up most of his belongings and lives in his allotment garden where he grows his own vegetables (Appx. C).

According to Dora, yoga makes her rethink behaviour patterns and emphasises the importance of the continuity of the practice: “The longer you practice, the more you’ll notice how deep it really goes. It goes beyond the body, the muscles, the tendons, the bones and meets you within the heart” (Appx. D) A lot has changed for her since picking up yoga - similar to Christian, she hints that she used to be “a bad girl” and that there are a lot of things she is not too proud of, but does not want to get into detail, as it gets very “explicit” (Appx. D). She says something very similar to Bea (see chapter 6.4.2): “I

used to be on the dark side of the force and have arrived back at the bright side” (Appx. D). She explains that there is a lot less drama in her life, it has gotten significantly more positive and she has gained more quality of life (Appx. D). She started studying after picking up yoga and had a change in career, met her husband which was due to her “drawing other things into my life” (Appx. D).

Ella notices that it is easier for her to stop and breath in for a moment whenever she feels agitated or stressed (Appx. E). She learned mindfulness through practicing yoga as well as understanding and taking care of herself and her surroundings (Appx. E). Georg describes how he rather changed the inner values of his life, rather than external factors (Appx. G). He cites an example of his changed attitude when he talks about how his relation to other people has changed:

A while ago, when it was still very cold outside, a person slept on the ground, so I woke him up, brought him some tea and bread. Something I would never have done back in the day because I was scared of the contact, getting sick or something. (...) Those people need our empathy (Appx. G)

He feels like he is socially more engaged, for example started to be a member of the work council at his company or, like Alina, Jana and Christian, tries to make more environmentally conscious decisions (Appx. G). He thinks that compared to others, his life did not change as drastically as he has a son to care for and therefore does not want to risk his financial security but describes how crazy it is what “yoga makes people do” (Appx. G).

6.4.4 Identity

You are not what you do. You are the person you are

(Alina, Appx. A)

Alina describes how people often identify others by what they do (Appx. A), which draws on the notion of Social Identity Theory. She says: “When you practice yoga, yoga is a part of yourself, but you are not yoga” (Appx. A). She further describes how finding a hobby like yoga or other passions can help people to find their identity by reinforcing your sense of yourself, “because you do what you love” (Appx. A). She explains that she thinks it is important to reflect on your identity and thinks about “who

am I and who do I want to be” (Appx. A).

Yoga is a path you can take, you can live. But you are an individual, just like any other person you’ve met. And that is perfectly fine. But when everyone identifies with yoga, well, then everyone is the same. And the good thing about us is that we are so diverse (Appx. A)

Bea says: “Through yoga, I’ve really peeled myself over the years and now I can say I’m at the core” (Appx. B). She goes on saying how she has become more authentic since doing yoga: “I know my weaknesses, I know my strengths, my dark side, my sunny side and have really arrived” (Appx. B). Thinking back to when she first started yoga, Bea recalls how yoga has helped her get to know who she really is (Appx. B). In Christian’s view, everyone takes their personality to the mat: “If you are a person who tends to shy away from every obstacle, every conflict and bury yourself, you’ll do this on the mat, too.” (Appx. C). He touches on the subject of the higher aim of yoga being the dissolution of an identity:

I know with generations before us, their gut, or heart was the boss and the ego was the employee. Because this is important so that we can protect ourselves. And today we have these giant inflated egos and the heart or gut is the slave (Appx. C)

When asked about identity, Christian talks about the importance of context: In his opinion, it is problematic to think about identity in a way of seeing it as a boost for his nationality, but rather he sees identity as inner work to find out who you really are or who I appear to be (Appx. C). He thinks it is problematic to identify yourself with a specific yoga style or teacher because these are external factors (Appx. C).

For Dora, identity is her ID, her tax number, her address (Appx. D). She says that whenever she goes to sleep, she takes off her identity and explains that only then she appears to go to a place where she is her true self (Appx. D). She further talks about identification with values, virtues, and character traits, which one ‘loses’ when going to sleep: “During the deep sleep phase, we are all the same “(Appx. D). Alina mentions that she thinks finding yourself is a lifelong process, while Dora does not seem to agree with her on that, as she states that she feels accomplished and connected with the self and is not on a quest anymore (Appx. D). Here it should be mentioned that the difference in age might play a role, as Alina is 28 years old, while Dora is 57 years old, which could explain this difference. On the other hand, this could also be due to general differences in their attitudes.

Ella feels like yoga helps her to understand herself and to get to know her better (Appx. E). Similar to Bea, she compares getting to know your identity with peeling the skin of an onion and says that yoga can help with that (Appx. E)

Felix is not sure if there is any connection between yoga and identity (Appx. F). After some thinking, he says that if it is possible to be open for yoga, it will have an impact on the identity (Appx. F). Georg agrees that yoga can help people find their identity if they are looking for it (Appx. G). Ingo believes that yoga can but will not necessarily be a part of your own identity, depending on how much one engages in the topic (Appx. I). He thinks that yoga can show a path that is able to influence our identity (Appx. I). Jana has the feeling that yoga reflects one's own identity but says “it is important that you’re not just that one thing you identify with” (Appx. J).

Although, I am aware that these interviews cannot be regarded as representative of the whole of the people practicing yoga, these are some interesting findings, which will be discussed further in the following chapter.

7. Discussion

It was shown that the practice of yoga is able to influence the life of the participants in a great way. As presented in chapter 6.4, practicing yoga not only has an influence on the participants’ perceived physical and mental health, but also contributes to behavioural changes as well as changes in their attitudes. A few would experience a shift in life values. The participants further noticed changes in their professional life as well as in their takes on nutrition and the environment.

Changes are discussed in the *yoga sūtras*. After successfully practicing and internalizing all eight limbs, a change in our *citta* can be achieved (Sriram, 2006: 153). In the fourth chapter, characteristics for altering the personality are determined (2006: 217) and it is possible to change the *citta* in a way that things are perceived differently (2006: 219). This supports the findings of perceived changes within the elements of health, attitude, and behaviour as this goes in line with some of the aims of practicing yoga. Adding to that, one of the most important topics in yoga is the engagement with the question of “who am I and who am I not” (2006: 156), which draws on identity formation.

Based on Social Identity Theory, a strong group identification could be noticed with a few, but not all participants. When talking about chapter 6.2.1 and the representation of the participants, it can

be noted that most of them presented themselves in a positive light. This might be a natural impulse, but one of them, namely Henrik, did talk about a negative characteristic. He further seems critical of some ways yoga is often represented. For example, when he talks about how people generally associate yoga with women only, due to its marketing in this direction (Appx. H). He further criticizes the notion of not being a good yogi when eating meat or be of quick temper. This could indicate that he is not fully comfortable with identifying with yoga. He connected identity first and foremost to his sexual identity. Based on this and Social Identity Theory, it could be argued that his in-group are men, rather than yoga and by seeing yoga tending mostly to women, he will not identify with it at such a high level.

It should be noted that Social Identity Theory has been subject of critique. The fact that the theory leaves out communicational aspects and socio-economic factors like globalisation or historical contexts (Dashtipour, 2012: 17-18) is important to mention especially with this research being written in the field of culture, communication, and globalisation. After all, since my research is not solely based on this theory, it was possible to extract the valuable implications of the theory and compensate for any shortcomings. This was done by using alternative theories, e.g. by Hall, who presents the missing transformational aspect of identity.

Within Hall's approach, identity is seen as something that is variable and the emphasis here is on transformation, rather than identity being static (Hall, 1990: 226), Various changes regarding their health, their attitudes and their behaviour were reported by the participants after picking up the practice of yoga. This supports the notion of yoga being a part of their identity and therefore having influence on it. Since identity is viewed as constituted within, rather than outside of representations within his definition (1990: 222), the way the participants represent themselves is important to consider. Their representations emphasise the importance of yoga to a great deal, which is why their statements can be ascribed value to in terms of their identity.

When referring back to Biswas' study about the role of yoga and class identities in New York, it was found that one group of students values both the physical and mental activities, whereas the other group predominantly value the physical benefits of yoga (Biswas, 2012: 108-109). This could not be supported by my research. All of the participants emphasized that they found equal value in both the physical and the mental benefits (see chapter 6.3.1).

However, the findings of the study about identity capital done in Turku, do correspond to my research. In this study it was found that the participants' identity capital is built upon mental and physical flexibility, strength, freedom, and a balanced, successful life including social relationships (Broo, 2012: 32). This could be said to be true to my participants as well, as these are all attributes, they ascribe value to during the interviews, except for successful life, which is not something that is explicitly mentioned. It is further found in the study by Broo, that the interviewees do not refrain from employing other identities besides their yogic one (2012: 30). Based on observations about the participants' hobbies and work profession and their ascribed value to both, it can be assumed that, to some extent, this finding could be supported in my research. For example, Ella and Henrik very often referred back to their respective work, which can imply that this is a very important part of their identity (Appx. E, H). Another example is Dora, who recalls that at one point in her life, she was solely a mother, which, according to her, has now shifted to being many different roles (Appx. D). Since the focus of this research was not on finding out about other parts of the participants' identity, this can only be an assumption.

7.1 Reflections

The findings represented in the previous chapter need to be regarded with some reflections in mind. One aspect that may have influenced the outcome are the governmental measures taken concerning COVID-19. During the time the interviews were conducted in April 2020, these measures included all sport and social facilities to be closed, borders to be closed and contact with only one other household, among others. These measures could have influenced the participant's perceptions of the importance of their yoga practice. It may be the case that the interviewees ascribed an even higher level of importance to the practice of yoga than they would have during times when they were able to live their "regular" life, since almost all participants stated they have increased their time of practicing. It is therefore likely that the impact of yoga is enhanced as the practice allows them to go back to a place of security, normality, and familiarity during these uncertain times.

Another aspect that should be mentioned is that most of the participants mention their openness as a characteristic. This can be ascribed to the fact that on the one hand there has to be a certain level of openness, when taking part in an interview in general, or on the other because of their interest in making yoga more popular, which was mentioned in chapter (6.2.2).

As already mentioned in the methodology part of this research, my own personal ties to the practice of yoga could have an influence on the outcome. By all means, I aimed for approaching the research as unbiased as possible, but it is hardly attainable to eliminate all bias. Adding to that, a research will never be completely unbiased (Bryman, 2012: 39).

On the same note, the choice of theory, which evidently is a very subjective one, should be regarded to. The combination of previous studies and theories applied was chosen as it was deemed the most valuable in regard to what was examined. By any means, there might be other theories out there that are equally fitting but could not be considered, also due to a time constraint.

Since my participants were not taking part in an identity status test, it is difficult to tell, whether their self-presentation has any implications on their self-views, as examined by Berzonsky (1995: 737). It would be interesting to see if there is any correlation between the way the interviewees represent themselves and their identity status, as nine out of ten exclusively mentioned positive characteristics when describing themselves. Moreover, based on their description, they all seemed very content with their life and would only report positive findings. Further research could engage in the aforementioned study of identity status combined with self-representation.

One last element to consider is the lack of diversity among the participants. All participants, except for one, are of Caucasian background and predominantly living in the northern parts of Germany. Again, this can be attributed to the time constraint and should be adjusted in future research.

8. Conclusion

The findings of this study provide significant implications for identity formation in regard to the practice of yoga. The aim of the present research was to examine how the practice of yoga influences identity. The first sub-question supporting the research question is: How does the practice of yoga influence people's perceived health?

This research suggests that all participants recognized their practice of yoga having a positive effect on their physical and mental well-being. Three of the participants reported picking up yoga after an injury or sickness, and that it has helped them to overcome their respective problems. The participants that did not report a sickness prior to picking up the practice of yoga still described positive health outcomes.

The second sub-question is: How does the practice of yoga influence people's attitudes?

The research has shown that the participants all agreed on the fact that practicing yoga had an impact on their self-development, in a way that they started noticing positive changes in their character traits and attitudes based on their personal perceptions.

The third sub-question is: How does the practice of yoga influence people's attitudes?

All participants reported behavioural changes after picking up the practice of yoga. For most, they have integrated the practice into their life to such an extent, that it has become a part of their identity. Thus, referring back to the research question, the practice of yoga seems to influence major parts of the participant's lives, therefore proving its ability to influence their respective identities in terms of attitudes and behaviour.

This research can function as a foundation and mental stimulus for further research. Future research could be carried out by using larger sampling sizes and greater variety of demographics. Furthermore, it could be conducted over longer periods of time while engaging in participant observations, in order to gain more diverse insights and an even deeper knowledge about the influence of yoga on identity.

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