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“Likes 👍 - the new Self?”

How does social currency affect yoga practitioners in
Sweden?

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Likes 👍 - the new self? How does social currency affect yoga practitioners in Sweden?

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Abstract

*This article discusses the impact of social currency on yoga practitioners in Sweden, emphasising the relation between social currency, sexualisation and yoga. Social currency is best described as the more likes on social media, the higher social status – especially on Instagram. Following this definition, this article aims at exploring **why** and **how** we practice yoga in Sweden by asking 1) **how** yoga practitioners perceive and embody yoga, and 2) to what extent there is a relation between **social currency**, **sexualisation** and **yoga**. Departing from a combined methodology of 10 narrative interviews and content analysis of 20 Instagram accounts, supported by a theoretical apparatus of French sociologists Pierre Bourdieu, Jean Baudrillard and American author bell hooks, two conclusions are drawn:*

- *Within the yoga community, two opposite philosophical directions are identified: the traditionalists and Yoga 2.0. This polarisation shows a tendency towards a shift in favour of those who use yoga to gain social currency. This has consequences for how we perceive and embody yoga, with individualism and sexualisation as prominent aspects.*
- *There is a strong relation between social currency, sexualisation and yoga, in which Instagram plays an essential part as being a role-model for how to perceive and embody yoga. This implies a normalisation of cultural and human exploitation and objectification.*

These results point at the necessity to broaden the discussion of social currency, sexuality, and what impact this will have on yoga practitioners today. This concern also involves how re-writing of culture has become a normalisation in which old colonial and oppressing structures not only are being sanctioned, but even more and reproduced and socially incorporated. The critique against traditional yoga practitioners being religious and obsolete, simultaneously creates the 'new' religion: that of worshipping the physical body as currency for social status and capital, which I call the 'Church of bodies.' This paradox opens doors for further research on the modern yoga and its consequences and impact on the direction in which today's yoga community is heading.

Key words: yoga, symbolic capital, cultural appropriation, hyperreality, sexualisation, Bourdieu

Introduction

This article discusses Yoga practitioners in Sweden contextualised within **social currency**. Social currency is best described as the more 👍 the more status, especially on social media like Instagram, Facebook, Tik Tok etc. (Colcol, 2020). The hunt for being **unique** and standing out from the rest has increased the practice of sharing popular content on social media, social networks as well as offline communities (Das, 2021; Mosley, 2021). From a Swedish context, social currency has become an increasingly growing phenomenon within the yoga community – especially on Instagram. Recent figures show that the top 10 yoga influencers on Instagram range between 92,7 to 3,4 thousand (starnpage.com, received 2022-08-04) – not including the account **@yoga_girl** with 2 million followers. The person behind this account, Rachel Bråthén

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is also the initiator of this yoga hype. When setting up her account in 2012 the aim was just to share pieces of her daily life while practicing yoga. Coinciding however with the fact that she was the only yoga influencer on Instagram at that time ([consid.se](https://www.consid.se), retrieved 2022-08-04), the impact became huge. Today, living in Aruba practicing being a full-time yoga teacher and influencer, Bråthén has also written two books of which the first (*Yoga Girl*) became New York Times' #1 bestseller in 2015 ([NewYorkTimes](https://www.nytimes.com), retrieved 2022-06-07).

My own experience of yoga reaches more than 30 years, (of which I have worked as yoga instructor for the past 20). During this time, I have witnessed an almost explosive yoga boom only the last 5 years, making its way into every corner of the Swedish society. Reaching an almost institutionalised status, yoga is seen everywhere today: gyms, schools, prisons, workplaces, health sector, clothing industry, books, DVD's, travel business etc. All this together have made way for the increased hunt for social currency, causing a dislocation of meaning: yoga as means for feeling good *inside*, has now transformed into a means to look cool, beautiful, athletic, and sexy on the *outside*. Today, yoga has been reduced to a tool for being unique in the eyes of others. This shift began already in 2014 when the niche called *New Age* became part of the cultural mainstream (Gregoire, 2014). The eccentric and controversial yoga philosophy was transformed into a popular and normalised practice (Jain, 2015). In 2021, yoga was the 5th most popular physical activity in Sweden, with more than 1,2 million practitioners (www.rf.se, retrieved 2022-08-04). However, despite this social impact, yoga is still a very little researched topic among Swedish scholars, which calls for concern.

Aim

Why should sociologists bother to talk about yoga? The simple answer is called *normalisation*. Yoga is everywhere. This normalisation though, brings several problematic issues of which social currency and sexualisation are two. The dislocation of meaning and practice has diminished the former, traditional, and niched practice into a goal-oriented, rational tool for social currency – with the side-effect that nothing is 'sacred' anymore. To me, this raises a concern as traditional yoga generally is considered as being opposed to everything social currency represents. This involves what I call external **collision**, and immanent paradox – especially on Instagram.



Figure 1: "Playfulness. Yoga to me is not about performing, it's not a show sport, it's an inner journey" [My translation]. Source: [@onenatureyoga](https://www.instagram.com/onenatureyoga) Retrieved 2022-06-22.

There are numerous posts showing this paradox as photo and adjacent text often contradicts each other. Take the post below, for example (see fig. 1): the photo shows @onenatureyoga performing a highly advanced variant of the yoga position (or *asana*) called *Salabhasana* (the Locust). The paradox is how she promotes a **non-performative way of using one's body**, while the photo shows her doing the opposite: a performance of athleticism. Having @onenatureyoga as example, I argue how these collisions and paradoxes are problematic in two ways: their effects on yoga practitioners, and the explicit focus on social currency. Discussing the results of 10 narrative interviews with active yoga practitioners, combined with a content analysis of 20 Instagram accounts, I will focus on:

- 1) **how** yoga practitioners perceive and embody yoga
- 2) to what extent we can see a relation between **social currency**, **sexualisation** and **yoga**

The Church of bodies

When contextualising yoga within social currency and sexualisation, we can talk in terms of what I call the **Church of bodies**. This is due to the dislocation from spiritual to physical body (Aguerre Falk & Ölund Pereira, 2018:30; Redden, 2011) – especially promoted among the Instagrammers (the analysed Instagram material). The increased emphasis on not only the physical, but the *sexualised* physical body, rather than spiritual body is beneficial for the Instagrammer's efforts to gain bigger ground. They simply create a 'pick-and-choose'-yoga (Redden, 2011). Like a bag of candy, you choose your favourites, while in the process also becomes your *own* authority. This liberalised and rational-oriented yoga practice enhances the physical body as tool for gaining social currency. In this Church of bodies, two elements are essential: the ability to perform **postural yoga**, i.e., advanced yoga *asanas* (De Michelis, 2008) and **sexualisation**. This is also an example of a collision and paradox. Although the yoga practitioners today move away from the ancient, traditional roots, advocating secularisation rather than sacralisation, the emergence of Church of bodies, *in itself*, becomes an even increased sacralisation (Redden, 2011; Hagevi, 2005). Opposed to traditional yoga (Iyengar, 1979), Church of bodies advocates not only to remain in the circularity of birth, sickness, old age and death (the wheel of *Samsara* Samsara. Retrieved 2022-09-17), but to *expand* it. This implies that instead of **uniting** with the Absolute Truth (Iyengar, 1979), yoga practitioners should unite with their physical bodies (Aguerre Falk & Ölund Pereira, 2018). Closely connected to physical body is **sexualisation**.



Figure 2: Source: @yoga_girl: Retrieved 2022-06-22.

The post above (see fig. 2) is [@yoga_girl](#) promotes sexuality as essential element within yoga, dressed in words like zen, peace, conform or wildwoman. This is also telling for the message we're exposed to at Instagram: sex sells! However, this liberation is quite opposed to the liberation (or *moksha*) mediated in ancient scriptures: the liberation from *Samsara* (Moksha, Retrieved 2022-09-17). From the post above, yoga practitioners today display more likeness to *liberalisation* as in freedom being valued higher than being *civilised* (Engdahl, 2009:76). Hence the reference to Wildwoman. However, this sexualised liberalisation is often supplemented with borrowed objects or customs from preferably eastern or native American cultures, to provide an air of mysticism, exotism and eroticism (see fig. 3).

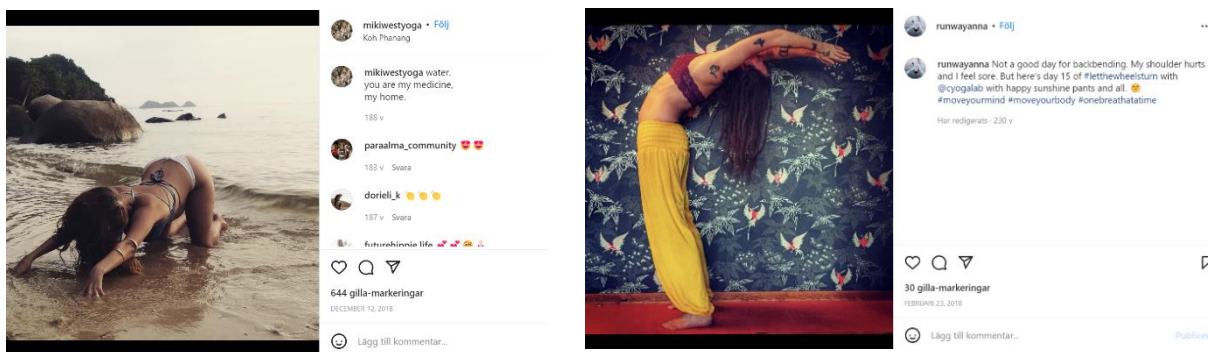


Figure 3: Source: Left: [@mikiwestyoga](#). Right: [@runwayanna](#). Retrieved 2022-06-22.

Church of bodies is also an illustration of the dislocation need → demand (cf. Bauman, 2008). In the era of rationality, we need quick fixes, quick attention and quick affirmation. Again, a practice opposed to ancient, traditional yoga philosophy. A cornerstone in traditional yoga is the Vedic scriptures advocating a philosophy built on four major branches: *Karma*, - *Raja*, - *Jñāna*, - and *Bhakti-yoga* (Lidell, 1983:29). The word Veda (वेद), means knowledge or sacred knowledge (Veda Retrieved 2022-06-03), which can be characterised as ‘slow’ knowledge based on a succession of steps, paths and authorities. A common metaphor is the *Eight Limbs of Patanjali*,² (see fig. 4) of which the current yoga practitioners often focus only on the third ‘limb’: *asanas* or postures performed slowly, combined with deep abdominal breathing (Lidell, 1983:19). This tendency is in line with the ‘fast science’ exceeding other limbs like *yamas* and *niyamas* (e.g., non-violence, truthfulness, purity, studies of sacred, philosophical texts etc., (ibid.)). A major factor is social currency: we want to look good at the gym or on Instagram as that will attract more immediate attention – and in the prolonging, likes 👍.

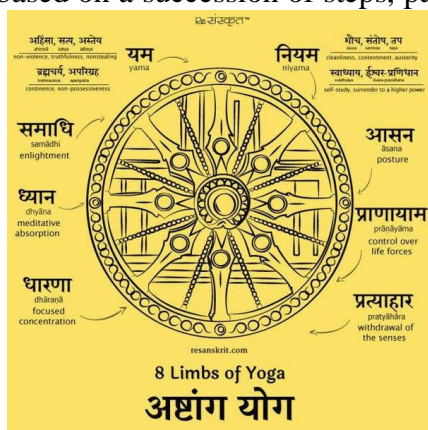


Figure 4 Source: [EightLimbsOfPatanjali](#). Retrieved 2022-08-18.

²*Yamas* (moral principles towards the surrounding world), *niyamas* (moral principles towards the own individual), *asanas* (body postures), *pranayama* (breathing exercises), *pratyahara* (withdrawal of the senses), *dharana* (concentration), *dhyana* (meditation) and *samadhi* (enlightenment and unity) (Lidell, 1983:19).

A brief history of yoga in Sweden

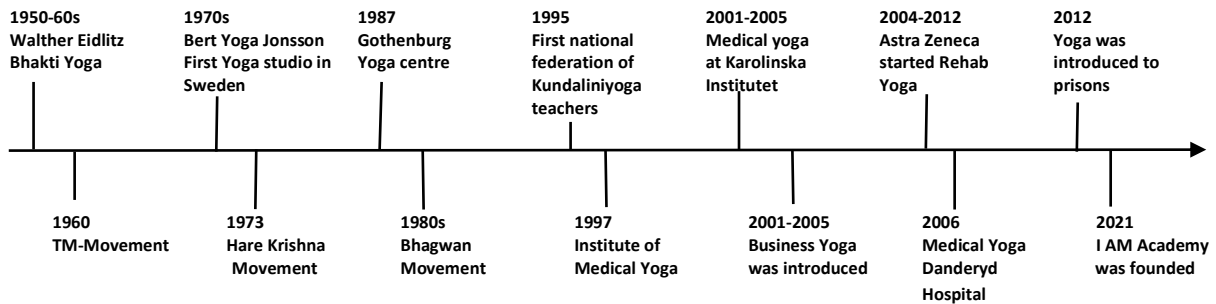


Figure 5 History of yoga in Sweden 1950–2021. My model.

In 1949, during the gymnastic event Lingiaden, Indian Shyam Sundar Goswami founded the Goswami Institute of Yoga in Stockholm, which is considered the oldest yoga school in Europe. Short after, Austrian Walther Eidlitz settles in Sweden while introducing the yoga tradition Bhakti yoga. In 1960, Transcendental Meditation (TM) came to Sweden and grew rapidly in popularity much because the Beatles' explicit interest in the movement (Boll, 2022). Today TM has about 85 000 practitioners in Sweden (TM Retrieved 2022-06-03). Another movement that grew in popularity was Hare Krishna. Founded in 1973, Jörgen Vegavan Sundvall and Willy Ajit-das Pfändtner set up the Swedish branch of ISCON (The International Society for Krishna Consciousness), with among others using the Beatle George Harrison as poster name (he had a strong interest in Hare Krishna and remain a devotee until his death in 2001). Hare Krishan is considered a major reason for the increased interest for philosophy and spirituality in Sweden during the 1970s and 80s (Essén, 2010). This made way for another movement, the Bhagwan (also called Osho, founded by Indian Bhagwan Shree Rajness). Focusing on freedom from all religious expressions, Bhagwan emphasises meditation, free sexuality and personal development. Although Bhagwan's centre is in Oregon, USA, there is a small, but growing, community in Sweden tied to the Bhagwan-centre in Rättvik, Dalarna (Baravara Retrieved 2022-06-03), while at the same time having been subject for strong critique, calling it a manipulative sect, profiting on people's search for inner peace (SRnews Retrieved 2022-06-03). Distinguishing itself from both TM and Bhagwan, Hare Krishna has an outspoken, explicit



Figure 6: A clay figure of a man sitting in a Lotus position. Dated to 3000 BCE (Lidell, 1993:13).

focus on the Vedic philosophy and texts, especially the Upanishads. With two large communities (Korsnäs gård and Almviks gård) and several temples and restaurants, The Upanishads are often referred to as representations of the highest meaning of Veda, primarily investigating the nature of Ātman - the True Self in Sanskrit (Müller, 2004), and dated between late Bronze Age and early iron Age, ca.1300 – 900 BCE (Stein, 2010). The later part of the Upanishads constitutes the foundation of

the yoga teaching still present today: the Vedanta (the idea of one Absolute consciousness). Around 600 BCE, two other major texts appeared: the Ramayana and the Mahabharata (also including the Bhagavad Gita). Archaeological findings of figures doing yoga postures were found in the Indus valley and are dated around 3000 BCE (Lidell, 1993:13).

More recently, yoga has become a major element within the Health Sector. In 2001, Karolinska Institutet introduced yoga to medical students, followed by the concept Business Yoga (yoga at workplaces) during the same period. In 2004, the medical company Astra Zeneca started the Rehab Yoga project as part of a rehabilitation program for their employees. With several hundreds of employees practicing yoga every week at work, this was considered as one of the most successful forms of rehab in Sweden. In 2006, Danderyds hospital implemented medical yoga in the cardiac intensive care, and in 2012, Swedish prisons began to employ yoga to improve the intern's wellbeing. The I AM Academy was founded in 2021 focusing on spreading knowledge of yoga and meditation, in combination with quantum physical and other transcendental disciplines. Furthermore, medical yoga is now established in more than 300 hospitals in Sweden, which makes Sweden a world leading country in using yoga as medical treatment (Boll, 2022).

Previous research

Trying to map the sociological field, a few recent studies are of special interest for this article. Starting at the international horizon, Bailey *et al.* (2021) discusses whether yoga is for everyone by problematise the idealised, flexible 'bodymind' mediated through Instagram posts. These posts function as 'expert instructions' for how to live the perfect idealised life packaged as the always 'happy yogi.' Similar topic is found in Hinz *et al.* (2021), who brings forth our dreams of the idealised athletic 'yoga bodies' of which 90 % are white, athletic, and thin women between 20 to 40 years of age (with a majority in their 20s). These women often perform highly advanced postures while excluding women that don't 'fit' the matrix of having the perfect yoga body. Bartholomew (2020) addresses yoga by investigating whether it's an expression for cultural appropriation or not. The answer is undoubtedly YES – unless the yoga instructor is well-trained with a foundational knowledge of how to perform traditional yoga without manipulate it to fit the modern society. This corresponds to Redden (2011) who puts cultural appropriation in the context of 'New Age' and the 'pick-and-choose' mentality that helps people express their own architecture of yoga. As such, Redden uses the term 'spiritual supermarket, resulting in a complete loss of all spiritual content when being marketized. Similar ideas, but from a Swedish context is discussed by Hagevi (2005), who argues that Swedes replace religion with self-fulfilment, driven by a need to totally exclude religion. However, this results in the opposite and an even stronger *sacralisation* as self-fulfilment of the body becomes the 'new' religion. The religious church has transformed into the Church of bodies. Still, this movement *away* from traditional moral foundations, inevitably causes a collision between attempts to strive for moral and righteousness risk being dismissed as subjective. A consequence of such collisions is how religion *returns* as we need a 'moral' compass, although a religion with *new* significance.

The case of sexualisation is addressed by several researchers. Björndotter (2021), for example, discusses the objectification of female bodies when being photographed while performing variations of backbends. These photos are a magnet for drawing attention with the purpose of selling yoga products (in which we can include bodies). Another aspect of

sexualisation is discussed by Bergman (2021) who addresses Tantra yoga with roots in ancient traditions, which now has been transformed into purely a business driven by sexual practice. This is due to how orientalism has reached a great impact on the emergence of ‘sex magic’ – a result of West meeting east during the early 20th century. What used to be an Eastern Tantra philosophy is now a Western sex practice. Molin (2022) also brings forth the issue with Tantra by looking at why people in Sweden practice Tantra sex. Due to people in Sweden lack every-day-spirituality, they integrate tantra yoga in their ‘ordinary’ sex practice (often related to Instagram accounts). A third study deals with the relation sex and Instagram, in which Åsthalm (2020), argues how the female body is both objectified and sexualised when displayed on Instagram. Her argument also involves defining what aspects contributing to dehumanise and degrading the view of women – and the cognitive effects of such behaviour.

Finally, three studies point at the danger of the increasing dislocation of meaning. Aguerre Falk and Ölund Pereira (2018) argues how ancient yoga philosophy has been transformed into only consist of beautiful, athletic bodies. Another danger is the ambivalence between positive effects on the practitioners, while simultaneously build on cultural appropriation and colonialism (Sundell, 2019). Nielsen and Morén (2018) address yet another danger of how Swedish female yoga influencers perceive yoga (including meditation, mantra and tantra). Prominent is their use of certain words (wellbeing, fitness and consumption) from a ‘new’ religious context, indicate a new ‘religious’ movement diminishing the original Hindu and Buddhist meaning. Although yoga has been well covered by previous research, I still argue there is a substantial gap in addressing yoga from the practitioner’s *own* perceptions and thoughts of yoga – especially in relation to social currency and sexualisation. To address a more *emic* (inside) approach, we need to engage individual’s voices to a greater extent than has previously been done, preferably through narratives. This approach is thus my contribution to the sociology of yoga.

Theory

The theoretical foundation builds on three concepts: **capital**, **cultural appropriation** and **hyperreality**,

To French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, **capital** is, not only the necessary resources for entering different social fields, but also what sets the rules for how to act in these often-hierarchical fields. Central in the rule-setting is how current immanent relations also create dynamics: if the relation change, the whole structure of the field change. Hence fields being equalled to arenas for constant power struggles over ranking, control of resources and what rules should be dominant for our ‘social game.’ Of the four capitals³, this article will emphasise **symbolic capital**, based on the idea of social currency being a sort of non-monetary **capital** (Miegel & Johansson, 2002:274; Engdahl & Larsson, 2011:244-45), often built on *habitus*⁴. Thus, social currency serves as credentials, sources of leverage, status, worth and the extent individuals benefit from them, while contributing to make individuals recognised and

³ Cultural, economic, social and symbolic (Engdahl & Larsson, 2011).

⁴ A system of socially ingrained dispositions of norms, regulations, values and behaviours of social groups (or class), and how people perceive and react to the social world surrounding them. These dispositions are often shared with individuals of similar background. Habitus is a system representing how culture and history shape the individual’s mind and actions (Larsen, 2014:80).

well-known, depending on how they **embody** ‘capital’ (as in perceive or express) (Bourdieu, 1986; 2006).



Figure 7: @rebeccalatos wearing a caste mark on the forehead, originally symbolising kshatriya (warrior) the second highest social class in the ancient Indian society ([kshatriya](#) retrieved 2022-06-22), or referring to bindu (red dot), symbolising a married Hindu woman ([Bindi](#) retrieved 2022-06-22). There are also two necklaces; a prayer beads and one depicting Fatima’s hand, a symbol of protection against evilness, as well as bringing luck among Muslims and Jews ([ethnostyle](#) Retrieved 2022-08-06). Source: @rebeccalatosyoga. Retrieved 2022-06-22.

When looking at yoga practitioners (especially on Instagram) we could use Bourdieu’s terminology *magical power*: “Symbolic capital is a certain characteristic [...] which can be perceived, experienced, and acknowledged as if it were a true *magical power*. (Bourdieu, 1995:154 [My translation]). To Bourdieu, this *magical power* manifests itself in terms of distinctions based on taste: those with ‘good’ taste distinct themselves from those who lack ‘good’ taste. This taste has a classifying function, dividing people in two polarised groups. In that sense, taste also divides people into categories as taste is related to adjacent phenomenon; a certain hairstyle is often combined with a certain style of clothing and music etc. Taste is also one of those practices in which an individual’s *habitus* is manifested (Miegel & Johansson, 2002:275). In connection to this, we can identify an almost hierarchical structure in which people are set against each other. *Magical power*, however, although being closely tied to symbolic capital, can also be found implicitly within both social and cultural capital. Connections, relations or affiliations are all built on *magical power*, as in belonging to the ‘right’ group – which in its turn affects the cultural capital. Having for example what’s considered the ‘right’ taste or appearance, is foundationally built on *magical power*. This is also how I choose to interpret Bourdieu: his description of the distinction between the French bourgeoisie into ‘rich’ or intellectual people (Engdahl & Larsson, 2011:253), can also be applied on today’s yoga practitioners. Using the idea of distinction and contextualising it within polarisation, I claim *magical power* to play a vital role as this will equip you with the ‘right’ tools for achieving likes and status, as well as distinct the ‘right’ yogis from the rest.

Defined as borrowing cultural symbols, artefacts, genres, rituals, traditions etc. (Rogers, 2006:474), cultural appropriation is closely related to what French sociologist Jean Baudrillard (1983a; 1983b) calls hyperreality. Borrowing and copy selected cultural-bound

elements helps increase the focus on image, status, and social currency, with *magical power* as result, making way for an imaginary reality. In this context, cultural appropriation has been exacerbated by social media (especially Instagram) using culture and traditions for gaining social currency. Today, an account without bikini posts (preferably in a sexualised position), and/or dreadlocks⁵, Hindu inspired make-up, tattoos, and ‘hippie’ clothes, is simply not a ‘proper’ yoga account (see fig. 3). Cultural appropriation can also be contextualised within the discussion about *the Other*, initiated by American author bell hooks’ (1992). The growing yoga hype is not just a tool *and* product of mysticism, sexuality, and exclusion, exploiting *the Other*, it is even more a tool for exploiting the consumers as in follower/participant/practitioner. Using a terminology of exotism and orientalism, the yoga hype contributes to enrichen, preferably the White mainstream culture, by turning *the Other* into a mere commodity fetish. A result of this consumer-driven society is how cultures, humans and their dreams and hopes, become mere tools for gaining social currency. This ultimately leads to how *the Other*’s historical, traditional, and cultural roots are being lost in the process (ibid.). When describing Hyperreality Baudrillard talks of **signs**, or **codes**, in the context of three different *simulacras*, or degrees (Baudrillard, 1983a:95):

- 1st degree *simulacra*: copies of a *de facto* existing original making it a forgery, similar to the original but lacking both emotions and context in which the original was created.
- 2nd degree *simulacra*: characterised by mass production of goods and signs, involving moving away from copying natural states or objects. Instead focus lies on creating a new world through images, without likeness or lack of likeness, no God, no man – only a world in which all real and authentic is absorbed.
- 3rd degree *simulacra*: lack all references tied to the original, only to other copies, symbols, and images – which in their turn refer to other images and symbols.

Representing a false reality, actors on Instagram use these signs to take over and invade our social and private life we increasingly live through social media (Lindgren, 2014). This involves turning yoga into consumption of pastiches, feeding on desires. “Producers of culture has nothing else to use but the past: to imitate already dead styles, to talk through all the masks and voices stored in the current global culture’s imaginary museum” (Jameson, 1991:17. [My translation]). Hence, by copying imaginary versions of reality, hyperreality emerges (Baudrillard, 1994). This distance from being authentic results in increased blurred lines between original and replica, between authentic and false.

This direction is headed towards what Baudrillard refers to as ‘murdering’ reality, with *simulacra* functioning as the ‘death sentence’ over all references (Lindgren, 2014:165). From that perspective, Instagrammers play a major part in shaping this ‘new’ normalisation in how we only communicate through copies and ‘dead’ material. What counts in our current society is only surface, appearances and bodies, copying themselves in an eternal loop of repetition. A big part of this hyperreality is to ‘borrow’ attributes and cultures, with the sole purpose of attract followers, making oneself become a dream to be desired and copied.

⁵ Often connected with the *Rastafari*-religion, originating from Jamaica stating Haile Selassie to be God (Barrett, 1988).

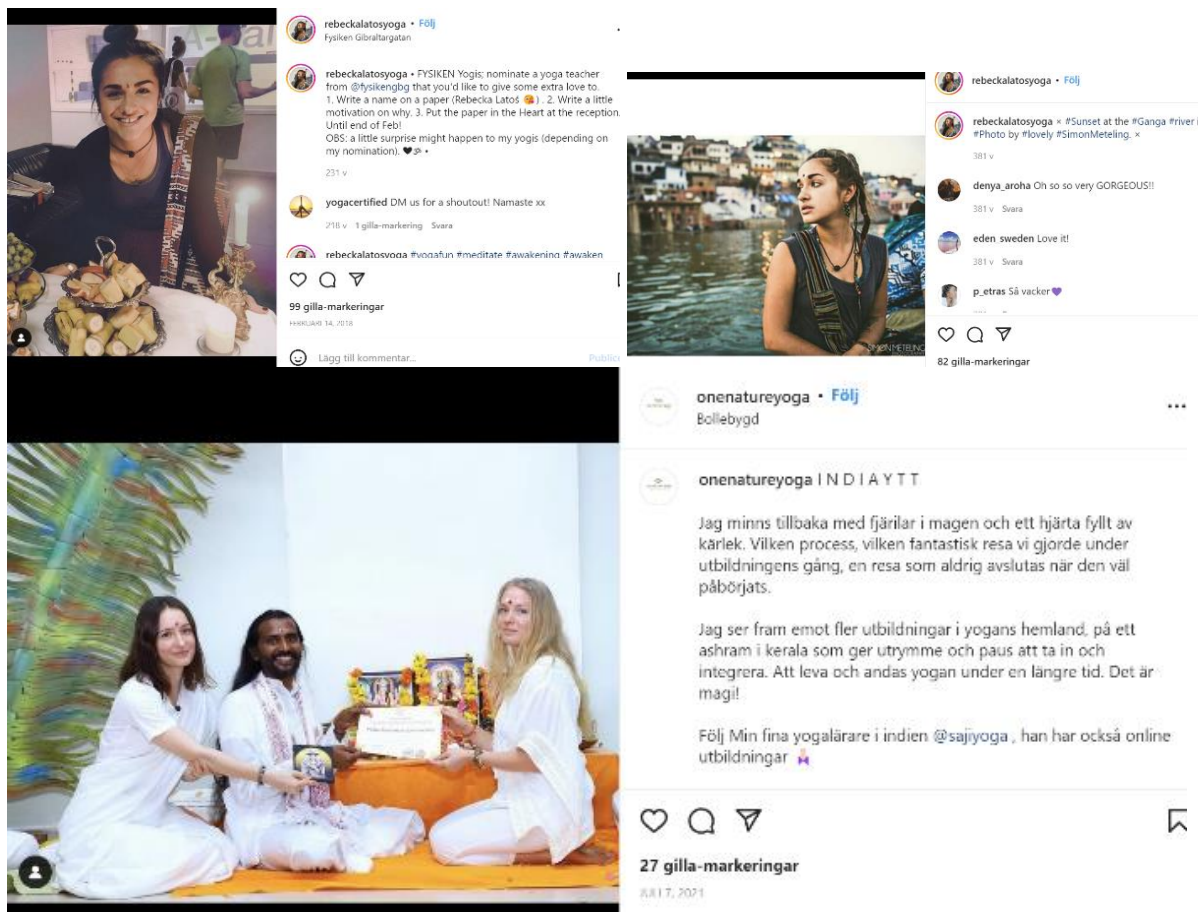


Figure 8: Far above: [@rebeckalatosyoga](#) mimicing Hindu culture: hairstyle, caste mark, clothing, jewellery, food, *Ganesha* (Elephant God described in Vedic literature as patron over intellectuals and remover of obstacles, while having a sweet tooth for sweets (*GaneshaGod* Retrieved 2022-06-27). Source: [@rebeckalatosyoga](#); [@rebeckalatosyoga](#). Above: [@onenatureyoga](#) to the right in Sari-inspired clothing, red caste mark on the forehead, surrounded by Hindu-inspired accessories (including the native individual between the two white, Western women). Source: [@onenatureyoga](#). Retrieved 2022-08-16.

The post above (see fig. 8) fits well with what I refer to as **bodily profit**. Opposed to monetary profit, bodily profit means to gain social currency and status through appearances and bodily expressions. This involves to a great extent cultural appropriation as mimicry and exploitation are essential elements of this practice. Enhancing bodily profit is also to state that here is where this article moves away from pure economic profit. Like Baudrillard claims (1994), Instagrammers feed on our emotions, desires, and dreams: the moment you look at a post, you're automatically transformed into a potential customer and user, paying in . Using sexualisation to gain social currency, isn't an exclusive 'yoga' phenomenon though; the hijab, for example, is just another 'victim' of sexualisation and bodily profit. Being reduced into a



Figure 9 Source: [Totalbeauty](#). Retrieved 2022-06-07

mere accessory, hijabs only serve as enhancing eye look. Promoting hijab as means to 'always' look your best when doing your daily shopping or going to 'work' ([Totalbeauty](#). Retrieved 2022-06-07), indicates how social currency also involves structural issues.

Using Baudrillard's terminology capital,

cultural appropriation and hyperreality can be contextualised as **circulation**. The ‘new’ is never new, only referring to what already exists. Its value is only based on its form and a re-referring from image to image, but never to anything authentic real – we only circulate copies copying each other (Baudrillard, 1983a; 1983b), with the consequence of extinguishing the authentic.

Method

The methodology consists of two analytical tools: **narrative interviews** (Bryman, 2021), and **content analysis** (Rose, 2002), with a corpus of 10 interviews and 20 Instagram accounts, profiling themselves as yoga influencers. The logic behind combining these tools is based on ‘storytelling.’ Both interviews and Instagram posts tell stories, enabling the understanding of the individual’s perceptions of their *own* yoga practice, as well as their take on Instagram profiles. This will facilitate mapping lines of conflict or polarisation within the yoga community, by providing with both *emic* (interior) and *etic* (exterior) perspectives. Furthermore, inspired by Kvale (1996), I consider the interviews as conversations rather than question-answer. This strategy enhance knowledge *through dialogue and interaction*, but without turning the conversations into personal sometimes therapeutic interviews. Although narrative interview is characterised by conversations over time, I still managed to rapidly build up confidence and trust (ibid.). Another challenge was to keep a balance between ‘going with the flow’ and freestyle, while simultaneously staying within the frames and topic of the interview. This balance also involves trying and be as symmetric as possible, although we can never be completely equal as I, in capacity of being a researcher, am the one who asks the questions – not the other way around. An advantage with narrative interviews is the opportunity to take part in someone else's lifeworld, experiences, and stories, helping to gain a closer understanding and deeper knowledge of oneself and others. Telling and listening to stories is a fruitful way to understand what it means to be human (Atkinson, 1998; Allen, 2017; Bryman, 2021). Above all, stories capture the most essential questions of: “Tell me what happened?” followed by “And then, what happened?” (Bryman, 2021: 542). These questions help not only to observe how the participants act (Göransson, 2019), but also to be an active listener (de Walt & de Walt, 2002).

The content analysis is simply to analyse the content of the selected Instagram accounts, focusing on the relation between photo and adjacent text. To facilitate an ‘open’ analysis, I avoided the use of a determined, specific set of criteria or codes, and rather let the material ‘speak’ to me. Still, the material needs to produce a ‘breakdown’ to become analytically interesting, as well as the necessity in emerging themes to be unambiguous. This will facilitate for other researchers to use the same categories when analysing the photos. The analysis of the adjacent posts undertakes the same procedures, emphasising the ‘posts’ to speak to me, while investigate their immanent relation, i.e., how they correspond to their adjacent photos (Rose, 2002).

Operationalisation and ethical considerations

The primary material consists of 10 interviews with active yoga practitioners (see table. 1), supported by a secondary material of 20 Instagram accounts depicting themselves as yoga profiles (see table. 2). The selection behind the interviews was based on a combination of *snowball strategy* and *gatekeepers* (Göransson, 2019:67-78), with initial contact via

Facebook/Messenger or e-mail. To help me find individuals to interview, I turned to my colleagues who provided me with people I had no prior knowledge of. This helped me to remain as objective and neutral as possible. Due to Covid-19, all interviews were conducted through the digital platform ZOOM (transcribed and translated into English). Each conversation lasted between 1-2 hours (with a total of 18 hours). In hindsight, ZOOM was a valuable tool as the computer screen served as an ‘invisible’ border’ creating safety, privacy, while at the same time defuse the situation. During the interviews I focused on three topics:

1. **Why** and **how** do you practice yoga?
2. **How** do you define yoga?
3. **How** do you think yoga affects your daily life?

Table 1 Overview of the 10 participants. (Names and age are fictive to secure anonymity).

name & age	gender*	Occupation & civil status
Isabella, 23	♀	Student social science & practicing yoga at her local gym. Lives in a large city with her boyfriend in a flat in a middle-class socio-economic area. Born in Sweden by Swedish parents.
Agnes, 32	♀	Full-time yoga instructor. Lives with her fiancé in a flat in a large city in a middle-class socio-economic area in a large city. Born in Sweden by parents from eastern Europe. Piercing in the nose. Earrings.
Dorian, 33	♂	Dancer and artist. Interested in yoga. Lives with his parents in a house in a middle-class socio-economic area in a large city. Born in Sweden by eastern European parents.
Atena, 34	♀	Employee army sector & yoga instructor. Lives with her husband in a house in a middle-class socio-economic area in a large city. Born in Sweden by eastern-European parents.
Samuel, 37	♂	Employee army sector & yoga instructor. Lives with his wife in a flat in a middle-class socio-economic area in a large city. Originating from a small town, born in Sweden by Swedish parents. Visible tattoo of yin yang.
Jim, 44	♂	Full-time yoga instructor. Lives with his wife in a flat in a middle-class socio-economic area in a large city. Originating from a small town, born in Sweden by Swedish parents.
Julia, 51	♀	Student social science & yoga instructor. Lives alone in a flat in a middle-class socio-economic area in a large city. Born in Sweden by Swedish parents
Anette, 53	♀	Employee health sector & yoga instructor. Lives with her family in a house in a middle-class socio-economic area in a large city. Two children. Originating from a Scandinavian country
Erik, 61	♂	Retired from academic sector. Been practising yoga > 40 years. Lives with his wife in a house in a small village. Has three children. Born in Sweden by Swedish parents.
Lars, 65	♂	Retired from health sector. Been practising yoga > 45 years. Lives with his wife (also retired) in a house in a smaller town. Born in Sweden by Swedish parents.

* All participants define themselves as either woman or man and considers themselves to be straight.

Table 2 Overview of the selected Instagram accounts. Number of followers retrieved 2022-08-17.

Instagram accounts and number of followers					
yoga_girl	2 M*	vackralivyoga	11,7 K	oneyoga.se	1,287
josefinesyoga	51,2 K**	mikiwestyoga	11,3 K	yogaisland_gbg	1,139
satuyoga	32,3 K	globalyoga.se	8,761	runwayanna	967
johannahector_K	30,1	magnusringberg	7,593	onenatureyoga	718
ulricanorberg_K	26,2	chaielu	4,157	juliaandingyoga	660
sheilaarnell_K	15,5	yoga_mum1	2,782	yogahome_yogahalmstad	285
magnus_fridh	12,9 K	rebeckalatosyoga	2,340		

*M= million **K= thousands

The selection of the Instagram material (table 2) was done in seven steps:

1. Using Google for key words like *top 100 Swedish Instagram profiles* and similar.
2. Using them as *gatekeepers* for accessing both well-known and lesser-known accounts.
3. As many posts contained almost identical content, I used the saturation tool (Göransson, 2018) ending up with 50 accounts based on relevance for this article.
4. These accounts were then divided into two categories: >10 K followers and <10 K, in which each category contained 25 accounts.
5. I finally drew lots within these categories ending up with the final selection of **20 accounts**.
6. Instead of using predetermined codes, I gathered the material in different categories *after* analysing it, to allow the material to speak as freely as possible.
7. All in all, I identified 13 categories: body positions, sexualisation, clothing, jewellery, tattoos, make-up, Indian culture, clichés, quasi-philosophy⁶, Sanskrit words, scenery and individuality. Some of these were extra significant for the analysis (sexualisation, Indian culture, quasi-philosophy, body posture and clothes).

Besides the Swedish Research Council's (2017) ethical advice, specific attention was focused to avoid harm or other dangers by exposing the participants. This involved using fictive names and age when presenting the interviews, to avoid any chance of identification. The participant's consent to record the interviews were given to me before we began the sessions, together with me informing them about their rights to read/watch the transcripts/recordings, interrupt at any time or even withdraw their participation (Iphofen, 2021). To avoid harm also meant that I informed them about their possibilities to contact me after the interview session if they felt needed. As for the Instagram material, by being a public figure, they've already given their consent as well as giving up their integrity (to a certain extent), by voluntarily exposing themselves to the public. This gives a 'silent' consent as both parties (Instagrammers and viewers) interact and agree that Instagrammer's 'job' is to tell their stories to a public audience, including me (Serafinelli & Cox, 2019). Nevertheless, I still need to take caution and avoid unnecessary harm or damage, despite their capacity of being public figures.

Results

Anette: I think there are many interesting things within the philosophy, but I'm also pragmatic...I live in this society, in this world...you can't live in a bubble just meditating and such...it doesn't work like that...in that sense I guess I'm not a 'proper' yogi.

There is a strong relation between social currency and being a 'proper yogi:' the impact on those who practice yoga also involves perceptions of what defines a 'proper yogi.' However, as these perceptions differ depending on what philosophy you confess to, I will address this by dividing the analysis in two opposing communities: Traditionalists and Yoga 2.0.

Traditionalists: Back to the roots

To traditionalists, a philosophical-driven approach to spirituality is essential, as they build their foundation on three philosophical elements: 1) advanced terminology of Sanskrit words, 2) succession of ancient, traditional scriptures and other authorities, and 3) transcendence. When

⁶ Someone who pretend to be philosophical without being it [SAOB](#), retrieved 2022-08-06.

practicing these elements, a homogenous group emerges, driven by a consensus of the necessity in transcending the body. By transcendence, traditionalists refer to the circularity of birth, sickness, old age and death (*Samsara*), symbolised by the physical and subtle body. A traditionalist can only achieve true happiness and liberation by transcending *Samsara*, emphasising a philosophy that focuses on moving *away* from the body.

Lars: [...] you're absorbed in the Atma realising that the body only leads to death and despair. You must transcend the body

To a traditionalist, circularity is vital, from two aspects. On one side, circularity means the loop keeping us prisoners in illusion and hyperreality, while on the other side, circularity represents the process leading us back to the roots. Only by transcending the loop of repetition, we'll return to the roots and true bliss, or as **Julia** and **Erik** state:

Julia: Yoga is the state when you no longer are reborn and don't have to die. You're totally enlightened in Samadhi...you've reached the ultimate liberation.

Erik: Yoga is when atman, your true self, unites with the absolute truth called Ishvara, transcending the physical and subtle body, leaving the circularity of birth and death.

Traditionalists consider confessing to successions of knowledge, subordinating to authorities as something positive. This linearity is important as by returning to the ancient roots of knowledge, the traditionalists simultaneously move forward, towards liberation and happiness. To look ahead and achieve complete awareness of your true existence can only be done by returning to the roots.

Dorian: My goal with practicing yoga is to reach Sat-cit-ānanda [Eternal knowledge and bliss. My annotation]. Who doesn't want that? But you have to pay the price...it ain't no quick fix...and people today are greedy, they want it all, but doesn't want to pay.

Here, **Dorian** touches upon an essential aspect of 'slow' knowledge. To achieve what he refers to as Sat-cit-ānanda we must confess to a slow philosophy. There are no shortcuts to happiness, which is an important remark in relation to hyperreality. In that sense, traditionalists would interpret Baudrillard (1983a; 1983b; 1994) in terms of copies and replicas only serving to create shortcuts. We neither have time nor desire to patiently follow a slow (and demanding) succession of knowledge. Instead, we turn to other authorities that give us instant satisfaction and *magical power* (Bourdieu, 1995). However, this has also got a price, a price, according to the traditionalists, we're not aware of but which, in the prolonging will have consequences. One of these consequences is how we mistakenly believe that hyperreality is real. This is a direct reference to *magical power* (Bourdieu, 1995), as this *magic* has the power to create a cosmic illusion of reality. Traditionalists are indeed not 'free' from symbolic capital, if put in terms of belonging to the 'right' group. This is also one factor that contributes to excel the polarisation within the yoga community. Both groups address yoga from the shared starting point of claiming to be the 'right' group – but with different definitions. To traditionalists, belonging to the 'right' group indicates a move *away* from what they call *Maya* (illusion [my annotation]).

This involves moving away from the numbness that cover us, making us ignorant of our True nature (Maya. Retrieved 2022-09-13).

Julia: Yoga is the counterforce to the capitalist-driven society where there's no place for humans...we're all just considered to be robots serving the capitalistic forces...it disgusts me really... We're all dead inside and yoga can bring us alive.

Dorian: The media junkies are really on the wrong track...it's fucking disgusting how they feed on individuals...like vampires! How can they look at the mirror saying 'I'm okey' when they feed on other's desires of being happy and beautiful...this isn't yoga...this is pure capitalism turning making us all robots. So many people are dead inside...but still believe they live.

As seen above; to traditionalists, possessing *magical power* is to know how to navigate in the current illusory society. This indicates that *magical power* isn't an isolated phenomenon within Yoga 2.0, but rather a shared tool for distinct and polarise traditionalists from Yoga 2.0. As such, both groups use it as a guideline for defining 'proper yogi.' If looking at Bourdieu's definition, this distinction occurs within the same societal level, but with different directions and purpose. He also indicates that level belonging to the higher societal elite (Engdahl & Larsson, 2011). As for the yoga community, although not talking in terms of social elite, we can still trace a distinction between traditionalists detaching themselves from the more populist driven Yoga 2.0 group. However, this doesn't imply a critique of the individuals within Yoga 2.0 *per se*, but rather the societal tendencies of hyperreality imprinted with illusion and 'death.' Thus, *magical power* holds a dual function within the traditionalists: to define those who reject the societal forces trying to keep them imprisoned, and those who freely becomes victims of these forces – of which one is Instagram. Their idealised images of reality (Bailey *et al.*, 2021; Hinz *et al.*, 2021; Aguerre Falk & Ölund Pereira, 2018) serve only to produce and reproduce signs and codes to the extent that nothing else but the 3rd *simulacra* is left. This obvious dislocation from reality to hyperreality is subject of concern to the traditionalists.

*Julia: It bothers me that there is no genuine yoga left. Everything is Me-time, self-love, and stuff. No one wants to subordinate to authorities anymore, only to oneself being one own's teacher, picking bits and pieces from Veda, Buddhism, Native Americans, Aesir faith...creating your own bag of candy to suit your desire. The **same** goes for cultural appropriation, I'm a yoga instructor but I'm not a Hindu woman. I live in Sweden...and it's almost pathetic if I were to dress up like an Indian woman at the gym...or in my private life. Yoga isn't about appearance, it's in my Ātma. It makes me sad that yoga is all about sex...especially on Instagram, but also in the fitness world...a fit athletic, sexy body in tights is nicer to look at, compared to a 'normal' body I guess...but that's not yoga, that's just profiting on other's wanting to have a nice body. I often feel ashamed for looking 'normal' when having classes. I don't wear harem trousers or dreadlocks...not even makeup. It's making me angry all those women on Instagram, prostituting themselves in the name of yoga. Why pretend to be a sexy Hindu when I'm not? ...it's just not yoga...it's prostitution... selling out both their bodies and yoga.*

Above, **Julia** gives voice for several strong concerns connected to hyperreality, cultural appropriation and sexualisation. These concerns involve how her and other traditionalists voices about liberalization have been misinterpreted. Opposed the Yoga 2.0, **Julia** claims freedom – not in the sense of uncivilised rationality on the 'pick-and-choose' yoga supermarket (Redden, 2011), but in the sense of returning to the roots. To be liberalised is to be awakened

from the illusion that's making us numb and unconscious. This is also what defines 'proper yogi:' someone who's conscious by re-connecting with its True self (*atma*). This implies a philosophy built on a holistic perception of yoga, as in incorporating yoga on a daily basis in everything you do – that is the cost for happiness. It doesn't suffice going to the gym once or twice a week 'doing yoga' – we need to embrace *all* aspects of yoga, including subordinating to successions of authorities, enhanced by **Dorian**:

***Dorian** : I think they're on the wrong track...we need to reclaim spirituality instead of being afraid of it. Our bodies are just dead shells...we must dive into and beyond our bodies to find true spirituality...and embrace it. This is best done alone, during deep meditation...it's got nothing to do with social media or stuff like that...we are not individuals...we are only one big spirit, but we can't see that yet...being blinded by all fake people on social media. I don't like the idea of spirituality being reduced to money...all these people on Instagram who stage photos to look unnatural, wanting us to give them their likes...that's not really yoga to me. The gyms are the same, you pay for a membership to get some second-class yoga 'wanna-be'...I don't want to be part of that.*

What we're faced with is a strong critique towards society in general and social media in particular. However, what differ traditionalists from Yoga 2.0 is their ability to also (to a certain extent) provide with instructions and/or solutions for how to re-connect with the roots. A key here is homogeneity and consensus spelled *transcendence* and knowledge of happiness beyond the physical and subtle body. Here is also where *their magical power* lies, built on symbolic capital of having proper knowledge of how to achieve happiness and liberation.

***Erik**: I think this strive for being loved by everybody has gone way too far. We shouldn't be too dependent on what other think of us, our genuine happiness already exists within the Atma...I feel sorry for all those who are so lost in their search for turning their bodies into a temple.*

If being critical, one could argue that alike Yoga 2.0, traditionalists also want social currency and *magical power*, however in different ways. To traditionalists, *magical power* significates abilities to reveal the illusory hyperreality advocated by Yoga 2.0. This is done by using advanced terminology to create a tight, homogenous community, automatically excluding those with lesser skills (alike how academic language divide people into scholars and non-scholars). This is an objection I (to a certain extent) agrees with.



Figure 10 @rebeckalatosyoga with a red caste mark, necklace of Fatima's hand, and a Buddhist quote. Source: @rebeckalatosyoga. Retrieved 2022-08-08.



Figure 11 Left: @rebeckalatosyoga wearing a red Sari. Source: @rebeckalatosyoga Right: @onenatureyoga "By practicing yoga and meditation you create a meeting with yourself. Through all bodily layers, into the core and your True Self. This is not about a search, it's about something more intimately. The return back home within yourself." [My translation]. Source: @onenatureyoga. Retrieved 2022-08-08.

What I don't agree with is the claims of traditionalists being dismissed as conservative, obsolete, and anti towards any social development and change, simply because there is no such evidence within this study. Instead, the results rather point at the opposite: returning to the roots might be a method to reach *real* social change, as it might be considered a counterforce against increasing de-humanisation and commodification of people (including both cultures *and* dreams and hopes). This is necessary to consider as (although as innocent it may seem), Instagrammers often promote behaviours exploiting *the Other* (hooks, 1992), to look 'cool' while promoting a 'pseudo-yoga' of cliché-oriented quasi-philosophy (preferably by dressing up as a Hindu woman). These remarks are important to make, as they instruct us to not only move away from the body and circularity of *Samsara*, but also to be aware of structural dilemmas like cultural appropriation and exploitation (Bartholomew, 2020; hooks, 1992). These remarks are important to make, as they instruct us to not only move away from the body and circularity of *Samsara*, but also to be aware of structural dilemmas like cultural appropriation and exploitation (Bartholomew, 2020; hooks, 1992). Furthermore, in their critique against social media, the traditionalists emphasise the dangers of idealising bodies as sexualised objects (Bailey *et al.*, 2021; Hinz *et al.*, 2021; Björndotter, 2021).

Lars: *There's too much business in yoga today...only bodies and idealised societies...everything is fake, more or less...there aren't many of us left who experienced the genuine yoga back in the 70s...nothing is sacred today...but I guess sex sells*

Dorian: *Yoga today is all about tits, mouths and ass...I don't buy that. To me yoga stands for authenticity and spirituality...not fake beauty...these Instagram accounts only promote a reality that isn't real...just fake.*



How do I find the sensual power? I bite my lower lip, breath through the nose, lick my lip and breathe out, getting ready for the explosion. [...] Letting my hands wander over the curves of my body...and the rest is history
 (@johannahector_)

Figure 12 Source: @johannahector. Retrieved 2022-09-26.

The melting heart, to open up and begin with a good thought in everything you do and say, with an open mind and in connection with the heart. To constantly be reminded to re-connect with this and reach deeper into the truth. (@onenatureyoga)



Sensual sensualism invites you to remember what you already know deep inside: you are your body and the body is you (@johannahector_)

Figure 13 Far above: source: [@onenatureyoga](#) [my translation]. Above: source: [@johannahector_](#). Retrieved 2022-09-18.

Sex sells. Exotism, mysticism and eroticism sell. Tantra sex, (what used to be an ancient philosophy, now converted into a manual for better sex life) sell (Bergman, 2021; Molin, 2020; Åstholm, 2020; Nielsen & Morén, 2018). Tits and ass sell (as seen in fig. 12 & 13). While commenting on **Dorian**'s concern and the posts above (see fig. 11 & 12), traditionalists also (to some extent) engage with hyperreality-oriented practices: they dress up in 'non-traditional' Swedish clothes, incorporating cultural elements from the Vedic philosophy (see fig. 13). Other practitioners, appears perfectly 'normal' without any visible appearances tying them to any specific cultural/philosophic context.



Figure 14 Left: a traditionalist with Tilak (a clay painting symbolising being a devotee to the authorities Vishnu or Kṛṣṇa [my annotation]), and a Tulasi (a necklace made of beads from Holy Basil trees [my annotation]). Source: [Traditional culture](#). Retrieved 2022-09-20.

And here lies an important key: whether they look like the normal person on the street, or dress up using 'strange' attributes, the intent is never to misuse or exploit the Other, but instead to show reverence. Thus, the homogeneity isn't in the appearance, but in the mentality and perceptions. Whether wearing a Tulasi, like **Erik**, or wearing no attributes at all like **Julia**, you can still belong to the community as the primary intent is to transcend the body and its circularity of life and death. This also points at the fine line between borrowing out of reverence or to gain social currency, indicating that pretend per se isn't a negative thing, rather it's the intention behind the pretend that should be questioned.

Yoga 2.0: The rebel!

Agnes: I've always been rebellious... I've always had hippie clothes, piercings, tattoos and stuff...I want to wear pyjama-pants even if I'd work in an office [laughs]. It can be a power thing. For some women...it might be a way to show the word that they have accept their bodies...like: Look at me! What a strong woman I am...not having to hide my body...it's easy to point one's finger at things one doesn't like.

The quote above covers the very essence of Yoga 2.0: the liberalised⁷ yoga, focusing on a philosophy advocating a spiritual supermarket (Redden, 2011) where every customer is a Rebel! This rebellious practitioner is also what defines 'proper yogi.' But this is also the big paradox: in the quest for being a heterogenous rebellious community, they all seem to depart from two very homogenous perceptions: the sexualised (often female) body and the strive to avoid *any* forms of subordination to authorities – the only authority is their own body. Hence, Yoga 2.0 is simultaneously both heterogenous *and* homogenous. Yoga is what *you* want it to be. Yoga 2.0 builds on a base which only foundation consists of architecting your own happiness through a philosophy of moving *closer* to the body. Pick-and-choose! Make rational choices! Do whatever you like! Mix whichever culture, religion or philosophy you like!

Anette: It's a broad spectrum of everything, like...not religion, but something you can believe in and give a higher meaning. I've been there and found it interesting, the knowledge behind it all, the Indian philosophy...but not anymore. I've taken the parts I find beneficial for me [...] To me, it's the mix that gives me the best experience. I 'zap' around, checking in what other's do. I like to combine different styles.



Figure 15 Source: [@mikiwestyoga](#). Retrieved 2022-08-16.

Essential for Yoga 2.0 is their focus on expressions of pseudo-yoga (see fig. 15 & 16), in which clichés and quasi-philosophy play a vital role: “Being a Yogi means being a Rebel” ([@mikiwestyoga](#) Retrieved 2022-08-16). This strategy builds on immediate attention and interest – primarily focusing on the images, resulting in 👍. The use of Sanskrit or similar, has

⁷ Referring to freedom as in surpassing being 'civilised' (Engdahl, 2009:76).

as only purpose to appear ‘deep’ and mystic, interacting with their sexualisation and idealisation of the (female) body.

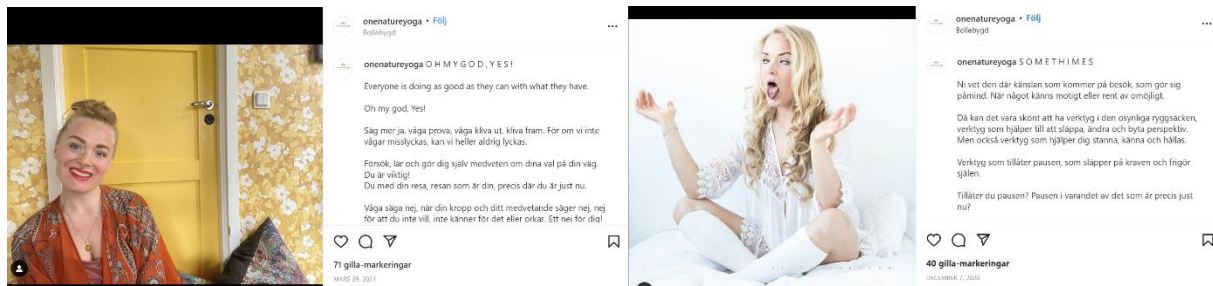


Figure 16 Left: “Everyone is doing as good as they can with what they have. Oh my god, Yes!” Source: [@onenatureyoga](#). Right: “Do you allow the pause? The pause in the beingness of what is right now?” [My translation]. Source: [@onenatureyoga](#) Retrieved 2022-08-16.

There is a widespread and shared perception of the necessity in ‘preventing’ the growth of the traditionalists’ view on how to practice yoga. However, their reasons for this normative and strong attitude, are very much held in the dark, as nothing in this study supports this critique. None of the interviewed confessing to traditionalists never expressed thoughts connected to oppression of women or preaching celibacy as a desired practice. Hence, prejudice is prominent within Yoga 2.0. Another prominent element is how Yoga 2.0 uses a populist rhetoric, by simply saying what we all *want to hear*. The homogeneity of Yoga 2.0 is represented by the perception that the old ways serve us no longer. The old ways are all about fighting freedom of choice, emancipation, sexuality, and liberalisation. Hence, re-connection with the roots is to be conservative, retrograded, moral-focused and full of obsolete ideals of self-discipline and abstention (which, again, there are no actual evidence found in the study).

Atena: *I know some ‘hard-core’ yogis advocate celibacy, but I mean...hello! We live in the 21st century now...we can’t hold on to ancient women-hostile philosophies. We’ve always been oppressed by men wanting to control us and our sexuality. This has to stop! And if I can use yoga to help liberate women, it’s my fucking duty. I’m not just a yoga teacher, I’m also a role-model. If you like your body...why feel ashamed? Sexuality is one of the strongest forces we have, and we must stop shame people for wanting to feel sexy and beautiful.*

As the quote below illustrates, Yoga 2.0 has a strong belief of *being in the body* (and to remain there), standing in direct contrast with the traditional idea of re-connecting with the roots through *transcending* the body.

Isabella: *I embrace the female body, if you’re beautiful why don’t show it...we’re all beautiful, and I’m tired of excusing myself for wanting to show my body. I don’t see it as an objectification, I see it as a strength to break with old structural norms. Yoga has helped me accepting my body as a beautiful place to be in.*

Jim: *I’m happy that women have the strength to be proud of their bodies no matter how they look, a strong woman is a sexy woman.*

In this context, **Jim** becomes a representation for the idea of men defining the frames of how a women should act (Björndotter, 2021). Accordingly with the increased popularity and yoga-hype, these frames will also expand, fortifying sexualisation as synonymous with social

currency and capital. This also indicates a consolidation of women-hostile and patriarchal-oriented structures. Being rebellious towards ‘the old roots’ and their moral and regulations, is also to gain *magical power* (Bourdieu, 1995), but this is also what I find quite problematic: the explicit sexualisation and objectification of the female body.



Figure 17: "Dear women and men. Feel free to EMBRACE your sexuality and the sensation of Pleasure [...] Sexuality is one of our strongest energy. Source: @onenatureyoga. Retrieved 2022-08-08

The post above (see fig. 16) has every classic ingredient: a soft backbend (Björndotter, 2021), lingerie-like clothing showing pieces of skin, closed eyes, loose hair and a facial expression of satisfaction – all in line with depicting an orgasmic-like pose (Dhikav *et al.*, 2010). What calls for concern though, is the close similarities with the ‘hysterical women’ of the 1880s. This phenomenon has its background in old photographs of patients at the Salpêtrière hospital (see fig. 17). Depicting women as fragile, weak, denudate and erotically loaded (Björndotter, 2021) has today become synonymous with the strong, rebellious, revolutionary, proud *and* sexy ‘proper yogi.’ (Especially evident on Instagram). This is also what creates collision and polarisation. Departing from the same phenomenon: yoga, traditionalists and Yoga 2.0 chooses two paths of opposite directions and purpose. And – this is also where being rebellious in many ways is a representation of moving away from reverence and towards exploitation of humans.

***Samuel:** I like the way Instagram profiles advocate sexuality...who doesn't like sex? It's not about fucking around. Tantra has been SO misunderstood, it's not a 'sex-cult'...it's a beautiful way to gain contact with inner tensions, to connect with deeper dimensions. Having sex with many people helps you become more confident of your own sexuality. Being polyamorous makes you see what true love is... you can't just love one...we must love all people.*

What **Samuel** states above is a direct reference to the dislocation of meaning regarding Tantra (Bergman, 2021; Molin, 2022). **Samuel** is also a good representation of Yoga 2.0 being both graphic in its photos and expressions. To Yoga 2.0, spirituality lies in detaching oneself from the roots, by raising the own body as the centre harbouring happiness and freedom. The way **Agnes**, for example, depicted herself during our conversation was quite representative: sitting under a portrait painting of a Buddha-like figure, she had a nose ring and piercing, while

wearing only a black lace bra underneath a hippie-inspired tunic (which made me quite uncomfortable as I this was the first time we met. What she wore beneath the waist was held in secrecy because of the ZOOM-format). But I guess that what she wanted to depict was a free, liberalised ‘Wildwoman’ (see fig. 2).

The real satisfaction is not what you have, know or how you look, but how you feel inside. You’ve been good for so long now, see where it’s taken you, a long way for sure, but not home. It’s time to stop play to win.

(@johannahector_)



Turn On. With sensual sensualism we awaken and washes away the tiredness. I long for play, to let go, more fuck it! less anxiety, more receiving. Feel the blush on my cheek, the lust in my blood, the mischief in my gaze!

(@johannahector_)

Figure 18 Left: source: @johannahector_. Right: Source: @johannahector_. Retrieved 2022-08-16.

In line with the graphic description of Yoga 2.0 above (see **Samuel**), actors on Instagram often use an almost pornographic approach to yoga (see. fig 16). Again, we see photos of backbends with references to the 1880s asylums and ‘mad’ women. Their performances of what was called *arc-en-cercle*, holds close similarities with how women today perform the yoga position *Urdhva dhanurasana*. Both variations of backbend are parts of the role women play, defined by men. The former doctors and audience have now become invisible playwrights behind the computer screen (Björndotter, 2021). Hence, the *magical power* is very much a product of the relation between men as observer and women as being observed (ibid.), cementing stereotyped gender roles.

In the Vedic scriptures, this dilemma is described in terms of *Purusha* (man) being the creator, and *Prakriti* (woman) being the one who’s being created (*Bhagavad-gita* Retrieved 2022-05-29). This shows a circularity in which today’s yoga practitioners repeat and re-produce the ‘hysterical women’ of the 1880s, dressed in modern clothes and sceneries, but with the same purpose: to enjoy and to be enjoyed (preferably in a sexualised and hyperreal way). *Magical power* lies in discern the exotic, mystic and eroticised orgasmic pleasure (Dhikav *et al.*, 2010) – but this is also the great paradox. The anti-authority rebels are very much agreed with how to depict and idealise the female body (Bailey *et al.*, 2021; Hinz *et al.*, 2021) – almost like a religious sacralisation (Redden, 2011; Hagevi, 2005). Having a strong, sexy body provides you with the ‘right’ social currency and *magical power* (Bourdieu, 1995). This hunt is also a hunt for finding ways to uphold the 3rd *simulacra*, as the traces of original, ancient yoga are almost non-existent.

Agnes: *Yoga has given me guidance in life [...] helping me to deepen my spirituality. You don't need to only read Bhagavad-gīta, there are so many tools to use. Patanjali is simpler, more concrete...which other religions can use as well. It doesn't become so much religion, rather a lifestyle*

Returning to the 'hysterical women, the similarity with today's Instagram accounts is almost frightening, while indicating a lack of knowledge, self-reflexion and self-criticism.



Figure 19 Left: Patient Augustine. Source: Björndotter, 2021:20. Far above: Source: [@ulricanorberg](#). Above: Source: [@mikiwestyoga](#). Retrieved 2022-08-08.

The explicit focus on sexualisation as tool for freedom and happiness, shows no resemblance with ancient philosophies, only idealised, and hyperreal images of (female) bodies. What it *does* show however, is that one prerequisite for gaining social currency and *magical power* (Bourdieu, 1995) builds on the stereotyped perception of female bodies (Bailey et al., 2021; Hinz, et al., 2021; Bergman, 2021; Molin, 2022; Åsthalm, 2020; Nielsen & Morén, 2018). With emphasis on *body*, Yoga 2.0 automatically dismiss women as being *and functioning* as mere objects for enjoyment and pleasure. Men set the frames, and women live up to their expectations, however, important to notice is how these frames build on reciprocity. To put it rather blunt, Yoga 2.0 can be said to stem from a women-hostile and patriarchal-oriented structures, the same structures Yoga 2.0 claims to discountenance from. Hence the paradox and collision. As this development is problematic from many aspects, is noticed by **Erik** and his concern for where Yoga 2.0 is heading:

Erik: *I see a difference from the 70s. Then we had this female revolution, which was necessary. But what's happening today is no revolution, on the contrary, the women today have become even more captured in the male domination, as they live their whole life trying to please men, to have their bodies acknowledged by men...they are completely dependent on men...that's no freedom...and it's very far from what yoga means.*

Conclusions

This article set out to 1) investigate how current yoga practitioners in Sweden perceive and embody yoga, and 2) explore to what extent there is a relation between social currency, sexualisation and yoga. From a corpus of 10 interviews and 20 Instagram accounts, two major conclusions can be made:

- The study shows a strong polarisation within the yoga community with two opposite directions: a re-connection with ancient roots, or the expansion of the physical body through cultural appropriation and sexualisation. In this polarisation, there is an overweight on those in favour of an increased focus on social currency, at the expense of the traditionals.
- The increased focus on cultural appropriation and sexualisation will have implications for how practitioners perceive and embody yoga. Alongside with yoga being increasingly normalised within society, so will cultural and human exploitation and objectification.

What I find the most problematic is not the dislocation from ancient to modern perceptions of yoga, but rather how yoga practices to such great extent contribute to expand a society imprinted with hyperreality. Voices within the traditionalists state how nothing is sacred anymore, referring to the loss of ancient, traditional values. From a greater perspective, this study agrees by pointing at the increased commodification and de-humanisation, of not only of cultures, even more, our dreams and hopes. The lack of reflexion is also troublesome, especially when looking at the relation between the ‘hysterical’ women from 1880s and today’s sensual and erotic ‘proper yogi’ (see fig. 18). This lack of reflexion also involves a big paradox as although advocating emancipation etc. simultaneously produces and re-produces stereotyped perceptions of the female body as sexualised objects. The role the ‘mad’ women played; that of living up to male expectations, is still being played – especially on Instagram (Björndotter, 2021:36). These results point at the necessity to broaden the discussion of social currency, sexuality, and what impact this will have on yoga practitioners today. This concern also involves how re-writing of culture has become a normalisation in which old colonial and oppressing structures not only are being sanctioned, but even more and reproduced and socially incorporated.



Figure 20 Left: @onenatureyoga embodying yoga as tool for sexuality and eroticism in 2020. Source: @onenatureyoga. Retrieved 2022-08-08. Right: Hysterical woman used for a clinical lesson in medicine at Salpêtrière hospital 1887. Painting by André Brouillet. Source: Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons [Salpêtrière](#) Retrieved 2022-09-19.

The critique against traditional yoga practitioners being religious and obsolete, simultaneously creates the ‘new’ religion: that of worshipping the physical body as currency for social status and capital, which I call the ‘Church of bodies.’ This paradox opens doors for further research on the modern yoga and its consequences and impact on the direction in which today’s yoga community is heading.

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