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Dreams and Reality in the Great Outdoors

A study of lifestyle marketing in the outdoor industry in Sweden

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SUMMARY

Much of what is on sale on the shelves of outdoor shops today will mainly be used in the less extreme environment of our “urban jungle”. The red or navy anoraks of days past have been replaced by stylish, lightweight and high-tech pieces of clothing in exotic materials and colors that may never set foot on top of a mountain. Yet images of climbers, skiers or hikers still grace the pages of catalogs and advertisements aimed at consumers that are often perceived as “buying into the lifestyle”. The purpose of this study is to explore the implications of image-driven marketing strategies in the outdoor industry in Sweden, and the relevance of lifestyle in creating value in this industry.

To deal with the complexity and ambiguity of this issue I have conducted a qualitative study based on interviews with seven respondents in managerial positions within the outdoor industry. I have also analyzed a number of advertisements and product catalogs from outdoor firms that illustrate, support and sometimes challenge the statements of the respondents. This material has been interpreted with a hermeneutic approach, based on a conceptual framework that includes semiotics, consumer behavior and lifestyle marketing theories.

Based on the study’s findings, it can be concluded that marketing based on signification and imagery is steadily growing in relevance in the outdoor industry, recognizing the perceived value of outdoor products as *signs* or ways to create and communicate meaning among consumers. The evidence also suggests that *lifestyle* is both a way for consumers to bring a clearer identity, order and continuity into their lives *and* a viable means for outdoor businesses to create value. From a marketing perspective, this is often achieved through a combination of three approaches. One such approach is redefining urban life as “rest”, as a way to more clearly relate it to outdoor activities and allow for some sort of continuity between the outdoors and city life. Another is to market the activity, such as climbing or kayaking, instead of products directly, in an attempt to win credibility in consumers’ eyes and relate the products to a more broadly defined lifestyle. The third approach is to highlight a core group of outdoor athletes, that seemingly live and breathe for the activity and the outdoors, as an embodiment of the outdoor lifestyle. A combination of these approaches and their integration with the growing focus on design is one way the outdoor industry can meet the challenges and opportunities the future holds.

Keywords: Outdoor, lifestyle marketing, sign, image.

FOREWORD

The rest of this paper is in English, men jag vill passa på och tacka några personer utan vars hjälp hade detta inte kommit till:

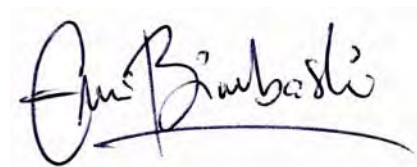
Hans Rämö, min handledare på Feken, som tidigt hjälpte mig att komma på rätt spår och alltid hade tid till extra handledning. Brian Collins som fungerade som bollplank, respondent och korrekturläsare genom arbetets gång. Hans Rynnel för sitt djupt reflekterande förhållningssätt till natur och friluftsliv.

Alla respondenter som tog sig tid och svarade på mina frågor, även om de fick vänta flera månader innan de fick se något resultat. Ett särskild tack till Eva Karlsson och Sven Sixtensson som var med som respondenter i min kandidatuppsats förra året och ändå tackade ja till att medverka i år också. Jag lovar att det här är sista.

Mina kurskamrater på MarknadsAkademien, som gjorde den här utbildningen till mycket mer spännande, utmanande och lärorik än jag någonsin kunde föreställa mig.

Uppsatsen är nu formellt avslutad, men friluftsliv och outdoorbranschen är mina två stora intressen. Jag tar därför gärna emot frågor, synpunkter, feedback och kritik till uppsatsen samt relaterade jobberbjudanden.

Stockholm, den 5 juni 2006



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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

A walk around downtown Stockholm on a usual fall or winter day reveals a multi-colored procession of rain parkas and thick down jackets walking alongside the more urban leather jackets or overcoats. Clothing designed to meet the rigors of wilderness travel and survival, with its proliferation of colorful details and oversized hoods, pockets and zippers, has slowly but steadily found its way into the somewhat less extreme environment of the “urban jungle”. People wrapped up in expedition-quality parkas on their way to school, work or the local coffee-shop are indeed not an uncommon sight in cities anymore. As the cliché goes, “there is more Gore-Tex on Kungsgatan than on Kungsleden¹”, referring respectively to the famous outdoor brand, a busy shopping street in Stockholm, and Sweden’s best-known long-distance wilderness trail.

The fashion industry, perhaps best-known for its ability to quickly pick up trends and adapt its offerings thereafter, has not let these developments go unnoticed by. Today consumers can choose among a plethora of outdoor-inspired clothing items in the same retail outlets where they buy their regular everyday clothes. Among the shelves of Hennes & Mauritz you can find down vests in trendy colors, at JC there are camouflage pants with lots of pockets, and (faux) arctic exploration jackets and anoraks can be bought just up the street at NK. Even brands that traditionally belong strictly in the fashion industry have tried their hand at the outdoors game: Polo Ralph Lauren has a full line of adventure clothing (under the RLX label) and one can even buy high performance skis at Prada (Greenfeld, 1999).

At the same time, turn on the TV or pick up a magazine off the rack and you are likely to be confronted with pictures of SUVs driving through the jungle or desert (advertising

¹ Thanks to Hans Rynnel at Stockholm University School of Business for relating this “cliché” to me.

for cars), people climbing sheer rock faces (Diet Coke) or high mountains (financial consulting), cowboys riding in the open range (cigarettes) or arctic explorers being passed by cars speeding through the snow (car tires). The Great Outdoors² is being used in advertising to sell everything from cigarettes to mobile phones to chewing-gum, and no association seems too far-fetched when it comes to communicating a brand's values by relating them to the feeling of conquering (or at least being one with) Mother Nature. An article in the American outdoor-lifestyle magazine *Outside* describes how the realm of adventure and wilderness travel has become advertising's favorite "image bank":

Add up all the positive connotations of the wilderness – the expansive vistas, the pine-scented mountain air, and the pioneers' noble triumph over all that untamed nature. Subtract the downside – frostbite, starvation, heatstroke, mosquitoes... [What is left] is just another virtual environment, a great place for a fashion shoot. All semiotics, no sweat.

Greenfeld, 1999, p. 106

1.2 THE OUTDOOR INDUSTRY AND "LIFESTYLE"

Traditionally the outdoor industry has supplied a niche market that stressed product functionality and a form-follows-function approach to design as main product attributes (Bimbashi, 2005). Today, the shelves and window displays of most outdoor shops could rival those of some high street fashion retailers; the old red or blue anoraks that "fit like big garbage bags³" have been replaced by contoured, fitted pieces of apparel which obviously better lend themselves to being worn in the outdoors as well as in the streets of the city. They are sewn in exclusive materials and in such exotic-sounding colors as cobalt, sangria, electric blue or anthracite (all real color names). Alongside these colorful, if still functional products, there is a wide selection of clothing such as t-shirts and casual pants and shirts that were never designed to be worn far from the paved streets of the city, but nevertheless bear such distinguished outdoor logos as Patagonia, The North Face or Lundhags. Functionality alone is seemingly no longer adequate for

² The term "Great Outdoors" is often used to (romantically) describe the natural environment and humans' place and activities in it as such.

³ From a personal conversation with Fabian Lidberg, manager of a Naturkompaniet shop in Stockholm.

selling outdoor products and the role of trendy design is steadily increasing (Bimbashi, 2005). Karl-Heinz Salzberger, CEO of VF Corporation (a large international conglomerate that includes outdoor brands such as The North Face and Jansport) explained in an interview for a industry publication that consumers are buying technical sport and outdoor apparel to use mainly in everyday, urban life: “Our research shows that only around 30 percent of consumers use the products in the manner for which they were designed, while 70 percent buy the products to buy into the lifestyle” (Willners, 2005, p.32, my translation).

In other words, it may have taken the outdoor industry some years to catch up, but it seems that it may finally be paying the fashion industry back with the same coin: it’s aiming to provide consumers with clothing for both outdoor and urban use, both play and work, both function and fashion. This apparent contradiction in terms is in practice neatly framed within the concept of *lifestyle*, which is as widely used as it is difficult to define with precision. It is my intention with this thesis to contribute to a better understanding of the relevance of these developments within the outdoor industry.

1.3 PROBLEM DISCUSSION

Two main perspectives can help us make sense of the world around us. Modernism stresses reason and rationality in the decision-making process, and emphasizes the objectivity of science and a belief in progress through the application of technology (Solomon et al, 2002). Postmodernism, in contrast, stresses the subjectivity of consumers’ individual experiences, and acknowledges that multiple interpretations and multiple truths can coexist, in a manner that “several themes are offered as alternative visions of the world” (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995, p. 244).

Firat and Venkatesh (1995) argue that postmodernism approaches consumption in a manner which is clearly better-suited to describe its role in our society than modernism does. Far from being a simple act of destruction of value from the part of the consumer, consumption is what ultimately shapes the true meaning of products through a continual process in which symbolic meanings, social codes and relationships are produced and exchanged (Clarke, 2003). Thus, the meaning of outdoor products is not something that

is given or even decided by their designer or manufacturer; it is ultimately created in a process of interaction among consumers and businesses. In the words of an advertising slogan: “You make it a Sony” (where “you” obviously stands for the consumer).

Consumers use products to define and express their social identities (Solomon, 1998). Beyond purely functional benefits, consumers are increasingly looking for meaning in the products they consume:

The consumer goods on which the consumer lavishes time, attention and income are charged with cultural meaning. Consumers use this meaning to entirely cultural purposes. They use the meaning of consumer goods to express cultural categories and principles, cultivate ideals, create and sustain lifestyles, construct notions of the self, and create (and survive) social change. Consumption is thoroughly cultural in character.

(McCracken, 1988, p. xi)

Solomon (1988) points out that some types of products categories, such as clothing or cars, are particularly rich in symbolic information. In this respect, goods function as signs that convey messages among groups of individuals (McCracken, 1988). Wearing a rain jacket designed for expeditions in the more forgiving environment of the city could then be seen as an effort to communicate a meaning that somehow “borrows” from that of the great outdoors.

This transformation of the product into a sign, of something (that modernism would call) real into something ethereal and symbolic is, according to Firat and Venkatesh (1995, p. 252), a central idea of postmodernism, as “sign value replaces exchange value as the basis of consumption.” Thus, in the example above, outdoor clothing could be said to function as a sign the scope of which greatly exceeds purely functional aspects. Indeed, according to this line of thought, reality itself, and with that any concepts we might have about the Great Outdoors, is part of the symbolic world and is subjective and constructed rather than objective and given (Baudrillard, 1995). Furthermore, the meaning that outdoor products borrow from the great outdoors is also subjective and “infinitely malleable” (Baudrillard, 1995, p. 8) at the hands of both consumers and

marketers. Much of what surrounds us in our daily lives, particularly if we spend these lives in highly socially-constructed spaces such as cities, would fit quite nicely in the above definition (Clarke, 2003). The styles of life that consumers construct with the help of meaning derived from consumption are as a result arbitrary and highly subjective. Clarke (2003) argues that today consumers are faced with an overwhelming array of consumption choices, which they struggle to put together into coherent and unproblematic identities with the help of lifestyles.

It is nevertheless difficult to argue that *all* reality is subjective and open to interpretation, as suggested above. When we try to fragment reality and categorize it so that we can understand it, the resulting boundaries between one category and the next “are artificial, not natural, for nature is all of a piece” (Fiske, 1990). Lévi-Strauss (1969, cited in Fiske, 1990) has argued that nature, however difficult for us to comprehend in its totality, is not subject to the same type of cultural subjectivism and fragmentation that cultural artifacts are, as nature is an objective reality that precedes culture. William Cronon (1992, p. 1374) defines nature as “the least human and least storied of worlds” and expresses the dilemma this way: “For me, there is something profoundly unsatisfying and ultimately self-deluding about an endless postmodernist deconstruction of texts that fails to ground itself in history, in community, in politics, and finally in the moral problem of living on earth.” If studying lifestyles means appreciating the profoundness of the superficial, as Dahl (1997, cited in Solomon et al, 2002) put it, does this deny the existence of a basic, underlying reality?

The outdoor industry has a clear and profound connection to the natural environment, and the existence of nature that is somehow not transformed by human intervention is its principal *raison d'être*. This industry relies on nature not only for semiotic backgrounds in its advertisements, but also as a physical playground where the basic functionality of its products is put to the test. It is difficult to envision an outdoor industry without the Great Outdoors, without a “real version” of the catalog images.

Yet, in light of the developments described in the paragraphs above, it is also difficult to deny the growing relevance of images and symbols in creating value in this industry. A

recent advertisement for climbing gear in *Rock & Ice* (a premier American climbing publication) gives a good example of this:

Join the tribe. You don't have to quit your job. Or climb three hundred days a year. Or even live in your van. All you have to do is dream and believe...it is possible.

Omega Pacific (2006)

It seems to suggest that enjoying the full benefits of a climbing lifestyle, such as having the freedom to climb as often as desired without being tied down to a job or a fixed place to live, can be achieved by simply dreaming and believing (and buying their gear, I can assume). It is somehow linking the products on sale (climbing gear) with images of how the targeted consumers would like to be perceived (as 'real' climbers) and the lifestyles they find most desirable (traveling around with nary a worry except for where to climb next). It also implies that this can be achieved without them ever needing to actually abandon their present way of life.

Lifestyles have been defined as groups or constellations of attitudes and ways to spend leisure time and disposable income that can, from a marketing perspective, be used to divide consumers into segments (Solomon et al, 2002). This definition, I suspect, is necessarily ambiguous and fuzzy, and the degree to which it is helpful towards understanding how the outdoor industry markets its offerings is for the moment unclear. What nevertheless *is* clear, is that this shift into a more abstract, image-driven marketing reality has created quite a stir in the outdoor industry and many different approaches to it exist. It is my intention with this thesis to describe and attempt to explain the complex and often ambiguous relationship between factual products and the natural environment they are intended to be used in on one side, and culturally-conditioned images in marketing on the other. I also intend to explore the concept of lifestyle as it applies to the specific context of the outdoor industry. Putting this into a greater theoretical context would help create a clearer picture of the value creation process in this industry.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTION

How can marketing strategies focused on creating and maintaining an abstract and culturally-dependent image of a company and its offerings be used to create value in an industry with a strong connection to the “real” world? More specifically, how can lifestyle marketing be used to create value in the outdoor industry?

1.5 PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to explore the relevance and implications of image-driven marketing strategies, in particular lifestyle marketing, in creating value in the outdoor industry in Sweden. It is my intention to explore how the concept of lifestyle is being used within the specific context of the outdoor industry. To fulfill this purpose I have conducted a qualitative inquiry consisting of interviews with several respondents from Swedish outdoor businesses, as well as a review of market communications from such firms.

1.6 LIMITATIONS

This inquiry concerns outdoor firms as defined below (see 1.7 Definitions), operating in Sweden, whether domestic or international. It does however focus solely on brands in the higher price segment, thus ignoring businesses that possibly have a considerable share of the market for outdoor apparel and equipment. The reason for this is that the phenomenon I find interesting to study is displayed more clearly in the marketing of firms that compete with means other than price.

1.7 DEFINITIONS

Definitions are sometimes straightforward, sometimes not. This study concerns the outdoor industry, yet the outdoor industry is becoming increasingly difficult to define. The fact that it concerns mainly Swedish firms, and the interviews were conducted in Swedish then translated into English, has proven to be a challenge: the traditional Swedish word for outdoor activities is *friluftsliv*, and it includes such human-powered activities as hiking, paddling or cross-country skiing. Yet, this term is increasingly

being replaced in use by the English word *outdoor*, which does not seem to mean exactly the same thing: if *friluftsliv* stands for the traditional activities described above, *outdoor* covers a much wider spectrum of things one can do in the outdoors, whether human-powered or not. Lift-served skiing and mountain-biking are two examples; they do not qualify as *friluftsliv* but, according to most of my respondents they fit neatly into *outdoor*. I will primarily use the term *outdoor*, as it seems to fit the description of the industry I received from the study's respondents, but I will use *traditional outdoor* when the respondents themselves emphasized that they were referring to the traditional definition of *friluftsliv*.

Most initiated informants would agree on a general idea about what the *outdoor industry* is and what it is not, although this definition is getting increasingly fuzzy at the edges. A working definition that I believe would be accepted by most of my respondents is: the outdoor industry includes manufacturers, distributors, retailers and other actors in the production, marketing and sales of clothing, footwear, equipment and experiences aimed at mainly, but not exclusively, human-powered activities in the outdoors.

1.8 DISPOSITION

Introduction

Methodology

Theoretical
Framework

The Study's
Findings

Conclusions

Above I have described the developments in the outdoor industry that have led to the formulation of the study's problem area and research question. In the next chapter (Methodology) I will present the different methods and approaches I have used in order to satisfy this purpose. Chapter 3 (Theoretical Framework) describes a collection of theories and models that have shaped my understanding of the problem area and which I have taken into consideration throughout the course of the study, especially while analyzing the empirical data. The Findings chapter (Chapter 4) presents an extensive summary of the data generated (both interviews and market communications of outdoor firms), which I then have analyzed with the help of the theoretical framework. I have chosen to have the data and the analysis together in the same chapter in order to make it easier and more accessible for the

reader. In Conclusions (Chapter 5) I have summarized the analysis of the findings and addressed the study's main research question, as well as discussed the study's contribution and possible further research in the subject area.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 INTERPRETIVE APPROACH

The aim of this study is to explore a complex and ambiguous phenomenon, the implications of which cannot simply be measured, they have to be interpreted. Interpretation, by definition, involves looking for a meaning that is not readily available (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000). Meaning and interpretation in marketing research are fundamentally qualitative matters (Gummesson, 2001). In attempting to interpret meaning a researcher takes a hermeneutic approach (Gilje & Grimen, 2004).

It would be misguided to attempt to understand the actions of people and organizations without having a sense of how they ascribe meaning to themselves (ibid); I have therefore reported on the perspective of respondents from several outdoor companies. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that a simple reproduction of respondents' own self-perceptions will tell us all we need to know about their and their companies' behavior. For this reason I have interpreted their statements and actions with the help of different theories presented in the next chapter. This balance between the respondents' self-perceptions, and my interpretations of them and their actions based on theory, pre-understanding, and sometimes imagination, is what Giddens (1976) defines as *double hermeneutics*.

As a researcher I can only interpret the meaning of the phenomenon under study from a perspective, praxis or a context (Patton, 1990). An essential part of this perspective and praxis is my own pre-understanding, which in this particular case is of considerable influence to the results of the study. I have worked in the outdoor industry during the past seven years, both in the United States and in Sweden as a shop employee for Naturkompaniet and The North Face Flagship Store. I climb as much as my family, school and work schedules allow for, and keep updated with trends within the outdoor industry through magazines, websites and other active people that I meet at work or at the cliffs. I have also written my bachelor thesis on sustainability issues in the

marketing of outdoor firms (see Bimbashi, 2005). According to Gummesson (2003a) it is not possible, nor indeed desirable, to exclude the researcher's pre-understanding from the interpretation process in the hope of producing more objective and reliable conclusions. This is why "I" am writing this, and not "the author". While I have made every effort to make my pre-understanding explicit and test it against the empirical data generated, the conclusions I have drawn from the data are fruit of my own "subjective judgment" (Holbrook, 1987, p. 106).

The process of interpretation and understanding has suggestively been pictured as a *hermeneutic spiral*; by shifting between interpretation of separate parts and interpretation of the whole text, between understanding and pre-understanding, the researcher achieves higher knowledge of the phenomenon under study (see for example Ödman, 2003). A valid interpretation of the study's findings has only been reached when separate parts are in harmony and support the whole text and vice-versa, and the researcher has come to a coherent understanding free of inner contradictions (Patton, 1990).

2.2 ABDUCTIVE METHOD

Looking back trying to pinpoint the exact moment in time when the original idea for this study first came into my mind seems to me an exercise in futility. I have been working in the outdoor industry for some years now, and have been thinking about the practical side of some of the issues now under study for quite some time. But I have also written a bachelor thesis on a closely related topic, which put me in contact with theories and models that have come to shape my understanding of the issue, and which I have relied on again for this study. Therefore, I cannot claim to either be able to make sense of the phenomenon under study "without imposing preexisting expectations" on it (Patton, 1990, p. 44), or aim to verify or falsify an existing theory (Gummesson, 2003b); my approach is neither *inductive* nor *deductive*.

What best describes the approach of this study is what Holbrook (1987) traces back to Charles Peirce and calls *abduction*:

Briefly, given 1) a rule (a law of nature or general truth drawn from experience), 2) a case (a presumption or hypothesis), and 3) a result (an observed fact)... abduction [draws an inference] from 1) and 3) to 2).

(Holbrook, 1987, p.99)

Thus, in an abductive reasoning model neither empirical data nor existing theory can stand by themselves; they define, interpret and challenge each other in a dynamic manner throughout the course of the study (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000).

2.3 PRE-STUDY

To draw inspiration for this thesis, and get a feeling for the kind of phenomenon under study, in February of this year I conducted a pre-study involving unstructured discussions and email exchanges with Hans Rynnel (whom I later also conducted a formal interview with, see “The Respondents” 2.4.1), Peter Mårtensson and Anna Nyberg (store manager and employee at The North Face Flagship Store in Stockholm) and my supervisor Hans Rämö at Stockholm University School of Business. I also gathered and perused 22 different product catalogs from outdoor companies, and visited several outdoor stores and two “concept stores”: The North Face Flagship Store and the Helly Hansen Concept Store in Stockholm.

2.4 SAMPLE

Qualitative inquiry typically focuses on relatively small samples, selected carefully and with a clear purpose in mind. “The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting *information-rich cases* for study in depth” (Patton, 1990, p. 169, emphasis in original). In choosing the respondents for this study I have had certain criteria in mind. First and foremost I have approached respondents from *conventional* businesses within the outdoor industry. While I cannot determine that these businesses are *typical* or *representative* cases in the strict sense of the word (Patton, 1990), there is nothing that suggests that these businesses are in any way unique or unusual. I can therefore claim that the conclusions drawn from the sample can generally apply to the outdoor industry as a whole, if to varying degrees.

Gaining satisfactory *access* to the phenomenon under study is of vital importance to the study's credibility (Gummesson, 2003b). My experience as an employee at Naturkompaniet in Stockholm proved valuable as an entryway to arranging interviews. All of the respondents-to-be that I approached agreed to take part in the study.

2.4.1 THE RESPONDENTS

I have chosen to interview respondents with a long first-hand experience of the outdoor industry, whom are either in decision-making positions or are presumed to have a good understanding of the industry and be able to elaborate on it in an interview setting. The latter is, in my opinion, of considerable importance given the abstractness of the topic. All of the respondents are from the "supply" side of the industry except for one; Hans Rynnel qualified on the basis of being a long-time certifying instructor in kayaking and paddle-sports (and therefore an avid outdoorsman) and a former Assistant Professor in marketing at Stockholm University School of Business (he was my supervisor for the bachelor thesis I wrote in 2005). Hans could therefore recount both on first-hand experience from the field, and more "academic" speculations on the present state of the outdoor industry.

Eva Karlsson, Marketing and Design manager at Houdini Sportswear

Helena Treiss, Store manager at Naturkompaniet on Kungsgatan 4A, Stockholm

Lars-Ola Brolinson, Marketing manager at Fjällräven

Sven Sixtensson, Marketing manager at Lundhags

Brian Collins, Store manager at Naturkompaniet on Odengatan, Stockholm.

Hans Rynnel, Kayak instructor examiner

Fredrik Dahl, former chief-designer at Peak Performance, presently freelancer and design consultant for The North Face

I have also referred to two other respondents that I have had brief exchanges with around the subject matter. Pete Wilson is the operator of Karbin climbing gym in Västberga in Stockholm. Pelle Andersson is a former PR manager of the Swedish Tourist Association (STF), whom I contacted during the course of my bachelor thesis in April of 2005.

2.5 DATA GENERATION

Gummesson (2003a, p. 486) suggests the term *data generation* instead of data collection, observing that “data in social settings are not objects that are ready for collection.” Instead, data are generated in a process of interaction between the researcher and the respondents or other sources of information in the study.

The empirical foundation of this thesis consists mainly of in-depth interviews with the respondents listed above. For these interviews I have used what Patton (1990, p. 283) calls the *interview guide*, which is a list of topics that are to be explored in the course of the interview. Within the general frame of these topics I have then altered the exact wording and sequence of questions to fit the particular situation of each interview, in order to maintain a relaxed conversational atmosphere, and have the possibility to probe into particular matters more spontaneously. I have nonetheless attempted, where possible, to cover the same material and generate the same information with all of the respondents in the study. All of the interviews were conducted in Swedish except for the one with Brian Collins, which was conducted in English. They were recorded on tape, and then later translated into English and transcribed to my PC.

In order to afford the respondents the possibility to candidly elaborate on their opinions, feelings and experiences I have consequently asked *open-ended* questions (Patton, 1990, p. 295). Such questions aim to obtain answers other than “yes” or “no”. Patton suggests that a simple way to establish if the interview is abiding to this structure is to see who is doing the most talking; if it is the researcher and not the respondent, there should be cause for concern. The interviews in this study lasted an average of 65 minutes, the shortest one being 50 minutes and the longest 2 hours, and it is fair to say that the respondents did most of the talking.

It is often said that a picture says more than a thousand words. I have chosen to support, and sometimes challenge, the statements of the respondents with photographs and illustrations from their own companies’ product catalogs, websites and advertising. I have also used some ‘external’ catalogs and photographs, from outdoor companies not represented in the interviews. These were purposefully chosen as a suitable means of

illustrating an idea or a different way of doing things. The respondents were shown these photographs and asked to give their impressions of them. I have also briefly interpreted these photographs with the help of the theoretical framework presented in the next chapter. All of the above material is included in the Empirical Findings chapter, so that the reader can get a feel for marketing communications in this industry.

While analyzing the findings a series of categories, or groups of data with similar meaning, have emerged. These categories have been shaped both by the different theories presented in the next chapter (and my pre-understanding) and the actual raw data generated during the study. These categories have then served as a means to structure the interpretation of the data in order to come to a coherent set of conclusions (Patton, 1990).

2.6 *VALIDITY AND CREDIBILITY*

“Qualitative data will tend to make the most sense to people who are comfortable with the idea of generating multiple perspectives rather than absolute truth” (Patton 1990, p. 483). Establishing the value of a qualitative study is therefore a more subjective process than when dealing with quantitative studies. Nevertheless, we can speak of a qualitative study’s *validity* and *credibility* as two criteria that need to be addressed for the study to be of value. Validity aims to establish whether, and to which degree, a researcher has been able to observe and analyze the specific phenomenon under study, and not something else (Gummesson 2003b). To address this issue I have carefully chosen respondents within the outdoor industry that I have judged to be capable of elaborating both on their own companies’ attitude and behavior and those of the industry at large. They have on average been with the outdoor industry for a substantial amount of time (10 years or more), and are all active people themselves. I have judged this to be important because the industry as a whole tends to attract people that are involved with its products at both a professional and personal level; they are both producers and consumers of outdoor goods. The questions I have asked them have all focused on the case at hand, and the theories chosen to aid the analysis are in my opinion applicable to the task.

A closely related criterion is *external validity*, which seeks to establish how well a study's conclusions can be generalized to apply to other situations (Gummesson, 2003b). While it is desirable for research to provide insights that can be applied to areas other than the narrow focus of a study, this is a qualitative study and its results cannot be generalized without further consideration; "Every generalization is a working hypothesis, not a conclusion" (Cronbach, 1975, p. 125). This study focuses on outdoor firms operating in Sweden, and its conclusions should not be assumed to automatically apply to other businesses, industries or countries.

The researcher's competence and accuracy in generating, interpreting and presenting the data, theory and methods used are vital factors in determining a study's credibility (Patton, 1990). I have tried to be as accurate, explicit and complete as possible in presenting my methodology, theory, data and pre-understanding, and I have addressed conflicting interpretations of the material whenever I felt they were reasonable. It is my belief that the study's conclusions are firmly planted in the empirical and theoretical material presented here. Nevertheless, this study is based on my own interpretation of the above factors, and its conclusions are subjective.

2.7 METHOD CRITICISM

Changes in consumer behavior related to the outdoors are often cited in this study, yet this is not a study of consumers and their behavior, and all references to consumers are perceptions of the study's respondents. Nevertheless, a great deal of effort in their daily work goes into observing, understanding, predicting and influencing consumer behavior, so their perception of consumers cannot easily be discredited.

I have focused on a specific phenomenon that the outdoor industry manifests, lifestyle marketing. This has led me to select certain images, advertisements and market communications that more clearly display this phenomenon, which may lead some readers to believe that *all* marketing in the outdoor industry centers on image and lifestyle. Such is not the case, and I would recommend a visit to the nearest outdoor shop to readers that want to get a more complete picture of the outdoor industry.

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Lifestyle marketing in the specific context of the outdoor industry has not, to the best of my knowledge, been the focus of published academic studies. There are nonetheless a number of theories and models from different fields of study, such as semiotics, marketing and consumer behavior, that may help direct our attention towards interesting aspects of the phenomenon under study, and allow us to make sense of at least part of what we end up finding. Below, I will present a collection of such theories and models that are relevant to this study.

3.1 THE STUDY OF SIGNS

“For communication to take place [we] have to create a message out of signs” (Fiske, 1990, p. 39). Therefore, signs are the essential building blocks of communication as a way to generate meaning. Semiotics, or the study of signs, is largely based on the works of Ferdinand de Saussure (1966) and Charles Peirce, which have a slightly different take on the concepts involved. I have here chosen to focus on Saussure’s model of signification because of the importance it places on establishing the value of specific signs.

Saussure’s (1966) focus was on language, but his linguistic model has been extended to apply to many other social practices which can then be studied as language. “This...development is based on the assumption that all social practices can be understood as meanings, as signification and as circuits of exchange between subjects, and therefore can lean on linguistics as a model for the elaboration of their systemic reality” (Coward & Ellis, 1977, p. 1).

Saussure (1966) proposes that a particular sign draws its value, and therefore meaning, entirely from the difference from all other signs that belong to the same system. In other words, a particular sign, say the word ‘red’, makes only sense when compared to other, related signs which it is *not*, such as ‘green’ (Saussure, 1966). As Clarke (2002, p.61)

put it, “the terms of a language are, like the holes in a net, strictly empty in themselves. They are defined not by any particular positive content, but by their boundaries with neighbouring terms” (see figure 1).

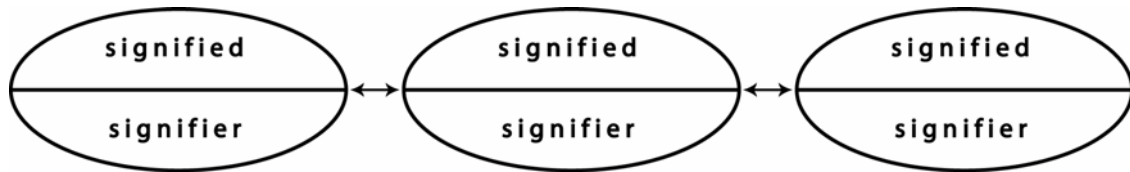


Figure 1: The value of signs (Saussure, 1966, p. 115)

The above is important because it establishes that signs have no intrinsic value; their value is only relative to that of other signs. Baudrillard (1996) takes this one step further, and argues that the ability of products to act as signs, their sign value, has replaced use value or exchange value in our consumption society. Products, according to Baudrillard, are consumed not for the functional benefits they provide their user but for the sign value they derive from being different from other products in the marketplace. Thus, an array of different (outdoor) products may provide the same functional benefits, but some of these products have invariably higher value because they signify, in relation to the other products, what the consumer might find desirable, such as belonging to a specific group, or possessing more health or power or wealth.

3.2 CONSUMPTION, IDENTITY AND LIFESTYLE

“Novelty, transience, diversity, and acceleration are acknowledged as prime descriptors of civilized existence” (Cialdini, 1993, p. 276). According to Giddens (1991), this increasingly frenetic rhythm of change has eroded our collective moral foundations upon which our sense of personal identity was crafted, and left us to define the self by investing our consumption patterns with greater personal meaning and relevance. As traditions lose their ability to provide people with a sense of security, consuming according to a chosen lifestyle becomes increasingly important in the constitution of self-identity and the ability to cope with everyday life (Giddens, 1991). Consuming through lifestyles, then, can be seen as a way to overcome the shortcomings of the mass-market as a vehicle of moral meaning, in that lifestyles “infuse consumption and marketing with a deeper sense of authenticity and moral purpose” (Binkley, 2003, p.

232). In Giddens' words (1991, p. 81), when it comes to lifestyles, consumers "have no choice but to choose."

Douglas and Isherwood (1996) have noted that products carry meaning, but seldom by themselves. Meaning is instead created and found in the relations between goods that are connected in consumers' minds with a specific lifestyle. According to Solomon (1983) product complementarity occurs when the symbolic meanings of different products somehow fit together. McCracken (1988, p. 123) further writes: "Things go together because of their internal cultural consistency. Products travel in complements because culture gives them the same symbolic properties." According to McCracken, lifestyles act as a force that encourages the individual to maintain a cultural consistency in the choices he or she makes regarding consumer goods. McCracken (1988) takes up yuppie culture in the United States as an example, where products that were earlier unrelated, such as BMW cars and Rolex watches, when put together came to symbolize a very specific lifestyle. This cultural consistency within possessions allows the consumer to survive in a society somehow spoiled by endless consumption choices. To summarize, "lifestyle...is the hallmark of a society characterized by an immense array of competing opportunities and advice, amidst which individuals must necessarily position themselves, by the choices they make, in order to impose some degree of continuity onto their individual life-experiences" (Clarke, 2002, p. 165).

Lifestyles nevertheless also present us with a paradox: they may be a way to impose continuity and order in our ways of living, but they can also provide us with the possibility to totally overthrow this order by switching from one way of living to another (Clarke, 2002). Since lifestyles often come bundled with a set of consumer goods, consumers are afforded the possibility to easily switch lifestyles by simply acquiring another set of goods connected to another lifestyle. McCracken (1998) exemplifies this with the observation that when we sometimes acquire or receive a product that does not fit with our present lifestyle and set of goods, it may a) be rejected or b) it may cause us to change our present set of goods to fit *it*, thus making us switch lifestyles.

When looking at lifestyle from a marketing perspective, the concept has been “provocative and unproductive in almost equal proportions” (McCracken, 1988, p. 121). Its main appeal is the possibility of improving on market segmentation practices based on simple demographics, which by themselves cannot account for the different consumption patterns of people belonging to, say, the same age or income group. Another benefit of a lifestyle approach to marketing, according to Solomon et al (2002), is its usefulness in organizing consumer choices into *patterns* of behavior, and thereby providing marketers with a more integrated and unified approach towards understanding why certain product *constellations* seem to “go together” (p. 505). Nevertheless, though the term *lifestyle* is widely used and a large amount of empirical research has been conducted, in the words of Anderson and Golden (1984, p. 406), “if you laid all of the people doing [lifestyle] research end-to-end, they would: (a) never reach a conclusion and (b) all point [in] different directions.” The problem, according to McCracken (1988), is that we have not yet developed the necessary theoretical tools to thoroughly understand the interrelated nature of empirical lifestyle data. Therefore, although we might have a suitable working definition of why people seem to consume by lifestyles, we have little in the way of a general theory of *how* to create value through marketing with the help of lifestyles. (I have as of yet not found any strong evidence of the contrary in the almost 20 years since McCracken wrote “Culture and consumption”).

A helpful starting point towards lifestyle marketing, according to Solomon et al (2002, p. 505), is “to identify the *set* of products and services that seems to be linked in consumers’ minds to a specific lifestyle” (emphasis in original), and then position a product or service within that existing pattern of consumption or lifestyle. Since consumers create and display their identities with the help of products in a continuous interaction within different social settings, the construction of lifestyles has been portrayed as in figure 2.

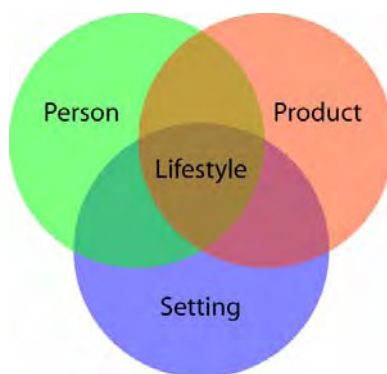


Figure 2: Linking products to lifestyle (Solomon et al, 2002, p. 505)

3.3 AUTHENTICITY

Authenticity, like lifestyle, has mainly been the domain of consumers and marketing practitioners instead of marketing theoreticians (Holt, 2002). Our consumer culture has developed a certain way to define authenticity that initially proved difficult for marketers to adapt to. In order for consumption to serve as a way for consumers to construct their identities and images of the self, it must be perceived as authentic: “To be authentic, brands must be disinterested; they must be perceived as invented and disseminated by parties without an instrumental economic agenda” (Holt, 2002, p. 83). Thus, marketing that is clearly permeated with commercial intent is branded by consumers as inauthentic and less useful in creating and conveying meaning.

“Consumers now understand that marketers promiscuously stitch stories and images to their brands that may have nothing to do with the brands' real history and consumption” (Holt, 2002, p. 85). So, consumers look for evidence of authenticity in areas removed from marketing spin, or in companies' behavior and roots in times before marketing hysteria became rampant. But, according to Baudrillard (1996), even authenticity is readily simulated by the market. It follows that signs that can simulate the true and the lived experience may penetrate consumer skepticism as long as they are *perceived* as authentic. This would explain the current rage in marketing of spreading myths and stories of origin and heritage among consumers, as nostalgia assumes the full meaning previously held by reality: “There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity” (Baudrillard, 1996, p. 8).

3.4 *HYPERREALITY*

Baudrillard (1996) has argued that in our post-modern society we often cannot tell the difference between signs of the real and the real itself. The sign, being more easily manipulated and thus made to be whatever we may want it to be, is then held up as the new standard against which the real is measured. In Baudrillard's words, this is "an operation to deter every real process by its operational double, a...perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes" (1996, p. 5).

Moreover, sometimes we choose to believe in, and treat as perfectly real or normal, signs and images that we know to not be real: "...the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (Baudrillard, 1996, p.1). Baudrillard uses Disneyland as an example, where children and adults alike choose to walk around a world full of pirate ships and fairytale castles and giant talking animals that have no base in reality whatsoever. We choose to believe in this hyperreal because it might be more fun, more satisfying or simply less terrifying than the real world waiting back in the parking lot of Disneyland. This short-circuiting of reality and its duplication by signs is, according to Baudrillard, a gradual process:

These would be the successive phases of the image:

1 It is the reflection of a basic reality.

2 It masks and perverts a basic reality.

3 It masks the absence of a basic reality.

4 It bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum.

Baudrillard, 1996, p. 6

As humankind continues to transform natural spaces into man-made urban constructions, we are increasingly losing touch with the natural world. Felluga (2003) gives the example of National Parks, which are slices of the natural environment that are "protected", which defines them only as the opposite of an urban 'reality'. Indeed, before entering national parks we are often presented with a sign that somehow frames

what we should expect to see: “You are now entering Yosemite National Park” is a way of saying “Look, it’s nature!”

3.5 *TRIBES*

Maffesoli (1996) (re)introduced the term *tribe* or (*neo-tribe*) to describe a new type of consumer behavior closely linked to lifestyle. In his view, modern tribes are spontaneous, self-creating and highly fluid clusters of sociality held together by a common style and possession of the appropriate products, such as clothes or haircuts. Tribal membership is, according to Clarke (2002), mainly defined by the type of *experiences* it promises to provide in return for its members adopting a certain lifestyle that resonates well with the particular tribe. Maffesoli himself (1996) argued that neo-tribes are a sign of diminishing individuality in post-modern life, but Clarke (2002) disagrees; insofar as tribes are highly ethereal and ‘members’ treat them as ways to take on temporary identities, they give consumers the possibility of switching between tribes (and therefore lifestyles) quite easily. In this respect, tribes promote individuality through temporary and shifting forms of collectivism (ibid).

Terms like tribes, authenticity or lifestyle may sound like hyped marketing buzzwords with, as sometimes is the case, little substance or relevance to how consumers and businesses behave in everyday situations. Yet, they have been essential in shaping both the questions I have asked the respondents and the eventual analysis and understanding of the data generated during this study. I hope that this will become clear in the next chapter, where I have combined the empirical data with the theories and terminology described above in order to come to a more coherent understanding of lifestyle and imagery in the marketing of outdoor firms.

4 THE STUDY'S FINDINGS

In this chapter I will present the data generated during the course of the study. I have let the respondents tell their story in their own words whenever possible, and analyzed the data with the help of the theoretical framework (Chapter 3) towards the end of each section. While this may not strictly follow academic praxis of clearly separating data from analysis, I believe it makes it easier for the reader to follow the line of reasoning and analysis and makes for a more approachable thesis as a whole.

4.1 REDEFINING THE GREAT OUTDOORS

All of the respondents are, in varying degrees, active outdoors' people. I started the interviews with asking them how they related to the Great Outdoors. It was obvious that this was a favorite topic of many of them, and the spectrum of activities in the outdoors is very wide.

Sven, marketing manager of Lundhags says: *I'm an old scout, so for me the outdoors is all about from picking mushrooms to extreme climbing and kayaking, and I can even count in fishing and hunting or biking. It's about just being out in nature. Drawing a line between having a picnic in Djurgården and being out in the wilds and cooking dinner on a trekking stove is difficult.*

Helena, store manager for Naturkompaniet: *A great part of it is the daily adventure, the small activities, especially now that we have children. You can go in the woods and pick flowers or count ants, and it's amazing. But it could also be sport climbing in France.*

Hans, kayak instructor: *The outdoors for me is about packing, preparing, moving through wilderness, living in a tent, finding some sort of pace.*

Brian, store manager for Naturkompaniet: *I think of a picturesque ring of granite peaks with a big grassy meadow at their base. I see myself with a big tent in the meadow staring up, and nobody around to bother me. The outdoors is about escaping civilisation and being free.*

The latter is a central and recurring theme when speaking of the outdoors with the respondents. The outdoors is often seen as the opposite of civilization, and as having a strong connection with our deepest feelings:

Helena: *The outdoors gives a mental relaxation that you cannot get in town. If you run in town it's just exercise, but running in the woods is some sort of renewal. Nature gives a lot, the activity itself does not have to be so extreme, it is often enough to be in nature to get something back.*

Hans: *It's about finding new things and crossing boundaries, both physical and mental. It's about being here and now. It's a contemplative "flow" feeling, a way of being connected to the environment. Some sort of interaction with the elements is what is attractive.*

Fjällräven's marketing manager Lars-Ola and Sven from Lundhags both point out that another way to relate to nature is the utilitarian one, with activities such as hunting or fishing providing food as well as escape from civilization. Nevertheless, Hans points out that the way most people relate to outdoor activities is somehow constructed, since we think of things to do in the outdoors not because of specific, pressing needs, but more abstract ones:

Hans: *People that actually live closer to nature are usually utilitarian in perspective compared to the people that come from the city and are all romantic about it. In a way, outdoor activities are "fake" because we set ourselves in that situation. But as individuals we live this sort of lie to ourselves, in order to build our identities through images and dreams. It's a sort of nature romanticism, the opposite of urban life.*

The difference between traditional and the “new” outdoors is also a topic that comes up often. The general feeling among the respondents is that people are taking shorter and shorter trips into the outdoors: “A week in the mountains is Thursday to Sunday nowadays”, says Sven. And although we seem to have less time to spend in the outdoors, we also want to do more different activities than before, a trend referred to as “crossover” from several of the respondents.

Brian: *Our customers often don't have the time to apply themselves to a specific activity because they want to paddle, hike, climb and Frisbee golf all during the same short summer.*

Eva, marketing and design manager at Houdini: *People are extremely active, and they want to do many different sports. Maybe they like climbing and hiking, but have tried mountain biking and kayaking and Nordic long-distance skating and so on.*

So, outdoor activities are necessarily becoming faster in order to keep up with the conflicting demands of less time but more diversity. This could explain the growing popularity and media exposure of activities such as adventure racing, where people basically run up and down mountains with tiny backpacks, and cover large amounts of distance in short periods of time, often combining skills from trail running, hiking, climbing, canyoning and navigation.

Hans: *The outdoors has become about competition, not just as a goal in itself anymore. Traditional outdoor for me is sustainable, not just in the ecological sense, but in the sense that you could continue doing it for a long period of time. Adventure races in the outdoors are constructed around a set of conditions and preparations. If there were no support stations in between, these people would probably die, and they stumble into the finish line totally exhausted.*

The same can be said about the “fast-and-light” or “done-in-a-day” approach to outdoor activities that are so often mentioned in outdoor publications and product catalogs (see for example the Patagonia or Thermarest catalogs listed in the references chapter). The focus has shifted from being self-sufficient and well prepared for a longer period of time

in the outdoors, towards doing things fast so you don't have to carry so much food and equipment, and can be back in civilization in time for dinner. This change in the way people relate to the outdoors has brought a new type of customer into outdoor shops.

Brian: *I think that we sell mainly to weekend warriors (people with regular office jobs that are active during the weekends). I would say about 15% are "core" users, that are in the outdoors very often, and really have it as their way of life. In fact, let's just drop the adjective "great" when describing the outdoors, as just being outside is great enough for most of our customers nowadays.*

Helena: *Our customers like to have an active free time, but most of them have regular day jobs. They want good products and they think it is worth spending a little extra to get them. I would say that 30% of the time the products will be used in the woods and 70% in town, back and forth from work.*

Eva: *We did a small customer survey, and it showed our customers are active but they don't do as much outdoors as we thought. Instead they exercise a lot and do activities closer to town, or on prepared trails such as cross-country skiing.*

The above statements paint a somewhat complex picture of what can be considered to be outdoor activities today. On one hand consumers are perceived as being willing to try new and varied activities in the outdoors, and more people seem to have discovered being in nature as a healthy way of living. On the other hand, these forays into the Great Outdoors are getting shorter and often more intense, with a growing focus on competition. Consumers are trying to squeeze as much action as possible into shorter periods of time, and often trying their hand at (for them) new activities, such as climbing or paddling or backcountry skiing. They are looking to enjoy the benefits of outdoor activities, such as skiing down remote peaks or kayaking to secluded islands. But the time restraints often do not allow for the gaining of necessary skills relevant to the specific activity, the intimate knowledge of the terrain involved and the 'mountain sense' that is necessary to be self-sufficient in a new and possibly hostile environment.

Consumers must then necessarily look for shortcuts that allow them to enjoy the benefits of the outdoors without sacrificing all the time and effort that would normally be required. Shortcuts that quickly come to mind are guide services and motorized (such as helicopter) backcountry access; they provide the knowledge and the means to quickly get to the ‘good part’ of outdoor activities without the tedious gathering of experience or slowly getting to the top only to ski down once. Another such shortcut, that is hinted at by most of the respondents in the study but is often taken for granted, is outdoor clothing and equipment from known brand-names. Having the same clothing and equipment as the guides, the professionals or the expedition-types is a means of stacking the odds in one’s favor, when the seriousness of the terrain or activity outweigh one’s experience, knowledge and preparation. This is one possible explanation for why consumers are buying clothing that is “tested on Mount Everest” (a classic cliché in the outdoor industry) to use in their often less ambitious adventures.

Another interesting observation is the discrepancy between the respondents’ own way to relate to the outdoors and the general trend of outdoor activities they describe. For most of them personally, the outdoors is about getting away from civilization and finding some sort of pace more in sync with the natural environment. The most often recurring statements are not about standing on top of a mountain like a conqueror of nature, but about the feeling of peace and relaxation that the Great Outdoors can grant. At the same time, they see the general trend as going towards a more fast-paced and often goal-oriented outdoor. I will analyze this seeming discrepancy further in the Lifestyle (4.4) section.

4.2 DESIGN, FUNCTIONALITY AND INNOVATION

Eva: The outdoor industry is quite a traditional industry, but exciting things are happening in many places. Established big brands are getting stale and don’t feel the need to be visionary. At the same time it bubbles of small companies and new ideas.

Eva's view of a tradition-bound industry is shared by most of the respondents. The Swedish market is dominated by a few large companies, like Fjällräven or The North Face, which have been around for a while. Functionality has always been the primary focus of product development, yet in the last few years a wind of change has been blowing through the outdoor industry.

Helena: Design has become more and more important, especially for a few fashionable products. We are feeling the influence of trends now more than we did a few years back, and some products or brands have become super hyped.

Eva: Function and quality are hygiene factors now, customers expect them. Design is becoming more important, which I think is great because there is no reason why a product should be expensive and ugly. People want to feel pretty even when in the outdoors, there's no reason why it should be otherwise.

The trend towards better design in outdoor clothing seems to go hand in hand with the growing popularity of these products as everyday wear. It is difficult to argue that functionality is the only thing that matters when outdoor clothing is being used more in the city than in the outdoors. Yet, according to four of the respondents (excluding Fredrik and Brian) functionality is the main attribute of outdoor products, and the main benefit that they believe their customers are after. They also believe that products are becoming better and better, and innovation is very important. Fredrik and Brian are of another opinion.

Fredrik, freelancer with long design experience with Peak Performance and The North Face says: *If you look at the functionality of outdoor clothing in the last few years, very little of true significance has happened. Sure, the clothes look a lot more high-tech now, but for the end user this has had no clear benefits. The clothes do pretty much what they did a few years ago, they just look much more functional. They keep the rain and the wind out, and they breathe a little, and a five year old jacket does just about the same thing. We did a new jacket with welded seams instead of sewn, but does it do its job better? Not really.*

The ever increasing functionality of outdoor clothing that is advertised in the catalogs of outdoor firms does not easily fit with the current trend of consumers using these products in less demanding situations and for shorter periods of time. The products are getting more advanced, yet consumers are increasingly using them in the city. This suggests that extreme functionality is valued not for and in itself, but as an important part of the sign value of outdoor products. A jacket that *looks* more advanced is undoubtedly more desirable than a simpler one, no matter if the additional functionality may never be called upon in a real situation. As Saussure (1966) suggested, the value of signs cannot be established without comparing them to other signs which they are not. In this respect, functionality as a bearer of value achieves its purpose by comparison to both simpler, cheaper products in the marketplace, but also to earlier products from the same brands. Thus, more functional, more expensive and newer products have a higher sign value than their cheaper or older counterparts. This also insures that the role of innovation in the industry is legitimized, although it often seems to be “innovation for innovation’s own sake”, in Brian’s words. (It may be in its place to point out that this line of reasoning only concerns innovation as relevant to the products’ suitability for their end-use. Innovation may have many other organizational functions that I have not taken into consideration here.)

4.3 THE POWER OF IMAGES

“If you took away the logo from the advertisements of many outdoor companies, you wouldn’t be able to tell who the sender is” says Eva, and points to the lack of differentiation in the marketing of traditional outdoor firms. Indeed, the classic “man and woman with backpacks, walking with mountains and trees in the background” (as Brian puts it) is by far the most common type of image in outdoor advertisements and product catalogs. This, of course, is only natural considering the type of product on offer. Nevertheless, several of the respondents suggested that this type of image has become so commonplace and overused that it stopped “saying anything” some time ago. “So we decided to do something different, to get some attention in the market and to renew ourselves” says Sven, and points at the cover of the 2006 Lundhags summer catalog (seen below).



The cover is graced by a stark graphic illustration depicting a waterfall, the edge of a forest, two hikers, and a fisherman. “That waterfall is Tennforsen, but you can’t really walk there like that” says Sven. According to him, the illustration is meant to depict a scene from Swedish nature that is both easily recognizable and attention-grabbing. For this reason the original picture has been altered to include the hikers, and the trees have received a more pronounced silhouette.

But this illustration may be more than just different and aesthetically pleasing; it is arranged in a way that its more prominent elements, the tree at the edge of the waterfall and the hikers, are quickly recognizable as icons of a healthy nature and a classic outdoor activity, respectively. Altering a picture and adding or subtracting different elements, in other words altering the “reality” of the image, can in this case make it easier for the beholder to read the picture more in line with the intentions of the sender. The tree functions as a very clear icon: “It’s nature!” In this case, the sign is more powerful and “real” than a picture of the same waterfall that is not retouched would have been; such a picture might not provide the beholder with all the clues necessary for a quick and “correct” reading. But in an illustration you can add, subtract or manipulate all the different elements to fit the idea that is being communicated.

Another approach is used in the Thermarest product catalog (Thermarest makes camping mattresses and accessories). The image below (Thermarest, 2005, p. 6) is very similar to the other images in the catalog. Here the background is a blurred and nondescript mountain landscape, fuzzy enough to keep the reader’s focus on the main character and the gear surrounding him (especially the bright orange mattress). The main character is a mountain climber taking a break somewhere halfway up a mountain.



Brian: *As a climber I can see that this picture is extremely posed and fake. The background does not look real, everything from his hands to socks to his mattress is spotlessly clean, all the gear looks like it has never been used, and he looks like he's been helicoptered into the picture. It's supposed to look natural and authentic, but it just looks arranged.*

A desire for renewal, differentiation and innovation lies behind the white backgrounds of the Houdini product images (found on Houdini's website), according to Eva.



Eva: *We wanted to do something different; all the pictures in outdoor ads look the same. We wanted something more pleasing to the eye. We want to give a feeling of comfort and movement, and focus on the products. That's why the backgrounds are clean and white, there are more than enough pictures of mountains and trees in the industry.*

The above examples may have something in common. In order to better pinpoint what this could be, it is helpful to consider what benefits the outdoor industry offers consumers. At a very basic level, all outdoor products promise one thing: to give their user control over weather and terrain. The clothes are marketed as keeping you warm, transporting sweat away from the body when you are working hard, while keeping rain, snow, wind, dirt (and maybe mosquitoes) at bay. Thermarest's images attempt to convey this feeling by depicting a spotlessly clean and comfortable person that is clearly comfortable in the environment around him. Houdini's images do away with the environment altogether, and depict only perfectly functional products that allow their user to move freely, while anything unclean, such as sweat, mud or rain is absent. They convey the feeling of being safe and comfortable, such as in a clean air-conditioned photo studio where one can move and stretch without breaking a sweat. The perfect

trees and waterfall of the Lundhags catalog portray the same feeling of a somehow digitized nature, one that affords us all the benefits of being outdoors but none of its drawbacks. This type of nature can give us freedom and health (if that's what we are after), but it cannot touch us, make us dirty or hungry or cold or lost. "All semiotics, no sweat" to quote Greenfeld (1999, p. 106) again.

Looking at this in terms of hyperreality (Baudrillard, 1996), the point of the above images is not giving the reader a faithful reproduction of reality, but to maybe make them think to themselves: "Ah, outdoor." Although Tennforsen is a real place, the way it is depicted in the catalog cover does not invite the reader to *go there*. The sign of nature is more effective at evoking the desired feelings in the reader than nature itself, which may be boring or dirty or messy. The sign in this case can be seen as something that "masks and perverts a basic reality" (Baudrillard, 1996, p. 6). We can recognize nature without necessarily ever having seen it. I will analyze another approach to nature and signification in the Authenticity chapter further below.

4.4 AN OUTDOORS LIFESTYLE

Lars-Ola: *Lifestyle is about having an identity, or even a couple of different ones.*

Before people used to be bakers or farmers and that was their identity. Now in our fast-paced society we can switch between identities over the course of a lifetime, but even over the course of a week or day. You work in a bank, counting money and wearing a suit all week, but go hiking in the weekends and are a totally different person.

Lars-Ola related lifestyle to having an identity, and similar viewpoints were shared by most of the other respondents, albeit with some differences.

Eva: *Lifestyle is a way to communicate which group you belong to. Maybe you're living in a big city, but you're a skier and that helps you be less anonymous. You create an identity so you feel more safe. This I think is true especially in the city, but some people buy the stuff because they would feel uncomfortable in the outdoors with old-fashioned clothing.*

Sven: *An outdoors lifestyle is how you direct your life: maybe on the weekends you go out in nature instead of sitting in a café in town. You can be a fanatical lifestyle person that is out in nature a lot. But you can also be a more laidback one that buys a lot of stuff and is out just a little, but reads outdoors' catalogs, knows the brands, and knows what's new at Naturkompaniet for the season.*

The above statements all touch on peoples' needs and ways to create an identity. Both Eva and Helena explicitly related the actual social need that lifestyles feed upon, the need to fit in with like-minded people: "You get pulled together with similar people" as Helena put it. Brian was also of the same opinion, that consumers of outdoor products "are looking for affiliation to a group, that they belong to the outdoors group or the climbing or hiking group by the brand label that they wear." The step from that social need of affiliation and belonging, to the satisfaction of that need through consumption of outdoor goods seems to be fairly short and straightforward. All of the respondents mentioned products as the means of building an identity, which Hans gives an example of.

Hans: *I have an old anorak from the seventies that still works, although I get a little self-conscious when I put it on. Especially when I run into other guides or examiners, since they are a very trendy bunch. The outdoor professionals are just as trendy as the finance-people on Stureplan. They are dressed in their little outdoor uniforms. People that are new to the sport try to copy what the pros are wearing. We look like small Christmas trees when we walk by, with all the stuff.*

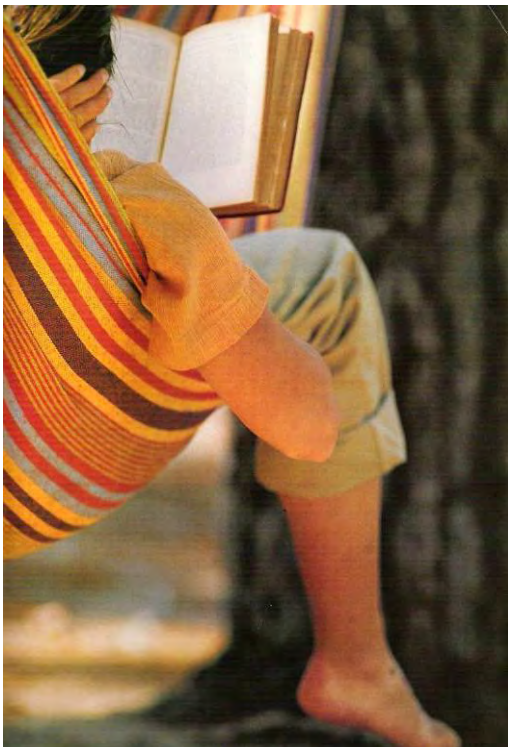
Considering that people are spending shorter time periods in the outdoors, and outdoor clothing is increasingly being used in the city, the above would suggest that consumers are looking for ways to construct and carry over their outdoor-related identities into their urban lives. As several authors have suggested (among others McCracken, 1988; Giddens, 1991; Clarke, 2002) lifestyles are means of bringing order and unity to the fragmented lives most consumers live in our modern society. Consumers of outdoor goods may spend more time in front of a computer than a campfire, but they still may identify more with other outdoorspeople than with their work colleagues. If they are to

have some sense of unity in this conflicting situation, the outdoors lifestyle must necessarily spill over into their daily urban life.

Brian: Many people may want to live a life closer to nature. But they have to put on a three-piece suit and go to the office every day. So they hang a carabiner [small climbing device] above their computer screen while they type away at it. That will keep them going the 50 weeks a year that they're at work, dreaming of those two weeks off in the mountains.

As Solomon et al (2002) have suggested, products are the building blocks of lifestyles. Outdoor products can then be seen as the building blocks of an outdoor lifestyle, no matter if they are being used high above the valley floor, or hanging as a decoration above a computer screen. Sven sums it up: "I don't have the time to be in the outdoors so often anymore, but if you look in my garage all the gear is there. That's lifestyle." Below I will present some different approaches to marketing such an outdoor lifestyle.

4.4.1 THE CONCEPT OF REST



"The balance between activity and rest is what we practice the most. We think of the possibility that in the morning bicycle around Lac d'Annecy at a brutally high tempo in record time, and then eat breakfast under a blooming cherry tree" (Peak Performance, 2006, p. 10, my translation). The above statement in the latest Peak Performance catalog caught my eye because it seemed to put into words a vague feeling I got when looking at images from the stack of outdoor catalogs on my desk. Even some of the respondents reacted to it.

Eva: *It's about a feeling, resting, reading a book some hours, hanging out with friends.*

I must say this is really good copy text; we have tried to say something similar with "go Nordic skating and end the day with a coffee break." You need to live life, it doesn't have to be adrenaline and sweat and tears and blood all the time.

References to resting, relaxing, taking a day off, recovering, chilling or hanging out are many in outdoor product catalogs. I've chosen a couple images to illustrate the point. There's the Patagonia one displayed above (2003, p. 51, caption: "Kelly Lipps takes a day off the rock. Mount Arapiles, Australia"). It gives a feeling of a well-deserved rest day after some hard climbing. The idea of taking a whole day off to read in the hammock brought knowing smiles to most of the respondents: "That's me, hanging out on the beach in Thailand" said Brian.



All the photographs of the Thermarest (2005) catalog show people relaxing on top of their mattresses. Although the mattresses are made for sleeping on, all the images show people sitting cross-legged, stretching or casually leaning on their mattresses. "Showing people

sleeping on a mattress is boring, nothing happens in such an image. But relaxing with friends after a day of activity is something we can all relate to" says Lars-Ola. The same feeling of relaxation and no hurry permeates all the Thermarest images.

Brian: *They've tried covering every possible angle of an outdoors lifestyle in these images. There's tents, kayaks, camp stoves, relaxing with friends, there's even a mountain bike in the picture. It looks very arranged: boy-girl-boy-girl, everybody sit cross-legged and look natural!*

Then there's the other Patagonia image (2004, p. 29, caption: "Bill Gamble puts his free time to good use prepping for the ice season. Durango, Colorado") showing an ice-climber in the off-season playing around with the axes used to climb ice in the winter.



He's wearing shorts, a sunhat and flip-flops, "and looks like he's just joking around, and any minute is going to sit in the veranda and crack open a beer" as Helena puts it.

Peak Performance's words about the balance between activity and rest give a hint to what the above examples have in common. Rest is what you do when you're not out on the activity. Yet, as we saw in the chapters above, taking a whole day off to rest from outdoor activities is fairly unrealistic for consumers that have to stress through the activity itself because of time constraints. People are not relaxing and taking days off to rest when they are done climbing or skiing, they are rushing back to the city to tend to their homes and businesses and cars and meetings. Dividing the day between activity and rest is a luxury few can afford. Marketing clothes to people for rest days would seem like a doomed business idea, unless some sort of imagery is at play: consumers of outdoor goods are not really going to work Monday through Friday, they are resting from the weekends activities! Redefining daily urban life as rest puts it clearly into relation to activity, thus helping maintain the unity and continuity of an outdoors lifestyle.

This also makes it much less problematic for the companies to market, and for the consumers to buy and wear, casual clothes from outdoor brands while in the city, which opens up a whole new market for the industry (as the image from the 2006 Lundhags catalog below suggests). Most outdoor brands now have a more or less extensive line of clothing, labeled sportswear (Patagonia), lifestyle (Marmot), casual (The North Face) etc. These products were never meant to be used far from city streets, yet are somehow connected to a feeling of the outdoors by means of the brand name. "As long as



Patagonia makes at least 40% of their clothes for real mountain use, it doesn't matter what else they make, people will have the same image of all their products" says Brian. All the consumers that already own technical outdoor clothing can now purchase casual apparel that bears the same logotypes, and thus the same mental associations and sign value, as their functional Gore-Tex or down jackets. Wearing casual clothing from the same brands that make true outdoor clothing may even be a more subtle way to build and maintain an outdoor lifestyle than wearing full-on expedition clothing. As Brian puts it,

"Only those 'in-the-know' would be able to tell I have a special brand on, and I like a special outdoor activity".

4.4.2 CORE

"Committed to the core" is Patagonia's slogan, a play with words that has two meanings: the *whole* company is committed (to putting into reality its vision, for example), and/or the company is committed to its *core customers*: the real outdoorspeople, the true believers, the ones sleeping in tents more often than in comfy beds, spending more time on rock faces than in an air-conditioned office. This core customer, the catalog copy claims, is who they make their products for in the first place. But Patagonia is not alone in this.

Sven: All outdoor companies want to be more cool and awesome than the masses, the regular nine-to-five people. But that type of customer is not that common, at least in Sweden; the ones that are in the outdoors a lot, they are not that many. We all want them, Naturkompaniet, Playground, Haglöfs, The North Face, we all want that core. We market ourselves towards them, but of course the money is in the greater number of regular people. Here can Fjällräven be a winner, because they are more "popular". We are more nichéd than Fjällräven, and so are most other outdoor companies.

This reference to a “core” group of users can be found in the marketing of many outdoor companies. Houdini and Peak Performance call a select group of them “Friends”, Patagonia has its “Ambassadors”, The North Face has its Athlete Team and so on. Common for all of them is that they are very capable and usually well-renown within their respective areas of expertise; whether climbing, skiing or kayaking they do it at a high standard.

Eva: Part of their function is to acts as tentacles for us, to feel a wide spectrum of sports at the practitioner level, mainly outdoor sports. They give us info from the field, what is missing or what trends they see and they are often the ones that first test our products. But they are people with a certain standing in their groups, and others often look up to them. We use them in our pictures, and they act as our ambassadors.

What sets this small core of active people apart, and makes them so appealing to marketers and other consumers alike, seems to be two things. The first is that they are undoubtedly good at what they do, and most regular people might never come up to their standard. The second is that they seem to live for their chosen pursuit, and are able to put all their time and effort into their activity; climbing or skiing or whatever is their life. While most people have day jobs and families and bills to pay, this small core seems to center its existence around the activity. They are the ones living in their van and climbing 300 days a year that the Omega Pacific (2006, p. 150, cited in the Problem Discussion chapter above) advertisement refers to. They are held up as proof that the outdoor lifestyle is not just an image; here’s a group of people that are actually living the lifestyle!

The founder and owner of Patagonia, Yvon Chouinard (2005) points out an interesting paradox: since these extreme outdoor enthusiasts are so focused on what they do, they often have no regular jobs and cannot afford Patagonia’s (or other high-end brands’) clothes. And even if they could, as Sven pointed out above, this group is relatively small and all the outdoor companies are after them. The outdoor industry would not survive long if this was their main target group, as the advertisements would suggest. “The real hard-core users usually get their stuff for free” says Eva. In exchange, they function as

both test-pilots and an embodiment of the outdoor lifestyle. They are an integral part of the *setting* (Salomon et al, 2002) that lifestyles are based upon. As the marketing focus is (slowly) shifting away from traditional pictures of wide-open natural spaces, towards images of people doing different outdoor activities (or “resting” for that matter), the setting that an outdoor lifestyle draws from is becoming more social and cultural than natural.

4.4.3 MARKETING THE ACTIVITY

Marketing the activity, instead of the product directly, is a common strategy in the outdoor industry. Helena says that “in many pictures you can’t even tell what products or brands the people are wearing, you’re just getting a feeling for the activity and environment. But often on the same page there are products on sale that *could* be used in that situation.” Climbing, for example, is often used in outdoor catalogs or the window displays of outdoor shops, because it has a peculiar ability to richly convey meaning, according to several of the respondents. “Climbing is more about lifestyle than other outdoor pursuits” says Helena.

Climbing stands for a wide variety of pursuits, from scaling high mountains in remote parts of the world, to steep cliff faces in more accessible locations, to gymnastic movement on small boulders often within the confines of the city. Nevertheless, these varied forms of expression seem to have a common denominator: an aura of danger and extreme situations is balanced by the allure of discovering new terrain, both in the external world but also mentally, by achieving inner strength and self-knowledge and control over body and mind, according to Brian. Indeed, climbing can be seen as an apex of outdoor activities; whereas hikers and backpackers may admire the high mountains from below, climbers strive for that most inaccessible point on a topographical map, the summit. And given that the greater the challenge one overcomes, the greater the rewards are supposed to be, climbing promises to deliver great satisfaction and fulfillment. This may be why it lends itself so well to metaphors of success, achievement, strength and so on, often in contexts far removed from the great outdoors (as described in the Introduction chapter).

Given climbing's perceived extreme image and close relationship with danger and hardship, "there are not that many climbers out there, especially if you compare with for example hikers", says Sven. In this respect, climbing is often seen as a subculture with a distinct set of attitudes that can easily be linked to a lifestyle; and climbers to a tribe, to use Maffesoli's (1996) terminology. Talking partially tongue-in-cheek about climbing tribes, Will Gadd writes in the New York Times:

For a tribe to be cohesive, there must be a set of shared beliefs, rules for conduct and, of course, the feeling that everyone in the tribe is of the chosen people, either by birth or salvation, and that members of other tribes obviously are not.

Gadd, 2006, p. 28

This distinct image of the climbing subculture could explain why it so often appears in the marketing communications of modern (as opposed to traditional) outdoor firms. Also in different forms of media related to the outdoors, such as magazines, it is often given more attention and space than hiking. This despite the fact that 1) it has a much smaller number of active practitioners than hiking, and 2) even the ones that can be labeled 'climbers' more often than not practice climbing mainly in indoor climbing gyms⁴, completely shielded from the exposure to danger and cold that gave climbing its singularity in the first place.

This is true for many of the "modern outdoor" activities, according to Pelle Andersson, PR manager of the Swedish Tourist Association (STF)⁵. They receive a lot of media attention and have a high profile, though they may not have that many practitioners. While most outdoor shops at one time or another have window displays with a climbing theme (replete with ice axes or colorful ropes), it's not always that the gear is for sale in that particular location. "Ropes and axes look good in the window displays, but we don't really sell a lot of those" says Brian. They are often seen as a means of giving

⁴ According to a personal conversation with Pete Wilson, operator of Karbin Climbing Gym in Stockholm.

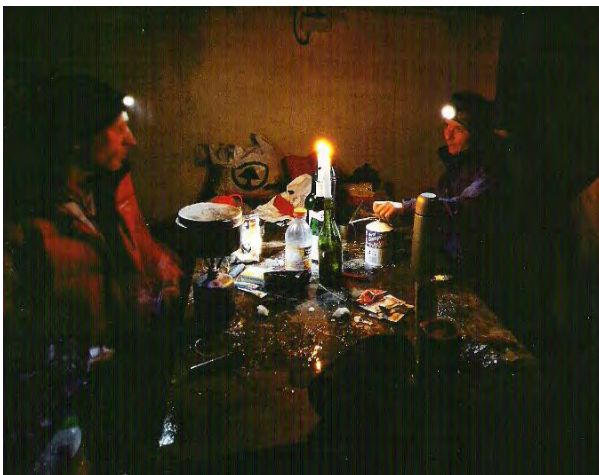
⁵ Telephone interview conducted during my bachelor thesis, see Bimbashi 2005.

credibility to the whole, and helping to sell the other products on display next to them, such as jackets, pants or backpacks.

It seems then that an image of a climber can be appealing even to those that do not climb themselves, and this is often being employed in the market communications of outdoor firms. This would suggest that some outdoor activities (of which climbing is good example) are rich in imagery and mental associations and a suitable foundation on which marketers and consumers can construct a lifestyle. Whether these images and mental associations have a sound foundation in reality is clearly debatable.

4.4.4 LIFESTYLE AND AUTHENTICITY

Authenticity is a subject that comes up often, both during the interviews and in the industry's market communications. In 4.3 (The power of images) we saw a trend towards an arranged, clean and digital approach to portraying nature and outdoor activities. A radically different approach is what Eva calls "the North American way", referring mainly to the marketing of such companies as Patagonia or Black Diamond (for examples of Patagonia ads, see 4.4.1). The most common remark from the respondents when looking at such images was "they look like snapshots of real people doing what they normally do". They often show people who look tired, dirty or cold (but nevertheless happy) seemingly in the middle of an adventure. The images are often accompanied by a caption telling the reader the place, activity and often the name of the people in the picture. The image below is a classic example of this approach (Black Diamond, 2006, p. 39, caption: "Reservations required, jacket and tie optional. Varco, friend and haute cuisine above Chamonix").



Brian: *It's messy, dirty and beat-up, and it's exactly how I would expect it to be in reality. The caption tells you who and where it is and what they are doing, so you get a feeling for the place and the activity. It feels authentic.*

Indeed, when asked to rank the different images and catalogs according to how authentic they felt, all of the respondents named Patagonia's and Black Diamond's advertising as the most authentic. Clearly arranged images such as those in the Peak Performance catalog were often seen as less realistic, but surprisingly, authentic nevertheless.

Sven: Peak uses a mix of models and outdoor athletes in their catalog, and you can tell that it's a big-budget thing with make-up and careful lighting and professional photographers. But the photos look good, the clothes and the people are pretty, and it's all so well-made. It doesn't have to be realistic to be good.

The same goes for Lundhags or Houdini's studio photos: they *look* good, and so they *are* good. As long as they satisfy a certain aesthetic standard, they do not need to be realistic, they can still be perceived as authentic. Part of this authenticity and credibility, according to several respondents, comes from the sponsored athletes in the catalogs; people know that these hard-core athletes are good at what they do, and they inject the brand with a dose of credibility.

Lars-Ola: Authenticity is closely linked to lifestyle, and it's very important for a company's credibility. At the same time, there's so much that customers don't know. For example we don't have the time to be out in the outdoors as much as we would like, so I'm not sure how authenticity works exactly. If the people who work for an outdoor company don't do the activity as much themselves, they have to bring in "activists" or "ambassadors" or "friends".

This suggests that authenticity, in the "true" meaning of the word, is of dubious value in the marketing of outdoor firms. While some highly-involved consumers may be able to see through the glossy catalog pages and make an informed decision about how authentic or credible a company is, most consumers of outdoor goods are perceived by the respondents of this study as going for what *looks* authentic at a quick first glance. As Baudrillard (1996) suggested, the market has the ability to simulate the true and lived experience, and consumers themselves may be willing to put faith into images

they know have no foundation in reality, just because they satisfy certain aesthetic criteria.

4.4.5 LIFESTYLE AND FASHION

As mentioned in the Introduction chapter, some customers are buying outdoor clothing to use solely in the confines of the city, and certain pieces of clothing have become fashionable with strictly urban dwellers. One such example is the Fjällräven Expedition down jacket, which ironically is one of those traditional products that has changed the least in the almost 30 years it has existed. This group of products seems to have become fashionable in settings long-removed from the Great Outdoors.

Lars-Ola: *The typical new customer of our Expedition jacket is an 18 year old girl [other respondents guessed the age to be around 14-18] that goes to high school in Östermalm or Bromma. We are thankful for their business, but I couldn't say that they are our customers, since they don't use the products in the manner for which we designed them, and we don't target them with our marketing. That jacket has had ups and downs over the years; now we're in an up phase, but we've never done an ad with that jacket as long as I've been here.*

The rest of the respondents were of the same general opinion; these sudden surges in popularity of certain products have provided a welcome cash flow for manufacturers and retailers alike, but these trends originate from outside the outdoor industry and when they die out, there's not much the industry can do about them. This is of importance because the group of consumers described above is sometimes used as an example that the outdoor industry has become purely a fashion industry. This, the evidence suggest, would be a misguided assumption.

The Fjällräven jackets mentioned above have looked roughly same for more than 30 years, and the credit for their having become fashionable in the city cannot directly be traced to their manufacturer or retailer. The producers and shops alike were caught by surprise by their sudden surge in popularity, and according to Brian and Helena, it took two full winters before supply finally caught up with demand for the jackets; in 2003 and 2004 the smaller sizes (worn mainly by the customer group described above) were

sold out by October, before winter had really started. The industry had no way of knowing and reaching out to these customers, all it could do was sit back and watch them come in through the door, and hope it had enough jackets in stock. While a few manufacturers have since tried to adapt their offering to these new developments (by the winter of 2005 there were big down jackets with lots of pockets for iPods and the like from several manufacturers), they were clearly out of their league in trying to predict and influence the behavior of this new, fashion-conscious customer segment, as Fredrik puts it. As Brian also said: “14-year old girls that come in and buy an expensive down jacket are not really our customers. We are thankful for the money, but we know we may not see them again in the shop”.

While the above phenomenon is clearly interesting in itself, the statements above suggest that from the point of view of the outdoor industry it can be seen more as an anomaly than a viable way to stay in business. There is a clear distinction between the customers described here and the ones that are more or less active in the outdoors and wear clothing from outdoor brands even while in the city. Therefore, the outdoor lifestyle that is the focus of this study does not really concern the trend described in the above four paragraphs.

4.5 CRITIQUE OF THE LIFESTYLE CONCEPT

Lifestyle marketing, having made such an impact in the outdoor industry, is not without its critics. Most of this critique is directed towards the perception that outdoor brands are becoming more preoccupied with image rather than substance, as some of the text in the preceding pages also suggests. John Sherman writes in the opening essay of the 2004 Black Diamond product catalog:

Don't call us core. Because the second you do it means we just sold a fashion helmet that matches your shoes and a designer-label-recycled-polarwool [shirt] of no use whatsoever [while actually climbing]. “Core” is the “Extreme” of the ‘00s—an overused buzzword sucked dry of meaning by vampire pitchmen bent on selling you fluff you don't need... [Climbing] has been hijacked as today's hot marketing vehicle. Take taut-atted fitness

model, objectify with undersized sports bra...—roll the cameras and voila! We have Hip Hop Nation's disposable income in our back pocket. Yep, [climbing] can sell anything these days... [But] we want you to obsess over climbing the way we do. Because then, every time you see a [climbing] photograph you won't think of SUVs, overpriced watches or low-carb beer. You'll think, "I need to get out there."

Sherman, 2005, p. 4

An advertisement for outdoor footwear manufacturer La Sportiva (2002) tries to distinct their philosophy from the concept of an outdoor lifestyle: "It's not just our lifestyle...it's our way of life." Peak Performance has also tried to distance itself from the "image" part of lifestyle, "because Peak wants to be perceived as a brand for the real hard-core users, and not for people that are after an image. That's why Peak calls themselves a 'Life Culture brand' now" says Fredrik, but admits that the difference may just be in the name and not the substance, as Peak Performance has not really won acceptance in that hard-core group. Speaking from her experience at Houdini, Eva disagrees with the above perspective:

Eva: Lifestyle has become something that you want to be but not are, which I think is wrong. I don't think that image and lifestyle are the same thing, a lifestyle doesn't have to be fake. I think most customers use the stuff when they are active. Our clothes are comfortable, which is why a lot of people wear them all day long, not because they feel uncomfortable in being themselves. It's so nice to have thrown away those old ugly outdoors' clothes, and feel good-looking both physically and mentally. Pretty is always better than ugly, and if it becomes lifestyle, then I think it is a good thing.

Both of the above perspectives are, in a way, correct. It is as difficult to argue that an outdoors lifestyle is entirely about the image, as it is to argue that the marketing of outdoor firms is strictly directed towards consumers that are very active in the outdoors. Most consumers of outdoor apparel use the products in the wind, rain, snow or sunshine of the Great Outdoors at least part of the time (whether 10, 20 or 50 percent is a matter of speculation). They are after functional benefits, and expect the products to perform in

the environment. Nevertheless, the data generated during this study suggests that the *trend* is slowly tipping the scales towards the image at the expense of the substance. The concept of lifestyle is being applied to a growing number of brands and products worn by a growing number of consumers with more or less intention and ability to use them in the outdoors. As such, the critique presented above may seem legitimate.

Yet, it is important to point out that this critique seems to concern the labeling and classification of the new image of the outdoors, whether “core”, “extreme” or “lifestyle”, more than anything else. What the above essay in the Black Diamond catalog (Sherman, 2005) is saying is that, yes we are core, but don’t call us that. Black Diamond may be trying to distance themselves from the hype of marketing’s “vampire pitchmen” (ibid, p. 4), but lifestyles are as much a way for companies to market their wares as they are a way for consumers themselves to build their identities with the help of consumption (McCracken, 1988; Giddens, 1991; Douglas & Isherwood, 1996; Clarke, 2002; Binkley, 2003). Not even companies such as Black Diamond can resist the demand coming from consumers themselves for products that allow them to construct their outdoor lifestyles, which is why they also make a line of casual clothing to be worn while ‘not climbing’. Lifestyle, whether image or not, is money in the bank.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

5.1 THE STUDY'S CONCLUSIONS

This study was instigated by the observation that technical outdoor clothing has become a common sight in the paved paths of our “urban jungle”. Outdoor firms, traditionally bound to the functionality and aesthetics of wilderness use, have risen to this new challenge by reinventing themselves with the help of what has loosely been defined as an outdoor lifestyle. The purpose of this study has been to explore the relevance and implications of image-driven marketing strategies, and in particular lifestyle marketing, in creating value in the outdoor industry. Below, I will present the study’s findings by first describing the general trend towards imagery and abstraction in the marketing of outdoor firms, and then focusing specifically on the outdoor lifestyle phenomenon.

5.1.1 IMAGES AND REALITY

As a way of revising my view of outdoor activities and the cultural world described in the Introduction chapter, I will start by suggesting that modern outdoor activities are a wholly cultural phenomenon. The cliché of “getting back to nature” simply means taking a vacation from the “real” world of stress and technology and having a break before going back to civilization. Moreover, the popularity of outdoor activities seems to vary with cultural trends and get influenced by images and products in magazines and advertisements. What might be cool this year will likely be replaced by something else in the near future, and the judgment is grounded on cultural values.

The scope and approach to outdoor activities is rapidly changing. Consumers are perceived as willing to try out an increasingly varied number of outdoor activities, while at the same time the amount of time they are devoting to being in the outdoors is getting shorter. This conflicting demand for more activity in less time is driving consumers to look for shortcuts to quickly get to “the good part” of outdoor activities. Thus, time-consuming affairs such as acquiring the required experience and knowledge for being in a hostile mountain environment, are being replaced by motorized access and guide

services that provide knowledge and safety even to inexperienced outdoorspeople. No less important, high-quality outdoor clothing from well-known brands is also a common shortcut: most people may not have the skills and experience of the mountain professionals, but they can at least have the same clothing and equipment. Consumers that may never set foot on the world's highest mountain are buying clothing that is "tested on Everest", as a way of stacking the odds in their favor when time, knowledge and experience may be lacking.

While no statistic gives a truthful picture of why consumers buy outdoor products, all of the respondents agreed that outdoor clothing is often used more in the city than in the wilderness (a 70-30 ratio was a common guesstimate). Extreme functionality has always been the main selling point of high-end outdoor products, but this does not easily reconcile with how the products are really being used in everyday situations. This suggests that the ever-increasing functionality of outdoor clothing is more of a way to increase the *sign value* of such items when comparing them to simpler, cheaper and/or older outdoor products, which has led to the role of design being rapidly on the rise in the outdoor industry. The evidence suggests that functionality and innovation are increasingly valued more as design elements that add to the sign value of outdoor products than for the direct benefits they provide consumers.

While most outdoor companies still have the classic "man and woman with big backpacks walking about in the mountains" type of image as the basis of their advertisements and product catalogs, the times may be changing. The current trend is to alter, blur or altogether remove nature in the background of photographs to satisfy a certain aesthetic or to lead the reader to interpret the image in the "correct" way. This is in line with the implicit promise of outdoor products to act as a barrier between the user and nature's less desirable sides, such as rain, cold or other types of discomfort. A digitized image of nature is less likely to create such unwanted associations in the minds of prospective customers.

5.1.2 MARKETING THE OUTDOOR LIFESTYLE

If we are to accept the theoretical claim that lifestyles aim to somehow give a sense of oneness and entirety to the fragmented ways we live our lives (all of my respondents could generally agree with this claim), it would follow that the outdoor lifestyle seeks to erase the boundaries between outdoor activities and urban life. The aim of lifestyle marketing in the outdoor industry is to make the feeling of being outdoors the prevalent one; it should be available around the clock, no matter if we are on top of a mountain or on our way to the office on a Monday morning. Outdoor products allow users to feel like outdoorspeople even within the confines of the city. In this respect, lifestyle is necessarily image-driven; city pavement is not a wilderness trail, and the office is not a mountain.

Yet, it would be misguided to criticize lifestyle marketing on these grounds without taking into account the fact that consumers themselves are demanding and using these images to build their identities. In other words, while no outdoor firm wants to be perceived as selling an image, they would be well advised to seek to satisfy consumer demand for more fashionable “lifestyle” products and marketing rich in imagery.

The marketing of outdoor lifestyles is based on three recurring themes: 1) redefining daily life as “rest” in between outdoor activities, 2) marketing the activity instead of the products, and 3) holding up a core group of outdoor athletes as both role models and living proof that the outdoor lifestyle is not just about an image but is in fact obtainable. By redefining daily urban life as rest, the market communications of outdoor firms are clearly putting it into relation to activity. Resting is a way of rewarding ourselves for a hard day’s playing in the outdoors. Resting is when we gather around the campfire and tell stories of the day’s adventures. No matter how scared we were while climbing, or how tired and cold while paddling or hiking, when we finally get to rest (whether at camp or at home), it is suddenly all worth it. It follows that, if going to work on a Monday can be conceptualized as resting for next weekend’s outdoor activities, it is much easier to communicate that sense of oneness and continuity an outdoor lifestyle aims towards. It is also much easier for consumers to identify with outdoor brands while not physically in the outdoors. This is where products from outdoor brands come in:

they are the medium of the transfer of meaning between activity and rest. They provide the link that allows consumers to be physically in the city but mentally in the outdoors.

The second approach involves marketing the activity instead of the product itself. Some outdoor activities get more catalog exposure than others. They are usually new, fast, dangerous, cool and rich in imagery and mental associations. Climbing is one such activity; images of people climbing remote mountains or steep rock faces appeal to a wide audience that may never set foot on such locations, and give credibility to a range of products and brands more or less associated with the activity. Marketing the activity instead of the product on sale is also a way of satisfying consumer demand for authentic, disinterested and not pushy marketing that may be more suitable as a foundation to lifestyle than marketing saturated with commercial intent.

An expert group, or core, of outdoor athletes is the third common element in the marketing of outdoor lifestyles. On a purely functional level, these core users give support to the statement we hear often in advertisements: if it's good enough for the professionals, it's good enough for you. On a more subtle level, they are living proof that the outdoor lifestyle is real, desirable, and attainable and not just an image. They accomplish this through a) they are very good at what they do, and that is something we can all strive for b) they spend all their time doing what they love, being in the outdoors practicing their activity of choice. In this respect, they are the perfect embodiment of the outdoor lifestyle.

5.2 FURTHER RESEARCH AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I hope it is clear to the reader that lifestyle marketing is just *one* of the ways the outdoor industry creates value, and it should not be mistaken to apply to all firms to the same extent. Neither should it be seen as the only solution to a successful business. As respondent Fredrik Dahl put it during our interview, “you could have the best marketing in the industry, but if you don't deliver the products on time to the stores, you're out of business.”

My intention with this study has been to describe lifestyle marketing in the context of the outdoor industry, and it has become clear during the research process that lifestyle is as much about marketing as it is about consumers living their lives and creating their identities through consumption. Studying this phenomenon from a consumer perspective would therefore contribute greatly to our understanding of it, and would give a more subtle picture of how different lifestyles can coexist among consumers.

It is reasonable to suspect that general cultural trends in our society influence the trends we see in the outdoors and the outdoor industry. Computers, cars and communications are getting faster, and so is the pace we are keeping in the outdoors. We are spending more time in front of digital devices and less in the outdoors, which could be why we have an easier time recognizing icons and symbols of nature than nature itself. The list could be made long, and I think a study of this phenomenon across the boundaries of several academic disciplines would make for very interesting reading.

The Great Outdoors for me is about getting in touch with an essential part of what it is to be human that I feel is getting lost in our consumption and information society. Every time we close it behind the fence of a national park, mark a trail with a start and a finish or run a race through it, we may be missing a chance to feel a connection with the earth that the human race has felt since the beginning of time. Next time I'm out there I'll try not to follow a trail or have a destination and a deadline. I might not walk far, but maybe that is not the point.

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