The Confluence of Ideologies in Consumption Activities

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When consumers engage in activities rooted in other cultures, they bring together disparate ideologies. Through six phenomenological interviews with yoga practitioners, this study examines how consumers negotiate ideological conflicts and why they immerse themselves in these conflicts. The interviews suggest consumers do so to authenticate hedonic pursuits and craft authentic consumption experiences.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Globalization has facilitated the transfer of cultural activities across borders such that consumers in Western societies increasingly engage in activities and use products that have roots in other cultures. As consumers adopt these products and participate in these activities, they draw on elements from their own culture rather than fully embracing the product/activity in its traditional form, along with its existing cultural underpinnings. For example, while yoga has philosophical roots in India (Eliade 1973), Western consumers only selectively draw on elements of this ancient practice and instead engage in a revised form of yoga that also reflects local cultures (Marowetz 2007). This adaptation is particularly interesting given these activities/products often embody ideological values that lie in stark contrast to the capitalist ideology of Western societies. For instance, given the centrality of transcendence in yoga, consider the divergent views across Eastern and Western philosophies of the relationship between technology and transcendence. Western consumers are quite adept at uniting their “infatuation with technological advance” with their “spiritual quest for transcendence” (Sherry 2000, p. 276). In fact, Western consumers rely heavily on technology to advance several capitalist ideals (e.g., freedom, efficiency, control) and are accustomed to drawing on technological resources to enhance consumption experiences and achieve goals (Kozinets 2008; Simpson 2003). In contrast, Eastern philosophy adopts an experiential and internally-driven worldview of transcendence (Gould 1991a). Eastern philosophy demands the rejection of the external world (i.e., material possessions), stating that this is necessary to becoming attuned with your inner self and achieving connectedness with the universe (Eliade 1973). Yet, Western consumers seamlessly integrate ancient practices into the capitalist marketplace such that the fusion of Eastern philosophies with Western ideology has become ubiquitous in culture. This paper seeks to enrich our understanding of the lived experience of consumers who negotiate these ideological conflicts and to examine why they may choose to immerse themselves in these conflicts.

To develop a rich understanding of the consumers’ lived experience as they engage in activities and use products that blend disparate ideologies, I conducted six phenomenological interviews with yoga practitioners in Western cultures. The interviews, which ranged from 60 to 90 minutes, were initiated with a grand-tour question yet remained largely unstructured so that participants could steer the interview. Probing questions, adapted to the language of the participant, were asked as needed to facilitate a fulsome discussion. While the confluence of ideologies is relevant across numerous consumer activities, yoga is a particularly rich context in which to examine the phenomenon. With historical roots in India, yoga refers to “any ascetic technique or any meditation method” (Eliade and Trask 1970, p.3). The focus is on achieving nirvana, a state of nothingness that contrasts with the materialist orientation of Western societies (Ojha 1999). Yet, despite these philosophical roots that seem antithetical to capitalism, yoga has been incorporated into Western society. American consumers buy technical yoga clothing and mats, engage in yoga forums and retreats, purchase yoga videos, join yoga studios and subscribe to yoga magazines (Morawetz 2007; Moran 2006). The interviews suggest that consumers are aware of the disparate worldviews that they are uniting in constructing their Westernized yoga practice. The participants actually held strong normative views of yoga and wrestled with the notion that their yoga practice diverged from these normative views. Interestingly, the gap between their yoga practice and normative yoga appeared to stem from the use of technology and its underlying values. In fact, a dominant theme across interviews was the conflicting presence of technology as both a liberator and constraint. Consumers used technological resources extensively to enhance their yoga experience (e.g., to engineer an ideal environment), yet were so dependent on these technological resources that they felt constrained by these same liberating resources. For example, because the interviewees depended on certain external resources (e.g., music, temperature, DVDs) to achieve instrumental goals, they were no longer self-sufficient and instead dependent on these resources. Thus, central to understanding the consumers’ lived experience is the contradictory relationship with technology. Technology at once liberates them from constraints (e.g., time) and yet constrains them from achieving their normative views of yoga.

The interviews also shed light on why consumers may choose to immerse themselves in these ideological conflicts. It appears that one reason consumers may do so is to authenticate their hedonistic pursuits. For instance, participants framed traditional Western forms of exercise (e.g., aerobics), which focus solely on physical benefits with little meaning behind the movements, as more shallow and superficial. Thus, unable to authenticate their hedonic needs through exercise routines that align with capitalist ideology, consumers may endeavour to do so by engaging in activities that have socio-historic roots in non-capitalist systems of philosophy. In a sense, consumers seem to use the inherent conflict associated with these activities to their advantage, reworking the Eastern ideology of individual transcendence to authenticate their practice while also satisfying hedonic needs. By co-opting cultural elements from Eastern philosophy, consumers can lend authenticity to their consumption experience without sacrificing hedonic pursuits such as comfort, efficiency and enjoyment.

This paper extends the literature in two important ways. First, whereas previous work notes that certain people turn to Eastern health solutions in rejection of Western scientific practices (Thompson 2004), this study notes that one reason consumers may instead engage in activities from Eastern cultures to authenticate their individual hedonistic pursuits. Second, this study suggests that consumers draw on ideological discourses not only to craft their identities (Denzin 2001; Hebdige 1979; Holt 2002; Holt and Thompson 2004) but also to construct meaningful consumption experiences. Broadly speaking, this paper enriches our understanding of the consumer’s lived experience as they participate in activities that embody ideological conflicts. Despite the inherent contradictions in the activities, which seems to stem, in part, from a conflicted relationship with technology (i.e., technology as liberator and constraint), consumers are able to draw on Eastern ideologies to authenticate their hedonistic pursuits and craft an authentic consumption experiences. In doing so, consumers demonstrate how they can fluidly bring together seemingly disparate ideological elements into their daily consumption activities.

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