Creating Hybridity: the Case of American Yoga

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This paper examines the processes of construction of hybrid practices in the marketplace in the context of American Yoga. Investigating the thirty-year evolution of yoga in the U.S. and the institutional practices of brands, we identify strategies through which hybrid practices are created.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In today’s global consumptionscape, cultural practices are characterized and constituted by multi-directional flows of people, technology, financial capital, mediated images and ideas (Appadurai 1990). In line with this disjunctive order of global cultural economy, research on globalization outcomes has increasingly diverted attention away from the perspective that globalization produces homogeneity and cultural uniformity, to one that emphasizes cultural heterogenization (Robertson 1992; Wilk 1998). Starting with Ger and Belk’s (1996) work on alternatives to global uniformity, consumer researchers examined complex outcomes of global flows in a variety of contexts including consumer resistance to Coca-Cola in India (Varman and Belk 2009), re-appropriation of yoga in India (Askegaard and Eckhardt 2012), reterritorialization of rock music in Turkey (Yazicioglu 2010), and appropriation and creolization of youth culture in Denmark and Greenland (Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006). These studies point to what globalization scholars conceptualize as hybridity, “a continuous two-way borrowing and lending between cultures, a form of transculturation or sociocultural process in which discrete structures and practices that existed separately, are combined to create new structures, objects, and practices” (Garcia Cancini 2005, 8).

In this paper, we build on this stream of research by exploring the processes through which hybrid practices are created in the marketplace. Specifically, we conceptualize the global flow of yoga practices and the emergence of American Yoga in the U.S. in terms of institutionalization of hybridity through market practices. Although there is no official description of what American Yoga is, institutional actors such as the Yoga Journal often allude to its hybrid form (Cushman 2000; Isaacs 2008). American Yoga has appropriated some of the ancient Indian yoga poses (i.e., asanas) and spiritual aspects of the practice (e.g., mantras such as control, self transformation, gratitude), and combined it with the physical exercise culture, English script, and popular music appealing to Western audiences. Its experience is also commoditized and hybridized with classes for beginners, intermediate, and advanced students, new styles such as acroyoga and antigravity yoga, and forms like spinning and yoga, budokon (i.e., combination of yoga and martial arts), yoga and chocolate, yoga and wine, as well as doga (i.e., yoga for dogs) (Brown and Leledaki 2010; Merry 2010).

Globalization Processes and Consequences

The influence of globalization processes on consumer identities, experiences and practices is multifaceted. On one hand, the flow of goods and ideas from the West to the East are suggested to endorse capitalism and Western values leading to a homogenous global consumer culture (Belk 1995; Featherstone 1990). On the other hand, the effects of globalization are posited to be not just unidirectional and the ensuing consequences to be more complex in the form of local interpretations. In line with this latter view, Ger and Belk (1996) identify four types of reactions globalization can bring about in local contexts: return to local roots, consumer resistance, local appropriation, and creolization. Fueled by marketization of global goods by multinational firms and the global media, local effects of globalization in Less Affluent World include increased ethnic and religious movements, and geographic nationalism. While these reactions can lead to fundamentalism and polarization among local communities, they can also indicate return to roots and revival of local traditions. Globalization can also result in consumer resistance in local contexts such as in the cases of boycotting Coca-Cola in India (Varman and Belk 2009) or foreign and infidel brands in Turkey (Izberk-Bilgin 2012). Another reaction to global consumer culture is appropriation of global consumer goods and reconfiguration of their meaning to better fit local contexts. Consumers can appropriate meanings and functions of global goods as evidenced, for instance, in the use of dishwashers to wash muddy spinach in Turkey (Ger and Belk 1996).

Finally, globalization can lead to creolization or hybridization, that is, “the meeting and mingling of meanings and meaningful forms from disparate sources” (Ger and Belk 1996, 290). Some creolized consumption patterns may be more like a fragmented post-modern pastiche rather than an integrated adaptation; yet, through transformation of meaning and local sense-making, they can be locally experienced in a coherent manner. Yazicioglu’s (2010, 240) analysis of Turkish Rock music showcases how hybridization comes to being through the processes of detrerritorialization and reterritorialization. Deterritorialization refers to “an appropriation process, a cultural pattern that is taken from its social context and applied to a new one in a different physical space, whereas reterritorialization denotes the making of this cultural pattern one’s own by producing a local form in this new society and geography.” In the process of reterritorialization, multiple variations and hybrid forms rather than merely homogenized and/or singular appropriations of cultural practices may emerge in their new contexts. Yazicioglu (2010) finds that, rather than homogenization of rock music, a new form of Turkish rock emerges in the local context of Turkey through processes of detrerritorialization and reterritorialization.

In summary, these multiple processes that connect and integrate different aspects of cultural products to the local cultures they travel to go beyond accounts of global homogenization and local appropriation. While the diversity of consumer responses to global cultural flows is well documented, the role of market actors (i.e., brands, service providers, journals) in detrerritorialization and reterritorialization of products/practices have gained less attention. Towards this end, we examine the market actors’ practices in collectively creating the hybrid practice of American Yoga.

Methodology

Research began with an aim to understand the evolution of yoga in the U.S. We sought to gain insight into the history of yoga in the U.S. with a focus on the actors who introduced as well as shaped the practice over time. We collected articles with the word “yoga” in the headline and the lead paragraph from the New York Times (n = 868) and the Washington Post (n = 604) published between 1980 and 2012. The collection of this archival data served as a starting point in forming a historical trajectory of the market capturing evolving meaning of yoga, identifying actors and brands that were involved in building of the market. We then conferred to a number of historical sources including books on history of yoga (n = 14), journal and magazine articles (n = 166), and websites of yoga associations to critically evaluate how American Yoga emerged over time. In addition, we engaged in participant observation in yoga classes in the U.S. between 2009 and 2014, taking field notes on the activities and content that made up these classes.
The data were coded iteratively to identify patterns and themes (Corbin and Strauss 2007). In the initial open coding process, we noted specific mentions of ‘American Yoga.’ We then analyzed the data to identify the strategies through which local actors create American Yoga. During this process, we also examined the literature on globalization and hybridity linking our findings to higher level constructs.

**Findings**

Yoga is a 2500-year-old discipline that is traditionally associated with quieting of the mind, transcending the physical self, and achieving union with the divine in journey to spiritual enlightenment (De Michielis 2004). While its origins lie in Sanskritic culture and the religious traditions of Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism, the theory and practice of yoga in modern and postmodern times stem broadly from the philosophies, teachings, and practices of Hinduism (De Michielis 2008). Swami Vivekananda’s speech in 1893 at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago marks the official introduction of yoga to the U.S. (De Michielis 2004). Vivekananda focused on contemplative dimensions of yoga, emphasizing metaphysical and devotional (i.e., Raja yoga) rather than physical (i.e., Hatha yoga) forms and articulated yoga as the core component of Hindu spirituality and the “unifying sign of the Indian nation” (Van der Veer 2007, 319). In the 20th century, a distinct American yoga started to emerge that gradually valued Hatha yoga and embraced “the physical as a route to the transcendent” (Albanese 2007, 247). Today 20.4 million Americans practice yoga and spend about $10.3 billion a year on yoga classes and products (Yoga Journal 2012). The wide variety of yoga styles and brands that have caught on range from Power Yoga to Jivamukti Yoga and constitute products of American appropriation of yoga that is covertly metaphysical and heavily inscribed within medical and fitness domains (Albanese 2005, 2007; Powers 2000). The analysis of our data reveals a series of deterritorializing and reterritorializing practices in creation of American Yoga.

**Deterritorializing Practices**

Our data indicates that the diverse meanings of yoga were picked and adopted selectively in the U.S. market via decoupling of the practice from its Hindu roots while continuing to emphasize its fitness and health benefits. The American Yoga Association (AYA), for example, is a non-profit organization that was established in 1968 dedicated to provide instructional and educational resources on yoga to students, teachers, and journalists. Its mission is to “convey the essence of Yoga philosophy in a manner that is nonreligious, educational, and sensitive to the particular needs of Americans” (www.americanyogaassociation.org). This conceptualization of the practice stands in contrast to that of Vivekananda’s. Yet, such de-ethnicization of the practice came to define contours of American Yoga and made the practice accessible to wider range of consumers who had different religious beliefs or sought purely physical benefits from the practice (Little 2011).

The resulting cultural product is set apart from traditional yoga practices in several aspects. While the variety of American yoga brands range from meditative to athletic practices, yoga acquired secular meanings over time to accommodate interest in physical exercises and religious diversity of American practitioners (Cushman 2000; Miller 2008; Powers 2000). For example, Tara Guber, the creator of the “Yoga Ed.” program that is now adopted in twenty-six states in the U.S. took the Hindu language out of the program: “I stripped every piece of anything that anyone could vaguely construe as spiritual or religious out of the program.” (Guber quoted in Miller 2008). Such transformations of yoga via its disassociation from Hinduism served to mitigate tensions regarding its incompatibility with Christianity.

Other market actors adopted similar decoupling practices as well. For example, the YogaFit brand was created as a “user-friendly” practice that dispensed with the Sanskrit names of postures and eliminated om-ing and chanting to address the challenges of teaching yoga in health clubs that appeal to diverse practitioners (Oldenburg 2004). Tara Stiles, the founder of Strala Yoga, arguing “people need yoga not another religious leader,” dismissed discussions of sacred Hindu texts, chakras. Instead she introduced plain terminology such as “push-ups” and “lower back” instead of “chaturangas” and “sacrum” (Alvarez 2011). Interestingly, while stripping down the Hindu scripts from the practice, new scripts and traditions were created in yoga classes such as those for kids, wherein yogic panting became “bunny breathing” and “meditation” became “time in” (Miller 2008). It also became common for some practitioners to adapt their yoga practice by integrating asanas (i.e., physical poses) with prayers and readings from their religion of choice (Morris 2010).

**Reterritorializing Practices**

Following deterritorializing practices involving selective decoupling, market actors appropriated yoga to the American context via embedding the practice with culturally relevant narratives and histories. For instance, yoga instructors often brought in their personal stories and experiences such as having a mishap and going through a stressful day, which are closely tied to the American geographic and cultural context, to their sessions. They, then, encouraged consumers to imbue their practices with such personalized meanings and employ yoga to cope with the daily ordeals of their American lives: “The instructor arrived with an enthusiastic spirit greeting everybody. He was dressed in striped swim trunks and a tank top with a sunset image on the front. He looked like he was ready to go to the beach. He started the class with a story to guide the day’s practice: “Let me tell you something that happened this weekend. I was driving up to Santa Barbara to see my best friend. In my excitement I must have been pushing the gas pedal a bit too much and all of a sudden there was a police siren behind me. I got a speeding ticket. So I want this to remind us to control ourselves and let go off the gas pedal. As you engage in your practice today dedicate it to self-control.” Throughout the practice he reminded us to focus on control as we held each pose. Right before the squads he started playing a Janet Jackson song, “Control,” to bring inspiration to our practice” (Field notes at CorePower Yoga).

We observe that the processes of institutional story telling and appropriation of yoga as a healing practice with the potential to overcome the ills of the modern Western society were successfully incorporated into individual consumers’ practices. The resulting individualized and private meanings mark reterritorialization of yoga in the U.S. and come to define the core of American Yoga: “For 65 consecutive classes I had not given up. I can’t give up because six years ago I was a junkie living on the streets of New York, shooting heroin, drinking methadone and feeding my addiction to pills. So what are the odds of me winding up here, at 49, training to be a Bikram yoga teacher? …Bikram yoga is a challenge for anyone, much less a recovering addict wracked with pain. It is a 90-minute class, practiced in a room heated to 105 degrees, with the same series of 26 postures patented by Bikram Choudhury. The postures are accessible to anyone, in any shape, but challenging for everyone, in any shape. The front mirrors force you to face the truth and the reality of your life. Slowly, I found a sliver of hope that I could change. I learned to allow my sadness, my anger, my discomfort, my fight-or-flight drama to just be.” (Heaton 2011; The New York Times, March 11)
Another reterritorialization strategy that emerged from our data pertains to the building of brand communities. First, a variety of yoga festivals were created that brought together like-minded yoga enthusiasts (www.yogafestival.com). The Wanderlust festivals, for example, are multi-day events that combine yoga classes with outdoor expeditions, music performances, wine tasting and organic dining featuring top chefs. Taking place in a variety of different states and cities across the U.S., the festivals are “all-out, ecstatic celebrations” that aim to create community around shared values and mindful living. The founders express their enthusiasm in seeing “a large community grow around the pillars of mindful living – yoga, the arts, personal spirituality, environmentalism, organics and conscious consumerism” and having Wanderlust serve as a central gathering point for this community (www.wanderlust.com).

Second, yoga studios cater to a sense of community. Special appearances of gurus and yoga celebrities, workshops and events in the studios offer experiences of collective flow as well as status to members (Leigh, Peters and Shelton 2006). For example, kirtan chanting sessions are gaining increasing popularity among American consumers. While traditionally kirtan is a form of worship in India’s bhakti devotional traditions, in its American appropriation it has become more of a meditation to escape from the stresses of American culture “relieving it [the mind] from its usual chatter — grocery lists, money worries, petty arguments.” Centers such as the Integral Yoga Studios or the Jivamukti Yoga School in Manhattan, sometimes host donation based kirtan sessions and draw hundreds of practitioners (Eckel 2009, E6).

Discussion

We explored the practice of yoga in the U.S. to illustrate the processes of hybridization evidenced in creation of American Yoga. Our findings that detail deterritorializing and reterritorializing practices of market actors point to an emerging consciousness of kind among American yogis. Some trained by Indian gurus, the American masters have combined different strains of Indian yoga to suit modern American tastes. Increasing number of yoga conferences, often sponsored by key institutional actors like the Yoga Journal and regional yoga associations provide an opportunity for prominent yoga teachers and yoga enthusiasts to socialize, become familiarized with and practice various styles of the hybrid cultural practice of American Yoga.

By focusing on how market actors’ practices helped create hybridity, this paper makes two key theoretical contributions to the prior literature. First, while extant conceptualizations of globalization have mainly focused on the outcomes of borrowing and lending between cultures and the diversity of consumer responses to globalization (e.g., Askegaard and Eckhardt 2012, Ger and Belk 1996, Yazicioglu 2010), our study identified strategies by which market actors mobilize flows of meanings to create hybridity in the marketplace. Second, we extend on the consumer culture theory work that explores the role of brands in construction of cultures and identities by showcasing their part in creation and institutionalization of hybridity (Kayla and Eckhardt 2008; Luedicke et al. 2010). Our longitudinal and multi-actor analysis of the U.S. yoga market reveals how brand practices contributed to shaping of the American yoga as a hybrid form of cultural practice.

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