

Of Digital Images and Digital Media

Approaches to Marketing in American ISKCON

Nicole Karapanagiotis

ABSTRACT: This article is a theoretical and ethnographic investigation of the role of marketing and branding within the contemporary ISKCON movement in the United States. In it, I examine the digital marketing enterprises of two prominent ISKCON temples: ISKCON of New Jersey and ISKCON of D.C. I argue that by attending to the vastly different ways in which these temples present and portray ISKCON online—including the markedly different media imagery by which they aim to draw the attention of the public—we can learn about an ideological divide concerning marketing within American ISKCON. This divide, I argue, highlights different ideas regarding how potential newcomers become attracted to ISKCON. It also illuminates an unexplored facet of the heterogeneity of American ISKCON, principally in terms of the movement's public face.

KEYWORDS: ISKCON, Marketing, Digital Media, Digital Hinduism, Krishna, Hare Krishna

One evening during an ethnographic site visit to an American ISKCON temple, a group of devotees engaged me in the following thought experiment:

Imagine that, as a Hare Krishna devotee, you have been given the money and the go ahead to build a new restaurant in town. Like all ISKCON restaurants, the one you have been commissioned to build will serve

Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions, Volume 21, Issue 3, pages 74–102. ISSN 1092-6690 (print), 1541-8480. (electronic). © 2018 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/nr.2018.21.3.74>.

prasadam: food that, having first been offered to Krishna in devotion, is believed to be infused with his grace.¹ Because the food to be served is *prasadam*, opening the restaurant is itself believed to be an act of preaching: a method by which to distribute to the public Krishna's grace in the form of edible bites.²

Now imagine that, as opening time for the restaurant approaches, it is your duty to come up with a name for it. What shall you call it, and on what grounds do you weigh various options for doing so? Historically, ISKCON restaurants have been named Govinda's: a name which suggests that the owner of the restaurant is Krishna himself, with Govinda being an epithet for Krishna meaning "protector of the cows." As a name of Krishna, "Govinda" conjures up images of him as the playful, loving, god of Vrindavan. But naming the restaurant Govinda's has another advantage: it ensures that people in the general public—at least those who read the restaurant's name on the sign out front—will have the opportunity to say Krishna's name at least once in their lives. And as an ISKCON devotee, this is an act which you believe carries tremendous religious merit.

Though you might go with the name Govinda's, you might also opt to name the restaurant something altogether different: perhaps something like Fresh Veg. In choosing the name Fresh Veg, you would do away with associations of Krishna altogether, opting instead to conjure images of a trendy, healthy, and organic eatery. A name like Fresh Veg, you figure, will draw in to the restaurant a larger cross-section of the public than will the name Govinda's. Therefore, though the public will not get the inherent merit of saying Krishna's name every time they read/say the name "Govinda's," a trendier name and set of associations might be better for the movement in the long run, as it means that more people will get to eat Krishna's blessed food than would otherwise be possible.

This discussion about restaurants unfolded at ISKCON of New Jersey in the winter of 2016. Though it was but one of many conversations in which I engaged during my several year (2014–2016) ethnography of the movement in the United States and India, it was one that I found particularly interesting because it was about marketing: a conversation in which devotees brought their theology to bear on practical decisions regarding which name would best be able to attract the American public not only to an ISKCON restaurant, but also to the ISKCON movement, and ultimately to Krishna himself.

Like the conversation recounted above, this article, too, is about marketing within the American ISKCON movement. But rather than looking at restaurant names, I instead examine the marketing enterprises of American ISKCON through analyses of the movement's digital media: namely, their websites and Facebook pages. In particular, I ask the following questions: how are ISKCON temples in the United States utilizing digital media in order to best market and brand themselves to the American public, and reach the greatest number of potential

newcomers? What are the various brands that they are creating in order to do so? Further, what do we learn about the ISKCON movement in the United States—how devotees understand conversion to their movement, how they understand the American public and its preferences, and what they see to be their movement’s most powerful/“sellable” aspects—by critically examining their various media brands?

In recent years, scholars such as Mara Einstein, Shayne Lee, Phillip Luke Sinitiere and others have paid increased attention to the intersection of religion and marketing—or the various ways in which, and reasons for which, religious groups package themselves, and their messages and practices, for the public.³ These studies usually begin with discussions of “competition,” arguing that if religious groups want to compete in the ‘religious marketplace’ for the attention of potential followers, then they “must present [themselves] as a valuable commodity, [as a set of] activit[ies] that is worthwhile in an era of over-crowded schedules.”⁴ In other words, they must present themselves as a valuable package to the public if they want to compete for both our time and our attention against everything else in our over-packed lives: including work, school, chores, friends, family, pursuit of hobbies, and even other religious groups.

There have been many important works about the ISKCON movement in the United States. These studies include the work of E. Burke Rochford, Jr., Edwin F. Bryant, and Maria L. Ekstrand which examine the movement’s structural and leadership changes (and also its problems) in recent decades.⁵ There is also work that investigates ISKCON’s early historical roots,⁶ as well as studies that analyze its recent sociological challenges with “Hinduization”: changes within ISKCON resulting from shifts in its community constituency from non-Indian converts to (largely) Indian Hindus.⁷ However, studies of ISKCON have not explored the ways in which the movement is being marketed in the United States. Rather, the few studies that have focused on marketing within ISKCON have focused on it in locations other than the United States, such as Ghana⁸ and the United Kingdom.⁹ Or, if they focus on the United States, they focus on marketing strategies from the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁰

This article hopes to fill this lacuna within scholarship on contemporary American ISKCON through a focused study of the digital media enterprises of two prominent North American ISKCON temples: ISKCON of New Jersey and ISKCON of D.C. Utilizing a dual methodology of media content analysis and in-person ethnography within the New Jersey and D.C. communities, I argue that we can learn a lot about the contours of contemporary American ISKCON by studying its digital media.¹¹ In particular, I show that by closely attending to the vastly different ways in which devotees present and portray ISKCON online—including the markedly different choices of media imagery that they use to draw

the attention of the public—we can learn about an ideological divide concerning marketing within American ISKCON. This divide has to do with differing perceptions of how potential newcomers become attracted to Krishna Consciousness, and subsequently the differing ways in which devotees feel the movement should be marketed to them. I show that this divide highlights an unexplored facet of the heterogeneity within American ISKCON (principally in terms of the movement's public face), and I argue that by examining it, we can see the competing ways in which ISKCON devotees are positioning their movement to attract newcomers into the future in the competitive American religious marketplace.

ISKCON AND DIGITAL MEDIA

ISKCON is a Vaishnava (Vishnu or Krishna centered) religious movement that has its roots in the Bengali Vaishnava form of Hinduism known as Gaudiya Vaishnavism. Like all Gaudiya Vaishnavas, ISKCON devotees trace their tradition back to the sixteenth-century Bengali saint Chaitanya—a key Hindu religious figure who promoted the ecstatic worship of the Krishna through the practice of *sankirtan* (the public chanting of Krishna's names).¹²

Though there are many schools of Chaitanya Vaishnavism, ISKCON devotees trace their particular lineage to Chaitanya through Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati (1874–1937): the Bengali-born son of prominent Vaishnava intellectual Bhaktivinoda Thakura (1838–1914). Though there were many dimensions to the religious teachings and practices of Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati, primary amongst them in importance to ISKCON were his inclinations towards asceticism and his interest in spreading devotion to Krishna worldwide.¹³

Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati was the guru of A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896–1977), the founder of the ISKCON movement. In 1965, Prabhupada left India and boarded a freight ship to the United States. In so doing, he was executing the wishes of Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati: he traveled to the United States because he hoped to start a worldwide devotional movement (ISKCON). He believed this movement would bring not only global love of Krishna, but also an end to the myriad of miseries he believed plagued the western world.

Arriving in New York City in 1965, Prabhupada was able to draw American youth to the ISKCON movement in droves.¹⁴ In the United States, he preached an unremitting devotion (*bhakti*) to Krishna, tempered by a communal lifestyle, and a rigorous program of chanting and asceticism. In terms of ritual, a central practice that Prabhupada established was deity worship: or the ritual worship of the divine as embodied forms (or images) known as *murtis*. Within ISKCON, as in Vaishnavism and Hinduism more generally, *murtis* are believed to be tangible forms

of the divine. More than being just symbols for the divine, devotees believe that murtis are physical embodiments of Krishna, present before them. Enshrining murtis in temples, therefore, allows devotees the chance to not only see and be seen by what they believe to be Krishna himself, but also the chance to show their love to him (and strengthen their relationship with him) by offering him flowers, incense, lamps, etc.

Worshipping the deities embodied as murtis was not the only practice that Prabhupada established for his disciples, however. Of equal (and many would say greater) importance, Prabhupada encouraged an intense evangelism amongst his disciples.¹⁵ He had come to the United States to save the western world, and his new American disciples were the instruments by which he hoped to accomplish this. This preaching imperative remains a central tenet of the movement today, and contemporary devotees are still encouraged to base their religious praxis in large part on “preaching:” that is, in trying their best to spread the teachings of Srila Prabhupada, and ultimately the love of Krishna, worldwide. There are a number of ways in which devotees enact this imperative today: ranging from book distribution (also called *sankirtan* within ISKCON), *rathayatras* (public chariot processions), and also public preaching programs.

Recently, devotees have begun to use their skills to spread Krishna Consciousness online: through various websites and social media channels such as Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram. Like members of many religious groups, ISKCON devotees believe that digital media sites are of great importance in the branding of their movement. They also believe that in today’s world these sites provide not only a tradition’s most visible presence to the public, but also one of its primary means of drawing the attention of potential newcomers. For example, at the 2014 ISKCON Leadership Sangha Conference, there was an entire session devoted to the design of official ISKCON websites, and the ways to make them more successful in attracting newcomers. Importantly, the leader of the session noted in his talk that “just having a website isn’t enough.” Instead, he remarked:

A very bad website does more harm for you than no website at all. . . . We are talking about people that we are asking to *change their life*. . . so we need to ensure that we have the best quality, and a very high standard, so people trust us off the bat. Many a times [sic] this [a website] is their first impression . . . and if their first impression isn’t so good, the sad truth is they won’t take the time to meet someone [in person].¹⁶

But deciding how to make a good digital “first impression,” like deciding what to name an ISKCON restaurant, is tricky, especially in deciding what content is capable of making this good impression. Let us now turn to two different American ISKCON temple models that approach this issue.



Figure 1. *ISKCON of New Jersey. Photo taken by author. 28 February 2016.*

ISKCON OF NEW JERSEY

Nestled off of a winding road, in the wealthy suburbs of Towaco, North Jersey, stands a large mansion that is home to the vibrant suburban community of ISKCON of New Jersey. From the road, the mansion looks like a structure straight out of the Victorian era, and as one pulls into the parking lot at the bottom of the hill, one almost expects to see a character from a Charles Dickens novel descending down the long, exterior staircase.

Though there is only one elderly couple that physically resides in the temple, the broader ISKCON of New Jersey community that they host and serve is quite large. On any given Sunday, 200–250 congregant families attend the temple’s “Sunday feast” program, an evening-long set of rituals that include *kirtan* (ecstatic singing), a lecture on scripture, *arati* (fire lamp offering), and a communal meal. The ISKCON of New Jersey community extends far beyond just its Sunday attendees, however: counting the families who regularly attend the temple’s festivals and *bhakti vriksha* (small group study) gatherings, as well as those who serve the temple in a variety of volunteering (*seva*) roles, the number of devotee families in the temple community is close to 400.

Demographically, nearly all of ISKCON of New Jersey’s attendees are of Indian descent, though a few are from South Africa and a smattering of other backgrounds. This predominance of Indian participants as part of the mainstay of the community—both in terms of its leadership and its congregant base—is reflected in the choice of deities (murtis) on

the temple's altar, where one finds embodied forms of the Rama Parivar (the family and associates of the Hindu god Rama). These deities include Sita (Rama's wife), Rama, Lakshmana (Rama's brother), and Hanuman (Rama's devotee who is also himself a Hindu god). The Rama Parivar is popular with Hindus, but is not typically enshrined in ISKCON temples. Sri Nathji, a popular form of Krishna in India, is also on the New Jersey altar.

The main deities of the temple, however, are Sri Sri Gaura Nitai. Sri Sri Gaura Nitai are a pair of centrally prominent ISKCON deities, believed to be the embodied forms of Chaitanya and his close associate Nityananda, respectively. ISKCON devotees believe that Chaitanya was none other than Krishna himself, who descended to earth in human form to experience life as his own devotee. Nityananda was the human form of Krishna's brother, Balarama. Because they are believed to have spent their lives in perpetual devotion to Krishna and in the constant spreading of his names, Chaitanya and Nityananda are figures of both worship and emulation within ISKCON.

While the Victorian architecture of the temple harkens back to a previous era in time, one should not gauge what is occurring inside the community by the building's exterior. New Jersey devotees are a pioneering and tech-savvy group of ISKCON innovators. Most notably, a subset of devotees within this temple community takes an avid interest in new technology—learning the skills of videography, digital photography, and webcasting—and uses these skills to create a powerful digital media outreach presence both for their temple and within the ISKCON movement at large.

In thinking about how to design, construct, and maintain this digital media presence, devotees at ISKCON of New Jersey consistently maintain that “Krishna's beauty is the best weapon we have in our preaching.”¹⁷ As such, the philosophy behind their web design is that images of Krishna—as many of them as possible—should populate the most publicly visible areas of their web and social media sites. This widespread public sharing and posting of Krishna's images ensures that as many people as possible will see them, or will “take their *darshan*,” that is, have the chance to see and be seen by them.¹⁸

The primary way New Jersey devotees spread Krishna's images on their digital media sites is through the use of the webcam—a service they started in 2007, when several members of the community decided to purchase and install a high quality webcam in their temple. This group of devotees affixed the webcam to the back of the ISKCON of New Jersey temple room, where it could capture the main altar from a direct angle and with unobstructed clarity.¹⁹ To this day, devotees at ISKCON of New Jersey livecast images of the temple deities on their website each time the temple curtains open for darshan. This means that at several times per day, people from all over the world—in fact anyone who stumbles onto

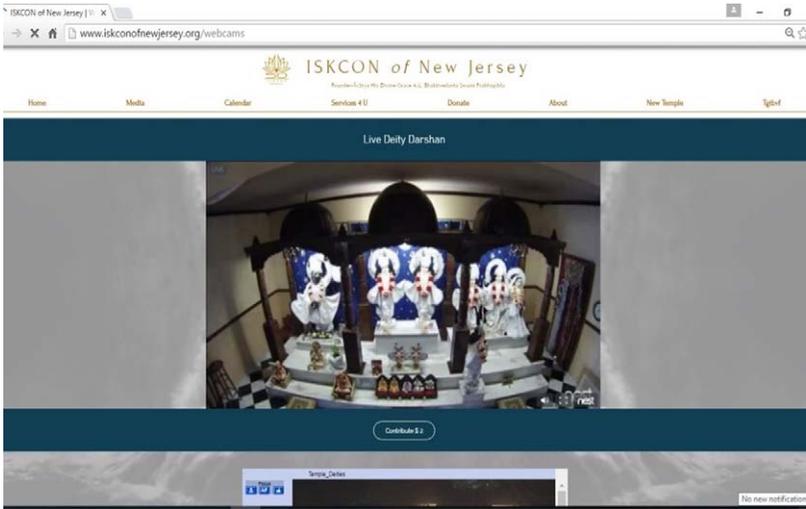


Figure 2. Screenshot of ISKCON of New Jersey webcam screen linked on the temple homepage. Screenshot by author. Courtesy of ISKCON of New Jersey. 16 September 2016. <http://www.iskconofnewjersey.org/webcams>

the ISKCON of New Jersey website—can get a live, real time glimpse at Sri Sri Gaura Nitai, Sita, Rama, Lakshmana, Hanuman, and Sri Nathji as it is occurring in the temple, right on the screen of their computer or smart phone. This makes the service that devotees at ISKCON of New Jersey offer to the public an example of a “digital darshan:”²⁰ an “online reconfiguration of the Hindu ritual tradition of darshan,” which “harnesses Web technologies and network space to represent [or foster] the act of seeing the sacred image.”²¹

Devotees at ISKCON of New Jersey cover their entire website and Facebook page with images of Krishna, providing ubiquitous opportunities to see images of him up close and in high resolution.

REASONS FOR POSTING

When asked about why they choose to populate their media sites full of images of Krishna in his deity forms (murtis), devotees at ISKCON of New Jersey consistently emphasize the effects that they believe these images have on all who view them. In particular, they post these images because the goal of ISKCON, they say, is to spread love of Krishna, and they believe that to see Krishna’s digital images is necessarily (even if unknowingly) to develop a seed of love for him. “Krishna is there in the photo,” devotees say, “because Krishna is absolute, so his potencies are also manifested in an absolute sense.”²² As one devotee at ISKCON of New Jersey put it:

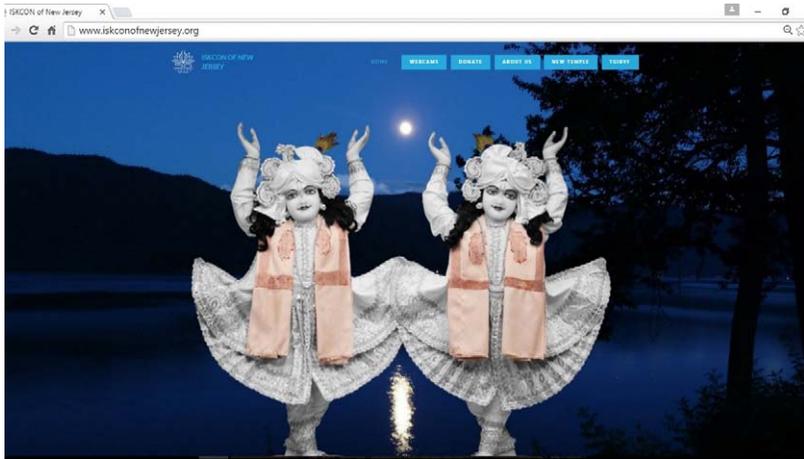


Figure 3. Screenshot of ISKCON of New Jersey homepage. Screenshot by author. Courtesy of ISKCON of New Jersey. 15 February 2016. <http://www.iskconofnewjersey.org>



Figure 4. Screenshot of ISKCON of New Jersey homepage with a “live snap” from the webcam. This “live snap” feature is no longer on the homepage. Screenshot by author. Courtesy of ISKCON of New Jersey. 26 February 2014. <http://www.iskconofnewjersey.org>

You know, in those days [when texts discussing murtis were composed], they could only comprehend that I could make [the murti] out of wood or mud. . . . [But] there’s really no difference between this and you know now you are watching [the deity or murti] through a picture or photo or through Facebook. It’s really just the manifestation or the expansion of the energy. . . .²³

To state it simply, devotees at ISKCON of New Jersey believe that the digital image is a full form of Krishna.²⁴ Consequently, they believe that



Figure 5. Screenshot of ISKCON of New Jersey Facebook profile page (public page). Screenshot by author. Courtesy of ISKCON of New Jersey. 19 September 2016. <https://www.facebook.com/iskconofnj/>

getting a glimpse of him (like getting a glimpse of his temple forms) will stir the viewer’s heart towards love of him: as such, they want to give the public a chance to see these images because they want to help them begin their journey on the path to Krishna. Significantly, New Jersey devotees believe that this glimpse of Krishna can operate on the hearts of *everyone*, even if they are unfamiliar with these images, confused about what they are, or are outsiders to ISKCON (or the Hindu traditions). “The goal of ISKCON,” an ISKCON of New Jersey administrator said,

is to spread love of Krishna, and if people see the photo online, it is not just a photo, like if you were to see a photo of me. . . . [Rather], the photo is imbued with some quality that ensures both material and spiritual growth. . . . Once you hear the name [Hare Krishna] once, or see the picture on Facebook [once], you are on your path to Krishna. It is the first step in devotional service. . . . Even if people [see the picture and] let go, He pulls them back. . . . He is a person, you know? Not some distant empty God. It might take eons of lifetimes, but [once you see], you are moved to Krishna. So, it is not just a photo you see on Facebook or in a webcam, its power is more than this.²⁵

We can understand the position of those at ISKCON of New Jersey if we recognize that for them, the *conversion efficiens*—or the mechanism by which people’s hearts begin to convert, or turn, towards Krishna—is the image of Krishna itself.²⁶ In their view, it does not matter the intention with which the viewer views the image, the context of the image, the particular composition (digital or otherwise) of the image, who is doing the seeing, or even whether one understands what one is seeing. It does

not even matter whether the viewer realizes that this conversion of her heart is taking place.²⁷ Rather, New Jersey devotees believe that it is the seeing itself of the image of Krishna—which they say is imbued with tremendous transformative power—that is responsible for effecting the beginnings of love for Krishna. On this view, those who view Krishna’s images are akin to what historian of religions David L. Haberman has called “accidental ritualists:” individuals who unknowingly perform religious rituals, yet who by so doing, inadvertently reap transformative results.²⁸ As Haberman notes, “more important than any other factor—such as intentionality,” for those who are accidental ritualists, “ritual action itself is identified as the transformative agent . . . physical imitative action itself is clearly endorsed, regardless of knowledge or intention. Putting the body in the physical groove of ritual action is lifted up as foremost among the possible transformative elements.”²⁹

Because it is the public’s seeing of these images itself that matters, and not necessarily their intention, the goal of those at ISKCON of New Jersey is not only to post as many pictures of Krishna online as possible, but also to ensure that no matter where a potential newcomer searches for information (e.g., on the main website and Facebook page when one is looking for local events, or after meeting a devotee on the streets during book distribution), he/she sees images of Krishna. Just like the name “Govinda’s” is said to be a ritually effective name for an ISKCON restaurant because it is believed to stir (automatically) the hearts of those who simply say or read “Govinda,” so too are Krishna’s digital images believed to rouse the seeds of love for Krishna in the hearts of those who see them.³⁰

ISKCON OF D.C

Though a large number of ISKCON administrators in India and the United States share the views represented by ISKCON of New Jersey, there is nonetheless a split in the movement in terms of how to spread Krishna Consciousness over digital media. In particular, though all agree that Krishna Consciousness should be spread and marketed to the public through web and social media, they disagree about what this should mean at the level of implementation. What is most at stake is the question of what kind of digital images will most attract newcomers, and therefore what type of images should make up the design of these sites. For a sizable segment of the ISKCON movement, the best images for this role are categorically *not* Krishna’s images. ISKCON of D.C. is an example of one such temple.

Tucked away in a wealthy, suburban neighborhood of Potomac, Maryland is the ISKCON of D.C. temple. It is situated off of a beautiful road that winds through the small hills of a street lined with large homes



Figure 6. ISKCON of DC Temple complex. Outdoor store set up in courtyard of temple complex for Janmastami (Krishna's birthday celebration) Photo taken by author. 5 September 2015.

and white picket fences. From the road, the temple looks like another suburban mansion in the neighborhood. But the closer one gets to the temple complex, one can see that the ISKCON of D.C. community is set up like a quaint, self-sustaining village: a set of small yellow buildings, arranged in a circular order, and complete with not just a temple, but also a gift shop, a cow pasture, and devotee housing quarters.

ISKCON of D.C. is a large and active temple community. Though located in Maryland, the temple serves the entire metropolitan D.C. area. As such, its devotee and attendee base is very large; its festivals draw devotees and visitors alike numbering in the thousands. What is more, the D.C. temple has been a devotional staple in the region for many years, with many of the temple's regular devotees and congregants attending its programs for over two decades. Like the New Jersey community, the demographics of the D.C. temple are largely comprised of Indian congregants; however, the D.C. temple is noticeably more diverse than New Jersey's, especially in its management board. The temple president is European (born in Ireland), and the board has several members of European-American descent. The community at large is also pretty diverse, with an appreciable degree of racial, ethnic, and national diversity.

Like most ISKCON temples in the United States, ISKCON of D.C. has an active digital outreach program. However, unlike temples such as ISKCON of New Jersey, which hold digital images of Krishna to be



Figure 7. ISKCON of DC Temple complex. Photo taken by author. 5 September 2015.

a *conversion efficiens* for newcomers, the devotees and administrators at ISKCON of D.C. take an opposing position. In particular, they argue that while Krishna’s images might work as a *conversion efficiens* for some newcomers, the images do not work as such for everyone. Most notably, the temple administrators at ISKCON of D.C believe that digital images of Krishna do not work to attract people whom they define as “westerners” (or more aptly, “western” newcomers): that is, non-Indian site visitors who are not already familiar with Krishna, ISKCON, or Hinduism.³¹ Instead, the temple administrators claim that Krishna’s digital images only appeal to or attract people who are already familiar with, and perhaps even affectionate towards, Krishna. In fact, the administrators at ISKCON of D.C. put it more strongly than this: not only are Krishna’s digital images unhelpful in initially attracting western newcomers to Krishna Consciousness, these images might actually turn them away.

For example, at the previously mentioned ISKCON website design session that was held at the 2014 ISKCON Leadership Sangha Conference, the session host presented the audience with the official website of ISKCON of D.C., which he helped design. He told the crowd that the D.C. website has become somewhat of a model within the movement. As he explained the key features of the D.C. website to the audience, he noted several of them that he believes should characterize every official ISKCON website. First, he said, the site should be clean of clutter, easy to navigate, and should avoid jargon-laden terminology that outsiders do not understand. Second, it should utilize carefully chosen site words to function as search terms or key words: for example, terms like

“*mantra* meditation” (sacred sound chanting) and “*kirtan*” (devotional singing) bring more visitors to a site than do terms like “*bhakti*” (devotion). Third, and most controversially, the site should not have any temple images or images of Krishna deities (murtis) on it. As he explained:

Notice the header [of our website] is deity picture free, temple picture free, [and there are] no pictures on top. The reason for that—we do have a search bar up there—the reason for that is we believe the brand is *very important*.³² We want people to understand that we are a professional international society and adding pictures does actually take away from that. Pictures of deities are wonderful. They are truly beautiful when you have an opportunity to go around the world and get a privilege of viewing them in many temples. *The concern with the western world [however], and when we identified our audience, is that . . . they would shut down and leave if they saw a picture of our deities on the homepage. Or if they saw, if they clicked on a daily darshan image and saw that.*³³ Our reason is that they have an immature understanding of idol worship. Now especially in the online world, people have very short spans of attention: if something doesn’t work out, they’ll immediately click onto something else. “Oh that’s a little too weird—done.” [So] we wanted to make absolutely certain that we wouldn’t have that happen, so on our website we do not have a daily darshan [deity viewing] link.³⁴

As is clearly indicated in these remarks, the design of the ISKCON of D.C. website is based on the philosophy that an audience of western newcomers cannot be drawn to the temple, or to the broader ISKCON movement, through websites that showcase deity pictures of Krishna. On the contrary, rather than enticing them, these images will only appear to them as “weird,” and/or conjure for them elemental “idol anxieties.”³⁵ As such, the D.C. temple does not feature images of Krishna on their official website or Facebook page. Instead, its sites make use of images that are presumably more innocuous for a western newcomer audience: such as flowers, teddy bears, scenes of nature, gardens, and a variety of other nondescript symbols.

As is clear from the following images, what you see if you look at the ISKCON of D.C. website are images of cows grazing on pastures, advertising the Gita Nagari Creamery located at the Yoga Farm, wherein one can purchase “cruelty free milk” (Figure 8). You also see blog posts with titles such as “The Gita and Change” (Figure 9), and “What to Do with Sadness” (Figure 10), each of which is coupled with its own non-sectarian images: a mountain-scape by a calm lake (Figure 9), a teddy bear (Figure 10), and the like. What you do not see are images of Krishna—his forms, murtis, temple scenes, and so on.

But pictures of Krishna are not just kept off of the D.C website; they are also conspicuously absent from the ISKCON of D.C. Facebook page. Rather than Krishna’s images, the Facebook page instead displays



Figure 8. Screenshot of ISKCON of DC homepage. Screenshot by author. Courtesy of ISKCON of D.C. 1 August 2014. <http://www.iskconofdc.org>

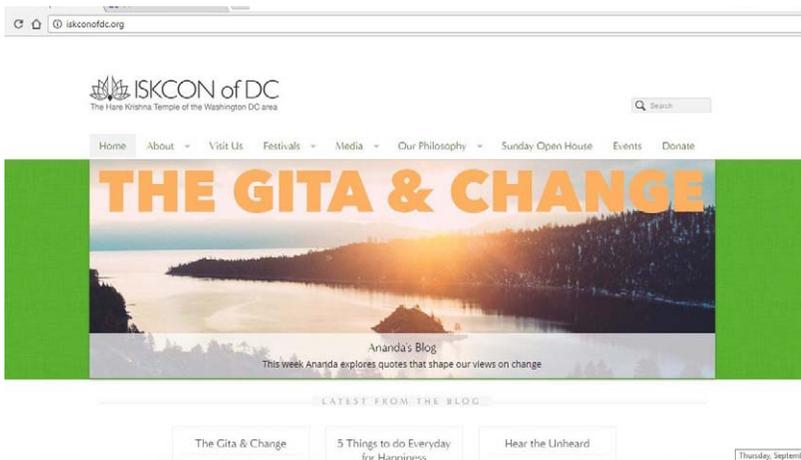


Figure 9. Screenshot of ISKCON of DC homepage. Screenshot by author. Courtesy of ISKCON of D.C. 29 September 2016. <http://www.iskconofdc.org>

images such as those of mindfulness meditation (Figure 11) and smiling daisies advertising a “Bhakti Arts Summer Camp” featuring “mantra meditation,” “spiritual stories,” and “yoga for children” (Figure 12). Finally, unlike ISKCON of New Jersey whose Facebook profile picture and cover photo are pictures of Krishna murtis, ISKCON of D.C.’s Facebook profile picture is a stenciled lotus flower, and its cover photo is an image of luminaria candle bags (Figure 13).

For ISKCON of D.C., then, Krishna’s images are clearly not believed to be a *conversion efficiens* by which western newcomers come to Krishna



Figure 10. Screenshot of ISKCON of DC homepage. Screenshot by author. Courtesy of ISKCON of D.C. 5 October 2015. <http://www.iskconofdc.org>



Figure 11. Screenshot of ISKCON of DC Facebook wall post (public page). Screenshot by author. Courtesy of ISKCON of D.C. 28 June 2014. <https://www.facebook.com/ISKCONofDC/>

Consciousness. Rather, devotees in D.C. believe that western newcomers must be drawn to the temple and to the movement through images and associations that are attractive to them, which the temple presumes to be images that draw on associations of nature, mindfulness and tranquility more generally. As an administrator at ISKCON of D.C. put it:



Figure 12. Screenshot of ISKCON of DC Facebook wall post (public page). Screenshot by author. Courtesy of ISKCON of D.C. 10 July 2014. <https://www.facebook.com/ISKCONofDC/>



Figure 13. Screenshot of ISKCON of DC Facebook profile page (public page). Screenshot by author. Courtesy of ISKCON of D.C. 19 September 2016. <http://www.facebook.com/iskconofdc/>

Especially for a western audience and a Krishna temple in the west, the deities would not be the first thing that people would [see on a website and] go, “Oh great, wonderful!” [This is] because [upon seeing them] they would not know [what they mean/are]. Our [ISKCON’s] way of dealing with the deities needs for most people a little bit of adjustment or understanding. . . . The webcam [should] not be our first level intro presentation of Krishna. I think the problem with ISKCON right now is that a lot of its websites . . . are really not newcomer friendly. They are just meant for those who have been practicing for a long time. And we at

ISKCON of D.C. try to make our site a little more newcomer friendly. . . . So [while] I think the webcam has a part to play in terms of being part of the support system to those who have already taken up the practice. . . . I don't think it's for newcomers at all and I don't think it should be on the first page of our website. . . . It's just something we have to become more conscious of. . . . [We need to ask ourselves], where do people usually go to find out more information about something? [. . .] When we go out and we meet people . . . we'll say, "Go to iskconofDC.org."³⁶

As can be seen from the above statement, for the temple administrators at ISKCON of D.C., the move to exclude Krishna's images from the website has nothing to do at all with a lack of sentiment for Krishna, or a disregard for his images (or even whether or not they think that Krishna's digital images are ontologically real forms of him). On the contrary, the temple administrators express both a deep reverence and love for Krishna, as well as a deep regard for the beauty and ontological reality of all his images, including his digital ones. However, for the D.C. administrators, the deity images are something to which western newcomers must gradually be introduced, once they have had some exposure to the movement. They are not something that they should be exposed to on their first visit to a site, and they most certainly are not an automatic or accidental *conversion efficiens* for them. If, they argue, websites and Facebook pages are meant to be a preaching tool for newcomers—a first step to bring them to the temple, the movement, and ultimately to Krishna—then these sites need to be pitched according to the tastes, preferences, and interests of a broad range of potential newcomers, not just those who are already familiar with Krishna's images and/or murtis.³⁷ In this way, the community in D.C. is markedly similar to those devotees who are on the "Fresh Veg" side of the restaurant naming debate.

ANALYSIS

While both ISKCON of New Jersey and ISKCON of D.C. support the use of digital media for the public preaching of Krishna Consciousness, they do not agree on how best to design a website for attracting newcomers to their temples (or to ISKCON at large). At the heart of this disagreement is a debate over the use of Krishna's images, and the relative merit (or lack thereof) of them as a tool to draw newcomers. One thing that this shows, I argue, is a lack of consensus over just what constitutes the *conversion efficiens* within ISKCON. For ISKCON of New Jersey, the image of Krishna itself is a *conversion efficiens*, working within newcomers—all of them—to rouse the beginnings of their love of Krishna even if they are unaware of it. The administrators at ISKCON of D.C., on the other hand, hold the approach of temples like ISKCON

of New Jersey to be misguided, if not slightly naïve: Krishna's images are only appealing, they say, to those website visitors who already have familiarity with Krishna, not all potential visitors to the site. Most especially, they say, these images are not attractive to western newcomers, and they therefore do not serve as the *conversion efficiens* by which their hearts are moved to Krishna.

Throughout this article, I hope to have shown that if we pay attention to the particular uses of American ISKCON temples' digital images, we learn about their different ideas about what constitutes a *conversion efficiens*. However, I want to conclude by suggesting that examining these different uses of digital images also shows us something else: namely, some of the ways in which American ISKCON temples are creating different kinds of "faith brands," or different public faces of ISKCON, each of which is seen as the most likely to draw in and attract newcomers.³⁸

In her work, *Brands of Faith: Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age*, Mara Einstein argues that "as people are increasingly prone to shop, religions will not only have to increase the level of marketing and promotion in order to be heard among so many competing forces, but they will also be increasingly prone to create a product that religious consumers will buy."³⁹ Put differently, Einstein argues that the success of religious groups does not lie alone in their doctrine or in the experiences they afford to their practitioners. Rather, it also relies on "their sales representatives," and "their marketing techniques:" that is, on their ability to pitch their messages successfully into packages that people are captured by and attracted to.⁴⁰ Shayne Lee and Phillip Luke Sinitiere also make a strong case for this point in their book, *Holy Mavericks: Evangelical Innovators and the Spiritual Marketplace*. Studying the "supply-side of religious vitality," Lee and Sinitiere argue that "religious suppliers thrive in a competitive spiritual marketplace [when] they are quick, decisive, and flexible in reacting to changing conditions, savvy at packaging and marketing their ministries, and resourceful at offering spiritual rewards that resonate with the existential needs and cultural tastes of the public."⁴¹

If we pay attention to contemporary American ISKCON discourses with respect to digital media, it is not difficult to read them as discourses on devotional marketing: the attempts of ISKCON devotees to use the latest media technologies in an effort to be heard, and to attract followers, over "competing forces." But what is perhaps most interesting, is that we can not only read the use of digital media as a move in ISKCON religious marketing generally, but we can also read particular positions on digital images—and on the use of the digital image of Krishna in particular—as internal disagreements over the branding of ISKCON. In other words—to borrow Einstein's terminology—we can read them not only as differences in opinion within American ISKCON over what

product new religious consumers “will buy” (or which religious products will “get people in the door”), but also as disagreements, therefore, over which face of ISKCON ought to be presented to them.⁴² Part of deciding these issues, involves devotees at American ISKCON temples asking themselves an uncomfortable set of questions: do potential American converts want to see images of Krishna? Do they/will they find these images of Krishna attractive? Will they be/can they be “sold” on such images? And if not, what then ought to be done?

In many ways, the New Jersey temple represents a “traditional” or “direct” style of marketing for the ISKCON movement, by which I mean a marketing based on the idea that it is the potency, or “being,” of Krishna himself which draws people to devotional life. This method of “marketing” is operative, for example, in the ISKCON outreach practices of sankirtan (public chanting/singing) and rathayatra (public chariot procession). Both of these practices are aimed at putting the public in direct, and often accidental, contact with a form of Krishna, whether it is the form of him in his name in the case of sankirtan, or his form as a traveling murti in the case of rathayatra. Just as sankirtan and rathayatra are believed to work automatically in the heart of any person who comes into contact with Krishna’s form through them, so too do New Jersey devotees believe that Krishna’s digital images (as digital forms of him) affect the heart of all website viewers automatically. For these reasons, I suggest that sharing digital images of Krishna is a “digital sankirtan.”⁴³

With the rise of interest in and familiarity with the principles of marketing and branding by devotees within the movement, however, many ISKCON temples like ISKCON of D.C. are beginning to challenge this model of “traditional” or “direct” marketing utilized by temples like ISKCON of New Jersey. In particular, they are beginning to question whether it might need to be supplemented or changed, especially if the movement wishes to attract more westerners. As E. Burke Rochford, Jr. has made well known in scholarship on ISKCON, in the time since the 1980s, the movement has undergone a set of changes—largely due to financial and public relations concerns—whereby its devotional base shifted from one of mostly non-Indian converts to one primarily comprised of Indian Hindus.⁴⁴ Given this demographic shift—contested and uneven though it may be—many devotees have expressed concern at what they see to be the low number of western (or non-Indian) devotees in the movement. As such, many temples—such as ISKCON of D.C.—have begun to develop branding tactics that are intentionally designed to bring westerners back to ISKCON. This is *not* to say that temples such as D.C. are only interested in attracting westerners, or that they do not believe that Krishna’s digital images are ontologically real forms of him. *Nor* is it the case that temples like ISKCON of New Jersey are uninterested in attracting westerners: on the contrary, New Jersey devotees think their methods *can* attract them. Rather, it is simply to say that

devotees at temples like ISKCON of D.C. are engaging in marketing and re-branding projects designed to focus on westerners more explicitly because they believe that westerners are underrepresented in the movement, and because they believe that innovative (or “indirect”) methods are necessary to bring them in.

Given this divide on views of marketing, there is a lively set of discussions within the American ISKCON movement about how to attract a wide range of converts to ISKCON. As one might expect, devotees’ discussions over how best to represent themselves online often also breed internal disputes—both across different temple communities and even within them. In fact, in my fieldwork at ISKCON of D.C., I saw many traces of these disagreements in conversations about the temple’s website: as a temple administrator put it to me, “a lot of our people who’ve been here for a long time think that our website should be just full of pictures of Madan Mohan, our temple deities here.”⁴⁵ But this sentiment has not changed the administrator’s views, who—on the contrary—retorts to the internal critics by stating:

Yeah, that’s great for YOU because you know all of this already, but that’s not going to work for somebody I meet on the street and they’ve got the Bhagavad Gita and they’re like wow this is really interesting and they’re going to go online and visit our website . . . and all of a sudden the first thing they see is just Madan Mohan who we see as beautiful but they don’t know what’s going on! [. . .] If we give them too much too soon, they’re just going to go, “Uh oh, [that’s] weird,” and they’re taking off and they won’t click back [on our website]!⁴⁶

The internal criticism of the ISKCON of D.C. website revolves around fears that the site is “too mundane” and “too Western” and perhaps also, too “non-denominational,” and these concerns highlight D.C. devotees’ fears about the limits of religious marketing. As Mara Einstein puts it, “taking on the mantle of branding also means taking on the mantel [*sic*] of marketing . . . [which often also] means pandering to audience tastes, no matter what the consequences are, all in the quest for the elusive goal—growth.”⁴⁷ But what the internal disputes at ISKCON of D.C. also show us is that there are different positions with respect to branding even within individual communities, and these positions reflect differences in *perceptions* on marketing: in other words, devotees do not agree on what exactly constitutes “pandering,” whether marketing oneself to newcomers is “pandering,” how much “pandering” is too much, how much “pandering” sacrifices the “core” of the tradition, what this so-called core is, and/or how much growth justifies the “pandering” to begin with.

With every such move to stretch a tradition to reach out to new converts, come fears about where the line should be drawn, or—to use the marketing metaphor—how far one can re(shape) a religious

product to fit customers' needs before one starts to lose the "core" of the product. Even though as scholars of religion we know that such conceptions of "the core" are shifting goalposts, or mere rhetorical moves, there is nonetheless much that we can learn from tracking devotees' discussions of them as they play out in conversations about branding. And this, perhaps, is one of the most instructive things that we learn by looking at the ISKCON debate on digital images: not only does this debate show us the ways in which newcomers are believed to convert to the movement, or the ways in which temple administrators and devotees create ISKCON faith brands in order to reach out to them, but it also contributes to our broader understanding of devotees' notions of tradition and innovation—including their conceptions of what constitutes the so-called "core" of ISKCON (or that which cannot/should not be subject to branding), and what constitutes ISKCON's "superfluous externals" (that which can be altered, added, or removed, for marketing purposes).⁴⁸ Further, understanding which aspects of ISKCON devotees place into these two categories can help us not only see where they fall in debates over digital images and representation in particular, but also where they fall on—and how they formulate their positions with respect to—a number of other debates that might arise as devotees attempt to market the movement into the twenty-first century and past the semi-centennial anniversary of their movement in the United States in 2015.

As an additional point, I want to suggest that a study of the split in approaches to digital marketing in American ISKCON highlights another interesting issue. Many scholars have argued that when religious groups aim to "go global," or universalize their messages so as to reach and attract a worldwide base of followers, they downplay their religiosity and ties to ritual and ethnic traditions, and instead reinvent themselves as more general, and often therefore more generic, forms of "spirituality." For example, Joanne Punzo Waghorne has studied this phenomenon with respect to Hindu guru movements in Singapore,⁴⁹ and Amanda J. Lucia has examined it in her theoretical analysis of innovative Hindu gurus.⁵⁰ Jeff Wilson has also studied it in reference to Buddhist mindfulness in the United States, arguing that "obscuring how mindfulness operated in historic Buddhist practice, or even going so far as to hide mindfulness's origins and Buddhist connections makes it (allegedly) available to everyone, increasing the sellers who can appropriate it, and the buyers who can consume it."⁵¹ It is my hope that my study of the digital (and ethnographic) rhetoric of ISKCON temples such as ISKCON of D.C. shows the ways in which this marketing move to universalization, de-ritualization, and de-ethnization is also being employed in the digital branding campaigns of American ISKCON.

Finally, in closing this article, I wish to address an important question that might occur to the reader, having considered my arguments herein. This question is whether the split in approaches to digital marketing in

American ISKCON is driven not only by views on conversion and marketing, but also by demographics. That is, do the demographics of the designers of the websites themselves—instead of, or in addition to, their views on conversion and/or marketing—determine the type of images they post on ISKCON websites. For example, it is well known that amongst most Indian Hindus, darshan (the act of seeing and being seen by a form of God) is a popular and important practice. It is likely, therefore, that ISKCON's Indian practitioners are, on average, more religio-culturally inclined to appreciate images of embodied forms of Krishna than are non-Indian practitioners. This appreciation, therefore, might motivate the choice of some temples whose administration is largely Indian (such as ISKCON of New Jersey) to lean towards the more Krishna image-centered approach to digital marketing. Conversely, temples with a mostly non-Indian temple board (like D.C.) might be more inclined to shy away from these images, favoring instead a more de-ethnized approach. Is it the case that non-Indian administrators and web designers are primarily the ones who are motivated to market ISKCON through a de-ethnized approach?

In some sense, I would argue that the answer to the question is “yes.” It is likely the case that demographics play a role in the temple administrators' respective preferences towards and approaches to digital marketing. However, I also want to suggest that the situation on the ground is decidedly more complex than a demographic analysis alone might suggest. This is especially apparent if one broadens one's scope for a moment, to consider ISKCON temples beyond New Jersey and D.C. For example, in my ethnographic study of ISKCON, I have encountered many Indian devotees in both India and the United States (ISKCON Chowpatty, Juhu, and Philadelphia) who are actively working to reach out to western newcomers. I have also worked with many non-Indian devotees at temples in the United States and India (such as ISKCON of Alachua and ISKCON of Mayapur) who enthusiastically share Krishna's digital images as a marketing strategy, yet whose temple boards and communities have a sizable non-Indian demographic. Though certain marketing predilections might exist within ISKCON's different demographic groups, in other words, it is my impression is that demographics alone do not explain the split in ISKCON temples' approaches to marketing. Rather, as I have argued, this split is instead predicated upon a complex amalgamation of factors, including views of conversion, familiarity with theories and tools of marketing, comfort level with “innovative” or “indirect” marketing models, the extent to which a temple board is concerned about drawing westerners to ISKCON, and the degree to which they believe that a “re-branded” or “indirect” marketing model is necessary for attracting a broad range of newcomers, especially western newcomers. Interestingly, I think it also has to do with the demographics of not the marketer herself, but rather of her guru, since

most devotees' outreach service within ISKCON is executed at the behest of their teacher.⁵² In this regard, I want to suggest that there is a strong indicator of demographic influence: though the demographics of the digital image posters themselves seem to vary, the gurus of many of the devotees who take a de-ethnized approach to marketing ISKCON tend to be non-Indian.

The extent to which demographics play a determining role in American ISKCON's marketing split is an interesting question for a careful sociological study. To paint a thorough picture, however, this study would need to examine not only the demographics of the websites' image posters and temple administrators, but also their gurus. Additionally, such a study would need to control for a variety of factors, including devotees' length of time in, and commitment to, the ISKCON movement: for it is certainly the case that non-Indian devotees who have been in ISKCON for most of their lives might be more inclined towards sharing Krishna's deity images online than recent initiates into the movement who happen to be of Indian heritage. Such a detailed analysis, therefore, is beyond the scope of this article.

Also beyond the scope of this article, but of equal interest, are investigations into the presumptions about the religious preferences of western newcomers that motivate temples like D.C. to choose a de-ethnized approach to digital marketing. Moreover, there are also many interesting questions regarding whether a de-ethnized marketing approach will be successful in attracting western newcomers to the movement, and, if it is, whether it will be successful at retaining them. For one can only wonder at what might happen when a western newcomer—having been attracted to ISKCON of D.C. by images of mountains, mindfulness, and teddy bears—decides to visit, only to find inside a full-blown ISKCON temple service: beautiful, ceremonious, and vibrant, yet nonetheless fully rooted in Bengali Vaishnava Hindu ritual, with the embodied forms of Madan Mohan and his entourage center stage.

Finally, one is also left to wonder what the long-term implications of this marketing split might be for the future of the ISKCON movement in the United States, and what further debates within the movement it might engender. Additionally, one is left to wonder how much these marketing strategies can shift over time, even within individual temple communities. For example, in the interim period for production of this article, both the New Jersey and D.C. temple websites changed slightly. The New Jersey temple put a large image on its homepage featuring a physically fit (American?) man rock climbing a steep mountain, and ISKCON of D.C. added at the bottom of one of its website tabs several darshan images of Krishna. These changes show that each of these temple communities at times makes an effort to accommodate on their websites the divergent viewpoints on digital marketing that exist within their ranks. How conversations about divergent viewpoints play out at

the individual community level will be an interesting issue to track over time.

Last but not least, one of the most interesting sets of questions to think about with respect to the split in approaches to digital marketing discussed in this study, is whether one of the approaches will ultimately win out over the other, whether one of them will ultimately prove to be more effective than the other, and/or whether both marketing models will continue to co-exist within the ISKCON movement in the long term (and if so, how?). Though it is only with the passage of time that scholars will be able to answer these questions, there is much to be gained in asking them, for it is these very questions—I believe—that give us the best vantage point from which to study the ISKCON movement’s future course in the ever-changing religious landscape of the United States.

Special thanks to the devotees at ISKCON of New Jersey and ISKCON of D.C. for the generous time they gave me during my many ethnographic visits and conversations with them. Many thanks also to the editors and anonymous reviewers at Nova Religio for their insightful feedback on an earlier draft of this article.

ENDNOTES

¹ For the convenience of the reader, I have omitted diacritical markings from all Sanskrit and Hindi words, except in quoting directly from texts. All translations are mine.

² See Benjamin E. Zeller, “Food Practices, Culture, and Social Dynamics in the Hare Krishna Movement,” in *Handbook of New Religions and Cultural Production*, ed. Carole M. Cusack and Alex Norman (Boston: Brill, 2012), 681–702. See also Anna S. King, “Krishna’s Prasadam: ‘Eating our way back to godhead,’” *Material Religion* 8, no. 4 (2012): 440–65.

³ Mara Einstein, *Brands of Faith: Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Shayne Lee and Phillip Luke Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks: Evangelical Innovators and the Spiritual Marketplace* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Jeff Wilson, *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2005); Robert Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); and Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America 1776–2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011). Peter Berger was another early theorist of religion and marketing. See Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Doubleday, 1967).

⁴ Einstein, *Brands of Faith*, 12.

⁵ E. Burke Rochford, Jr., *Hare Krishna Transformed* (New York: New York University Press, 2007); and Edwin F. Bryant and Maria L. Ekstrand, *The Hare Krishna Movement: The Postcharismatic Fate of a Religious Transplant* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

⁶ Ferdinando Sardella, *Modern Hindu Personalism: The History, Life, and Thought of Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Federico Squarcini and Eugenio Fizzotti, *Hare Krishna* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004).

⁷ Rochford, *Hare Krishna Transformed*; Travis Vande Berg and Fred Kniss, "ISKCON and Immigrants: The Rise, Decline, and Rise Again of a New Religious Movement," *Sociological Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (2008): 79–104; Nurit Zaidman, "The Integration of Indian Immigrants to Temples Run by North Americans," *Social Compass* 47, no. 2 (2000): 205–19; Zaidman, "When the Deities Are Asleep: Processes of Change in an American Hare Krishna Temple," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 12, no. 3 (1997): 335–52.

⁸ Albert Kafui Wuaku, "Selling Krishna in Ghana's Religious Market: Proselytizing Strategies of the Sri Radha Govinda Temple Community of Ghana," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 30, no. 2 (2012): 335–57.

⁹ Kim Knott, "In Every Town and Village: Adaptive Strategies in the Communication of Krishna Consciousness in the UK, the First Thirty Years," *Social Compass* 4, no. 2 (2000): 153–67.

¹⁰ E. Burke Rochford, Jr., "Recruitment Strategies, Ideology, and Organization in the Hare Krishna Movement," *Social Problems* 29, no. 4 (1982): 399–410.

¹¹ The views herein reflect those I gathered during the ethnography I conducted (2014–2016) with devotees at ISKCON of New Jersey and ISKCON of D.C. I conducted this research primarily in person, but also online, by phone, and via Skype.

¹² Chaitanya believed Krishna's names to be sonic forms of Krishna himself.

¹³ See Sardella, *Modern Hindu Personalism*, for an excellent history of Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati.

¹⁴ Many books discuss the early years of ISKCON and its official founding in the United States. These include E. Burke Rochford, Jr.'s seminal *Hare Krishna in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991); Squarcini and Fizzotti, *Hare Krishna*; Kim Knott, *My Sweet Lord: The Hare Krishna Movement* (Wellingborough, England: Aquarian Press, 1986); Graham Dwyer and Richard J. Cole, eds., *The Hare Krishna Movement: Forty Years of Chant and Change* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007); and David G. Bromley and Larry D. Shinn, eds., *Krishna Consciousness in the West* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1989).

¹⁵ There is debate within ISKCON about how much centrality the deities had during the time of Prabhupada. Prominent American ISKCON guru, and founder of ISKCON sub-movement Krishna West, Hridayananda Das Goswami argues that the deities did not have a prominent place in the movement historically and that their present prominence is a result of the movement's large Indian Hindu demographic (personal conversation, 15 June 2015). E. Burke Rochford, Jr. argues a similar point in *Hare Krishna Transformed*, noting that

many ISKCON temples in the United States would have failed if not for the financial contributions of the Indian Hindu community. This financial need, he suggests, drives temple practices (such as focus on the deities), as devotees want to ensure that the wishes of their largest donors are satisfied. There are many devotees in the movement, however, who maintain that the deities have always had a central place in ISKCON, even during Prabhupada's time.

¹⁶ A video recording of the session host's presentation is available on ISKCON Desire Tree YouTube Channel: "Best Practices for developing your ISKCON website—Gopinath Prabhu," 24 February 2014, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cf10FYdTG8>, accessed 18 September 2017. Emphasis in original.

¹⁷ Personal interview with devotee, Towaco, NJ, 16 July 2014. For the sake of anonymity, I refer to all devotees here as either "devotee" or "administrator," though these roles are not as distinct in reality as the titles suggest.

¹⁸ Diana L. Eck, *Darshan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 3.

¹⁹ A new webcam, purchased and installed in 2010, is currently in use at the temple.

²⁰ Several important works have been published on digital darshan. See Nicole Karapanagiotis, "Cyber Forms, 'Worshippable Forms': Hindu Devotional Viewpoints on the Ontology of Cyber-Gods and -Goddesses," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 17, no.1 (2013): 57–82; Phyllis K. Herman, "Seeing the Divine Through Windows: Online Puja and Virtual Religious Experience," *Online—Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 4, no. 1 (2010): 151–78; Madhavi Mallapragada, "Desktop Deities: Hindu Temples, Online Cultures and the Politics of Remediation," *South Asian Popular Culture* 8, no. 2 (2010): 109–21; Heinz Scheifinger, "The Jagannath Temple and Online *Darshan*," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 24, no. 3 (2009): 277–90; and Heinz Scheifinger, "Hinduism and Cyberspace," *Religion* 38, no. 3 (2008): 233–49.

²¹ Mallapragada, "Desktop Deities," 114.

²² Personal interview with devotee, Towaco, NJ, 16 July 2014.

²³ Personal interview with devotee, Towaco, NJ, 28 February 2016.

²⁴ Several devotees also cited verse 11.27.12 of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa in support of digital images of Krishna being ontologically full forms of him. This verse states *śailī dārumayī lauhī lepyā lekhyā ca saikatī manomayī maṇimayī pratimāṣṭ avidhā smṛtā*: "It is taught that embodied forms (*pratimā* [like murtis]) are of eight types: those made of stone, wood, metal, plaster, paint (or drawing), sand, mind (*manomayī*), and jewels." Devotees noted that digital images of Krishna are like those made of paint (or are made of paint). See Ved Vyas, *Śrīmadbhāgavat-Mahāpurāṇa* (Part Two), (Gorakhpur: Gita Press, 1995).

²⁵ Personal interview with administrator, Towaco, NJ, 16 July 2014.

²⁶ I use the term *conversion efficiens* as an adaptation of Johannes Quack and Paul Töbelmann's phrase *ritual efficiens*. See Quack and Töbelmann, "Questioning Ritual Efficacy," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 24, no. 1 (2010): 13–28.

²⁷ In this article, by "conversion" I mean simply the turning of individuals' hearts towards Krishna.

²⁸ David L. Haberman, “The Accidental Ritualist,” in *Hindu Ritual at the Margins: Innovations, Transformations, Reconsiderations*, ed. Linda Penkower and Tracy Pintchman (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2014), 151–65.

²⁹ Haberman, “The Accidental Ritualist,” 154.

³⁰ The ritual effects of eating prasadam (food offered to Krishna) are also believed to work automatically. See Zeller, “Food Practices, Culture, and Social Dynamics in the Hare Krishna Movement;” and King, “Krishna’s Prasadam.”

³¹ Within ISKCON, the term “westerner” typically refers to all non-Indians.

³² Emphasis in original.

³³ Italics added for emphasis.

³⁴ “Best Practices for developing your ISKCON website—Gopinath Prabhu.”

³⁵ Josh Ellenbogen and Aaron Tugendhaft, eds., *Idol Anxiety* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

³⁶ Personal interview with administrator, Washington, D.C., 1 August 2014.

³⁷ ISKCON of D.C. has an Instagram page where they post daily darshan images of Krishna, but it is not accessible from the main website page because it is considered to be for community members not newcomers.

³⁸ Einstein, *Brands of Faith*.

³⁹ Einstein, *Brands of Faith*, xi.

⁴⁰ Finke and Starke, *Churching of America*, 9.

⁴¹ Lee and Sinitiere, *Holy Mavericks*, 3.

⁴² Einstein, *Brands of Faith*.

⁴³ Malcolm Haddon raises the fascinating research question of whether ethnography of sankirtan might itself be a form of sankirtan. See Haddon, “Anthropological Proselytism: Reflexive Questions for a Hare Krishna Ethnography,” *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 24, no. 3 (2013): 250–69.

⁴⁴ E. Burke Rochford, Jr. refers to this phenomenon as the “Hinduization” of ISKCON, a term encompassing both ethnic and religious changes in the movement. See Rochford, *Hare Krishna Transformed*. See also Vande Berg and Kniss, “ISKCON and Immigrants;” and Zaidman, “The Integration of Indian Immigrants to Temples Run by North Americans” and “When the Deities Are Asleep.”

⁴⁵ Personal interview with administrator, Washington, D.C., 1 August 2014. Madan Mohan is the Krishna murti of the oldest temple in Vrindavan, India. Like many other deities, Madan Mohan has many replica forms in other temples—forms that are not seen as diminished in their ontological status for being replicas.

⁴⁶ Personal interview with administrator, Washington, D.C., 1 August 2014.

⁴⁷ Einstein, *Brands of Faith*, 94.

⁴⁸ These questions become very important in ISKCON’s newest “sub-movement”—Krishna West.

⁴⁹ Joanne Punzo Waghorne, “From Diaspora to (Global) Civil Society: Global Gurus and the Process of De-ritualization and De-ethnization in Singapore,” in *Hindu Ritual at the Margins: Innovations, Transformations, Reconsiderations*, ed.

Linda Penkower and Tracy Pintchman (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2014), 186–207.

⁵⁰ Amanda J. Lucia, “Innovative Gurus: Tradition and Change in Contemporary Hinduism,” *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 18, no. 2 (2014): 221–63.

⁵¹ Wilson, *Mindful America*, 73.

⁵² Wishing to ensure the institutional success of ISKCON after his passing, Srila Prabhupada devised a leadership system whereby his disciples could become gurus after his death, and he chose eleven men to succeed him jointly as gurus. Though there has been much debate over the exact authority Prabhupada intended these gurus to have (see Rochford, *Hare Krishna Transformed*), today they function in two general capacities. First, they serve as guardians of ISKCON and are seen as the teachers best able to pass on the spirit of Prabhupada’s movement to others. Their primary role, however, is to take individual disciples under their wing by formally initiating them into the ISKCON movement, thereby vowing to provide them with religious guidance for the duration of their lives. “Taking initiation” in ISKCON makes one an official, full-fledged devotee to the movement’s formal practices and regulations. Individuals choose the guru from whom they wish to take initiation and subsequently execute their preaching activities at their guru’s request. Today, there are over seventy such gurus within the worldwide movement.