Transforming Lives and Businesses: Spiritual Aspirations in Yoga Marketing

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Abstract

This article explores the aspirational marketing modalities promoted by "spiritual marketing coaches" (SMC) that target freelancers in the well-being and yoga sector. It focuses on the narratives of success applied in what is essentially a "marketing of marketing," analysing the semiotic qualities, functions, and implications of these promotional strategies. Specifically, it investigates how SMCs engage in meaning-making and religion-making through aspirational narrations while using inbound marketing to promote the use of the same. I argue that "spiritual marketing" incorporates a semiotic shift towards language and narrations commonly used in contemporary spirituality. This has introduced modalities that combine marketing tools with spiritual and esoteric doctrines via algorithmic processes, the spiritual exercise of bringing forward a business idea with purpose, and inner transformation for the sake of signalling authenticity. Promoting the esoteric paradigm that thought controls matter, "spiritual marketing" inadvertently relies on the appeasement of online marketing algorithms to attract more clients.

Keywords: spiritual marketing coaches, modern yoga, spiritual economy, algorithms, inbound marketing, netnography

Introduction

"What if your vision were to become reality?" The first line of the poster I came across on Facebook promises nothing less than the vision of many aspiring yoga teachers. In becoming a *yogipreneur*, I am promised instructions on how to double my monthly turnover as a yoga teacher and fill up my classes. I am encouraged to contemplate the possibilities that would follow from earning a living as a yoga teacher rather than having to depend on permanent employment. No risk. Flexible. 14-day money-back guarantee. "Click here for more information." I click.

This paper explores the marketing of modalities promoted as "spiritual marketing" by a group of individuals whom I refer to as "spiritual marketing coaches" (SMCs) towards freelancers in the well-being, spirituality, and yoga sectors. "Spiritual marketing," in the sense of the protagonists of this study, is an approach that combines spirituality and marketing in that it not only offers advice on online marketing methods but also on how to dissolve belief patterns or overcome mental barriers construed as obstacles to achieving success. Consequently, applying marketing techniques becomes a spiritual exercise that is in part decontextualised from marketing and reapplied to spiritual meanings and doctrines, such as positive thinking modalities, discourses on the power of the mind, or the "Law of Attraction." Using an online ethnographic approach, I analyse the themes and discourses employed by SMCs (in English and German) to promote these marketing strategies across various social media and online platforms. The theoretical considerations underpinning this work result from ethnographic observation and participatory ethnography conducted in the yoga sector across various social media platforms and websites over a period of about four years. Large portions of the qualitative data circulating these domains are transient. Online posts or website entries can easily be edited or deleted, and social media stories are typically displayed for only a few hours. For this present case study, I collected qualitative data from the material of five women SMCs,

which included five podcasts, three websites, and seven social media profiles (posts included text, photos and videos) across the Facebook and Instagram platforms. All protagonists have also regularly featured content of collaborating coaches, but I have not focused on them in this present analysis. My research started with a personal interaction I had with one SMC. Immediately upon intensifying my research, following her profiles and engaging with the topic online, I was suggested additional material by other SMCs through algorithmic prediction. My behaviour on social media platforms and online searches had left a trace. This is how inbound marketing works. In the words of the protagonists of this study, my research intention had "magnetically attracted" this material to me. This is relevant insofar as it partially confirms the effectiveness of their proposed framework, at least on a phenomenological level. Being targeted by algorithmic suggestions also reconfigured my position from that of a mere observer to taking a participatory stance, as I was now subjected to the same mechanisms as the SMCs' potential clients.

Large portions of the material I reviewed for this study are publicly accessible online. However, Snodgrass (2014, 486) notes that "[m]uch Internet data […] were not given in confidence to a particular researcher, and its creators might not welcome its use for research purposes." Following Snodgrass's concern about obtaining informed consent in these contexts and questions raised about the public nature of internet data (e.g. Sveningsson 2004; Clegg Smith 2004), I am also concerned about protecting my protagonists, considering many operate as freelancers, where their private and professional lives largely overlap. Therefore, I use alias names for the protagonists of this story and do not name their profiles, podcasts, or websites.

Engaging with their material, I provide an analysis of recurring themes, the language used, its functions, and implications. Many SMCs promote the narration of becoming a

yogipreneur, someone who is both a practising yogi and an entrepreneur.[1] This image of a successful freelance yoga teacher, who also maintains a private passion for yoga, symbolises the utopia that many SMCs seek to share: to aspire for both spiritual *and* economic success. Both the SMCs and their clients are "religious entrepreneurs" (Hero 2014), as they each seek to provide a form of spiritual service.[2] Yoga teaching can be a precarious form of labour (Clarke 2022). This experience motivated many SMCs to start their coaching business to generate additional income or simply to help others, as Cassandra says of herself. Cassandra is one of the few SMCs that has an entire team of nine to support her in running a program for aspiring *yogipreneurs*. Her own transformation, she says, lead her from being a "corporate worker" in marketing to being a yoga teacher to now running a "six-figure […] business" (Cassandra, website, last accessed March 2024). Cassandra writes on her website that despite her own quick success, almost none of her yoga teacher friends made sufficient income. This, she writes, motivated her to start her program with which she has already helped "thousands" by sharing insights into mindset work and marketing (Cassandra, website, last accessed March 2024).

In line with previous findings by Hero (2014) and Höllinger and Tripold (2012), these origin stories, along with narratives the SMCs provide on their developments and transformations, matter in their self-presentation and in legitimising their expertise. The pandemic-induced digitalisation has increased the potential and necessity for many businesses to represent their services online. As yoga instructors face growing pressure to market their services online, SMCs play a pivotal role in responding to this demand. Their marketing

[1] I have also encountered variations of this as "yogi entrepreneur" or "spiritual entrepreneur." It has also been adapted to refer to women specifically, for instance, as "womenpreneurs" and "wombpreneurs" (referring to the womb as a source of intuition for business decisions). Throughout this text, I refer to all variations consistently as *yogipreneur* for narrative purposes.

[2] I accept some analytical blur, employing the terms "religious" and "spiritual" as partially synonymous manifestations of the religious domain. I accord precedence to the emic term "spiritual" in my ethnography.

services do not provide implementation, however, but help others to help *themselves*, transforming their businesses and themselves at the same time.

In this paper, I explore the aspirations and semiotics promoted in "spiritual marketing" with a focus on the yoga industry, as it is informed by language and themes used in contemporary spiritualities, New Thought and other positive thinking modalities, and promotes highly individualised utopian lifestyles. I proceed by providing an overview of existing literature that situates modern transnational yoga in the digitalised market economy, as it is shaped by individualisation and the rationale of self-help. I then define and analyse how the language of the SMCs' promotional strategies makes use of semantics of esoteric doctrines and modern yoga and address what we can learn from it about the relationship between business and religion. I argue that SMCs make wide use of semiotic similarities in spirituality and marketing to address their target audiences. Furthermore, I show that the "spiritualization" they propose is widely based on rhetorical shifts that have been enabled specifically by digital inbound marketing and is in large parts congruent with the narrations on self-development, purpose, and authenticity that are popular in contemporary discourses on spirituality. In the following sections, I discuss my research in relation to McLaughlin *et al.*'s (2020) argument that religion and economy must be studied without applying an analytical binary. Although the authors' intervention informs my approach, my argument differs from their consideration in that I propose to study the corporate form and religion not only as organised or institutional entities. My case study considers marketing as a specific modality of the corporate form and "spiritual marketing" as a specific extension of the corporate form of religion. I suggest that this case is useful in analysing religion and business more generally and in a way that overcomes the analytical binary by focusing on practitioners that overtly combine religion and business but at the same time reject both organised religion and the employment market. Instead of looking

only at the corporation and its narration of belief and power, we must also pay attention to the modalities that produce and transport such notions, such as "spiritual marketing".

Situating Yoga in the Market Economy

There is already evidence that yoga and coaching, both popular modalities in the self-help industry, have owed their increasing popularity over the past decades to broader social changes such as the increasing culture of individualisation and the ongoing solidification of the wellbeing industry. Scholars have also discussed these underlying social processes in relation to the effects of a broad medicalisation of society (Hauser 2021; Conrad and Bergey 2015) and a focus on self-optimisation and self-help (Illouz 2008; Carrette and King 2004; Papalini 2012; Cabanas and Illouz 2021). This shift towards individualisation has also been considered a cause for the commodification of the religious domain into a wide range of products for self-help, well-being, spiritual self-care, and other such practices (cf. Carrette and King 2004). As affiliation with religious organisations or communities has become less relevant for spiritual practitioners, adherence to a certain practice has often found its expression elsewhere, such as through the attainment of consumer lifestyles (cf. Beaudoin 2006). The yoga industry effectively illustrates how different brands have emerged in light of this, calling themselves "styles," "lineages," or "traditions," and bringing forward a plethora of yoga-related products for yoga practitioners to express their lifestyles (Jain 2014). With this growing commodification and "brandification," yoga providers began to participate in the market economies of post-industrial societies and adapted to these market logics in order to succeed (cf. Usunier and Stolz 2014). One consequence of this was that yoga practitioners were to be treated as (potential) customers who had to be targeted by means of marketing. Thus, in its modern transnational form, yoga is now situated at the intersection of three related industries: health, wellness, and religion or spirituality. Suzanne Newcombe (2020, p. 162) defines this

form of yoga as "[…] a family of practices shaped by globalised ideas of biomedicine, physical culture, New Thought, esotericism and psychology (among other factors)" (see also Alter 2004; Armstrong 2018; De Michelis 2005; Singleton 2010; Strauss 2005).

Jeremy Carrette and Richard King (2004) criticise such commodified religious practices as "capitalist spiritualities" because of their apparent ability to soothe the problems associated with modern capitalism, such as pressure to perform, without actually liberating from or even addressing these problems. In other words, a relaxing yoga class may help the overworked employee recharge and continue to be efficient. From a similar perspective, research that critically examines the social roles of psychotherapy and psychiatry also suggests that these methods, which often promote well-being and self-help, risk becoming complicit with the systems they operate in. Consequently, they may fail to provide the refuge or transcendence they claim to offer (e.g. Moncrieff 2022; cf. Rose 2010; 2018).

However, McLaughlin *et al.* (2020) rightfully argue that the sole focus on commodification as a processual development is monocausal and teleological in explaining the association of religion and economy. Therefore, I want to focus on the impact of situational factors, specifically more recent opportunities in marketing and its digitalisation. The market economy (and marketing) was already at the core of the "capitalist spiritualities" that Carrette and King described in 2004. In the past two decades, however, the marketing world has undergone a fundamental shift which saw the emergence of social networks (e.g., Facebook in 2004, Instagram in 2010, and TikTok in 2016) and, as a result, the opportunities of social media marketing, content marketing, and search engine optimisation. These methods are often summarised as "pull marketing" or "inbound marketing" (see for instance Halligan and Shah 2014; Wall and Spinuzzi 2018). Inbound and pull-based marketing use content published across the internet and on social media platforms to attract the attention of prospective clients, implement engagement, and eventually generate customers. While these are not entirely new

approaches,[3] they have developed significantly with the technical opportunities provided by social media networks, search engine optimisation and algorithms, and have thus created entirely new marketing sectors. This approach is often valued for avoiding the impression of straightforward selling tactics (Clarke 2022; Thompson and Weldon 2022; Tagg, Stevenson, and Vescovi 2012), instead fostering a sense of community and belonging between brands and their client base in social media networks.

As organisations needed experts and tools to help them navigate the complexities of the newly emerging algorithmic world that dictates inbound marketing, the modality became itself the centre of a growing industry offering marketing services, software, and advice. The use of analytical and predictive models also transformed the opportunities of marketing, for instance, through predicting consumer choices or interests or foreseeing the relevance of specific content for users (such as the PageRank algorithm that led to the creation of Google). These algorithmic marketing processes significantly negotiate the online experience of internet users, whether they are aware of the often-invisible algorithms (Bucher 2017; Beer 207) or not. Digital marketing efforts, in turn, put a prevalent focus on the impact of the algorithmic intermediary and seek to optimise this impact by becoming "algorithmically recognizable" (Gillespie 2017). Convergently, all internet users are treated as potential consumers, and their user data is leveraged to enhance data models that inform further predictions.

This study argues for a broader interpretation of what McLaughlin *et al.* (2020) termed the "corporate form". McLaughlin *et al.* (2020, 696; italics in original) argue that "the study of corporate cultures, histories, and missions is essential because it illuminates *religion* as a

[3] In 1895, the agricultural machine manufacturer Deere and Company introduced the magazine *The Furrow*, "…intended to indirectly boost sales and profitability for the company's John Deere brand by delivering valuable information to farmers on the latest agricultural technologies and business methods" (Beard *et al.* 2021, 139). This is often cited as one of the earliest examples of content marketing.

category and *religion-making* as a social phenomenon that crosscuts different spheres." This is because it can facilitate an understanding of religion as a category intertwined with various sociocultural processes. Some of these are also rooted in corporate culture and contribute to forming belief systems, whether explicitly presented as religious or not. Furthermore, in rejecting the binary between religion and the corporate form, the authors suggest that the corporate form be used as a framework to improve understanding of the relationship between religion and the economy, while at the same time treating these dimensions as not entirely separate.

While McLaughlin *et al.*'s manifesto (2020) suggests an important analytical approach, it remains to be defined how we can construct the (fluid) boundaries between religion and the corporate realm or whether we should treat them as different peculiarities of the same social phenomena of belief and power. For instance, Di Placido *et al*. (2022) describe how the seemingly distinct domains in which modern postural yoga exists are essentially guided by the same discourses centring self-care, self-responsibility and self-control (i.e. subjectivation) and form what they term the *Health-Spirituality-Neoliberalism Nexus*.[4]

McLaughlin *et al.*'s critique suggests their intention to look for more subtle expressions of one domain in the other, but the authors risk assuming that the corporate form of religion would only expose itself to those assuming an analytical approach to it. However, the protagonists of my case study position themselves overtly with a corporate approach to religion or spirituality, proposing that economic success is a direct consequence of spiritual development. If we fail to consider these groups by focusing exclusively on organised forms of religion, we might risk neglecting a wider field of actors who generally tend to be more wary of institutions and more inclined towards individualism and religious eclecticism.[5]

[4] Refer also to Di Placido (2022) for a more general discussion on yoga and neoliberalism.
[5] Refer to Altglas's seminal work *From Yoga to Kabbalah* (2014) which offers a sociological approach to individuals who engage in eclectic spiritual practice.

As a contemporary modality in various marketplaces, modern yoga continues to be dependent on its commodification as yoga providers rely on income to survive (cf. Usunier and Stolz 2014). In the decade preceding the COVID-19 pandemic, the yoga market expanded substantially. Despite this, it also engenders a competitive environment, with significant implications for independent yoga teachers—a key stakeholder group within this market—who continue to grapple with the often precarious conditions.

Marissa Clarke's (2022) work illustrates the individual and collective precarities that many yoga freelancers are confronted with and the wider injustices of the yoga teaching market, which are often widely unknown to novices or prospective yoga teacher training candidates. Independent yoga teachers, who typically operate as freelancers, are particularly reliant on digital marketing through online platforms such as Instagram to find work, fill their classes, or build their business. Clarke suggests that these freelancers can be considered parallel to workers affected by the "Uber-ization" of the gig economy[6] in which intermediaries, such as the Uber corporation through its app, organise labour for freelancers without taking on the responsibilities associated with employing. For yoga freelancers, however, the intermediary organising labour is not a taxi app but the social media sphere, functioning as a virtual marketplace, where independent yoga teachers are now solely responsible for their (self-)promotions to attract customers on these platforms. Their social status, elsewhere displayed by customer reviews, is here created by likes, followers, and other forms of engagement (Clarke 2022). While the internet and its marketplaces, such as social media platforms, have seemingly democratised access and visibility in marketing (e.g., websites and social media profiles can

[6] The term gig economy makes an analogy to the music industry, where the word gig, derived from jazz culture, refers to musical engagements. The term has "[…] been adopted in popular culture and scholarship on the organisation of labour as an analogy for the way in which work is casualised and increasingly being mediated by digital platforms" (Clarke 2022, 4).

be set up with little cost or time), they have also established a competitive "attention economy" (Wu 2016; 2018), widely governed by corporate algorithms. Professionalising online marketing, therefore, can be a time-consuming and cost-intensive task. Many independent yoga teachers require help with this, a niche filled by the SMCs who often emphasise the aspirational nature of the freelance economy, underlining the freedom that comes with flexibility. Here, too, Cassandra has a clear message to her podcast listeners:

> Now is the time to make a much bigger impact in the world. You are listening to [Cassandra's podcast], a podcast for entrepreneurial yoga teachers, who want to stop the hustle and overwhelm and instead create more income, freedom, and success.
>
> (Cassandra's podcast, January 2020).

This observation can be contextualised as part of a wider phenomenon of "aspirational work" (Duffy 2017). This form of labour, frequently engaged in by social media influencers, is often motivated by a personal choice and is executed unpaid in exchange for the aspiration that it will pay off at a later point, whether financially, through status, future opportunity or other outcomes (Duffy 2017).[7]

Successful Spirits

The coaches of spiritual marketing

Spiritual marketing coaches (SMCs) are individuals who provide advice on what they call "spiritual marketing." Jessica, a digital nomad working as an SMC, explains that spiritual marketing is characterized by its focus on the client's self-development to achieve success:

> […] it's also about dissolving beliefs, discussing limitations, blockages, fears, worries... and getting out of shame. Because I believe that it is these very points that prevent us from being truly successful.
>
> (Jessica's podcast, October 2021, my translation)

[7] Aspiration to achieve prosperity is also a theme blurring "[…] the distinction between economic and religious" in prosperity theology by "[…] finding the religious *in* the economic and the economic *in* the religious" (Bartel 2021, 20 italics in original). In Bartel's study, Prosperity Christians in Columbia make heavy use of credit card debt in the hope of economic salvation.

The concept of the "spiritual marketing coach" that I propose substantially differs from other forms of coaches described in spiritual economies (Rudnyckyj 2009; Mossière 2022; see also Christopher's article in this special issue) in that SMCs reject established religious doctrine, are not committed to any specific denomination, and profusely focus on marketing in the digital realm as a site of success and self-development. SMCs offer their services through online training, coaching, and a plethora of audio-visual, auditive and written content across various online platforms aimed at teaching freelancers in the spirituality, health, and wellbeing industries how to leverage their success. The SMCs are using (in their marketing) and promoting (to their clients) the use of inbound marketing strategies as they seek to present organic ways to improve business figures and blur the lines between spiritual advising and marketing instruction. As inbound marketing is a method to attract advice-seekers and convert them into prospective clients, the SMC's content is widely aspirational: it invokes a feeling that people can reach higher, gain more, and make better use of their potential. It promises quick results by use of "spiritual marketing" techniques but often remains elusive about what these look like and instead seeks to sell additional (paid) content. These "call-to-action" points are reference points in the customer journey that mark the moment the prospective client is encouraged to register for additional services and transform into a buyer. Underlying this process is rhetoric suggesting that only a few more clicks are needed to get to the key to success. The proposed figure of the *yogipreneur*, committed to yoga *and* their business, is presented as someone who has successfully established ways to make these two paths sustain each other. The recurring invocation of such utopian livelihoods combines spiritually and economically successful lifestyles otherwise perceived as incommensurable. Achieving this becomes then only a matter of aspiration: just one more click to "subscribe" to the next spiritual marketing coaching, the potential client is told.

Become a Yogipreneur

The programmes I explored promise to transform interested followers into *yogipreneurs*. They are designed specifically for interested yoga teachers or similar freelancers and promise training in social media marketing and strategies to start or evolve their business. Jessica, an SMC who leads such an initiative, considers this an empowerment programme for those who want to leave a permanent position and become self-employed as yoga teachers. She intends to help others aspire to success. Jessica set up her own marketing coaching and training business after initially struggling as a yoga teacher—but returning to employment was out of the question for her. In a Facebook post, she wrote:

> There is no need for more people in permanent positions who quietly betray the call of their soul in this system, or therapists who have fought their way through university and the clinical system with a straight A average. Rather, [it needs] courageous people who are willing to take unusual paths. Who feel that they would like to support and accompany other people instead of selling their souls to an employer.
>
> (Jessica's Facebook post, November 2021, my translation)

Jessica's *yogipreneur* programme is one of dozens of similar offers tailored towards yoga teachers or freelancers in the wellbeing sector and adjunct markets. These offers actively promote the freedom and individuality that supposedly come with working in these economies. Often, the SMCs behind these offers are themselves freelancers who run their businesses entirely online. Many SMCs live work-travel lives as digital nomads or are permanently located in foreign countries, far away from their target audiences. Amongst other factors, their locations are attractive because of weather and/or favourable money exchange rates. The *yogipreneurialism* they promote proposes freelancing as an opportunity to enjoy liberty from traditional employment constraints (see also: Clarke 2022) and to tailor one's labour conditions individually while leading a spiritual lifestyle. This is portrayed against the particularly

negative alternative of living an alienated life in a system suppressing one's inner calling or potential. Sonsoles, an SMC addressing specifically women in the spiritual economy, seeks to make this point very persuasive: "You cannot not be successful," she writes in an Instagram post promoting her latest offer. "Saying YES" to making a step towards self-employment and buying her program will make interested followers feel like they have a "CEO insurance," she promises (Sonsoles's Instagram post, March 2024). By encouraging individuals for whom yoga or spirituality are important parts of their lives to create a "heart" or "soul business" (aligned with the desire to do a work that one "loves", see Duffy (2017)), the SMCs promote the idea of a fulfilling and successful endeavour that aligns with their clients' values, abilities, and purpose.

The Language of Spiritual Marketing

Combining spirituality and marketing has primarily created a rhetorical shift promoted by SMCs as "spiritualization." This has both structural and linguistic impact. It is important to note that language is at the core of pull-marketing strategies, such as content marketing, which heavily depend on linguistic elements such as keywords. Adopting the semiotics and semantics used by their audiences is crucial for businesses aiming to attract customers effectively. The following discursive analysis explores how the SMCs have used claims that their marketing is spiritual to build their customer base and delves into some of the underlying semiotic qualities, examining the spiritual references in the SMCs' language and the supposed transcendence of marketing.

The problems and challenges of the yoga gig economy and related precarities can, according to the SMCs' narratives, be overcome with marketing efforts and the "spiritual" strategies they teach. Their offer, however, does not provide the implementation of marketing services but instead includes coaching and training that follow, in principle, the self-help

paradigm of modern self-centring spirituality and place responsibility (and the need for constant aspiration) on the individuals themselves. With that, it is difficult to assess their offer in quality and function, as there are no established measurement criteria—a common problem with spiritual services (Hero 2014). Obstacles to success, in turn, are framed as barriers that may require "inner work". A theme the SMCs recurringly engaged with, for example, was the problem that some of their clients supposedly had "negative" attitudes towards money or their own (monetary) self-worth. SM-coach Colleen, who runs an entire coaching franchise, not just for aspiring *yogipreneurs*, says her program has helped more than 100,000 clients to develop the right mind for attracting "more love, money, and success" into their lives (Colleen's program website, last accessed March 2024). Negative attitudes towards money, she says, are a common obstacle to success, as many of her clients wanted to "serve not sell" (Colleen's podcast, March 2023). Instead, she suggests, her clients must realize that a spiritual product is itself doing a service to those it is sold to, encouraging them to reflect upon their own identity and self-worth and, ultimately, adjust their prices upwards (Colleen's podcast, March 2023). Such rather strong calls to selling tactics stand out in the language of "spiritual marketing," which otherwise tends to avoid direct appeals and uses more elusive advice through the language of spirituality. SM-coach Astrid stresses in her podcast dedicated to "manifesting customers" that about 80% of the work was about one's mindset, inner work, and the transformation to "becoming conscious", whereas actually, only 20% was about strategy (Astrid's podcast, July 2020, my translation). Hence, she suggests that even the best strategy to gain more customers would not help if someone was "not ready to grow" and do their inner work (Astrid's podcast, July 2020, my translation).

When SMCs apply "spiritual" meaning to marketing, they also redefine non-spiritual marketing techniques. One example is the "buyer persona". SM-coaches often suggest meditations to visualize or grow a feeling of connection with a customer audience, essentially

resembling the marketing exercise of the buyer persona. This is at the core of the semiotic shift: instead of generating customers, "spiritual marketing" speaks about "manifesting" customers or "attracting" clients by means of esoteric doctrines and inner work. Where more traditional marketing approaches apply market research and analysis to create models of potential customers (the buyer persona), "spiritual marketing" suggests this is essentially an exercise of assuming the right inner state or mindset and that the connection to these target audiences can occur using esoteric practices such as visualisation and forms of introspection, connection, or manifestation. Sonsoles suggests that many business decisions, such as the correct pricing, could be made via proper self-regulation of one's nervous system (Sonsoles's Instagram post, March 2024) or via an enquiry in mediation (Sonsoles's podcast, April 2023). Jessica introduces a "healing meditation" to her followers to help let go of limitations (Jessica's podcast, April 2022) and suggests that "creating a field of acceptance" by working on one's own weaknesses and fears will help attract clients (Jessica's podcast, April 2022). Astrid also makes a similar intervention and advises her clients to attempt to "communicate" with their businesses and their products as entities, as they can offer messages and insights. The meditation needed for this process is available in her podcast (Astrid's podcast, February 2024), but as is generally the case across the SMCs' material, the suggested practices are rarely explored in more detail or tested for efficiency.

Another example concerns the domain of business development, usually a core corporate function involving sales, marketing, and strategic positioning, which turns into placing the personal brands of the *yogipreneurs* at the centre, unveiling their status as "corporate selves", and encouraging them to undergo (self-)development towards authenticity. In these ways, SMCs encourage their clients to fully *become* their businesses through processes supposedly making them more authentic and spiritually evolved, thus blurring the lines between personal, spiritual, and business matters. Notably, the coaches emphasize to their

clients the significance of marketing, and the marketing method becomes, in this context, the primary means of self-expression. The role of the *yogipreneur* as both a spiritual self and a business owner fuses into one unified business entity capable of navigating marketing worlds. The aspirational natures of spirituality and marketing are levelled against each other. Yoga entrepreneurs are called to transform themselves into a personal brand and a commodity to fully become *yogipreneur*s. In Astrid's words to her clients, this reads as follows: "The niche is you. The brand is you. Your brand can hold everything that you are if you allow yourself to be all that you are" (Astrid's podcast, June 2023, my translation).

One category that appears central to "spiritual marketing" rationale is the notion of purpose. Purpose, as is suggested, is gained via an understanding of self-development and authenticity, following the trope that the more authentic the entrepreneur becomes, the better they will manage to situate their purpose. Astrid explains that a business will grow "the more authentic you are in your business […] because you are expressing yourself through your business" (Astrid's podcast, July 2020, my translation). According to her, this is due to the magnetic effect that authenticity has on potential clients who, when buying a product or service, desire to resonate with the supplier. Considering that the coaches speak of marketing as a main tool through which their clients should express themselves, it is evident that they consider *yogipreneurs* as business entities in the roles of influencers or personal brands. Consequently, all modes of self-expression are tethered to marketing-oriented objectives, requiring *yogipreneurs* not only to professionalize and commercialize their expertise but also their personal lives. This phenomenon, increasingly normalized in influencer culture,[8] may indeed appear attractive to those who desire to make a living through a personal passion, such as

[8] Refer to Duffy (2020) and Duffy *et al.* (2023) for a discussion of social media influencing.

teaching yoga. It also hints towards a common belief in contemporary spiritualities that "like attracts like," sometimes referred to by SMCs as the "Law of Attraction".

In relation to purpose and self-development, SMCs frequently speak about authenticity, a concept which is difficult to operationalize or assess. Aspirational claims (to achieve authenticity) are, therefore, a central concern of my analysis. Both marketing and spirituality delineate pathways to such aspiration of growth and achievement, albeit in distinct modalities and contexts. The spiritual growth suggested in these contexts primarily revolves around personal development, focusing on individual transformation, while marketing is concerned with business expansion and the development of a customer base. However, SMCs amalgamate these two seemingly disparate concepts. The coaches place the personal brands of their clients at the epicentre of a discourse that seeks to achieve business growth by foregrounding their spiritual growth as an essential cause for the former. Authenticity plays a major role in this effort, as in marketing outside the spiritual economy.[9] In the spiritual economy, as Hero (2014, 76) notes, "[e]ven after the actual act of purchase, namely during 'consumption,' the characteristics of spiritual services are revealed to the consumer only to a limited extent […]". Authenticity, then, serves as a means to establish trust for entrepreneurs and is often understood as a match between the ideas on offer and "the supplier's identity, lifestyle, and past" (Hero 2014, 76). In spiritual marketing, with its focus on personal "brandification," *self*-development is portrayed as the path towards authenticity. However, considering the unclarity of the constituent elements of authenticity, success is commonly posited as the sole indicator of (having achieved) authenticity. This results in a teleological argument that implies that lack of success equates to lacking (aspiration to) authenticity, thus internalising any difficulties for aspiring *yogipreneurs*. The SMC remains unaccountable for the outcomes of their services.

[9] Marketing scholars are equally concerned with understanding the consumers' demand for authentic brands, and with the strategies for how brands can positively influence their (perceived) authenticity (cf. Fritz, Schonmueller, and Bruhn 2017).

The success and effectiveness of online content to gauge the attention of audiences are assessed by the engagement that is generated, such as likes, followers, views, and conversion rates. These are, however, not only influenced by the quality of the content but largely by how algorithms process it, or rather, by how well the content has been optimized for algorithmic handling.[10] This convergence of authenticity and success may lead to two consequences: the singular *raison d'être* of self-development becomes synonymous with the marketing self, and marketing itself becomes the yardstick for assessing spiritual development, a convergence that resembles what McLaughlin *et al.* (2020) discuss as "co-constitutive processes of religion-making and corporation-making".

Predictive power of algorithms:
From the universe to the online marketing space

Inbound marketing and contemporary spirituality relate through the concept of "like-for-like" attraction. This principle, central to many contemporary spiritualities, was popularised in the 19th-century New Thought movement, itself a product of American individualism, mesmerism, and resistance to Protestant doctrines. New Thought focused on teaching techniques based on the belief that thoughts and desires can influence or attract corresponding outcomes in the material world, i.e., they "manifest", "magnetically attract", or "materialize" (Griswold 1934; Haller 2012; Satter 2001), a concept that became known as the "Law of Attraction" (Atkinson 1906).[11] Seen as a "cult of success" at the time (e.g. Griswold 1934), the movement lost relevance at the onset of the 20th century, but its esoteric principles influenced many other modalities, including modern yoga (Singleton 2007) and positive thinking modalities such as

[10] These forms of content optimization involve, for instance, search engine optimisation (SEO) and search engine marketing (SEM), the use of keywords or advertising based on algorithmic prediction.
[11] Influenced by Swedenborg and his doctrine of correspondence (Haller 2012), New Thought's technique was based on the Western esoteric assumption that material and spiritual planes were inherently connected and in mutual dependency. Refer to Hanegraff (1997) for a more comprehensive discussion of Western esotericism and the New Age.

Positive Psychology (Cabanas Díaz and Sánchez González 2012).[12] In the new millennium, the "Law of Attraction" experienced a renaissance with the publication of Rhonda Byrne's book, *The Secret* (2006), which gained international popularity.

Beyond the metaphysical realm, predictive algorithms in inbound marketing also mirror the concept of "like-for-like" attraction. Consequently, pull and inbound marketing methods ideally combine with the narration of "spiritual marketing", through which, as Astrid puts it, the process becomes about "inviting customers into your business" (Astrid's podcast, July 2020, my translation). Broadly speaking, the apparent power of a (marketing) algorithm lies in its capacity to predict what users think, desire, or put their attention towards. The data used for these predictions is collected through tracking and analysing online behaviour. The esoteric belief underlying the "Law of Attraction" that everything can be manifested through the power of thoughts and that "like attracts like" has thus found an important and appealing parallel in digital marketing and its invisible algorithmic order, governed by what I term here the "Law of Prediction."

In equating spirituality with marketing, the SM-coaches not only blur the lines between these two domains but also subject humans to evaluation against success-driven criteria largely dictated by corporate algorithms. "Algorithms […]", Beer (2017, 4) argues, "are inevitably modelled on visions of the social world, and with outcomes in mind, outcomes influenced by commercial or other interests and agendas." In the case of marketing algorithms, the desired outcome is the anticipation of customer behaviour and interests through predictive models. For numerous social media platforms operating as marketplaces in the "attention economy" (Wu 2016; 2018), this necessitates ongoing endeavours to sustain user engagement and retain the users' attention and time on the platform, for instance, by selecting the content that they are being displayed. For the SMCs, this context fosters a conducive environment for their visions

[12] See Haller (2012) for a review of the history of New Thought and some intellectual precursors.

and narrations. A substantial number of their clients are drawn to their services through pull marketing, as I was myself in this research. They are then urged to employ similar methods to engage their own prospective clients, perpetuating this cycle. This recursive system is inherent in the principles of the "spiritual marketing" approach, which prominently relies on digital marketing and algorithmic paradigms presented as the outcome of a *spiritual* framework.

This observation underscores that, despite their claims, SMCs do not "spiritualize" marketing but instead provide a language and ideological framework that introduces alternative perspectives on digital marketing and how it can be applied successfully. It widely suspends technical reflections on algorithmic processes and suggests explanations rooted in a self-help and self-development framework. The foregrounding of values such as authenticity and purpose also reframes what is essentially a neoliberal framework that aligns with the operational mechanisms of digital inbound marketing. The semiotic similarities between the "Law of Attraction" and the "Law of Prediction" allow SMCs to promote a concept that aligns with their clients' worldview and supports belief in the validity of their supposedly "spiritualized" marketing advice, on the one hand, and their life advice, on the other. The similarities in "like-for-like" attraction between the "Law of Attraction" and the "Law of Prediction" are apparent: The original desire to harness and cultivate one's thoughts and achieve outcomes through the "Law of Attraction" morphs into a struggle to master the newly emerging "Law of Prediction," that digital marketing has presented. As such, the previously metaphysical idea that a person's thoughts have a vibration or magnetism has found its semiotic counterpart in inbound marketing, where the same language applies, and customers are attracted or pulled.

The relationship between thoughts and matter, once a metaphysical concept meaning to transcend the inner realm of thought and the outer realm of matter, has now materialized, as these "thoughts" are stored in the form of data. What makes this connection particularly

powerful is that, even though data centres and hard drives are much a physical entity, they remain invisible for most people concerned and form part of the "technological unconscious" (Thrift 2008; cf. Clough 2000). Similarly, algorithms remain elusive concepts, intangible and beyond physical concepts to most consumers. Singler (2020) observed that internet users have also referenced their experience with algorithms through theistic conceptions.[13] "Blessed by the algorithm" was a phrase posted on social media by users who felt they had been particularly favoured by algorithmic impacts, such as when their online content achieved increased visibility, or they succeeded in procuring work in a gig economy. By portraying algorithms and artificial intelligence as God-like, Singler wonders whether this may in the future give those who provide advice on algorithmic visibility (such as the SMCs; other forms of advising were also proposed by Bishop 2020) the status of "modern prophets" (Singler 2020, 7). Whether this will be the accurate terminology or not, the impact of algorithms is already evident and is likely to increase and expand in the future, making the roles of those able to understand and operate them paramount.

The proposed "spiritual marketing" system intends to provide control of an order primarily negotiated by algorithms. This control is reminiscent of the initial New Thought model, which advocated control of material realities through the power of thought. This desire to control or participate notably emerged within a gendered social and economic order widely dominated by men in the late nineteenth century (cf. Satter 2001). Similarly, "spiritual marketing" serves as an empowerment strategy, primarily endorsed by women, to overcome existing orders and their precarities: social, economic, algorithmic.

Conclusion

[13] See also Singler's discussion (2017) of artificial intelligence in the context of religion.

This case study delves into the realm of a modality that proposes to "spiritualize" marketing by providing an alternative rhetoric to the conventional understanding of business development. "Spiritual marketing" is fused with ideas on self-development and esoteric concepts, such as the "Law of Attraction." The potential effectiveness of "spiritual marketing" promises seems to be founded on the metaphysical idea that thought controls matter. This appears to be reflected in the more physical yet equally intangible world of digital marketing, where data are stored in distant data centres and controlled by algorithms. The case study explores how SM-coaches effectively blend the languages of spirituality and business by emphasising the belief that success ultimately lies in spiritual aspirations. Upholding this aspiration remains a driving force that is mediated by the necessity to apply techniques of self-development and express authenticity through the use of inbound marketing. At the same time, the pursuit of authenticity and the discovery of one's "heart business" are framed as acts of service, evoking a sense of a broader collective purpose.

At the centre of the SMCs' enterprises lies the promise that marketing is the panacea for all precarities and anxieties of the labour market or yoga gig economy and that interested clients can free themselves by attending training and coaching sessions. The foundation of this success, supposedly based on a mindset of abundance and growth, eludes quantification through more conventional performance indicators. Instead, the promoted perspectives internalize economic success (and failure) as inherently connected to the person behind the brand. Rather than relying on a marketing strategy, spiritual marketing (over-)emphasizes the self-development of the aspiring *yogipreneur*, following the doctrine popular in New Thought and contemporary spiritualities, that it is "inner work" which is required to achieve external goals. In line with the paradigm of self-development in contemporary spirituality, SMCs suggest that success is a reflection of an inner state and that (economic) success is bound to happen once their client has become truly authentic in their business. This also suggests

economic success as a measure of spiritual evolvement, as both are suggested to be in causal (but teleological) association. In equating spirituality with marketing, SMCs essentially subject their clients to success criteria controlled by corporate algorithms, placing them into potentially precarious positions. The once metaphysical idea of "thought vibration" then finds its counterpart in inbound marketing, where its language and concepts materialize in the form of data controlled by algorithms, allowing SMCs to promote "spiritual marketing" advice that aligns with their clients' beliefs and desires for self-agency. Eventually, "spiritual marketing" seeks to generate a need for *yogipreneurs* to claim agency and control over their lives and aspirations, and positions the modalities it sells as a promise to success. The appeasement of algorithmic processes is essential to digital marketing success but is presented here as a spiritual exercise. This representation reconfigures the meaning of this essentially neoliberal undertaking, that is, making *yogipreneurs* into influencers, seemingly free and fully individualized persons acting as privatized business entities in a precarious market.

I agree with McLaughlin *et al.*'s (2020) argument that a more thorough analysis of the intersection between religion and economy is warranted while also letting go of the assumption that there is a binary and ontological distinction to be made. Instead, we ought to consider the many ways in which these concepts interact, overlap, and incorporate a wide range of functions, narrations, and modalities that were once exclusively attributed to one or the other. In contrast to McLaughlin *et al.*'s perspective, I propose that examining the corporate form solely as a collective or institutional entity, such as a company, proves too limited in scope. This perspective risks neglecting the significant role of individuals who are not (formally) affiliated with such organised entities and enterprises but form collective action and value (see also Bernard's and Crockford's articles in this special issue). In my case study, I demonstrate that the freelance yoga market, comprising self-employed yoga teachers, intermediaries, and

service providers, such as marketing coaches, does not conform to the structural patterns expected of corporations. Instead, these actors often actively reject conventional affiliations and place the promotion of values such as individual freedom and self-development at the core of their work, which they claim cannot be achieved within the corporate system of employment. Nonetheless, I showed that they are involved in comparable discourses discussed by McLaughlin *et al.* (2020) by extensively employing processes of meaning-making, religion-making, and narrations to propose a path to aspiration and forming collective value. My case study illustrates how religion is not constricted solely to the domain of business, nor is business solely adopting religious attributes. Rather, in "spiritual marketing," the applied rhetoric serves to reconfigure distinctions and apply spiritual meaning to the world of marketing, thereby bridging the previously perceived binaries. At the same time, the pursuit of authenticity and the discovery of one's "heart business" are framed as acts of service, evoking a sense of a broader collective purpose. Many SM coaches shared origin stories and narratives of leaving the corporate world, which is portrayed as exploitative and a hindrance to personal development. However, the relinquishment of job security, a stable income, and the precarious reality of the yoga gig economy can lead to anxieties that SMCs seek to address by promising success through mere aspiration.

More research is needed to explore particularly the gendered dimensions of the success category in the context of "spiritual marketing," considering that all the SMCs the algorithms presented me with were women. While this is not a representative measure, the perspective is given further weight by Satter's (2001) argument that the New Thought movement developed from a gendered discourse on womanhood, desire and compulsory norms, as well as by Duffy's (2016; 2017) observations on the gendered dimensions of aspirational labour and social media influencing.

Lastly, it would be valuable to theorise more on the convergence between the "Law of Attraction" and the "Law of Prediction," reflecting specifically how discussions on extended mind theory (Clark and Chalmers 1998) and technologies of the extended mind (Fitz and Reiner 2016) may help conceptualise this convergence and issues of autonomy arising with it (e.g. Reiner and Nagel 2017). Additional attention should be directed towards exploring in more detail how aware SMCs and their clients are of the algorithmic implications of their doing.

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