



## Research Article

# The Cultural Appropriation of Buddha in American Advertisements

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Employing a mixed qualitative and quantitative method, this paper explores why and how Buddha is being reimagined, appropriated, and baked into American advertisements, as well as what underlying values inform such a practice. Building upon previous scholars' work, we argue that Buddha-branded advertisements cater to all socio-economic classes not just the elite. Buddha is used as a spiritual resource to promote desire, reinforcing rather than challenging consumer culture. Buddha-branded advertisements are shaped by American cultural principles, and in return, the advertisements reshape various facets of identity and everyday American life.

**Keywords:** advertisements; Buddha; cultural principles; appropriation; goods; identity; secular spirituality; social groups

EN has long been stripped of its complications, divested of its Buddhist framework, reinterpreted, and used as “a commercial buzzword” to sell goods in the United States (Irizarry 2015: 53). The same thing is happening with Buddha; advertisers strategically co-opt images of Buddha and its associations with spirituality.<sup>1</sup> Buddha-branded advertisements are informed by, and interpreted through, an American cultural lens, and, in turn, help reshape Americans’ perception of Buddhism.

In studying culture and consumption, Grant McCracken (1986, 1988, 2005) has argued that culture is not just an abstract idea but also materials and actions. Commercial goods are informed by “cultural categories” and “cultural principles” (1986: 74; 1988: 131). Cultural categories are based on age, gender, class, nationality and so on. Cultural principles are the “organizing ideas” underlying cultural practices. These principles can find “expression in every aspect of social life, not least of all, they found expression in goods” (1986: 73; 1988: 76).

McCracken’s theoretical approach echoes Judith Williamson’s work. In her groundbreaking book, *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising*, Williamson argues that “Advertisements are one of the most important cultural factors molding and reflecting our life today” (1978: 11). She maintains that effective advertisements draw upon preexisting ideological meanings, transfer them to the goods, and have the consumer, in turn, complete the ads’ meanings. Indeed, Buddha-branded advertisements rely on a dominant visual representation of Buddha to make ads distinctive. Advertisements, an important component of the mass media, play a significant role in shaping the American cultural imagination.

<sup>1</sup> We use “Buddha” or “the Buddha” depending on the context following the lead of Jørn Borup in his article “Branding Buddha – Mediatized and Commodified Buddhism as Cultural Narrative” published in the *Journal of Global Buddhism* (2016). Since we analyze the contents of Buddha-branded advertisements, we mainly refer to the advertisers who created these ads. Nevertheless, we do concur with the existing scholarly body of literature that few advertisers can avoid the influence of the existing cultural norms of their time.

In *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture*, Jane Iwamura argues that the mass media co-opts dominant ideologies and stereotypes to construct a symbolic “Oriental Monk” to satisfy Americans’ fascination with Eastern religions. The Oriental Monk is the figure “onto which we project our assumptions, fears and hopes” (2011: 4). This tells us more about America and its geopolitics in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century than Asian religions. Building upon the Oriental Monk, the image of Buddha, an Asian male calmly meditating in the lotus position, is employed to signal “Eastern Spirituality.” Buddha is being reappropriated in ads, in the garden, in living rooms, at restaurants, in gyms and stores—everywhere in a rapidly evolving socio-economic and religious landscape.

Buddha-branded advertisements carry multifaceted meanings through texts, symbols, and images. Yet, as Rick Moore noted, “very little research has integrated whether advertisers use religion to pitch products and (if they do) how they use it” (2005: 5). To fill this gap, this essay draws upon a survey of 549 Buddha-branded American advertisements, and explores *why* advertisers adopt Buddha, *how* advertisers appropriate his name and image to pitch goods aimed at American consumers, and *what* underlying cultural principles inform these appropriations. We argue that the meanings transferred to Buddha-branded goods tend to be compatible with preexisting American cultural norms such as individualism. Buddhist ethics, such as suffering arising from desire, are often omitted as they are incompatible with the structurally rooted yearning for personal happiness, individuality, and consumption.

### **Class-Oriented Consumption**

A few scholars have explored the commercialization of Buddhism via goods in the United States. Douglas Padgett examined the consumption of meditation cushions to reveal the interplay of material culture and American Buddhism, and how such consumption is shaped by “spiritual communities” or “elite Buddhists” (2000: 63, 71). Similarly, Charles Jones found that over 90 percent of the books about American Buddhism sold at bookstores focus on meditation and self-help and were primarily written for educated white converts (2007: 217–19). In the 21<sup>st</sup>-century, meditation and mindfulness have become increasingly popular.<sup>2</sup> Jeff Wilson noted that mindfulness is used to sell the middle class “auxiliary products” such as meditation-related books, magazines, blogs, and CDs, as well as expensive enlightenment-friendly consumer goods (2014: 134; 2016). In addition, Wilson summarized two important “modes” of the mindfulness movement: “on the one hand, the selling of Buddhist meditation practice through the use of secular images and rhetoric; on the other hand, the selling of secular products through the use of Buddhist images and rhetoric” (2016: 110). Wilson maintained that mindfulness is medicalized, commodified, psychologized, and privatized, which essentially means making mindfulness more palatable by secularizing it (2014).

Zen went through a similar process. In *Put a Price on Zen*, Joshua Irizarry provided us with a transnational perspective. He contrasted Zen in Japan with what he called “consumer zen” (indicated by the lower-case z) in the United States to show the significant transformation of Zen over the last fifty years (2015: 51). Irizarry argued that “zen has taken on a life of its own as a floating signifier, a hypersignified ‘catch-all’ usable by anyone as befits their needs” (2015: 66). He suggested that “the word zen has commercial value not only because it has been stripped of its religious aura, but also because it has consequently been transformed into a semiotic blank canvas upon which qualities desirable to consumers can readily be projected” (2015: 52). Advertisers also use Zen to target middle- and upper-class women and men.

These pioneering studies have made a significant contribution to our understanding of the transformation of Buddhism in the United States and the interconnections among spirituality, commercialization, and

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<sup>2</sup> Since 2015 over 2,500 meditation apps have been brought out. The top seller, Calm, generated well over \$90 million in revenue in 2020 (Todd 2021).

consumption. Interestingly, all these scholars tend to focus on products consumed by the elite and the middle class. We concur that advertisements do target affluent spiritual seekers. However, focusing only on the middle and elite classes' consumption has its limitations. According to our data, advertisers, who keep on top of newly ascending spiritual trends, are keen to reach consumers of every socio-economic class by using Buddha.

### **Capitalizing on Secular Spirituality: Co-opting Buddha**

Spirituality, like Zen, is hard to define. Spirituality, in popular, 21<sup>st</sup>-century American usage, is generally considered more individually oriented, and religion more institutionalized and communally oriented (Carrette and King 2005; Roof 1999). Spirituality is also often employed in non-religious spheres including "health, art, psychology, therapy, media and commerce" (Borup and Fibiger 2017: 5). Since the last decade, more Americans claim that they are spiritual and not religiously affiliated: "[O]nly 54 percent of US adults think of themselves as religious – down 11 points since 2012 – while far more (75 percent) say they are spiritual, a figure that has remained relatively steady in recent years" (Lipka and Gecewicz 2017).

Carl Bielefeldt (2001) used the term "secular spirituality" when referring to "a longing among many (especially the white middle and upper classes) who are still not satisfied with what they have and who want something more; who have all they can eat, but are still searching for that special flavoring, some 'psycho-spice' of self-acceptance, perhaps, some rare 'inner herb' of 'guilt-free self-satisfaction'". The secular spirituality discourse emphasizes self-expression and personal growth.

The desire for self-growth coexists with consumer desire; self-discovery is often realized through goods. Identity can be articulated through the food one eats, the clothing one wears, the furniture one possesses, even one's weight (Belk 1988; Bordo 2013; Einstein 2008; Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998; Fischler 1988; McCracken 1987, 1988, 2005). Williamson observed long ago that Americans are socialized to "identify themselves with what they consume" instead of with what they do (1978: 13, 45–46, 179). Today, an endless torrent of ads plays with identity politics from the perspective that Americans are socialized to believe that individuals are responsible for creating their own identity.

### **Cultural Appropriation and the Power of Advertisers**

What we now call Buddhism was founded more than 2,500 years ago. Buddhist practices, as well as Buddha's names and images, have changed over time in response to different geographic areas and changing economic and political circumstances. However, Buddhist principles, such as the Four Noble Truths, remain the same: life is suffering experienced within a cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Suffering is caused by loss, sickness, pain, and desire. Accumulating positive karma is believed to be the way to be born higher in the next life, eventually achieve enlightenment, and escape the cycle of rebirth.

The concepts of karma, rebirth, and life as suffering, nevertheless, are incompatible with many prevailing American cultural beliefs. Consumerism is crucial for capitalism to flourish. The main objective of advertisements is to make commodities and services desirable (Goldman 1992; Lalvani 1995; Twitchell 2005). One way or another, every detail advertisers craft—logos, imagery, text, humor, price, and packaging—serves to sell the product. The idea that personal well-being and/or spirituality can be achieved through purchasing goods is endorsed by many ads. Consequently, Buddha, as a symbol, has become a resource for ad-generated revenue.

Thus, the cultural appropriation of Buddha in these advertisements must be analyzed explicitly in an American context. In his study of the movement from cultural exchange to transculturation, Richard Rogers points out that cultural appropriation is an action which originated from the idea of selectively choosing elements of

another culture to “make [it] one’s own” (2006: 475), and that such actions are “shaped by, and in turn shape, the social, economic, and political contexts in which they occur” (2006: 476). Along the same lines, Buddhism is being appropriated by some advertisers to satisfy the cultural taste of American consumers. Robert Sharf sums it up nicely: “Buddhist practice is reduced to meditation, and meditation, in turn, is reduced to mindfulness, which is touted as a therapeutic practice that leads to an emotionally fulfilling and rewarding life” (2015: 472). Meditation is now being used for various therapeutic purposes: to relieve stress, to increase happiness, to lose weight, have better sex, and eat a healthier diet (Wilson 2014, 2016). Others, such as Jon Kabat-Zinn, a founder of the mindfulness movement, chose to ignore the connections between meditation and Buddhism (Purser 2019). Kabat-Zinn connects meditation with “the power of mind” and “speaking in terms of energy, flow, and flux; and sees ‘salvation’ from suffering primarily in terms of therapy and healing” (Hickey 2019: 186). Donald Lopez argues in *Buddhism and Science* (2008) and *The Scientific Buddha* (2012) that although meditation is often linked with science, Buddhism and science are essentially incompatible because each has a different focus and purpose. Nevertheless, meditation, legitimated by science and psychology, has been embraced by some corporations (K. D. Williamson 2018). Employees are encouraged to practice meditation to become mindful and increase productivity. However, Buddha images are largely absent from these sites (2018: 2).

In contrast to meditation and the mindfulness movement in the United States, many advertisers appropriate Buddha’s name and image. These appropriations have their own characteristics: Buddha is perceived as a resource adding value to goods, yet, at the same time, the dharma is being ignored, erased, distorted, or redefined as the effect of drawing upon preexisting American cultural principles. While the cultural appropriation of meditation, mindfulness, and Buddha-branded advertisements vary, they are all compatible with American cultural fashions—individualism, psychology, science, and the pursuit of personal happiness. Collectively, these advertisements, in different configurations, impose American cultural principles and taste on other cultural elements and practices, not the other way around.

Advertisers have long used spirituality to brand goods (Carrette and King 2005; Einstein 2008; Stein 1999). Different types of capital are interconnected and convertible; symbolic capital can be converted into economic power (Bourdieu 1987: 3–4). Using Buddha in advertisements is part of a strategy to convert symbolic capital into economic capital. Advertisers are behind-the-scenes but active agents. Their job compels them to refashion cultural information to elicit consumer desire. They are simultaneously shaped by social, cultural, political, and economic forces and they, in return, influence consumers. Buddha-branded ads embody the power advertisers possess; the positions from which they speak; the ways in which they pitch their products; and their cultural values.

### **Methodology and Research Design**

In 2016 Jiemin Bao began this project with a pilot study of American advertisements that used Buddhist iconography to sell products. These data were collected online by several undergraduates and a graduate student who were instructed to find the advertisements using web searches. Systematic searches were conducted to approximate the actual experience of shoppers’ access to ads on the internet. This compilation focused on commercial advertisements with Buddhist iconography aimed at American consumers. Advertisements ranged from goods one can only purchase from an online marketplace like Amazon, to those available at various retailers including big box chain stores like Walmart or Home Depo, or at specialty shops. After examining 111 advertisements, Bao realized that images of Buddha and the use of the word “Buddha” had overtaken “Zen” in frequency: 53 percent to 26 percent. Building on this pilot study, the survey shifted to focus on Buddha-branded ads. By the end of 2019, 549 Buddha-branded advertisements had been collected online, mostly by UNLV undergraduates and some by one graduate student. These data were classified and coded by Bao and Willis with help from two UNLV graduate research assistants.

The following five aspects of Buddha-branded advertisements—time, categorical product types, product price, and language, as well as the use of Buddha’s name and/or image—are important for sorting out and analyzing how Buddha-branded ads are made.

**Time.** We roughly sketched out a timeline for the growth of businesses that used “Buddha” as part of their branding by assessing the patterns in state business license records by searching the keyword “Buddha” in their online databases. To avoid including registrations from religious institutions, we excluded non-profit organizations. We also included whenever a business refiled the licensing paperwork to better understand the total saturation of Buddha-branded businesses through time. Incomplete records made it difficult to provide insights into long term trends. However, 15 states had clear and complete business records supplying the filing dates and names of each business entity (fig. 1).

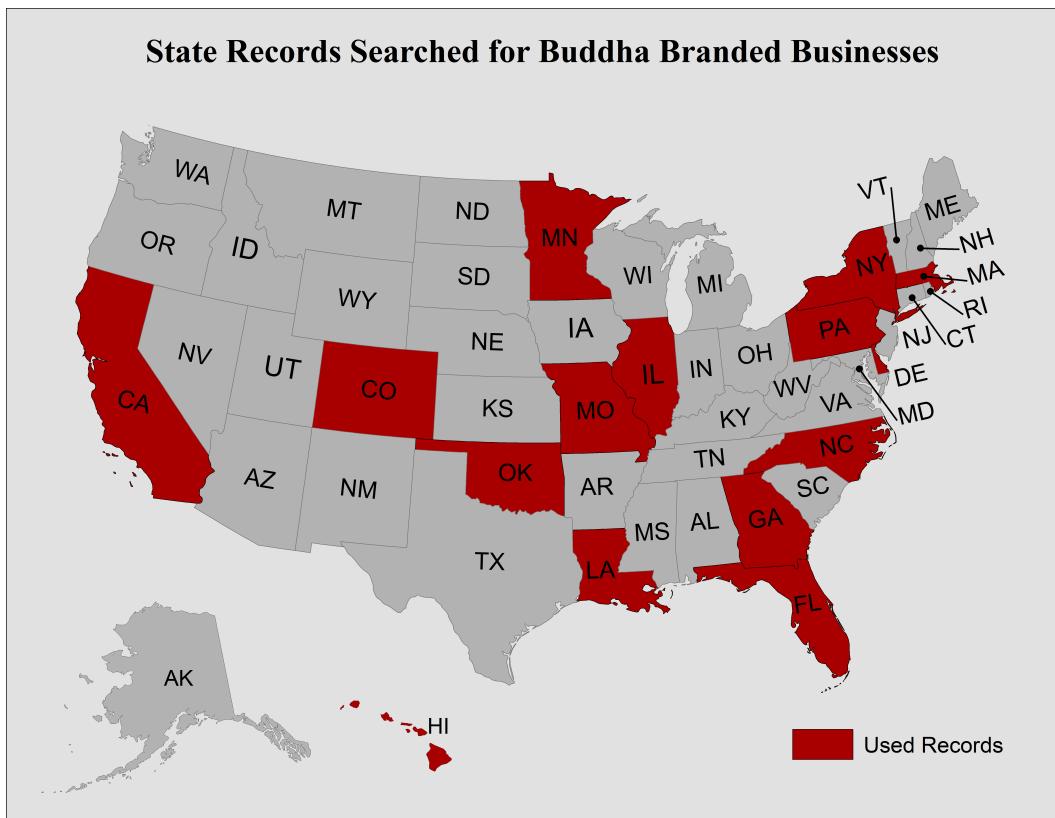


Figure 1: States whose business records were searched.

Buddha was rarely used in a company or product name up through the first half of the twentieth century (fig. 2). Usage grew in the mid-1980s when the mindfulness movement took off. In the year 2000, eleven registrations used Buddha as part of their name. By 2019, that number jumped to sixty-six. This enabled us to situate ads into a time-specific framework.

<sup>3</sup> All the states shown in the chart had records going back to the early twentieth century.



Figure 2: The growth of Buddha-branded businesses over time.<sup>3</sup>

**Product types.** We divided the 549 advertised goods into eight categories: apparel, apparel accessories, drug-related products, artwork, home décor, food products, novelty items, and wellness merchandise.<sup>4</sup> Among them, home décor and novelty items were the most abundant and food products the least (fig. 3).

**Product price.** To better understand affordability, we categorized available product prices based on the number of poverty level workdays that would be required to purchase the product before taxes. Poverty level workdays were computed for a forty-hour work week paying \$48.04 per day.<sup>5</sup> Product prices were divided into three categories: Group A included products ranging in price up to \$48.04. Group B had products priced between \$48.05 and \$96.08. Group C included products that cost \$96.09 and up.

**Language.** To tease out the cultural categories and principles residing within these advertisements, we identified keywords and phrases which frequently recurred, and then sorted them each into corresponding themes. These themes were further condensed into eleven overarching meta-themes to reduce the number of variables within the study. All themes and meta-themes were repeatedly sorted, assessed, and discussed until consistent groupings were formed. Finally, to identify the relationships between specific advertising themes and certain types of products, we employed exploratory chi-square goodness of fit tests.<sup>6</sup> This mixed (qualitative and quantitative) method helped us capture some of the principal ways in which Buddha is being appropriated.

<sup>4</sup> Apparel: Includes any clothing item excluding jewelry. Apparel accessories: Includes jewelry, handbags, tote bags, purses, sunglasses, name badge holders, and so on. Drug-related products: Includes any product that was associated with cannabis, alcohol, and tobacco consumption or promoted such. Cannabis products included edibles, smokables, pipes and paraphernalia, and CBD oil products. (CBD products are often not intoxicating, yet they are marketed similarly to the intoxicant cannabis products. Hence, we classified them as a drug-related product.) Artwork: Includes products where the purpose of the item was atheistically related such as artistic prints, statues, sculptures, and wall hangings. Home décor: Includes furniture, household wares, kitchenware, candle holders, linens, pillows, curtains, bathroom essentials, office products, and knick-knacks. Food products: Includes any food or beverage that was a consumable other than drug related products or medicines. Novelty items: Includes toys, games, oddities, pet products, stickers, magnets, keychains, snow globes, Christmas ornaments, wrapping paper, and stationery. Wellness: Includes health products, supplements, soaps, cleaners, deodorants, toiletries and toiletry accessories, incense and incense paraphernalia, essential oil products, and yoga products excluding apparel.

<sup>5</sup> Poverty threshold was calculated for a household size of one using guidelines produced by the US Department of Health & Human Services Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. See <https://aspe.hhs.gov/2019-poverty-guidelines> (Accessed March 1, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Chi-square tests are an inferential statistical technique that can help evaluate whether categorical variables are associated with one another more than one would expect by chance alone.

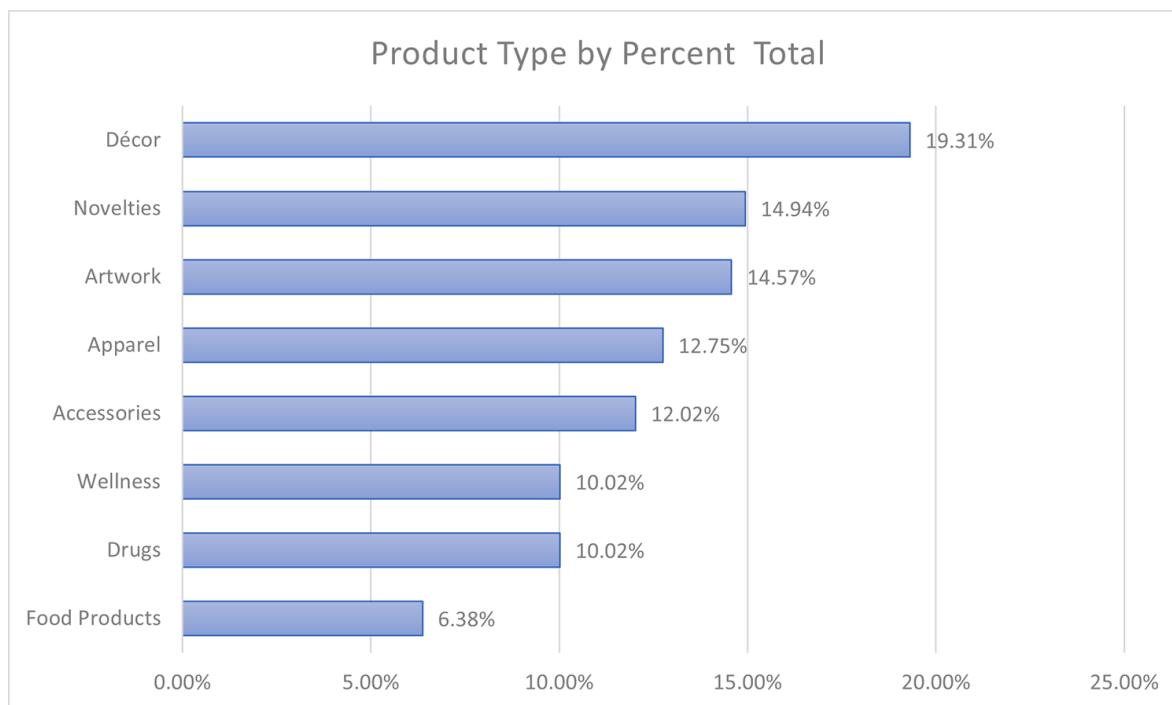


Figure 3: Buddha-branded product types by their percent total.

**Buddha's name and images.** All the ads in this survey used Buddha's name and/or image. For images, we included the ad if Buddha appeared on the product itself, product packaging, or product webpage. According to the Urban Dictionary, Buddha is used as slang for cannabis.<sup>7</sup> Of all the Buddha images, "Laughing Buddha," an incarnation of Maitreya, appears most often. Laughing Buddha's image is based upon Budai, a rotund 10th-century Chinese monk. In addition, Buddha's head, without the rest of his torso, was the only disembodied body part used extensively in the ads.<sup>8</sup> Many of the advertisements appropriated Laughing Buddha's image for the sake of visual humor. These usages included anthropomorphic mashups and ironic situations. As humor is often related to expressing class taste, chi-square was again used to test the association between visual humor and our price classes.<sup>9</sup>

### Product Types and Thematic Advertising Patterns

In this survey, we identified thematic language in 82 percent of our Buddha-branded advertisements (fig. 4). Among the 18 percent without thematic language, Buddha images were used instead as well as a small number of products that used the name Buddha as part of their branding.<sup>10</sup> This occurred most frequently with drug-related products, novelties, apparel, and accessories, and least frequently with works of art. For example, *InterestPrint*, a company that specializes in adding designs to various products, sells men's boxer shorts with a colorful Buddha pattern. Their advertisement fabricates a visual representation of a meditating Buddha wearing headphones and sunglasses. Instead of using the Bodhi tree as a backdrop—underneath which the historical Buddha attained nirvana—it uses psychedelic mushrooms instead, implying

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Buddha> (Accessed March 10, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> To examine how Buddha head products were appropriated, we separated them into four categories: a). Used for branding or packaging; b). Used as decoration for part of the product or is itself the product entirely. c). Makes or is a consumable product such as candies or cakes, ice cube trays, or chocolate molds; d). Used as a vessel or storage container such as flowerpots, mugs, oil diffusers, cookie jars, shot glasses, and alcohol bottles.

<sup>9</sup> It was hypothesized that lower priced products would contain significantly more humor.

<sup>10</sup> Advertisements that were determined to be themeless either did not have any advertising language at all, or only contained brief descriptions of the product.

that enlightenment may come through hallucinogenic experiences. Many advertisers attempt to reach non-Buddhists through image-making and let the consumer complete the meaning. Using iconic Buddha images alone, without any spiritual rhetoric attached, reveals just how evocative and ubiquitous Buddha images are in the marketplace.

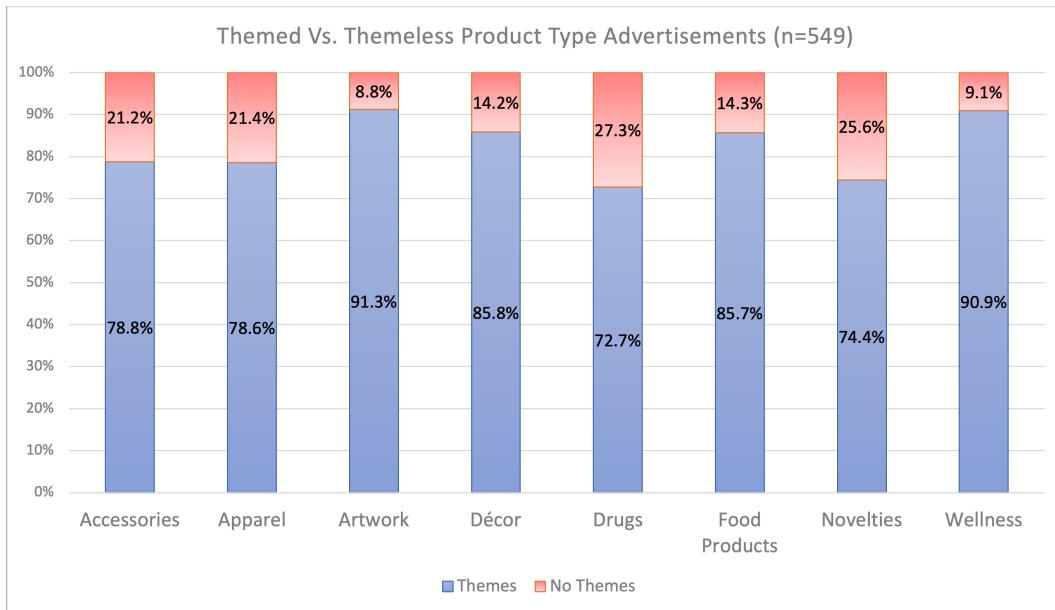


Figure 4: The percent of themeless products for each product type are represented by the top shaded portions of the bar graph.

Many Buddha-branded advertisements employed multiple themes. Of the remaining 452 (82 percent) product advertisements with keyword themes, 286 (63 percent) contained language related to spirituality (fig. 5).<sup>11</sup> However, advertisers used the category “spirituality” across the board ( $\chi^2 = 6.221$ ,  $df = 7$ ,  $p = 0.514$ ).<sup>12</sup> For example, an ad for *Buddha Teas Organic Root Chakra Tea* claims that drinking the product will help balance your “energy centers,” and enable you to “feel safe in the world” so you may “take healthy risks, knowing that all will be well.” Spirituality is tied to the desire for well-being.

The spiritual rhetoric in Buddha-branded advertisements redefine Buddhist concepts such as enlightenment. *Buddha Bread* claims that its bread delivers “Pure enlightenment in every bite”; *Buddha Soap* claims: “Use our serene soap sculptures to attain a state of enlightened cleanliness”; *BBQ Buddha*’s slogan is “Enlighten your grill.” The meanings of enlightenment are continuously being rearticulated stoking consumer desire and fueling the imagination.

Closely related to spirituality, “tranquility” is underscored by broad notions associated with meditation and inner peace and is significantly associated with works of art, and less associated with novelty products ( $\chi^2 = 15.579$ ,  $df = 7$ ,  $p = 0.029$ ). Some advertisers promise that products will improve the quality of a consumer’s everyday life. Goods featuring Buddha’s head are frequently advertised as a means of bringing peace and equanimity into one’s life. For example, a *Buddha Meditation Canvas Print* depicts a golden Buddha head to emphasize serenity; a ceramic fountain sold at Sears claims that “The peaceful presence of this Buddha Head

<sup>11</sup> In coding “spirituality,” we included Buddhist language as well as secular concepts. These words included enlightenment, Zen, compassion, kindness, lotus, mandala, dharma, inspiration, and so on. To break it down even further, we differentiated tranquility, well-being, and happiness, even though the three constitute dimensions of spirituality. Broadly speaking, tranquility is underscored by the notions associated with meditation and inner peace; well-being with health, healing, and balance; happiness with emotions such as joy, love, and optimism.

<sup>12</sup> We used an alpha level of 0.05 for our significance tests.

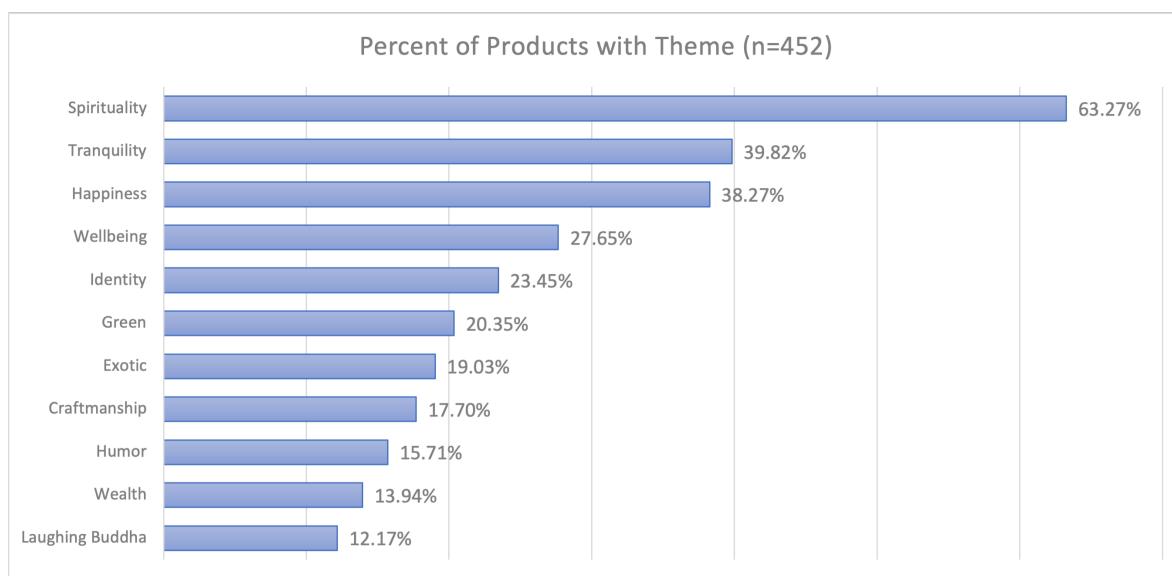


Figure 5: The percent of themed advertisements (n =452).

tabletop fountain will add a Zen-like calm to your room.” Buddha is used to signify serenity on the one hand and reduced to a commodity on the other hand.

The theme of well-being, underscored by health and healing, is more frequently associated with food and wellness products and less so for apparel ( $\text{Chi} = 47.223$ ,  $\text{df} = 7$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Food and wellness products frequently intertwined as a positive force for nourishing the body, mind, and soul. For example, *Buddha's Yang*, a dietary supplement, offers a remedy for “those who desire to build powerful Yang Jing energy.” “It is excellent for athletes and martial artists who desire more ‘inner power.’” *Hungry Buddha Coconut Jerky* is marketed as an organic, vegan “healthy snack” without mentioning that it is loaded with saturated fat and sugar. The mantra of its company, *Buddha Brands*, is “Live Healthy. Be Happy, Snack Wisely.” The so-called “Buddha Brands way” is to “seek balance and find happiness in the small things, like a day in the great outdoors, or a taste of a coconut-y snack!” Using Buddha as a symbol for individualistic and material-based happiness obscures the promotion of endless craving. Instead of the Buddhist principles of moderation and recognizing desire as the source of suffering, these advertisers emphasize that desire is fine, so long as consumers choose to buy their goods.

This tactic is commonly used. In this survey, happiness, often expressed in terms of joy, love, and optimism, is more associated with food and wellness products but less with accessories ( $\text{Chi} = 23.629$ ,  $\text{df} = 7$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). Some advertisers project happiness as the cornerstone of spirituality to legitimize their products and give consumers justification to spend money on themselves. Buddha is appropriated to create space in which consumers can feel virtuous about themselves. In other words, these advertisers try to entice consumers to imagine and interpret Buddha within an American cultural framework.

Many advertisers also associate Buddha with being environmentally conscious in relation to spirituality and eating healthy food. Ideas of biophilia—that humans have an innate connection to nature—environmentalism, and attention to specialized diet choices like non-GMOs or vegan foods were abundant in this survey. These notions were assigned to the “green” thematic group and found to be associated more with food products and less with home décor ( $\text{Chi} = 43.848$ ,  $\text{df} = 7$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The ad for *Organic Himalayan Pink Popcorn* sold by *Lesser Evil Buddha Bowl Foods* may serve as an example: “The ancient parable says that when the Buddha Bowl broke it became a vehicle to awaken human potential and find one’s true self.” On the popcorn packaging it claims:

Like in a Buddha Bowl we only wanted to put healthy and beautiful things in our popcorn bags. Our popcorn is special because it is earth friendly (it's organic), so it's free of many of the chemical residues that exist on conventional popping corn.... We then dust with Himalayan salt which we think is the purest form of salt available.

Similar to selling the coconut jerky mentioned earlier, the advertisers make the popcorn sound very appealing. Consuming organic popcorn is aligned with being an “awakened human” or ethical being. While appropriating the symbolism of the Buddha, advertisers link healthy eating with preexisting ideals of environmental ethics and well-being—thus creating a composite of meanings residing within the product. Nevertheless, if we look back, the historical Buddha ate whatever people offered him. According to the Buddha’s teachings, one should eat for survival, not for pleasure (Payutto 2018: 15–16). Eating alms food is still practiced by Theravada Buddhist monks to this day. These ads are at odds with Buddhist history and monastic practices.

Buddha-branded advertisements persuade consumers that their goods are a way to outwardly express who they are as much as to inwardly reinforce self-identification. An ad for a tie-dyed textile adorned with a Buddha at the center of a mandala claims:

Add an ethnic feel to your room with this cotton handmade wall hanging. Go for a dramatic makeover of your wall and this tapestry would become a conversational piece of art. A must have in any season for all ethnic savvy ones. This is a rare beauty not to be missed, a genuine collector’s item & the result of masterly workmanship.

While leaving “ethnic feel” undefined, these advertisers regard ethnicity as a form of cultural capital. The ad makes this textile sounds more desirable than non-ethnic ones by exhibiting a consumer’s multicultural and cosmopolitan identity. The ad further suggests that the tapestry can serve as “a conversational piece of art.”

The advertisers know that a product is not a passive display of identity but rather an active signaling of socio-economic capital in the sphere of social interaction. About 19 percent of the products had advertising language under the exotic theme, but it is hard to say that this was related to one type of product over another ( $\text{Chi} = 13.325$ ,  $\text{df} = 7$ ,  $p = 0.065$ ).<sup>13</sup> This test was very close to reaching statistical significance and the theme occurred more often in works of art, home décor, and drug products. Similarly, about 17 percent of the advertisements invoked ideas of craftsmanship. While this theme was not statistically associated with any product type, it occurred most frequently within works of art ( $\text{Chi} = 10.64$ ,  $\text{df} = 7$ ,  $p = 0.155$ ).

Advertisers sometimes use specific language to elicit desire and enable consumers to articulate their personal identity. This happened more with apparel and less with novelties and wellness products ( $\text{Chi} = 18.682$ ,  $\text{df} = 7$ ,  $p = 0.009$ ). Clothing with an eye-catching design or slogan is an easy way to make a personal statement. Self-identification is often articulated by constructing images of how an individual wants to be perceived. A shirt advertisement featuring a picture of a stone Buddha head wearing over-the-ear headphones reads:

Set your mind at ease and dress in style with this stylish Buddha with headphones T-Shirt. No matter if you’re a Buddhist or not, the Chilling Buddha T-Shirt is the perfect gift for those who love to relax, dress in style and be one with the universe. Wear it to meditate, while listening to music, yoga classes, play music, DJing or just chill.

Whether you are spiritual or not does not matter; what matters is that you have style and are at “one with the universe.”

<sup>13</sup> In coding “exotic,” we include keywords and phrases that imbue the advertisements with ideas of ethnicity, uniqueness, foreignness, or otherworldliness.

The exoticized image becomes a site for inscribing a multiplicity of meanings. Keywords related to the theme Laughing Buddha, including synonymous variants, were associated with wellness and drug products the most and accessories the least (Chi = 19.710, df = 7, p = 0.006). The ad for Cannabismo's *Laughing Buddha Marijuana* claims that its product will leave "consumers feeling happy, upbeat, and ... giggling even when battling depression." The advertisers promise quick positive results and instant gratification. Happiness, something difficult to achieve, now is promised to be easily attainable through consumption.

Some advertisers stimulate the viewers' appetite to consume in exchange for luck. An ad for a Feng Shui wind chime decorated with the face of a Laughing Buddha assures consumers that the chime will "improve karma" and "the luck of your child." Rhetoric promoting the idea of gaining wealth and good luck through goods were in roughly 14 percent of all product advertisements, although there were no significant relationships between this theme and product types (Chi = 6.37, df = 7, p = 0.497).

Finally, Buddha is depicted in absurd or incongruous circumstances as a joke. While just under 17 percent of advertisements did this, humor does not appear significant to any particular product category (Chi = 7.234, df = 7, p = 0.405). Employing humor to sell goods is nothing new. What is new is removing Buddha from a religious context and placing him into the marketplace imbued with American cultural meanings. For example, *Buddha in Your Pocket*, a novelty item, goes so far as to use a hoary erection joke: "Is that a Buddha in your pocket? We thought you were just happy to see us." Drawing upon preexisting systems of meaning, Buddha is appropriated to evoke preferred associations.

### **In America there is a Buddha for Everyone**

Many advertisers market Buddha-branded products to consumers of all socio-economic classes, not just the elite and those seeking spirituality. The cheapest item in this survey was a *Buddha Henna Wisdom Elephant Postcard*, priced at \$1.15. The most expensive, a *Sheryl Lowe Labradorite Buddha Pendant* at \$1,275.00.

Among the 469 advertisements with price data, price class A, the lower-priced goods, represented the most advertisements by far at 77 percent. Price class B represented 12 percent of the advertisements, and price class C, the most expensive goods, represented 10 percent. In addition, there were associations between price classes and the use of visual humor to sell products. Twenty-four percent of the 363 advertisements within price class A made use of visual humor. Within the 58 advertisements for price class B, only 5% used this type of humor. Finally, price class C, which represented 48 advertisements, had just 4% with visual humor. These differences are significant and highly unlikely to be the product of random chance in our sampling (Chi = 15.52, df = 2, p < 0.001) (tbl. 1). The correlation between price category and the frequency of humor is evidence that these advertisers attempt to signal distinction through class taste.

Visual humor was used in 20 percent of all advertisements; among them 33 percent used humorous rhetoric and Buddha images together. Most ads relied on the power of Buddha images mixed with perceptual displacements and incongruities such as animal substitutions and ironic juxtapositions to convey their humorous intent. For example, *Shooter Zoo-Tough Luck Buddha Tee* directs the consumers' gaze at Buddha holding an assault rifle. This humor works because the circumstances are so unexpected: a stereotypically peace-loving smiling Buddha armed with a killing machine. Such an ad has nothing to do with spirituality but reinforces an American ideal of individual rights reified through gun fetishism. This type of ad, which would be against the law in several Asian Buddhist countries including Thailand and Burma, attracts many American consumers (Clark 2015; Slutskiy 2019: 63).

Table 1: Price class in relationship to visual humor use.

	Total in price class	With humor	% with humor
Price Class A	363	87	24%
Price Class B	58	3	5%
Price Class C	48	2	4%

In other cases, ads present anthropomorphic depictions of Buddha or Buddhist monks to reach pet lovers. A *Hand Carved Wooden Praying Cat Statue*, sold by Buddha Groove, is typical. Since pets are often treated as family members, some advertisers exploit the animal and human bond as a strategy for tapping a huge pet-related market. Pets are often sculpted as meditating in the lotus position, a ubiquitous Buddha image. The ad for a meditating dog sculpture says “the dog has a Buddha nature and can one day be reincarnated into [a] human and ultimately into ... [an] enlightened being. Keep this figurine by your bed or anywhere in your home for a Zen and peaceful atmosphere” (fig. 6). Spiritual sounding words such as enlightened being, Zen, and peace are imposed upon the dog. These goods amplify how advertisers recast and manipulate Buddha as a symbol by drawing meanings from pre-existing American cultural taste. Consequently, consumers are invited to fill in what the ad implies, that is, dog and Buddha are interchangeable.



Figure 6: Meditating Buddha dog.

### The Cultural Appropriation of Buddha's Head

Buddha's head carries culture-specific meanings. Thai Theravada Buddhists, for example, regard Buddha's head as the most sacred as it resides at the highest point of his body. They rarely touch the head of a Buddha statue except to dust it and then one would show respect by saying “Pardon me” first. To even point at a Buddha statue with one's foot, the lowest part of the body, is a cultural taboo. However, these bodily distinctions between high and low space are not as widespread in American cultural practices.

In ads, Buddha heads take on a new life of their own. A Buddha head image was found in 19 percent of all advertisements and 22 percent of those that used Buddha's likeness. Most Buddha head products (66 percent) were appropriated for home decor such as art, statues, and fountains to decorate living rooms, bedrooms, and

yards (fig. 7). Buddha's face adorns bedsheets, pillow covers, shower curtains, tapestries, toilet seat covers, and yoga mats—just about any flat surface one can imagine. Buddha faces are also fashioned into cufflinks, nipple rings, and ankle bracelets, as well as decoration for packaging, wine stoppers, herb grinders, cannabis pipes, keychains, and doorknockers.

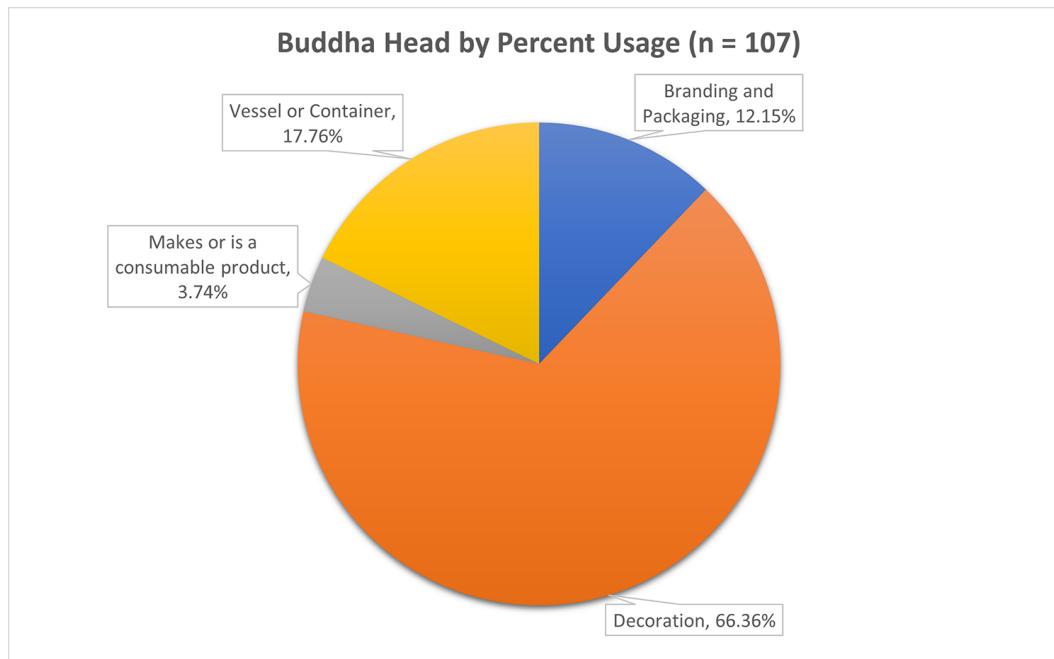


Figure 7: Different ways Buddha's head was used in advertisements.

Roughly 18 percent used a Buddha head image as a storage container or another vessel including flowerpots, aromatic oil diffusers, cookie jars, shot glasses, ice cube trays, ashtrays, and ceramic planters. About 4 percent of the Buddha head products consist of Buddha's face molded into chocolate candies or cakes. Imagine a Thai Buddhist's feelings about Buddha faces being eaten bite after bite. For them, such treatment of a Buddha head is unethical or even an act of "blasphemy" (Jerryson 2020: 136). This kind of cultural appropriation is neither cool nor entertaining to many within the Buddhist community, but rather contributes to their emotional suffering (Blair et al. 2006; India Today 2016; Nakamura 2008: 186; Tran 2016).

The advertisers who used Buddha's head in such ways undercut and diminish Buddhism through the misappropriation of Buddhist iconography. A century ago, many Americans regarded Buddhism as a strange, perhaps dangerous, cult; it was even cited as evidence of "Yellow Peril" (Anningson 2018). Today, Buddha head branded goods are marketed to make the consumer feel good about themselves. Each of these two distinctive endeavors tells us something about social change and the underlying American cultural principles.

### Reimagining Buddha

This study suggests that Buddha is being reimaged and baked into American advertisements. Buddha is deployed to promote a wide range of merchandise: from novelties to food; artwork to accessories; home decor to apparel; drugs to wellness products—a deluge of goods. The advertising industry, like the mindfulness movement, disassociates its products from Buddhism, but unlike the mindfulness movement, reconfigures Buddha images in advertisements to convert symbolic capital into economic capital. Through positive rhetoric, humor, and iconic images, Buddha is reduced to an exotic sign, reinforcing rather than challenging consumer culture. Dominant referent systems are continuously being transferred to goods through Buddha images and spiritual sounding feel-good bromides. In other words, Buddha has not only been displaced and

disconnected from its historical, religious, and cultural roots in Asia, but also is appropriated to stimulate the desire to consume products.

The cultural appropriation of Buddha for advertisements reveals asymmetrical power relations and tension between two different sets of principles. According to Buddhist principles, desire is detrimental to well-being; endlessly seeking to satisfy desire is a form of suffering. Modest consumption and abstaining from intoxication are considered ethical (Payutto 2002).<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, today, an assessment of a person's success or worth is frequently measured by material possessions. In the United States, material success is often supposed to correspond with an individual's work ethic as the adage "pull yourself up by your own bootstraps" implies. Attaining the American Dream is often equated with achieving class upward mobility and material comfort.

This study shows that advertisers work within, not against, this conceptual framework. In the name of Buddha, advertisers claim that happiness comes from consumption, a notion antithetical to the Buddhist ideal of freedom from suffering and the cessation of desire. Co-opting Buddha as a spiritual resource is deceptive. This cultural appropriation becomes part of a social force to assimilate Buddhism into American society.

Buddha has become a proven symbolic resource to perpetuate the illusion that well-being, and a fulfilling, stress-free life can be achieved through consumption. A dizzying assortment of products featuring Buddha's torso-less head are sold in response to Western aesthetic taste. The strong bond between many Americans and their pets is also fostered with Buddha-branded goods. Apparel such as tee-shirts, pants, and shoes imprinted with the image of a Buddha head are unrelated to spiritual or Buddhist beliefs. Yet they are appealing to those who share established cultural knowledge. Like the Oriental Monk in *Virtual Orientalism*, Buddha-branded goods tell us more about American norms than Buddhist ethics. Furthermore, advertisers constantly draw upon the bedrock American cultural principle of individual freedom by emphasizing the right to choose. Propagating the ideal that everyone is entitled to express who they are reaches a larger population and enables consumers to cross class boundaries.

Thus, we suggest that Buddha-branded ads not only cater to middle and elite class spiritual seekers, but consumers of all ages from all socio-economic backgrounds. Many advertisers employ innovative strategies to propagate their goods: brand-names are employed to forge connections between specific social groups and particular products. The company *Skinny Buddha* targets health-conscious consumers by promoting fitness and weight loss; *Fat Buddha Bar* invites foodies to "reach enlightenment through great food, drinks, company, and music"; *Barking Buddha* advertises healthy, nutritional, beef cheek treats for dog lovers; *Neon Buddha* sells a high-end luxury clothing collection. More important, humorous ads, often centered upon class-based stereotypes, are crafted to pitch the less expensive products, and Buddha images are reconstructed to reach non-Buddhists, who may not be interested in spiritual or religious practices but are attracted to Buddha images.

Consequently, individual choice, freedom, and identity become materialized. Consuming organic food or meditation products is equated with being a spiritual person. Wearing jewelry or tee-shirts adorned with a Buddha image is linked with being cool or fashionable. Placing a Buddha sculpture in the garden or hanging a Buddha canvas art print in the living room, signals being cosmopolitan. Buddha-branded ads are shaped by American cultural principles, and in return, the ads reshape various facets of everyday American life and personal identities.

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<sup>14</sup> Abstaining from intoxicants is the Fifth Buddhist Precept.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the graduate and undergraduate UNLV students who helped with collecting and entering data over the last few years. Special thanks go to Allyssa Chua, Lyndsey Craig, Angelique Deitrick, Dacia Flowers, Eric Fries, Vanessa Olive, Cecelia Rumsey, and Dylan Person. We would also like to express our gratitude for the very helpful input from the two anonymous reviewers whose suggestions served to greatly strengthen this article.

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