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Consuming wellness, producing difference: The case of a wellness center in India

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Abstract

Over the past decade, there has been a discernible rise in the number of wellness centers and fitness studios in urban cities in India. These centers are spatial manifestations of the rise in a particular type of "self-care" regimes and "body projects" in modern social imaginary prevalent in urban India, predominantly enabled by the rise of middle-class consumer culture. While the literature on fitness spaces and wellness clubs in Western contexts is instructive to a very large extent, the local particularities of consumption experiences in non-Western contexts require contextualized empirical research in order to better inform modern theories of consumption. This article is a study of a wellness center in the South Indian city of Chennai. Using ethnographic methods, I attempt to unpack the experience of consuming wellness in a space that ostensibly claims to remedy the ills of modern living while doing so in a culturally traditional and "Indian" manner. I show how the experiences of predominantly middle-class consumers here are dictated not by a sentimental attachment to tradition or locality, but by a vocabulary of speaking that primarily favors a language of consumer choice and rational decision-making. Whether or not that is the case, the way in which consumption of an "Indian" brand of wellness occurs demonstrates the stronghold of the language of consumer choice making the space at the wellness center a performative arena for self-identity formation to occur.

Keywords

Consumption, wellness, urbanity, identity, India

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One of the dominant values driving bourgeois consumption patterns today is a quest for wellness. While the term has a fairly dated resonance in psychology and health sciences, what could be of more immediate interest to a sociologist or an anthropologist is how people use and interpret this term in everyday interaction. In fact, the very pervasiveness of "wellness" as an adjunct to our most mundane consumer practices today merits such scholarly attention. It would hardly be controversial to say that the term "wellness" is used in everyday conversation to indicate a healthy balance of mind, body, and emotions – not just of the body or the mind – and this term is also generally associated with ecological sustainability. Wellness, as a quality, is purportedly being sold through a range of objects and services, from a bottle of shampoo at Body Shop to the complex practice of power-yoga. The operationalization of "selling wellness" occurs on a variety of scales, through a range of mechanisms and, most importantly, at a number of different sites. Shopping for healthy food at Whole Foods is a somewhat different experience than getting a massage at a spa. Yet, they both affirm the value of a seemingly all-encompassing term "wellness" in modern life. In a caustic critique of the overriding focus on wellness in modern societies today, Cederstroüm and Spicer (2015) argue that the pervasive visibility of wellness as a societal mission is having two dominant effects: one, "wellness" has become an ideological normativity which pathologizes those who do not conform to the ideal of wellness or partake of a lifestyle that merits such a label, and two, the relentless pressure to perform wellness might be self-defeating and work against itself in a sense that it could lead to a more alienated, and an unwell society.

While this critique is timely and important, it is imperative that we probe deeply the reasons why wellness consumption is on the rise. We need to explore what consistently maintains the narrative of wellness as it features in everyday interaction. Wellness sellers, for instance, claim to perform the function of providing care and wellness in a society that *lacks* these values. Discursively, these wellness centers portray themselves as championing a salubrious approach to consumption with the subtext pointing an accusing finger at mass consumer capitalism. Wellness, it is argued, will lead to happiness. As individuals, then, we aim to enhance our wellbeing and engage in social communication by consuming healthy goods and services bit-by-bit or by living a certain lifestyle. In the process of doing so, we also *produce* specific self-identities. Of course, the production of self-identity and social interaction through the consumption of goods and services is a classic sociological interest (Belk, 1988; Lasch, 1979; Slater, 1997; Warde, 1994). The role of emotions and affect too is integral to the consumption of objects as experiences (Campbell, 1987; Illouz, 2009; Miller, 1998b). However, what merits further research is the process of the formation of self-identity, and affective experiences, in differently oriented consumption spaces, such as those that *ostensibly* shun the malevolence of consumer capitalism. One kind of scholarship in this vein is that literature on ethical consumption and the production of moral consumers (see Micheletti, 2003; Soper et al., 2009). However, most of this literature has been situated in Western contexts and has not sufficiently engaged with questions of locality, tradition, and cultural practices in non-Western contexts. Of course, with the growth of consumer markets in Global South countries, there has been a visible move by social scientists to understand the social life of consumption in local, non-Western contexts. A burgeoning literature on consumer culture, circulation of goods, and shopping malls is the manifestation of such a move (see, for instance, Abaza, 2001; Erkip, 2005; Goldstein-Gidoni, 2005; Gooptu, 2009; Isla, 2013; Laden, 2003; Mathur, 2010; Salcedo, 2003). However, while the literature has been tremendously useful to understand the production of difference, glocality, a new middle class, neoliberal subjectivity, new forms of public sociality, and changing gender relations in urban cities in non-Western contexts, there is still a lot to be understood about sites of wellness-oriented consumptive practices in non-Western contexts.

What kinds of subjectivities are produced in the consumption of an experience that rejects mass consumption and advocates for "wellness" in modern life? This general question is difficult to answer without taking into account the different modalities and contexts of consumption which produce different subjective experiences, and this is precisely why space and place are absolutely imperative to be taken into account when we talk about consumption. As we have known for a while now, "space and place are crucial elements of consumer identities" (Miller, 1998a: 7) and as John Urry (1995) insists, we are always consuming places as much as we are consuming objects. Qualitative inquiry such as ethnography, then, seems like a ripe and useful methodological tool to examine spatially sensitive concerns. In this article, I examine one site of consumption – a wellness center in an urban city in India – using ethnographic methods as my primary mode of inquiry. By "wellness center," I mean a site that provides *both* intangible services and sell tangible goods that are oriented toward securing individual wellness. Situated in a major urban city, Chennai, this wellness center is one of the many centers that perform the function of providing wellness services in the thick of the city itself as opposed to in far flung "wellness tourism" destinations. The center that I am writing about is just 6 years old and is known for its focus on ecological aspects of wellness, such as organic produce, sustainable energy, vegetarian diet, plastic-free environment, and so on. In analyzing this particular wellness center, I aim to analyze why consumers are drawn to this wellness consumption, and how these reasons are linked to the modern social imaginary of contemporary consumer culture in India.

Literature review

Fitness and consumer culture

While the broader concerns of this article are tied to consumption experience, self-identity formation, and consumption spaces in the context of wellness centers, the literature on "body projects" and the sociology of fitness speak directly to the empirical case of a wellness center.[1] In Western contexts, the discourse around fitness has ranged from a critique of fitness culture as being a byproduct of an alienating, atomizing, and narcissistic consumer culture (Lasch, 1979; Sennett, 1998) to the idea that a reflexive Self undertakes a secular project of self-presentation in late modernity (Featherstone, 1982; Giddens, 1991). Both of these approaches to understanding the social life of “fitness” are predicated on the idea that in consumer capitalist societies, pleasure, consumption, and self-identity are inseparable in one way or the other (see Baudrillard, 1998; Bordo, 2004; Featherstone, 2007; Shilling, 1993; Tomlinson, 1990). Of course, undergirding the understanding of “body projects” in consumer society is the Foucauldian view of external, and internalized, disciplinary techniques which are the result of increased power and knowledge over and of the body (Foucault, 1977; Foucault et al., 1988). On a related note, Shilling (1993) contends that it is precisely a feature of consumer culture that in an age where we have unprecedented knowledge and information regarding our body, we are thrown into “radical doubt of what our bodies are and how we should control them” (p. 3).

In recent years, self-care seems to be associated with *leisure* in a specific ethos of consumption. For instance, in an empirical study of exercise manuals in the United States, Smith Maguire (2008) shows us how the very idea of “leisure” is changing from its historic association with the pleasure of the freedom from work to something else: a consumption-driven responsibility to cultivate an ethic of self-care and self-production (also see Smith Maguire, 2002). It would also seem that “this is no longer an age where bodies produce commodities; but where commodities produce bodies: bodies for aerobics, bodies for sports cars, bodies for vacations...” (Faurschou, 1987: 72, cited in Glassner, 1989: 185). The production of bodies, however, is not a feature of consumer culture alone. Social identities are inscribed on our bodies from the moment a child is born (see Butler, 1993; Foucault, 1980). It is a condition of the performative cultivation of class/gender/race distinctions that “the body becomes a signifier of individual identity” (Hall, 2000: 24). In that sense, the cultivation of “wellness” (or fitness) also produces particular bodies. What needs further research, in the context of fitness, is the *process* by which this production happens, where this happens, and what this production does to social life in general.

Sassatelli (2010), building on Foucault, notes that contemporary consumer culture is characterized by a dual subjectification process whereby “people are asked to be both creative and committed, desiring and reliable, self-oriented and accommodating” (p. 3). The paradoxes inherent in the making of a “fitness culture” are not surprisingly leading to, thus, a situation where we might get *sick* from trying to be *well* (Cederstroüm and Spicer, 2015). However, this gap that continues to nag our lack of absolute control over our bodies is *precisely* what continues to fuel desire for fitness. A similar analogy can be drawn with wellness, although the newer vocabulary of “wellness” also imparts a moral hue to the conversation. As Cederstroüm and Spicer (2015) put it ever so tartly, “Today, wellness has become a moral demand – about which we are constantly and tirelessly reminded” (p. 3). Consumption of one kind or another is deemed imperative to attain the noble goal of being well. The point, as Sassatelli (2010) notes in the context of Britain and Italy, is that fitness fans are "good consumers primarily because they portray themselves as such: subjects capable of making individual choices, deriving pleasures from choice, and making pleasure coincide with long-term wellbeing" (p. 201). Consumption is crucial to establishing one's status as fit and healthy citizens.

The process of engaging with a fitness and wellness culture need not be viewed as being a completely joyful abdication of reflexivity, an anxiety-ridden isolating and alienating experience, or a calculative and shrewd rational decision – it is, perhaps, all of these processes at once and more. Mostly importantly, however, the recognition of the "need" to be fit and the "feel good factor" seems to emerge not through knowing abstract concepts about fitness but by visceral, consistent engagement with activities in gyms and health clubs (Monaghan, 2001; Sassatelli, 2010: 202). Theoretical critiques, thus, might not be helpful after a certain extent to get at lived experiences and the several contradictions that haunt our everyday life. Empirical accounts of the interaction processes at sites of fitness consumption, consumer narratives, conversations about *feelings*, and so on are perhaps more useful to seriously explore the question of how people experience fitness and wellness, and what it means to them (see Sassatelli, 1999). Smith Maguire (2007) shows us how the very term "fitness" is appropriated by individuals to mean different things depending on societal norms, notions of control, commercial characterizations of beauty, and so on. According to her, fitness is thus best understood as a cultural field, a "field of negotiations, within which individuals contend with the competing, and often conflicting, demands made by consumer culture and the service economy" (Maguire, 2007: 3) since that captures the granular meanings. Ethnographic accounts of gyms and fitness centers in the Western context have shed light on the multiple processes of identity formation and newer forms of sociality that emerge in these spaces.

Spielvogel (2003), in her detailed ethnography of fitness clubs in Tokyo, shows us how the domestication of a Western import – aerobics – into the local context makes the several stakeholders involved in the process reorient themselves to this import in a manner that brings up questions about gender, nationalism, cultural identity, meanings of work and leisure. However, what I found most interesting and relevant to my own findings here is that irrespective of whether or not the fitness club is a segregated space of an "American" practice, it bears visibility in the public life of Japanese society and merits a constant rearticulation of local "self-identity." The fitness club provokes a performative anxiety of the place of this practice in contemporary Japanese life and, in doing so, serves to reformulate unfamiliar practices in familiar ways: the categorization of people according to gender, education, and class through the disciplinization of space within the clubs is consistent with such practices in other institutions in Japan; patriarchal practices are not subverted as much as repositioned and reimagined; questions about national identity are not forgotten in a spurt of "aerobic enthusiasm," but they are rearticulated as consumers fail to reconcile the heritage of Zen philosophy with modern artifacts of aerobics; rupture is experienced instead of the mind–body synchronization that is aimed for; and, self-identity formation in these clubs fail to have the kind of resonance not because of their “western” appearance but because the genealogy of Japanese local practices is inverted.

Spielvogel’s analysis of the ways in which foreign practice get accommodated in unanticipated ways in local contexts is instructive for it suggests new ways of thinking about questions of subject formation in non-Western contexts. However, “fitness” as an American input via the conduit of aerobics is very different from the ways in which local practices of “body projects” get implicated in modernizing societies. While one way to think about contemporary body-oriented practices is to look at how western imports get accommodated in non-Western contexts, an equally important angle to this would be to examine how local practices get positioned in non-Western societies that are considered to be straddling traditional and modern cultures at once. Indian consumer culture is considered to be a ripe example where ideas of “tradition” and “modernity” are deployed in a manner that uses cultural difference to generate self-identification that can incorporate both value-systems (Mathur, 2013).

Wellness in the Indian context

> Wellness-gurus have combined the idea of the body as a temple with that as a signifier of affluent, beautiful lifestyle and happiness. The need to appear well-groomed and physically attractive has assumed greater importance in the last decade, not just for women, but for men as well... A beautiful body is a happy body. (Brosius, 2012: 307)

The cultural meaning of fitness, or wellness, is particular to the social context it develops in (Spielvogel, 2003: 173). However, the focus on Western contexts in consumption literature has had limited contributions to the way we understand the cultural dynamics of fitness and wellness discourses. Examining non-Western contexts might, thus, help in shedding light on contemporary regimes of consumption that prevail in other parts of the world. One could argue that there is literature available on wellness tourism that does engage with non-Western contexts since wellness tourism is, generally, premised on an orientalist retreat and an “exotic” or “spiritual” experience of the non-West (see Laing and Weiler, 2008; Lehto et al., 2006; Smith and Kelly, 2006; Smith and Puczkó, 2008). Yet, we must be cautious when we take for granted this body of literature since it is still not critically conversant with what wellness consumption means to the people who live in non-Western contexts, in their everyday lives, and those who inhabit these spaces as locals, not as tourists.

On the one hand, the structural conditions of cultural production might differ between societies: the class (and caste) composition, urban growth, gender politics, kinship patterns, and so on. On the other hand, the rise in the conversation about wellness/fitness – albeit a conversation confined to certain social classes – is definitely underway in non-Western parts of the world. It would be problematically teleological to say that non-Western contexts *will* eventually resemble Western societies in regimes of fitness that emerge with time. Instead, I would argue that different societies understand the culture of "being fit" and "being well" differently. Globalization theorists have also found that a linear approach to understanding the diffusion of cultural trends from the West to the non-West misses out on how global cultural trends are adopted by the local patterns of consumption and meaning-making (see Appadurai, 1996; Eade, 2003; Robertson, 1992, 1995, 2012; Tomlinson, 1999). Without going into the details of these arguments – and their various politics – one can assume, surely, that the cultural meaning of fitness would be different from what we know about Western societies.

In the case of India, the value of the cultural capital of value-laden discourses of "fitness" and "wellness" is linked to the growth of a consuming, desiring, and aspiring middle class (see Brosius, 2012; Munshi, 2001; Fernandes, 2009). The performative and discursive centrality of the "middle class" is particularly important when it comes to any discussion of consumer culture in contemporary neoliberal urban India (see Mazzarella, 2003a). Since this article does not seek to clarify or critically evaluate the parameters of the "Indian middle class," suffice it to say here that this social class is generally characterized as being oriented toward consumerism, service-sector employment and entrepreneurship, urban residency, hypermobility, and both political apathy and hegemonic aspiration (see Fernandes, 2006; Fernandes and Heller, 2006; Gupta, 2000; Varma, 1998). In maintaining their status as "middle class" people, in performing tastefulness to distinguish themselves from not just the working class and the elite but *also* the "old middle class" (which was averse to conspicuous consumption), this social class has begun to adopt new lifestyles, regimes of pleasure, and meanings of leisure. The discursive focus is not on being *strong* – which would be a working-class body – but on being *healthy*. These two words are worlds apart. The middle- and upper-middle-class aspiration to a "fit body" is not the same as, say, the famous Indian "wrestler body" (Alter, 1992). The former is a manifestation of an aspirational project to a "feel good" ideology.

Furthermore, the process of self-identity formation in neoliberal urban India is further complicated by cultural narratives of tradition and modernity (Srivastava, 2009). Normative definitions of beauty, wellness, and physical appearance are particularly gendered as the middle-class woman's body becomes the site of a discursive struggle to work out a balance between the "East" and the "West" to establish an authentic "Indian respectability" as has been shown by scholars (Munshi, 2001, 2004; Radhakrishnan, 2009). In the case of self-care, the normative–aspirational understanding of wellness in India is linked to the spurt in the popular practice of *yoga*, spiritual centers, and wellness gurus in urban cities. The energetic and zealous celebration of International Day of Yoga in India in which the Prime Minister Narendra Modi performed yoga exercises in public was, amidst religio-political controversy, symptomatic of the centrality of yoga in a social imagination of wellness in India. The fact that the Yoga Day was celebrated in urban cities, garnered a lot of media attention, middle-class participation in both media coverage, debates and in the yoga spectacle itself is further indicative of this positive association between yoga and wellness in contemporary India. This is important to note since this trend in self-cultivation and "body projects" is of course a middle-class phenomenon but is also a typically *nationalistic* one where the essential supremacy of traditional, ancient "Indian" lifestyle is valorized and sought to be brought back to counter the ills of the stressful, alienated life in modern urban India (see Brosius, 2012: 310–312). In fact, if there was ever a more important point of distinction between fitness cultures in the West and in India, it would be the complicated relationship between tradition and modernity, and the East and the West that emerges in talking about wellness and fitness. It is precisely this negotiation that is crucial to understanding *self-identity* in the context of fitness and wellness cultures in India. Since there is a lack of literature that I can borrow from in this regard, I shall elaborate on this point using my primary data in later sections.

Site, data, and methods

Site

The data used in this article were collected from systematic observations in a wellness center WellCare (name changed) in the urban city Chennai in the southern part of India. Chennai is a large city of about 4.6 million people and is the capital of the state of Tamil Nadu. Chennai, like most major cities in contemporary India, has an influential and prominent middle-class in public life and public culture. The site chosen for this study, WellCare, is located in a populated, historic part of the city which is known for both residential and commercial density. There are also a lot of temples in this area which attract both devotees and/or tourists. WellCare was launched in 2010 and since then has attracted fairly large amount of local media attention. WellCare, as a whole, comprises a restaurant, cafe, boutique, spa, and a fitness studio; it is not coincidental that all the facilities are overtly projects of self-care and aimed at producing wellbeing through the body. The fitness studio has both a gymnasium and a yoga studio, while the spa offers traditional Indian massages as well as ones from other traditions and cultures. The boutique comprises crafts, clothes, body care products, jewelry (made from sustainable materials, handmade or ethically produced), ethnic trinkets, yoga paraphernalia, and yoga-related and self-help books and CDs. The restaurant and cafe, which are easily the more popular sites at WellCare, have on their menus traditional South Indian food and some other "snack options" such as Sandwiches and smoothies. However, the ingredients used in the food are "healthier alternatives" to mainstream South Indian food which is rice-based. Instead, these foods use a variety of millets, less starchy cereal, and healthier oil. Also, the food is thoroughly local in the sense that the names on the items on the menu are listed in Tamil, the local language, and the dishes are unusual since they are not easily available in restaurants in the city.

They are an attempt in the revival of an ancient and rural gastronomic ethnic heritage.

The building that houses WellCare, as such, is a large house, and there are trees that surround the building in the premises. The facilities at WellCare, coupled with the use of incense, natural lighting, pastel shades on the walls, brass and copper bric-a-brac, and instrumental classical music all seek to give one an experience of sensory pleasure but of a kind that is in contrast to the sensory pleasures that dominate mainstream consumption patterns. The music is soft, and Indian classical instruments dominate the kind of music played, and there is the aroma of incense everywhere (jasmine, camphor, sandalwood, and rose). The reception area is one that signals an "ethnic feel," as one of my respondents put it. The use of earthen colors, stonework, rustic metal, and wood builds up the effect and seems to make a point: an alternate to the glaringly modern glass–steel–plastic trilogy. This unique fusion of Indian and western influences in this center's architecture, interiors, services, and products is what makes this a unique case study, and one worth pursuing since this "fusion" trend is catching on in a lot of cities in India. In a lot of places in urban India, especially consumer sites, there is today a concerted effort at syncing, as yet another eloquent respondent said, "the best of both worlds – the modern and the traditional."

Data and methods

I collected my qualitative data primarily through interviews, observations, and interactions on site between December 2013 and May 2014. For thick consumer narratives, I interviewed 18 consumers using a semi-structured interview method in which a broad range of questions guided an otherwise free-flowing conversation with my informant (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Nichols, 1991). The average age of my respondents was 38 years. They were predominantly upper middle class and English speaking, although 3 of them were having obvious difficulty in speaking English continuously and kept switching to Tamil. The average duration of each interview was around an hour. A total of 10 interviews were in person while 8 were over the phone. I also did follow-up interviews with a couple of respondents since their initial responses were not too detailed.

I was additionally able to have minor unstructured conversations with the consumers at WellCare which while shorter than the semi-structured interviews were able to provide a lot of depth to my data since they were generally exchanges on site during consumption of one service or another. My field notes, however, were most developed by participant observation over these 6 months in which I consumed the services at WellCare and learned more about the site through "exposure to day to day routine activities of participants in the researcher setting" (Schensul et al., 1999: 91). I also tailed consumers through the site, indiscreetly, observing their engagement with the space as such. I also observed interactions between the staff and the consumers, especially at crucial "meet points" like when the servers took orders, the cashier billed goods, the receptionists seated the customers in the waiting area, fitness instructors explained fitness programs to the customers, and so on.

I coded my interview transcripts in three cycles – in the first cycle, I coded for facts, descriptive information, and thick data; in the second cycle, I coded for emotion and attitudes; and in the third cycle, I coded for values and dominant normative judgments (Saldana, 2015). I then compared my field notes to the data yielded by my interviews. My own position in terms of gender and class was revealed to me by this exercise of comparison, and it helped me control for extreme cases of variance in perception. For instance, while I noted the tone of servility and care to be particularly resonant of an ecofeminist posturing, none of my informants phrased it in those terms overtly. I chose not to frame my article in those terms since I did not think it was fair to superimpose my judgment on their views even though I think such a framing would be theoretically enriching.

Analysis of data

At a general level, there are both predictable similarities and provocative differences in the cultural meaning of wellness that emerged at WellCare vis-a-vis analyses done in Western contexts (see section "Literature review"). In terms of similarities, WellCare seems to provide a performative space of a particular kind of normative self-care and self-cultivation which privileges one kind of lifestyle over the other. It is also a transformative space where self-identities, more than bodies, undergo continuous construction. My respondents saw themselves as self-aware consumers who were choosing ethical forms of consumption and this gave them a sense of belonging to a particular social class. They reiterated their willingness to, as one respondent put it crisply, "invest in our bodies at an early age in order to reap the benefits of a hassle-free old age." These themes are not particularly different from the consumer narratives in the West. The fact that all of the respondents articulated, or implied, that consumption of specialized goods and services was imperative in asserting their identities as healthy consumers is symptomatic of how normative the discourse on both consumption and wellness in the Indian case is.

While some of these patterns are not particularly unique to non-Western contexts, there were some recurrent themes that struck me as a feature of non-Western contexts that needs more discussion in the literature on consumerism and "body projects." One such salient theme that emerged in my conversations with consumers at WellCare was their insistence on the relevance of traditional lifestyles *especially* in a culturally modernizing Indian society. Many of my interlocutors kept insisting that it is, in fact, Western cultural invasion that "spoiled our good habits." In asserting the validity of traditionally "Indian" practices in modern times, they were also invoking the goodness of the past vis-a-vis the "corrupt present." For instance,

> We were always better than the West when it came to taking care of our bodies. Our traditions and culture did not have obese people. It is this fever we have to ape the West that has made us like this. We need more and more such initiatives to bring back traditions and ancient heritage, like yoga and homemade food. When I was young,

> I was lean and fit and could run ten miles without sweating. Why do you think that was possible? Our food, our habits, our traditions ensured that. Now, look at my son. He is always stressed, the pollution and noise in the city add to his stress, and then he tends to eat all this American fast food – your pizzas and burgers – and has become so fat. If I say anything to him, he says I am backward! (Venkat, 52, field notes)

The excerpt above is from an interview with Venkat, 52 and a software engineer, who moved to Chennai from a town nearby approximately 30 years ago. He has been a member of several fitness clubs in the past, but he prefers the space at WellCare a lot more because of its insistence on reviving Indian traditions in "modern and accessible ways" (verbatim quote). Venkat, along with many other respondents, insisted that they were not being nostalgic or longing for the past 'in a sentimental manner' "; instead, they were being practical. As Simone, 33 and a yoga teacher, told me over a cup of *sukku* coffee[2] at the cafe,

> doing yoga, eating traditional food, using local products and keeping alive a culture of respect is not about sentiment. All this really works better! In that sense, I am just being smarter. It is about time we do what is right for us, not just what the popular "fad" is.

The need to clarify that they were practical, thinking subjects was very important to my respondents. They wanted to be good consumers *but also* good cultural subjects. They were trying to distance themselves from "those people" who blindly followed ideas of *both* mass Western consumer culture and fitness projects. Most importantly, there was a general sense of *wanting* wellness but in a certain "Indian" style. Lakshmi, a 57-year-old lady who spends some time volunteering at non-governmental organizations (NGOs), told me,

> Have you ever seen the farmers and generally the people in our villages? They are so strong and fit. Why? Because they eat the right kind of stuff for their strenuous lifestyles. They eat coarse grain and consume less refined products and that's the way to be! We have fallen prey to all kinds of greasy, refined food and coupled with our sedentary lifestyles, it is the worst idea. We should take lessons from them, really. WellCare is doing such a great job of using all this kind of healthy local grain and making them available to all of us again. I encourage everyone I know to come here for this reason. (Lakshmi, 57, interview)

On the other hand, it is not as if there was no valorization of a "traditional rural past" at WellCare. From vintage bric-a-brac scattered all over the place to local language on the menu to the quality and type of services and products offered, there was a clear effort at invoking a spatial (the rural) and temporal (the past) Other. The irony of this is twofold: one, it invokes a past that perhaps most of the present consumer have not really lived since there is as much an *invention* of collective memory in its representation – a classic feature of nostalgia (Appadurai, 1996), and two, the experience of the temporal and spatial displacement into a pastiche of a rural past *reinforces* one's position as a contemporary modern urban subject. This brings to mind the dual subjectification of fitness consumers where one is expected to experience and conform to contradictory impulses that Sassatelli (2010) also noted in her ethnography, but the twist here is that of a cultural one. Yet, this dilemma of the "colliding" worlds of tradition and modernity was not anxiety-laden as much as a matter of choice for my interlocutors. They were trying to wring the best of both worlds and found the route to doing that in this form of a wellness-oriented consumption at WellCare among other similar places: it was an alternative, a solution, a resolution. They articulated both their comfort and their curiosity in a space that was so utterly intimate and yet so strange to them. For instance, Kavya, 23 and a recent engineering graduate, visits the cafe with her husband almost every other weekend because

> The setting here, especially the jackfruit tree in the middle of the café, is so rustic and serene! I feel like I am not in the city anymore, even though I am, and since I have never really visited a village or anything in my life, I feel like this is something better than the usual noisy and commercial cafes in the city, you know? It sort of feels homely but then again, I grew up in concrete blocks of apartments in the heart of the city! I don't know. It just *feels good,* like a healthy retreat from the sweat and grime of the city. Eating some cool stuff here reminds one that we need not always go global to experience something exotic! It is right here, in our country, in our villages and we just don't know it! (Kavya, 23, interview)

What we see here is that the space at a wellness center, while definitely a spatial enclave on its own, finds itself being the site of something more than just "body projects" of an individual kind. In each articulation, my interlocutors used the term "we" to mean an "Indian society" of some kind. It is interesting how the consumption of wellness practices and products became the viaduct through which larger concerns about culture and tradition were articulated. Of course, this was made possible because of the kind of efforts made by WellCare to imbibe a sense of nostalgia in its products and services, but the larger point of self-care being the point at which cultural discourses come to bear importance cannot be ignored. This kind of an approach is one of the many, I would argue, that make the non-Western context different from its Western counterparts. Consumption of an *idea* of wellness was deeply linked to rhetorical articulations of cultural and civilizational supremacy. Yet, this was not a naive "return to the roots" narrative since the opinion of many of my respondents was that it is modern forms of living which make possible the conditions for *choosing* the "best of both worlds." The supremacy of tradition has got to give way to the supremacy of liberal consumer choice.

Another theme that emerged time and again, and closely linked to the theme of tradition vis-a-vis modernity, was that of respectful conduct and behavior in consumption spaces. Pointing to the soft-spoken staff at WellCare, Madhavi, 37 and a homemaker who comes to WellCare often with her sons aged 7 and 5 respectively, said,

> It is so rare to see service that is neither makes you go ‘‘How rude!’’ nor makes you feel uncomfortable like in posh hotels and all. You can see that these people here *care*, they mean well and they are not just pretending to be good for tips. I like this fact a lot especially since Chennai is otherwise such a rude city! People are just always so irritable. Here, on the other hand, they are so gentle. That’s the point of all this wellness talk, no? Being at peace with yourself and the world! (Madhavi, 37, field notes)

In comparing the experience at WellCare with other consumptive places, many of my interlocutors expressed their relief at finding one place where they felt genuinely respected. In my own experience, I found the atmosphere at WellCare very quiet, so much so that when my phone rang during one of my observations there, a lot of people turned around in surprise. Phones seldom ring loudly in the quiet confines of WellCare. The expectation of *maintaining* a silent and serene setting indoors is non-verbally communicated through the behavior of the staff themselves. The servers, masseurs, gym and yoga instructors, concierge, boutique assistant, and even the maintenance staff were smiling gently throughout and every action of theirs conveyed a sense of patience and calm. While it is hard to gauge what other places are *really* like in terms of staff–consumer interaction in the confines of this article, what was particularly telling of the appeal of WellCare is how many times my respondents brought this up. In bringing this quality of WellCare up, they drew contrasts like the one drawn by Madhavi. Madhavi’s husband, Suresh, had a similar take on the conduct here, but he went further into the heart of the matter:

> Our culture always had respect and patience for guests as top priority. Nowadays, that respect is fading. It is considered cool to be efficient and quick – like in all these fast food restaurants and even in like other western type gyms in the city – but what they forget is that no customer wants to be treated badly! It’s just basic business sense! But this basic business sense is actually very good for one’s health also. These people, even the basic level staff, reminds you of how important it is to remain calm. And that’s what yoga is about. See, just *being* here relaxes me – I don’t even do yoga! [laughs]. (Suresh, 40, field notes)

The need for respect and honesty was neatly tied into the concept by other consumers as well as they told me how wellness is not confined to the body but is about wholesome balance between mind and body. In doing so, they drew contrasts with the fitness culture in the West. Respect and gentleness were integral to Indian culture but not so much to the West, the general argument went. Furthermore, it is only through an attitude of goodness, charity, and kindness could the world become a better place, some of my respondents insisted. Simone, 33 and a yoga teacher, put it most curtly when she said,

> It's not like gyms and diets are bad. But they don't do what places like WellCare do – they give you a wholesome package not some short-term solution. These people really care about your wellness because the idea is to not be materialistic. Whereas, in the West, it is all about buying fitness – all kinds of products, this and that. Places like WellCare, of course, promote their brands through products but these are just essentials! They work in making these essentials itself good, you know? And, like, the proceeds go to charity – why would anybody not want that? It's a different idea of being "well," one that is a lot more social and less materialistic.

The idea that "why would anybody not want that?" is a crucial one here – the point is not just that symbolic boundary-making occurs by communicating one's social status through the use of symbolic markers and tokens of distinction but that in the very process of exclusion, there is an impulse to appropriate the "feeling" of wellness as if to deny the legitimacy of other kinds of experiences. In making it a matter of "East versus West," what is employed by the consumers at WellCare is not a trite civilizational rhetoric of national supremacy, but superior "consumer choice" couched in rationalistic rhetoric. They "know" better.

Discussion

Joseph Alter (1992), in his classic anthropology of a wrestling community in north India, finds the centrality of "body projects" in constructing a utopian nationalist discourse – an imagined community where the body politic would be fit and strong enough to defend the country against any attack (pp. 237–260). In imagining such a future, the well-built, sturdy wrestlers Alter spoke to often distance themselves from those "thin and pale" youth who were "victims" of Western influences and were useless for building a defensible nation. The wrestlers had political opinions about the state of the nation and the need for rejecting Westernization was deeply linked to the cultivation of self-care techniques that rejected ephemeral experiences of sensuous joy for the sake of the nation. The very definition of citizenship and belonging rested on being committed to the idea of building a nation that required self-denial of pleasure, an antagonistic relationship to the West, a spirit of detachment from material objects, and so on. However, after the liberalization reforms in India in the 1990s, a different idea of citizenship has begun to take center-stage in the modern Indian social imaginary. The citizen-subject is imagined as one who can contribute to the development of a nation *by* consuming more, *by* partaking of the affective, sensuous pleasure of consumer culture, and by fueling an image of the country as not being opposed to the West as much as being on par, but different (see Fernandes, 2006; Mazzarella, 2003). In this process, the embodied self-identification is also different. As Brosius (2012) notes, the focus on the "presentation of the Self" is as individual as it is national: the move is to look groomed, cared for, chic, and "modern" while retaining the distinctive hue of "Indianness" and an authentic tryst with the past. What is interesting is that the very notion of nationalism, in these conversations, was couched in the language of "not a big deal": instead of making it appear as if nationalistic fervor was the point in question, my informants made it seem as if Indian traditions just *make more practical sense*. In distancing themselves from – as one respondent put it – "patriotic junkies," my informants were simply following the rational, cool logics of consumer culture: weighing the pros and cons of a Western lifestyle vis-a-vis an "authentic" local one, they favored the latter because it made more sense, not because they were seduced by any ideology. So important was the need to revel in a modern discursive packaging of traditional values for them that they often contrasted "their way" with the "American way" but not in a manner that Alter's wrestlers did – these consumers were more bothered about their individual lives and their own lifestyles than about a larger political commentary on "the state of society," even if they did allude to a general "others" while referring to those who were not doing "wellness" right. They did not consider these others, however, as being "victims"; they just considered themselves to be more rational, more keyed in to what is practical, more aware of the ramifications of consuming wellness; and in short, consuming at a place like WellCare became a conduit for my informants to reassert their *modern* selves while partaking of a supposedly *traditional* lifestyle. Even the very mode of transcending the perils of consumption was possible only by consumption. Consuming some idea of authenticity and tradition, through the place in itself and/or the services offered at WellCare, became the primary mode through which my informants could assess and reassess their modern, liberal selves. This is possible precisely because the space at wellness center, even if physically closed in, not just retained but enabled a tryst with "Indian tradition." This link between the local "past" and the global "present" is precisely what was missing in Tokyo, for instance, which led to the patchy accommodation of aerobics in the local context, as Spielvogel (2003) shows us. The requirement for the context of local authenticity in the context of "body projects" for it to be transcended by "rational" means was vital in the context of my study.

Conclusion

The culture of "fitness" or "wellness" at WellCare exceeded simplistic ideas of the appropriation of subjectivity in a consumer-culture framework. While the spatial enclavization of wellness in an island of "retreat" in the midst of a busy city created spatial and symbolic boundaries that communicated its superior status vis-a-vis the "public" city, what emerged, instead, was a confluence of ideas about the nation, practical reason, and the role of culture and tradition – ideas that went beyond the domain of "body projects" in an individual sense. The fact that engaging in "body projects" is a process that is anchored in a larger context of social and cultural meaning is not surprising, of course, but what is interesting is how this rhetoric is couched in a language of nationalism and consumer choice. In situating my work in the literature on consumer culture in India, I find that the need for spaces of wellness that use ancient knowledges and traditional culture in new, modern ways was important for the following reasons: one, WellCare became a performative space for respondents to reiterate how "modern" they were even if it appeared that they wanted to evoke some nationalistic nostalgia; two, the role of "just being practical" was crucial in establishing their status as knowing consumers who were just being smart in taking care of themselves in the context of their very busy lives; three, the importance of the meaning of fitness was lost in translation between cultures, so much so that the cultural reasons for consuming products and services at WellCare overshadowed what I had assumed I would see on-site, namely, an obsessive concern about body and health; and four, the centrality of urban cities in producing *both* the problems and the solutions to the stress of everyday life was emphasized. My informants were consuming the idea of wellness not just through the consumption of products and services at WellCare but also through symbolically cultivating a sense of their identity that was ostensibly rooted in consuming authenticity, but was equally so an exercise in asserting liberal consumer choice and performing modernity.

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Notes

1. There is some literature on wellness *shopping* and ethical consumption (Nicholls and Opal, 2005; Barnett et al., 2005; Cherrier, 2007), such as consuming goods from stores like Whole Foods (Johnston, 2008; Pitchford, 1996), Body Shop. However, since my focus here is on *services* and consumptive practices provided at a particular site, I might make references to the above literature, but they are not my core concern here. I do acknowledge that ethical consumption and moral narratives that surround the same would be a great alternative framework to view this case with. I am, in light of space constraints, focusing on the self-care aspect of it through the frameworks used in the literature on fitness.

2. *Sukku* coffee is a non-caffeinated hot beverage made with dry ginger and herbs. It is generally made in Tamil Nadu and other South Indian states.

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