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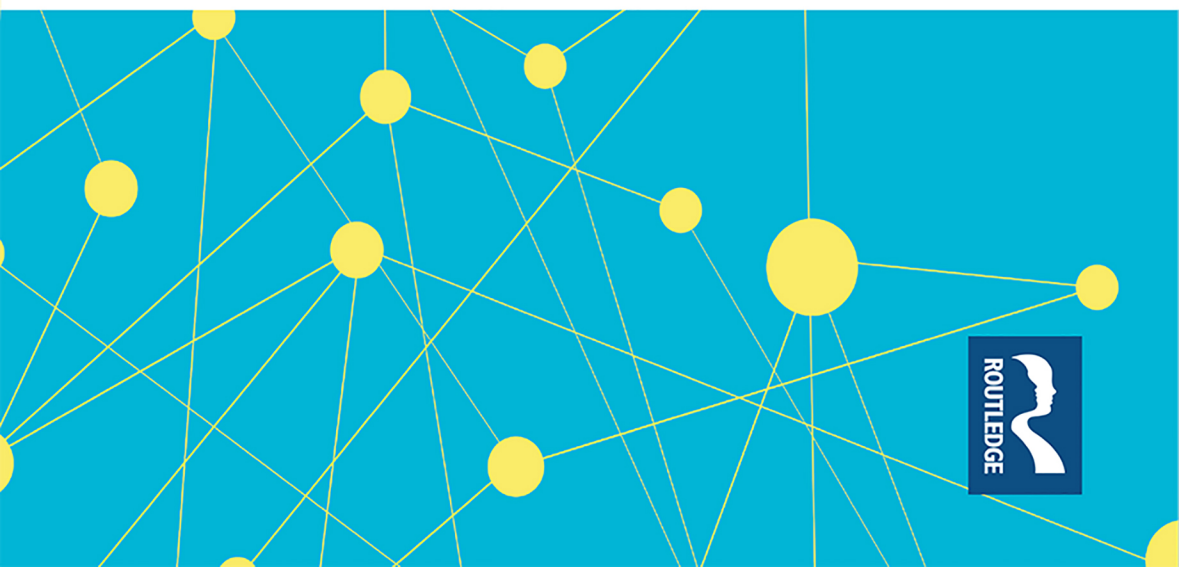
MUSIC, BRANDING, AND CONSUMER CULTURE IN CHURCH

HILLSONG IN FOCUS

Tom Wagner



Music, Branding, and Consumer Culture in Church

Starting as a single congregation in Australia, Hillsong Church now has campuses worldwide, releases worship music that sells millions of albums, and its ministers regularly appear in mainstream media. So, how has a single church gained such international prominence? This book offers an ethnographic exploration of the ways in which music and marketing have been utilized in the pursuit and production of spiritual experience for members of Hillsong Church. An experience that has proven to be incredibly popular.

The main theme of this book is that marketing, specifically branding, is not just a way to 'sell' religion but rather an integral part of spiritual experience in consumer society. Focusing on the London Hillsong church as a case study, the church's use of its own music in tandem with strong branding is shown to be a co- and re-productive method of organizing, patterning, and communicating information. The church provides the branded material and cultural context in which participants' sacred experience of self unfolds. However, this requires participants to 'do the work' to properly understand, and ultimately embody, the values associated with the brand.

This book raises important questions about the role of branding and music in forming modern scared identities. As such, it will be of great interest to scholars of religious studies, ethnomusicology, and media studies.

Tom Wagner is a London-based percussionist and ethnomusicologist. He is currently a Lecturer in Ethnomusicology at the University of Manchester, having previously held positions at the University of Edinburgh and Royal Holloway, University of London. His writing on Hillsong has appeared in the *Australian Journal of Communication* (co-authored with Tanya Riches), *Journal of World Popular Music*, and the edited volume *Religion as Brands: New Perspectives on the Marketization of Religion and Spirituality* (Ashgate, 2014). He is also the co-editor (with Tanya Riches) of the collection *The Hillsong Movement Examined: You Call Me Out upon the Waters* (Palgrave, 2017).

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Hillsong in Focus

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To Mom and Dad

Contents

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Introduction

The first thing one sees when emerging from the London Underground station on the northeast corner of Tottenham Court Road and Oxford Street is the marquee of the Dominion Theatre. If you had done this between May 14, 2002, and March 11, 2014, a giant golden statue of Freddie Mercury, the front man of the legendary British rock band *Queen*, would have confronted you from atop it, fist held high in the iconic pose he struck so many times during the band's glory days. For almost 12 years, Mercury's statue welcomed theatregoers to the jukebox musical *We Will Rock You*, the roaring review of *Queen*'s greatest hits that uses no small amount of quasi-religious imagery to sacralize rock and roll, the apostles *Queen*, and the saviour Freddie Mercury. Constructed in 1928 at the edge of London's theatre district, the Dominion Theatre is the West End's largest theatre, boasting a seating capacity of 2,182. The theatre's architecture suggests a mix of a theatre, jukebox, and religious space: replete with lush burgundy carpeting and audacious gold railings, it recalls both the luxury of high-end, old-time theatre-going, the aesthetic of many of Freddie Mercury's outfits, and the opulence of an Eastern Orthodox church. Stained glass frames the theatre's box seats.

We Will Rock You ran six nights a week in the Dominion, as have the shows that followed such as Meat Loaf's *Bat Out of Hell*. But on the seventh day, while the rock and roll faithful rest, a different group of devotees converge on the theatre. Hillsong London has held its Sunday services in the here since 2005.[1] The church's services are every bit as spectacular and professionally produced as the *We Will Rock You* show. Dry ice fills the stage. Lights flash. The music is loud and driving. Indeed, to a layperson who saw the musical on Saturday evening and returned for church on Sunday morning, the main difference she might notice is that the Hillsong logo is projected at the top left of the theatre's proscenium stage.

Freddie Mercury literally cast a shadow over the entrance of the Dominion, and his figurative presence continued to be felt once inside during the Sunday services. One could sense him: roaming about the lobby, mingling with the crowd, always just in the background. In the upper foyer photographs of Mercury's early years peeked out from behind the temporary signs marking Hillsong's 'Ask Me' and 'Living in London' team stations.

Downstairs, the theatre's merchandise stand served as the church's cloakroom, so that the T-shirts worn by Hillsong team members working the station were juxtaposed against the *We Will Rock You* and *Queen* T-shirts that hung just behind them. This semiotic mash-up contributed to a particular experience of church—a (post)modern pastiche in which music, marketing, and meaning coalesced alongside the search for sacred experience.

The 'New Paradigm' of religious experience: lifestyle, branding, and value(s) in consumer culture

Hillsong London's presence in the Dominion Theatre is a colourful example of the 'New Paradigm' of evangelical Christianity (Miller 1997). The New Paradigm is a broad rubric that describes religious organizations that use 'seeker-sensitive' approaches to evangelism and church building (Trueheart 1996; Miller 1997; Sargeant 2000). In contrast to established denominations, which have struggled to appeal to the post-1945 'baby-boom' generation, New Paradigm churches 'have succeeded in responding to the therapeutic, individualistic, and anti-establishment themes of contemporary culture' (Aldridge 2007, 126; cf. Roof 1999). Worship at these churches uses contemporary music and language and often focuses on physical and emotional experiences (Albrecht 1999). Preaching is rooted in the Bible and draws on an evangelical Protestant tradition in which the clergy were often not formally trained.[2]

New Paradigm churches take a range of forms, the most prominent of which is the megachurch. Megachurches are usually defined as ones that attract at least 2,000 worshippers a week (Thumma and Travis 2007, xviii–xxi). However, this definition does not capture the diversity both between and also within megachurches (ibid, 135–46). The internet has also radically expanded the notion of the 'local church', and many (if not most) megachurches are more accurately described as 'network churches' that operate several locations in a given geographic area, country, or—as in Hillsong's case—across the globe. Furthermore, individual homes can also be thought of as part of network churches, as people who do not attend a physical church location because of proximity or other reasons can still experience the service via live internet feed or by accessing recorded services or other media content on the churches' websites (Campbell 2005, 2010).

New Paradigm churches are often described as 'non-denominational', but this is a misnomer in two ways. First, while these churches do not necessarily have a denominational title in their name, their beliefs and practices are deeply rooted in the denominational legacies of their founders. The second is that many of the largest New Paradigm churches undertake the same functions and provide the same services as the denominations that they are supplanting. For example, many churches provide training for clergy, educational resources for individuals and other churches, and perhaps most importantly a musical liturgy—all with a brand name attached.

The vertically integrated structure of New Paradigm churches such as Hillsong, and the self-referential nature of their resources, leads to a situation where the church brand is, in essence, the 'new paradigm' of a denomination.

Donald Miller (1997) suggests that New Paradigm churches are successful because they appeal to the 'postmodern' ways that their constituents make meaning in consumer culture. Religious consumers do not practice the religious 'brand loyalty' of pre-baby boomer generations, eschewing the churches of their parents for new forms of religious experience that are synergetic with their everyday experiences. But this does not mean that the constituents of New Paradigm churches endlessly float from church to church. On the contrary, the argument I make in this book is that New Paradigm churches engender intense new forms of community and loyalty through branding, a powerful organizational and communicative method that leverages the vernacular of the consumer culture to embed religious meaning in everyday life.

Consumer culture is a multivalent concept. Sociologist Celia Lury writes that it is not a single process but rather a variety of social, cultural, and political-economic processes that pull in various directions and have various effects (2011, 5). According to Lury, some of the most significant processes associated with consumer culture are as follows:

- The organized interpenetration of economic and everyday life.
- The increasing importance of the exchange of commodified objects and services within a global capitalist division of labour.
- The interrelatedness of different kinds of exchange and regimes of value, meaning that even non-economic exchanges and forms of value creation are ultimately subsumed by capital.
- The growth of consumer politics, where consumerism becomes the ascendant form of citizenship.
- The use of goods by different social groups and cultural intermediaries in the creation of subcultures and lifestyles.
- The political identification of freedom with individual choice. (ibid: 5–6)

Consumer culture is one in which society is structured through the production, circulation, and consumption of goods and services within the dominant paradigm of economic exchange. This does not mean, however, that theories of consumer culture should focus primarily commodity exchange. Rather:

> [The study of consumer culture] involves a dual focus: first, on the cultural dimension of the economy, the symbolization and use of material goods as 'communicators' not just utilities; and second, on the economy of cultural goods, the market principles of supply, demand, capital accumulation, competition and monopolization which operate *within* the sphere of lifestyles, cultural goods and commodities.
>
> (Featherstone 2007, 82; italics original)

For Mike Featherstone, the production, circulation, and consumption of goods structures society, yet consumer culture is not so much about consumption *practices* as it is about the symbolism that is produced in the consumption *act*. Cultural products have 'social lives', acquiring layers of meaning as they move from production, to circulation, to consumption (Appadurai 1986). These overlaid meanings are contested and often change as the products move through different networks based on different value systems (Lash and Lury 2007, 19). Because of this, the meaning of branded products is never fixed, but instead always multiple and evolving.

A central concern of this book is the meanings that Hillsong's brand accrues within the dialectic of consumer cultural and evangelical Christian cultural value systems. Goods, ideas, and practices are not intrinsically valuable but accrue value through use within cultural contexts (Appadurai 1986; Graber 2001); it is what people *do* that is valuable. David Graber (2001) writes that value 'is the way people represent the importance of their own actions to themselves' (45). But the meaning and value of these actions are only understood and realized in reference to a totalizing binary within which comparison occurs (e.g., good/bad, right/wrong, or sacred/secular), and this evaluation also implies some kind of audience, which may be either 'real' (i.e., constituted by direct, interpersonal relationships) or 'imagined' (Anderson 2011). In other words, meaning and value are constructed in relation to both society and culture.

For the purposes of this book, then, consumer culture is the 'superculture' within which ideas, goods, and practices accrue value as materials participants use to construct and experience meaning and, ultimately, themselves. The material I will be focussing on in particular is the brand and how it is used to construct and maintain a (subcultural) evangelical Christian lifestyle. As will be evident throughout this book, Hillsong is a lifestyle brand that is inseparable from the economic, social, and cultural value(s) that define both consumer culture and evangelical Christian culture. The culture industries understand and exploit the fact that values are valuable: brands 'add value' to the consumption experience if the consumer feels that the values associated with branded products or services align with her own values and identity. An important consideration of this book, then, is how values and identity are marketed and experienced in a 'Christian culture industry'.

The interplay between economic, social, and cultural value(s) becomes clearer when the practical and critical marketing perspectives of modern branding are contrasted. By practical marketing, I am referring to the body of literature that focuses on 'how to' approaches to marketing. This body of literature tends to celebrate branding as a co-productive activity, through which value is generated for both brands and their participants. An example of this is the Ford Motor Company's 'user-generated' advertising campaign for its 2013 Fiesta. Participants were provided a Ford Fiesta, fuel, and insurance for eight months. In return, they agreed to blog, tweet, and post on YouTube about their (presumably positive) experiences of the car

(Heine 2013). From a marketer's view, this 'Web 2.0' type of campaign is a win-win endeavour: participants derived value by getting a free car, fuel, and insurance, and Ford derived value in the form of user-generated advertising content for a fraction of the cost of a traditional advertising campaign (along with whatever metadata was generated through user interaction with the campaign). More importantly, though, Ford had the opportunity to generate long-term value for its brand by integrating its product into the everyday lives and lifestyles of consumers.

In contrast to practical marketing, critical marketing draws on critical theory to present a less rosy picture of branding (Saren et al. 2007). The critical perspective asserts that, although marketers claim to afford participants creative freedom, this freedom is illusory because the closed nature of the brand predetermines the ways in which branded material can be used and understood (Lury 2004; Arvidsson 2006; Carah 2010). Critical marketing views marketing as a technology that reinscribes capital ever more deeply into the fabric of culture and individual bodies (cf. Foucault 1976 [1998]; Smythe 1981; Featherstone et al. 1991). Contrary to the marketing perspective, the critical perspective holds that participants do not 'really' author the brandscape through their actions. Rather, their agency re-creates a cultural context in which the brand delimits and determines the range of meanings and uses branded products and services afford them.

Research questions

This book draws on insights from both the practical and the critical marketing perspectives to understand how Hillsong's branding 'adds value' to the organization and the experiences of its participants. Branding both affords and delimits meaning making in consumer culture, and this raises questions about how it is used in charismatic groups, particularly evangelical Christian churches such as Hillsong. What is the nature of the value that the brand adds to its participants' worship experiences, and how does the quality of those experiences in turn add value to the brand? What values are encoded and decoded in Hillsong's musical and marketing messages? How do marketing, expectations, and experience interact in the embodied meaning-making activities of participants? Do worshipers 'find God' more easily, or have a more intense worship experience, when engaging with Hillsong's branded music rather than other music? Does the context matter? The contrasting views of marketing presented above also raise questions about agency, particularly of who is 'in charge' of Hillsong's brand meaning. These questions are not easily untangled. However, I hope this book offers a unique perspective for addressing them. In the remainder of this introduction, then, I offer an overview of the existing perspectives on music, marketing, and religion. I then give a chapter overview that provides a framework for reading this book.

Music, marketing, and religion

This book is situated primarily in three fields of scholarship: music studies, marketing studies, and religious studies. Although there have been several recent academic and popular studies of music and branding, branding and religion, and countless treatises throughout the ages on religion and music, there have been few attempts to study music, branding, and religion as a single rubric. This is surprising given the major roles of both marketing and popular music in the spread of evangelical Christianity throughout history (Moore 1994; Sargeant 2000; Twitchell 2007; Nekola 2009). This book begins to address this omission by addressing the experience of music, branding, and religious meaning as a gestalt.

Studies of the relationship between music and branding have tended to be written from the practical marketing perspective that focuses on the ways music and sound can be used to create an aural brand identity. With titles such as *Audio Branding: Brands, Sound and Communication* (Bronner and Hirt 2009) and *Sounds Like Branding: Using the Power of Music to Turn Customers into Fans* (Lusensky 2010), their authors promote audio branding as the next frontier of marketing. The most 'audible' brands use music and sound in ways that encourage stakeholders to experience them beyond the simple memorability of a jingle. For example, audible brand elements include the sounds the product makes (such as the revving of a Harley Davidson motorcycle engine); sonic logos and themes (such as the three-note 'chime' logo of the American television network NBC); and collaborations with artists, sponsorship of music events, and even the lilt of the brand name and slogan (Kilian 2009, 41). When the audibility of a brand is combined with touchpoints that stimulate other senses, such as taste or smell, the brand accesses the deep meaning-making machinery of the human body. In other words, the brand is *embodied* by the stakeholder.

Another popular view of music and branding is that lessons in brand identity management can be learned from rock stars like Madonna and KISS. Examples of this view can be found in books like *Brands that Rock: What Business Leaders Can Learn from the World of Rock and Roll* (Blackwell and Stephan 2004) and *Brand Like a Rock Star: Lessons from Rock 'n' Roll to Make Your Business Rich and Famous* (Jones 2012). Aimed primarily at brand managers, these breezy 'how to' tomes seek to explain how iconic musicians have built, managed, and capitalized on their 'brand' and why devoted fan/brand communities such as Jimmy Buffett's 'Parrot Heads' and Lady Gaga's 'Little Monsters' coalesce around artists.

Music studies works that engage critically with branding are still relatively rare, although books such as Nicholas Carah's (2010) *Pop Brands: Branding, Popular Music, and Young People*; Elizabeth Barfoot Christian's edited volume *Rock Brands: Selling Sound in a Media Saturated Culture* (2011); and Kristin J. Lieb's (2013) *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry: The Social Construction of Female Popular Music Stars*

suggest that the subject is getting more attention, at least in relation to popular music. The most complete treatment of the political-economic relationship between music and branding can be found across Tim Taylor's corpus of work, particularly *The Sounds of Capitalism: Advertising, Music, and the Conquest of Culture* (2012) and *Music and Capitalism: A History of the Present* (2016). In *The Sounds of Capitalism*, Taylor traces the changing role of music in twentieth-century American advertising as it moves from a stand-alone medium to part of an ever-expanding media ecology that includes film, television, product placements, and brand extensions. However, it is not until he reaches the 1990s in the final two chapters that he begins to use the term 'branding', reflecting its incorporation into popular discourse during that period. In *Music and Capitalism*, Taylor traces the connections between music and branding within a framework that links globalization, digitization, and the cultural industries within neoliberal capitalism. Of particular interest in relation to the present study is Taylor's focus on the roles of music and the brand in the creation of both non-economic and economic forms of value, and the various ways branding converts the former to the latter.

Similar to the work on music and branding, treatments of branding and religion also tend to proceed from either a practical marketing perspective or a critical sociological perspective. Those written from the former promote the view that successful companies and successful religions are both intense corporate cultures built on shared corporate values. For example, in *Primal Branding: Create Zealots for Your Brand, Your Company, And Your Future* (2006), Patrick Hanlon posits a seven-piece 'primal code' of corporate communication that is shared by successful companies and religious organizations. Similarly, Jesper Kunde's *Corporate Religion: Building a Strong Company through Personality and Corporate Soul* (2002) uses case studies of secular brands like Virgin and Harley-Davidson to find the 'right formula' to create a 'brand religion'. The idea of a 'corporate religion' is one that circulates widely in popular culture (e.g., the 'Cult of Mac', see Kahney 2004), and there are undoubtedly similar social process of identification between secular brand communities and religious communities. But viewing secular brands and religions as homologous ignores an important difference between the two, which is one of seriousness. Simply put: while morality, values, and even transcendence may all be part of the experience of secular brands, they do not hold the existential weight that religion both engenders and demands.

Because of the 'consumerist' connotations of the terms 'brand' and 'branding', religious organizations have traditionally been reluctant to use them in describing their organizational and marketing techniques, even if their practices tell a different story. However, Phil Cooke's *Branding Faith: Why Some Churches and Nonprofits Impact Culture and Others Don't* (2008) as well as a proliferation of church-branding consultancies indicate that this has changed in the twenty-first century. One of the best examples of the

'Christian Branding' movement is Artistry Labs, which offers churches and ministries a range of branding, consulting, and content management packages that seek to improve congregational engagement through marketing.[3] The company's description of branding is particularly telling:

> Great branding is enduring. It takes people deeper. It ascribes value on them. It makes them want to engage.[4]

Artistry Labs views branding as a way of inculcating people into the Christian faith and value system. Not surprisingly, they emphasize the integral place of worship music in the process:

> We often run into a church that is in transition, looking for decisiveness on tender topics … 'Should we have multiple worship styles?' 'Do we go more acoustic?' 'More Hillsong?' 'What about the hymns?' 'Why are we not attracting certain groups of people?'[5]

It is telling that churches looking to grow their congregation would ask if they should play more Hillsong songs, but the above statement also reveals that Christian organizations' embrace of branding is driven at least in part by the need to attract and maintain participants who have a variety of choices of both religious and secular organizations and activities with which to engage. This is the view taken in many sociological treatments of religion and branding that, drawing on a tradition of economic analysis, view religious landscapes as competitive markets (e.g., Stark and Bainbridge 1986; Young 1997; Finke and Stark 2005). From this perspective, organizations that have best fulfilled the spiritual wants and needs of religious consumers have historically thrived, while those that haven't have stagnated or disappeared. Donald Miller (1997), Wade Clark Roof (1999), and others suggest that the most successful religious organizations erase the line between the sacred and the secular by making use of the vernacular communicative techniques of their time, which in the case of the New Paradigm is (post)modern consumer culture. But this is not a simple case of the sacred appropriating the secular: Mara Einstein's *Brands of Faith: Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age* (2008) argues that 'religious' and 'secular' are collapsing in popular and consumer culture.[6] For example, 'new' televangelists such as Joel Osteen, Creflo Dollar, and Joyce Meyer unabashedly use their celebrity to promote their faiths, but so do 'secular celebrities' such as Maddona for Kabbalah and Tom Cruise for Scientology. Furthermore, Oprah Winfrey uses religiously inflected language, which to some qualifies her as a 'faith brand' (Einstein 2008, 122). The distinction between 'sacred' and 'secular' is further obscured with the rise of 'religious lifestyle branding' (Clark 2007), which is fuelled by a massive industry that produces 'parallel' products and services marketed to religious groups. The meanings that accrue during the production, circulation, and consumption

of these goods and services are not merely the results of the sacred and secular mutually appropriating one another but rather a fundamental dialectical relationship in which each (re)produces the other (Ram 2007).

Methodology

The foundation of this book is data collected during three years of participant observation (Shelemay 2008) at Hillsong Church London. Between 2010 and 2013, I attended weekly church services, served on volunteer teams, participated in 'connect group' meetings, attended Hillsong's night college, and attended conferences and special events.[7] I also conducted 17 semi-structured face-to-face, Skype, and email interviews with participants and staff of Hillsong London and Hillsong Church. My observations and interviews are supplemented by content analysis of a variety of media produced by and about the church, including CDs, videos, websites, blogs, advertisements, books, secular and Christian press, and scholarly articles.

My decision to use participatory research as the primary method of inquiry is related to one of the main arguments of this book: that it is through the experiential dynamics of participation that 'participants' become 'stakeholders' in social groups, in this case churches and brands. This focus on the centrality of experience in the (re)production of social groups is at the heart of Lave and Wenger's theory of learning called 'legitimate peripheral participation'. Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that while most *teaching* (at least in the Western system of knowledge production) is done abstractly (i.e., in a classroom), actual *learning* comes through active participation in social processes. For Lave and Wenger, knowledge is embedded and embodied through experience. This claim is based on studies of different types of apprenticeships in different cultures, including those of Yucatec Mayan midwives in Mexico, Vai and Gola tailors in Liberia, the U.S. navy quartermasters, butchers in U.S. supermarkets in the 1970s, and 'nondrinking alcoholics' in Alcoholics Anonymous. In each social group, participants learned to perform the skills necessary to be a 'productive' member of the community by engaging in the actual process of trying to perform them; they learned from, and through, experience. Furthermore, as participants mastered productive skills, they gradually moved from the 'periphery' of the group to the 'centre', and in doing so, they assumed more important roles in the maintenance and reproduction of the group. It is no coincidence that apprenticeship (either formal or informal) is an essential part of experiential religions in cultures throughout the world (e.g., Qureshi 1986 [2006]; Kapchan 2007; Jankowsky 2010). These traditions seek, among other things, a visceral encounter with the divine. The 'affective volitional' states (Hirschkind 2001) needed to enter into these encounters are culturally framed and acquired through various degrees of enculturation, socialization, acculturation, and practice (Rouget 1985; Becker 2004).