



2013

# Just Like Everyone Else? Locating South Asians in 21st Century American Popular Media

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## Recommended Citation

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

JUST LIKE EVERYONE ELSE?  
LOCATING SOUTH ASIANS IN 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY  
AMERICAN POPULAR MEDIA

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN SOCIOLOGY

BY

BHOOMI K. THAKORE

CHICAGO, IL

MAY 2013

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation would have not been possible without the guidance of my committee members. First, I would like to thank my chair, Dr. J. Talmadge Wright. During the 2+ years that we have worked together, I have learned a great deal from you about audience studies and the very unique world of media sociology. In the fall of 2012 leading up to my dissertation defense, I had the privilege of meeting with you on a weekly basis to talk about my research, my teaching, my job market status, and everything in between. That time proved invaluable for me and I greatly appreciate it. Without you, this product here would not exist in its present form.

I would also like to thank Dr. Laura Miller, one of the longest-serving members of my committee. While I missed your presence locally, I appreciated the opportunities to learn from you and to discuss my research with you in detail. (And, thanks for lunch!) To Dr. Adrienne Massanari, thank you for taking me on in the middle of my dissertation. My analysis benefitted greatly from your expertise in communication and media studies. Finally, I would like to thank Dr. David G. Embrick for his professional and personal inspiration to me and to all of the Graduate Students of Color at Loyola. We are all stronger and highly equipped scholars because of your guidance.

I would like to thank my survey and interview respondents. Many colleagues and friends helped me out in recruitment and participation, and for that I am forever grateful. This research was generously funded and supported by Loyola University's Graduate

School through the Advanced Doctoral Fellowship, the Research Mentoring Program, and the Dean's Merit Award. Thanks to Dean Samuel Attah, Assistant Dean Jessica Horowitz, Associate Dean Patricia Mooney-Melvin, and the rest of the staff.

Special thanks to a few of my colleagues – specifically Rebecca West, Victoria Brockett, Kasey Henricks, Dennis Watson, Saher Selod, Derrick Brooms, Crystal Jackson, and Chez Rumpf for their help in everything from conversation to IRB proposals, writing groups, peer review, inter-rater reliability, and collaboration. Thanks to my PI at Northwestern, Rick McGee, and my Pathfinder colleagues Michelle Naffziger-Hirsch, Jennifer Richardson-Stovall, and Simon Williams for their support and for our weekly writing group. It is to them that I dedicate Chapter 2. I would also like to thank my primary care doctor and my other doctors in the surgery, endocrinology, and nuclear medicine departments at Loyola University Medical Center for dealing with my thyroid cancer and making sure that I could see this through to the end.

Finally, I would like to thank my family near and far. Your support and love has been forever felt and appreciated. My love and respect go to my father, Kirit J. Thakore, who brought me into this world but left it long before he could see this beginning and end. I know he would be proud. My mother, Daya K. Thakore, lives for me. Without her, I would have not been possible.

To my Mom –  
who gave me everything so that I could have something.

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## ABSTRACT

In the 21st century, representations of South Asians in American popular media have grown exponentially. This is a particularly interesting phenomenon when considering the status that South Asians occupy in the American racial hierarchy. In *Just Like Everyone Else? Locating South Asians in 21<sup>st</sup> Century American Popular Media*, I examine audience perceptions of South Asian/Indian characters and actors in American popular media. My research is guided by the following question: *to what extent do audience perceptions of South Asians in U.S. popular media reflect pre-existing ideologies of race, gender, ethnicity, and immigration?* Using data from 155 open-ended online questionnaires and 50 in-depth interviews, I argue that South Asian media representations today no longer embody the overt stereotypes associated with this group: savage foreigner, heavily accented new immigrant, and cheap small business owner. Rather, respondents describe and discuss contemporary representations to indicate that they are portrayed as assimilated and even “Americanized.” However, from a critical race perspective, I argue that while media representations of South Asians can be characterized as conforming to mainstream, white, American norms, these characters actually do little to challenge the racial status quo in American society. Additionally, these characterizations through intentional writing and casting decisions present a particular representation of American society in which racial hierarchies are maintained and not challenged.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

In September 2012, FOX premiered *The Mindy Project* (Kaling 2012). The show is written by and starring Mindy Kaling, a well-known Indian American writer who until recently played ditzy Kelly on NBC's *The Office* (Gervais and Merchant 2005). Kaling the actress is a Dartmouth educated writer whose parents emigrated to the U.S. from India via Nigeria. Her mother was a gynecologist and she bases much of her new character's profession on those experiences. On the show she plays Dr. Mindy Lahiri, a successful 30-something dealing with life and love in New York City. She balances her friends-with-benefits co-doctor with her crush-from-afar co-doctor and the other men she dates with her best girlfriend and supportive co-workers.



Figure 1. The cast of *The Mindy Project*.

Audience reviews compare the show to *Sex and the City* (Star 1998) and note the benefits of having diverse representations in popular media. Indeed, Kaling brings a very spunky, un-stereotypical representation of a second-generation Indian-American woman to television today. However, Kaling is unique in that she is the primary creator and producer of her image, but there is no doubt the media executives who look after this show still maintain the final word. For example, Mindy's entire social network and all of her love interests are white. While this may accurately reflect the social circles of many well-educated and professional South Asians, she is the only real "diversity" on this show.

Additionally, Kaling is darker and curvier than most of the South Asian women on television in recent years. On a recent episode, she and her co-workers go to a night club. Mindy says, "All Black guys love Indian girls, especially because we have big booties." When her friends tell her she can't say that, she assures them, "No, it's a fact." This exchange is interesting for a few reasons. For one, Mindy's comments allude to perceptions of beauty by Black men, particularly those who date outside of their race. The assumption is that while Black men may be less likely to date Black women, they are more likely to date Indian women who have certain desired features of Black women, such as a "big booty." In general, Mindy's comments also assume a racial hierarchy in which she can align her physical beauty with the kind that is appreciated in the Black community, but also distance herself just enough from this group to make the comment in the first place.



Figure 2. Dr. Mindy Lahiri and her co-workers go to a club on a recent episode of *The Mindy Project*.

At the time of writing (December 2012), the long-term fate of the show is unknown. *The Mindy Project* has only been on a few times and will continue to film the 22 episodes for a full season. But who knows what will happen to this show next year. While there are strong the and funny Indian characters in shows like *Parks and Recreation* (Daniels and Schur 2008), *The Big Bang Theory* (Lorre and Prady 2007), and *Royal Pains* (Lenchewski and Rodgers 2009), the most recent Indian-focused show, *Outsourced* (Borden 2010), was on a similar trajectory as *The Mindy Project* and then abruptly cancelled after one season. It is to be determined whether *The Mindy Project* will be a long-term example of a South Asian character on America television (who consumers will ultimately decide whether to watch or not), and the extent to which representations in this show influence audience perceptions of Indians and South Asian Americans in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In this dissertation, I study audience perceptions of Indian and South Asian<sup>1</sup> characters in television and film by a sample of fairly young and relatively educated audiences.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, I examine South Asian media representations of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century to discuss the extent to which these representations reflect current assumptions and attitudes of South Asian held by mainstream American audiences of all race/ethnicities, genders, and ages. Using data from 155 online surveys and 50 in-depth interviews, I identify some of the characteristics associated with these examples and the ways in which these representations reproduce common perceptions of non-whites in American society. Additionally, I examine the extent to which gender, casting decisions, and national identity inform audience perceptions, and relate to locating South Asians in the current racial hierarchy. I also use the example of the South Asians in the 2010-11 NBC television show *Outsourced* to understand representations of this group in American media today. This show, the first with majority-South Asian actors and writers, was the first real example of diverse television programming on NBC since the 1990s. However, it received a great deal of criticism during its run for its representations of Indians and India. I was interested in really understanding how audiences felt about *Outsourced* to better understand why it was ultimately cancelled.

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<sup>1</sup> The term “South Asian” is an umbrella term used for identifying individuals who have family origins in such countries as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bhutan (Leonard 1997; Purkayastha 2005). In many ways, this term reflect the Indian subcontinent and the country of Hindustan before British imperialist rule that split the nation. In this research, I generally use Indian and South Asian interchangeably, except when specifically talking about Indian characters or respondents.

<sup>2</sup> I define my sample henceforth as representative of “mainstream” audiences. I do so because of their high levels of self-reported popular media consumption, and also for the majority of respondents who fall into the highly-targeted 18-34 media age demographic. For a more detailed discussion of my sample and my research methods, see Appendix A.



The findings I present in this dissertation are important for a few reasons. First, my respondents are mostly white, mostly female, and highly educated. As a result, the data presented here represent the perceptions of these media representations by mainstream, white American audiences. Second, there has been an exponential increase in the number of Indian and South Asian characters in American media since around 2000. This is a contemporary popular cultural phenomenon and it warrants an in-depth analysis. Third, perceptions of Indian and South Asians in the United States are very tenuous. Balanced in between the (general) Asian model minority stereotype (Takaki 1985; Wu 2002) and the post-9/11 stereotype of Muslims as terrorists (Nacos and Torres-Reyna 2007; Alsultany 2012), it is important and useful to understand where this group fits within mainstream American racial ideology. Fourth, there is a great deal of relevance to studying this population. I illustrate this further in the next section, in which I discuss recent social trends among Asians in the United States.

### **“The Rise of Asian Americans”**

In June 2012, the Pew Research Center released their report from their study of a nationally representative sample of over 3,500 Asians living in the United States (Pew Research Center 2012). According to data released by the 2010 U.S. Census, individuals who identify as Asian (both single-raced and mixed-race) make up almost 6% of the American population. Of this segment, 18.4% are Indian. While the report presented Asian experiences as a monolithic one, without regard for the cultural and national differences among Asian Americans, the findings are noteworthy for providing a better understanding of the overarching Asian experience today.

First, it is important to understand recent trends in immigration. In 2009, it was estimated that more Asian immigrants were arriving to the U.S. than Hispanic/Latino immigrants. In terms of these newer immigrants, it is estimated today that approximately half of the larger Asian population in the United States does not speak fluent English today. Additionally, in 2011, the Department of Homeland Security found that 62% of immigrants from Asian countries receive green cards based on family membership, and 27% receive green cards from employee sponsors.

Overall, it seems that Asians' concepts of identity have been largely influenced by their degree of assimilation. Of those Asians in the Pew research sample, over 60% identified themselves as Asian American or (country of origin) American. For Indians, 61% defined themselves as Indian-American and 57% thought of themselves as different from a typical American. Overall, Asians are more likely than other groups to live in racially-mixed neighborhoods rather than traditional Asian enclaves. Between 2008 and 2010, 29% of Asians married a partner outside of their race, compared to 26% of Latinos, 17% of Blacks and 9% of Whites. The most common form of interracial marriage was between an Asian woman and a white man. However, Indians in the Pew sample were least likely to marry outside of their ethnicity. Additionally, U.S. born Asians have a much lower proficiency in the Asian language of their families compared to U.S. born Latinos who have proficiencies in Spanish. These findings suggest that Asian Americans are slowly integrating into mainstream American society.

In addition to assimilating into U.S. social structures, Asian Americans are also assimilating into diverse social circles. Almost 60% of Asians and 60% of Indians

reported that their social circles are made up of mostly non-Asians. For Asians born in the United States, this number increases to over 80%. These findings indicate that not only do Asians have a diverse network of friends, so too do non-Asians have Asian friends. In terms of inter-group relations, Asians report that they get along with them slightly better than even other Asians, and almost a third of Indians report that they get along very well with whites. This suggests that the social circles of mainstream white Americans are also diversifying, particularly in major metropolitan areas and within school and university settings.

With regard to professionalism, Asians are also buying into the model minority myth (which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2). In the Pew report, 43% of Asian respondents suggested that U.S. Asians have been more successful than other racial and ethnic groups. Additionally, 75% of the Indians in the sample agreed with the sentiment that most people who want to get ahead can do so if they work hard. The report also found that Asians reported in relatively equal numbers that they were both just as successful as other Americans, and more successful than Americans. Specifically, 54% of Indians reported that Asian-Americans have been more successful than other racial and ethnic minority groups. In terms of attitudes about immigration in the U.S., 83% of Indians feel that hard-working and talented immigrants strengthen the country.

One of the most noteworthy findings of the Pew report was that far fewer Asians today report personal experiences with discrimination in American society. This is compared to the long history of systematic Asian discrimination that informed early immigration policy and that has continued through both overt and covert examples of

racism (Takaki 1989; Prashad 2000; Wu 2002). According to the report, the majority of Asian respondents feel that being Asian American has no effect on school admission, getting a job, or getting a promotion. In fact, a small percentage of the Asian surveyed feel that being Asian actually helps in these areas. While nearly 20% of Asians reported that they had recently been treated negatively because of their Asian identity, only 13% of Asian Americans say that discrimination toward Asians is a major problem in American society. For Indians, 18% have experienced discrimination and 10% have been called an offensive name. Asians in general also feel that they get along better with whites than they do other Asian groups, Latinos, and Blacks, respectively.

These findings from the Pew Research Center are important for a few reasons. For one, it contextualizes the relevance of understanding the Asian and Indian populations in the United States today. Specifically, the data suggest that Asians are speaking English at higher rates than other immigrant groups, intermarrying, and spending time in diverse and mostly-white social circles. At the same time, Asians are subscribing to the “American Dream” ideology that success will come simply from working hard. Additionally, Asians and Indians are not feeling the stings of overt discrimination in American society, especially as compared to rates among Blacks and Latinos. However, a systematic analysis of the South Asian experience is still missing. All of these results contextualize my discussion of the ways in which popular media representations of South Asians impact mainstream audiences. In the next section, I discuss the layout of this dissertation and provide an overview of the chapters.

## Overview

My research is guided by the following question: *to what extent do audience perceptions of South Asians in U.S. popular media reflect pre-existing ideologies of race, gender, ethnicity, and immigration?* In this dissertation, I focus on audience perceptions of these characters and use images throughout the text to contextualize some of my arguments and themes. This is a natural presentation of material that is inherently visual. Additionally, the analysis presented here is strengthened by the fact that I focus on audience discussions and not on my own opinions. In my analysis of the data, I searched for organic themes rather than imposing my own opinions on what people had to say.

In Chapter 2, I provide a detailed content analysis of South Asians characters and actors by presenting the historical trajectory of these images in U.S. popular media. For example, in the 1980s, while South Asians were presented in the media as foreigners, in the forms of convenience store owner and taxi driver, East Asians were perceived and presented in popular media as the model minority. While South Asian media characters transformed into these model minorities in the 1990s as doctors and professors, they were still limited to background roles. Since 2000, more and more South Asians have been cast as regular characters in films and television shows. I discuss some of the political reasons that this happened, the implications of this trend, and how both dynamics inform the audience perceptions that I discuss.

I use my research data in the following four chapters to guide my discussion of some of the overarching themes and trends among South Asians characters in popular

media today.<sup>3</sup> In Chapter 3, I discuss some of the South Asian characters most frequently reported by my respondents from my online survey of mostly college students. Through this analysis, I identified three degrees of characters that exist in the media today – the forever foreigner, the model minority, and the average American. These findings suggest that representations of South Asians in popular media have undergone a racial formation in both their encoded characterization on the screen and their decoded perception by media audiences. However, in the same way that minority characters in the media have been found to reproduce particular racial ideologies, so too do South Asian characters today. While it appears that South Asian representations are improving, audience perceptions in general fail to acknowledge the ways in which racial inequality is reproduced in the media. This first round of data collection proved beneficial in making sure that the list of South Asian characters I used to question interview respondents pulled very much from what my survey respondents reported knowing – not what I know or what I watch.

In Chapters 4, 5, and 6, I analyze my data from interviews with regular consumers of popular media. In Chapter 4, I focus on the discussion by my respondents that South Asian characters are positively represented, and void of any overt cultural characteristics and characterizations. However, in an examination of these responses through the critical lenses of gender, beauty, casting, and nationality, I find that many of these characters are characterized in ways that perpetuate the assumption of South Asians as non-white, non-normative, and Other. Additionally, the ways in which gender and beauty are essentialized, the ways in which media corporations and producers make specific choices

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<sup>3</sup> For my survey and interview protocols, see Appendix B and C, respectively.

about who they cast as the “South Asian character,” and the extent to which South Asians are portrayed as secondary characters suggest that South Asian representations are still subjected to these limited stereotypes.

In Chapter 5, I focus on the discussion by my respondents that South Asian characters are positively represented, and void of any overt cultural characteristics and characterizations. However, in an examination of these responses through the critical lenses of gender, beauty, casting, and nationality, I find that many of these characters are characterized in ways that perpetuate the assumption of South Asians as non-white, non-normative, and “Other.” Additionally, the ways in which gender and beauty are essentialized, the ways in which media corporations and producers make specific choices about who they cast as the “South Asian character,” and the extent to which South Asians are portrayed as secondary characters suggest that South Asian representations are still subjected to these limited stereotypes.

In Chapter 6, I discuss perceptions of the 2010-11 NBC television show *Outsourced*. The representations of an Indian call center in the show reflected what many respondents identified as the new stereotype of India in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In my analysis, I compare responses of South Asian viewers with non-South Asian viewers, and responses of those who watched the show with those who did not. For example, South Asian viewers found that the culture clash presented between the white/American managers and the Indian employees reflected their own experiences with mainstream whites in American society. Additionally, while those who did not watch the show characterized it as racist and offensive for its stereotypical representations, those who watched

*Outsourced* described the show's eventual progression into presenting the characters as well-rounded individuals as positive. The show proved to be revolutionary for having a majority-minority group of actors and writers, but was eventually cancelled for these perceptions by others as "racist."

In the Conclusion, I summarize my findings from the chapters and discuss how my research makes interventions on the traditional literature on stereotypes and race relations in the United States. Additionally, I discuss how my arguments make larger policy implications, specifically with regard to media ownership policy, and suggest that more South Asian-created characters are the solution to these limited representations. In the next chapter, I begin my analysis of South Asians in American popular media with a historical overview of South Asians in the United States and minorities in American film and television.



## CHAPTER TWO

### THEORETICAL REVIEW

In the previous chapter, I presented a discussion of the show *The Mindy Project* (Kaling 2012) as an example of the latest in South Asian media representation. Additionally, I presented recent Pew data on contemporary social trends among Asians and South Asians in the United States to argue for the relevance of studying this ethnic group. In this chapter, I discuss the theories and schools of thought that inform my overarching arguments in this dissertation. First, I will focus on immigration theories and literature to better contextualize how South Asians fit into the American racial landscape. I then move the discussion to focus on the literature around race relations, particularly as it pertains to ethnic stereotypes and the intersections of race with gender and skin tone/phenotype. Finally, I will focus on the literature related to representations in popular media. Specifically, I will discuss the research by media studies scholars on racial and ethnic minority representations, and the literature to date on South Asian media representations.

These three bodies of literature are relevant for a few reasons. First, I argue that historic examples of South Asians media representations have embodied some of the commonly understood stereotypes that exist around this ethnic group. Specifically, Indians and South Asians have long been understood as either foreign and greedy or educated and successful. While my majority-white respondents reported that these stereotypes have essentially been replaced in the media with representations of this group

as “just like [mainstream white Americans],” I argue that contemporary representations, and respondents’ perceptions of them, still possess overtly ethnic and non-normative characteristics. It is this phenomenon in particular that is of interest to my research and to my discussions in the following sections.

### **South Asian Immigration**

#### **A Brief History of South Asian Immigration to the U.S.**

While there has been a great deal has been written on examples, causes, and effects of South Asian immigration to North America in the early 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, much of these discussions are outside of the scope of this research and will simply be summarized here for their relevance to my research.

A significant percentage of Indians, mostly Punjabis, migrated to the West Coast in the early 20th century and established communities in such areas as Vancouver, Canada and Imperial Valley, California. Originally, Indians were considered members of the Aryan racial group alongside white. However, this identity was eventually challenged by the United States government. In 1923, the Supreme Court made their decision on the citizenship rights of Bhagat Singh Thind. A World War I veteran, Thind’s U.S. citizenship was originally approved by the Oregon court but was eventually overturned on the basis that, even though he was classified as Aryan, the Supreme Court judges knew that he was Indian and that made him ineligible (Helweg and Helweg 1990; Leonard 1997; Kitano and Daniels 2001). This led to many issues for Indians in their American communities, and many eventually migrated back to India. By 1946, the

Filipino and Indian Naturalization Act eased restrictions on immigration from South Asia and allowed those already in the U.S. to become citizens.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the first wave of Indian students who came to the U.S. mostly had intentions of returning back home upon graduation, but many ended up staying permanently (Takaki 1989). In 1965, President Johnson signed the Immigration and Nationality Act, which allowed up to 20,000 highly-educated migrants from each country in Asia to immigrate to the United States. Soon after, Asians became the fastest growing ethnic group. In 1970s, Asian immigration increased by 143% percent, compared to 38% among Latinos (Takaki 1989:5). Most Indians who immigrated after 1965 came from major cities in India and were highly educated. For example, 83% of Indian immigrants between 1966 and 1977 had backgrounds in the STEM fields, including approximately 20,000 science PhDs, 40,000 engineers, and 25,000 doctors (Prashad 2000:75).

Overall, members of this early wave of Indian and South Asian immigration were more educated and professional than their early 20<sup>th</sup> century counterparts, or even counterparts from different countries of origin. These are the same educational and professional backgrounds present in contemporary media images (as discussed further in Chapters 3, 4, and 5). Keely (1971) defined the “new immigrant” as those who were not European, highly educated, and migrated out of their countries primarily to seek professional-level employment. Saran (1985) defined this group as “elite ethnics.” Indeed, many of the new immigrants from India learned English early on in schools. As

Helweg and Helweg (1990) argued, this new wave of immigration contributed to the “brain drain” of highly educated Indians and South Asians out of their home countries.

However, in the same way that these characteristics inform media representations, so too do they influence general racial perceptions. The racial formation of South Asians has been influenced in large part by the South Asian immigration in the 1960s and 1970s that brought these highly educated and professional migrants (Prashad 2000; Takaki 1985; Wu 2002). The mainstream stereotype of Asians as “model minorities” in the United States has been popular since the mid-1980s after news stories following President Reagan’s remarks in 1984 about the high educational achievements of Asian Americans. Within a few years, there were stories about Asians as the model minority on 60 Minutes and in *U.S. News and World Report*, *Fortune*, *The New Republic* and *Newsweek* (Takaki 1989:474). To some extent, this rhetoric was true for the time. In 1980, 36% of foreign-born Asians had college degrees compared to 11% of whites. In 1990, this increased to 42% of Asians compared to 25% of whites (Wu 2002:50-51).

Most South Asians immigrated to the U.S. for financial and professional success. Many of them achieved upward social mobility as a result of the educational capital they brought with them. Additionally, their success influenced the success of their children and proceeding generations. However, much of this success will be dependent on the level to which South Asians can assimilate into a culture that is already hostile to non-whites. The trouble with the model minority stereotype is that it assumes success is inherently biological (Wu 2002). Even for being models, Asians were and continue to be unable to achieve the same economic and professional standing as whites. When

factoring in education, gender, ethnicity and working hours, the average personal incomes of Asian Americans still tends to be less than whites (Takaki 1989).

Additionally, race relations in the U.S. continue to be segmented for immigrants due to their cultural differences. On the other hand, the model minority myth is one important element of South Asian identity formation. Not only is success encouraged by their parents and families, but the external pressure of what it means to be “Indian” is also reflected off of them. As a result, education and success become a part of Asian identity.

Since the 1980s, a significantly smaller percentage of South Asians immigrating to the United States would fall under the definition of the model minority. In fact, the majority of newer South Asian immigrants have migrated under the family reunification policy to join their family members who are naturalized citizens (Prashad 2000). As a result, these newer migrants are much more varied in their educational and professional backgrounds. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, these variances in migration patterns have led to a larger number of South Asians in working class occupations. In many cases, South Asian migrants have established small business such as motels and convenience stores, and invited relatives over to serve as cheap labor (Prashad 2000:78-79; Dhingra 2012). Many scholars have studied the experiences of South Asian Americans in the United States from both of these waves who fall into a range of socio-economic backgrounds (Maira 2002; Purkayastha 2005; Shankar 2008). However, what these scholars have found is that, regardless of immigrant status, their experiences in the United States have always been dependent on their level of assimilation into American society.

### South Asian Assimilation and Acculturation

What is particularly noteworthy in a society like the United States where South Asians are a relatively new, emerging, and growing demographic is not only the ways in which they adjust to their new surroundings, but how South Asians negotiate their own identity within these new cultures. Like all other immigrant and ethnic groups before them, Indians and South Asians have experienced an uphill battle in conceptualizing their identity in the United States and identifying their place in the American racial hierarchy. Traditional immigration scholars have argued that minority groups can best blend into their new societies through a process of assimilation – letting their culture go for the customs and cultures of their new country (Frazier 1947; Myrdal 1944; Park 1950; Moynihan and Glazer 1970; Glazer 1971). For example, Robert Park (1950) presented this trajectory through his race relations cycle in which he argued that inter-group relations consisted of initial contact, then conflict, accommodation, and eventually assimilation. Through assimilation, Park argued that racial characteristics would become irrelevant in social interactions. However, race relations in the U.S. continue to be segmented for immigrants due to their cultural differences. Portes and Rumbaut (1996) suggested that assimilation is based on three factors: color, geographic location and the structure of labor markets. The extent to which new groups can assimilate into society will be determined by the extent to which they let go of their ethnic culture (Alba and Nee 2003; Gordon 1964; Park 1950; Steinberg 1979).

Milton Gordon (1964) defined the different forms of assimilation that can take place for different immigrant groups. Structural assimilation occurs when an immigrant is

able to integrate into all of the structures of their new society, while cultural assimilation (acculturation) occurs when an immigrant foregoes his/her ethnic culture and takes on the everyday cultural habits of their new society. The benefit of structural assimilation in the U.S. is full integration to the status quo of American social institutions. On the other hand, cultural assimilation allows for an outward expression of American culture and values which allows for integration into American society. As Alba and Nee (2003) noted, some level of assimilation is almost inevitable for immigrants, lest they remain isolated in their host country or plan to eventually return to their native country. Some examples of assimilation among late 20<sup>th</sup> century immigrant groups include no longer speaking their ethnic language, adopting Americanized names and pursuing inter-racial relationships and marriages (Rosenfeld and Kim 2005; Sue and Telles 2007; Waters and Jimenez 2005). These behaviors and practices inform the extent to which ethnic groups can integrate into their new society, which in turn inform their acceptance by mainstream white Americans.

Scholars like Robert Blauner (1972) argued that immigration has not been as straightforward as that presented in Park's assimilation model. Under the influence of internal colonialism, the migration and labor habits for particular groups are largely influenced by their country's status during the reign of European colonialism. For South Asians, this is particularly relevant given the history of British imperialist rule and migration patterns that created the twice, thrice, and even quadruple South Asian migrant of the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century (Bhachu 1985:224). As Kitano and Daniels (2001)

argued, Asians and South Asians lie somewhere in between the models presented by Park and Blauner.

The ability for one to assimilate will be dependent on their access to particular forms of capital. In American society, assimilation can also be strengthened by social economic status – particularly, class, occupation, and wealth. As Portes and Rumbaut (2006) discussed, the path to assimilation for new immigrants is not a singular one. The assimilation experiences of second-generation immigrants will be dependent on the resources available to them through their families and communities. However, traditional theories of assimilation fail to take into account those factors of racism that inform experiences with social structures. In the next section, I discuss the extent to which assimilation for South Asians are informed by Western definitions of race and gender.

### **Racialized and Gendered Relations for South Asians**

In the history of the United States, race relations have been fluid and often served particular political or social interests. For immigrants, their place within the racial hierarchy is informed by their levels of assimilation and acculturation. Their racial categorization in turn informs racial attitudes and racial perceptions toward them. As I argue in this dissertation, it is these racial perceptions that influence audience perceptions of South Asian media representations. In this section, I discuss some of the trends in the racial formation of South Asians in the American landscape and the extent to which these stereotypes and prejudices inform the racial attitudes toward this group.



### The Racialization of South Asians

As immigrants and ethnic minorities, South Asians experience a number of both internal and external influences on their identity development. As Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1995) argued, racial formations are the result of social, political and economic forces that have determined the status and perceptions of racial and ethnic minorities. These statuses have formed over time and are dependent on various social and historical circumstances. For example, Black-white relations have been strained for centuries due in large part to ideological allegiances to Social Darwinism (Omi and Winant 1995:15). For other minorities, including Asian Americans, the dynamics have been similar. With regard to the combining of groups from all Asian countries into the umbrella identification “Asian American,” Omi and Winant wrote,

Ethnicity theorists might object that this is an improper exercise of ‘race-thinking,’ that there should be no recognition by the state of such a category, that these various groups should be able to maintain their ethnic identities and thus avoid ‘racialization.’ But the majority of American cannot tell the difference between members of these various groups. (1995:23).

Indeed, Asian Americans of all origins have struggled for decades in mainstream American society to define and defend their racial, ethnic and national origins in the eyes of mainstream Americans. The most important struggle took place in the U.S. Census, where it has only been since 1980 that Asian Americans could self-identify as one of nine Asian/Pacific Islander groups (Omi 1999; Zhou and Lee 2003). This fight for recognition in the Census was due in large part to the ways in which their racialized and ethnic identities were perceived in America.

But even with political recognition, South Asian Americans are subjected to the same social and institutional forms of racism as other minorities. On one hand, it is assumed in popular rhetoric that all minorities today are equal and that racism no longer exists. However, as many significant race scholars have identified, race relations in the United States have shifted from overt practices of separation and inequality to more covert actions and attitudes that promote inclusivity on the surface but maintain covert actions that perpetuate a racialized social hierarchy. This dynamic is commonly understood as colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2009; Doane and Bonilla-Silva 2003; Feagin 2000; Pager and Shepard 2008). Additionally, the everyday experience with discrimination in the form of racial microaggressions (Constantine 2007; Sue et al. 2007) and even racial battle fatigue (Smith et al. 2007) strongly inform the everyday experiences of non-whites in America.

Today, scholars have argued that race in the United States is developing into a three-pronged racial hierarchy (Kim 1999). This is similar to the racial hierarchies in many Latin American countries where skin color and socio-economic status determine one's social position (Bonilla-Silva 2004). In the United States, the hierarchy consists of a white group at the top, the honorary white group in the middle (which includes light-skinned and successful South Asians), and the collective Black group at the bottom. The purpose of the middle group is to create a buffer between whites and Blacks and maintain an exclusive white category based on favorable characteristics. As Bonilla-Silva (2004) said,

The honorary white strata, which will be the most unstable group in this new order, is the product of the socio-political needs of whites to maintain white

supremacy given local and international changes but, at the same time, actors in this group will develop their own agency. Regardless of the reasons for its existence, members of this strata will defend their status vis-a-vis those below and try to achieve racial mobility through whitening as intermediate racial groups have done in the Caribbean and Latin America (942).

The placement of light-skinned individuals of any race or ethnicity into the honorary white strata suggests that skin tone will play the most prominent feature in determining one's racial background. As Bonilla-Silva (2004) suggested, the racial identity assigned to minorities by whites will determine their racial identification. Once an individual's racial background is identified, their interactions with social structures are determined. In particular, skin tone/phenotype and class will be the most significant markers of perceived "whiteness."

The dynamics associated with physical difference are particularly influential for Asian Americans. As Tuan (1999) discussed, the racialization of Asian American has been similar to Blacks in America in that both groups are marginalized for their identities outside of white racial norms. However, Asians are subjected to overt assessments of their ethnic origins that are due entirely to phenotype. Regardless of immigrant status or level of assimilation, Asians continue to be seen as "forever foreigners" in American society. While assimilated ethnic whites in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have the ability to choose from a variety of racial options that determine their categorization into a particular ethnic category, even the most assimilated Asians are not as fortunate. The extent to which an immigrant identifies him/herself is based in large part on the ways in which they are identified by others (Wu 2002; Bonilla-Silva 2004; Purkayastha 2005).

Additionally, ethnic identity in general is shaped in large part by the extent to which ethnic minorities can distance themselves from this bottom. For example, well-to-do first-generation South Asians also actively try to distance themselves from Blacks and Latinos, two groups with which they share physical characteristics and phenotype (Bhatia 2007). This largely alludes to a racial/ethnic self-segregation by class that is present in both media representations of South Asian characters as “acceptable” minorities, and of audience perceptions of South Asian characters as “acceptable” minorities that can be portrayed alongside white characters.

#### Immigrant Perceptions and Stereotypes

Gunner Myrdal’s (1944) examination of the Black experience in the 1930s found that discrimination toward non-whites in American society strongly influenced racial attitudes and the social status of racial minorities. For those South Asians who are not structurally or culturally assimilated, discrimination and prejudice are based in large part on assumed ethnic stereotypes. Interestingly, the word “stereotype” was originally used to describe the metal printing plate used to reproduce texts. For Walter Lippman (1922) stereotypes were simply mental pictures. In many ways, the ideological stereotype serves a similar function – to reproduce mainstream perceptions of the ways in which those of a particular race, ethnicity, gender, class, age, sexual preference, and ability appear in the mind’s eye and in society. As Portes and Rumbault (2006) later wrote,

Although [race/skin color] may appear at first glance to be a characteristic of individuals, in reality it is a trait belonging to the host society. Prejudice is not intrinsic to a particular skin color or racial type, and, indeed, many immigrants never experienced it in their native lands. It is by virtue of moving into a new social environment, marked by different values and prejudices, that physical features become stigmatized and defined as a handicap (2006:248).

These authors suggest that prejudice is largely dependent on the normative racial structure of a particular society. For non-white immigrants in particular, the racial structures of their home countries may be far different from the status quo in the United States. It is this transition between societies that is particularly damaging and impactful on immigrant experiences and immigrant identification by the mainstream.

In his work examining the experiences of early 20<sup>th</sup> century immigrants in American society, Gordon Allport (1954) described prejudice as a prejudgment; a social rejection based on presumed religions and racial categorization. These assumptions are based not on any tangible threat but on an assumption or stereotype. Allport defined a stereotype as, “an exaggerated belief associated with a category. Its function is to justify (rationalize) our conduct in relation to that category” (1954:191). In general, prejudices and assumptions can be either positive or negative, but those based on race/ethnicity tend to be negative. While it is the tendency of the human mind to categorize people just as it categorizes ideas and concepts, prejudices toward people are based on in-group loyalties and social distance. Further, Allport suggested that these pre-existing stereotypes continue to be utilized and supported by mass media. The use of stock characters was popular during the time of Allport’s writing, but continues to have influence and impact in the media today.

Claude Steele (2010) expanded on the critical concept of the stereotype and defined stereotype threat as the result of stereotypes that serve in contrast to an individual’s actual personality. These threats can have negative impacts on an individual’s everyday performance and experiences. Representations of stereotypes in the

media contradict the real-life experiences of South Asians in the United States. Further, stereotypical media representations that reinforce particular ideologies associated with South Asians as a group can also have harmful and detrimental effects on self-perception and identity formation.

In general, stereotypes of immigrants in the United States utilized particular ideas that exist within mainstream white American ideology. In the next section, I discuss how racist ideologies also inform mainstream perceptions on gender, beauty, and skin tone. As I suggest, the extent to which these ideologies are reinforced in society can inform the social status and social perceptions of non-whites in that society

#### Gendered Perceptions of South Asians in the United States

As Kimberlee Crenshaw (1991), Chandra Mohanty (1991), bell hooks (1992), Aida Hurtado (1996), and other intersectionality scholars have suggested, women of color are faced with social disadvantages far beyond those conceptualized by the (white, middle-class) women's movement. On one hand, the influences of patriarchy inform and influenced inter-gender relations. However, gender is just one aspect of inequality. Racialized notions of gender are critical for understanding how women of color perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others. In this system, South Asian men and women are presented as both overachieving and inferior in order to perpetuate white supremacist and male-dominated ideologies.

South Asians representations in the media are informed by such ideologies. As Patricia Hill Collins (2000) discussed the ways in which those controlling images created and produced by those in positions of power are used to exploit and subordinate people of

color. These representations serve to inform a racialized binary in which non-whites are savage and exotic compared to the refined civility of normative white behavior (Frankenberg 1993). As Yen Le Espiritu (2008) wrote, “these ideological assaults—the condensation of Asian American men and women’s multiple differences into one-dimensional caricatures—construct a reality in which racial, class, and gender oppression are defensible” (15).

Even today, Asian and South Asian men tend not to be presented in overtly masculine ways. This is another way that Asians are presented outside of white male normative identity. Asian men are also portrayed as either oversexed or asexual depending on the nature of the characterization and, more specifically, the extent to which that representation is presented alongside white males (Said 1979; Espiritu 2008). The rhetoric of non-white men as predatory and threatening has been utilized to delegitimize people of color in white American society for centuries (Frankenberg 1993). The kinds of capital assigned to such Caucasian physical characteristics as a muscular build and square jaw prove important in maintaining a physical hierarchy of what masculinity “looks like.” Additionally, the perpetuation of the model minority myth has helped propel the characterization of Asian American and South Asian American men as professionals without individual humanity or sexuality. These types of representations position South Asian men as submissive, secondary, and outside of the realm of white normative male behavior.

Perceptions of attractiveness tend to reflect the physical features ascribed to white/Caucasian women. Women of color all over the world use facial creams with

dangerous chemicals such as hydroquinone and mercury with the hopes of producing fair skin (Glenn 2008). These products remain popular because of the high value that light skin tone has for beauty in society. The ideology of a white beauty ideal can cause psychological impacts for women of color insofar as it informs what it means to be attractive in American society. This is a phenomenon that Ronald Hall (1995) has referred to as the bleaching syndrome.

In the media, Asian and South Asian American women tend to be characterized as women with overt sexual prowess and/or as women who are servile and docile (Nagel 2003). Both images perpetuate a characterization of Asian women as both others and in direct contrast to white women (Marchetti 1993). Representations of overt sexuality invoke the chaste morality inherent to mainstream white identity and place white women in stark contrast to Asian “lotus blossoms” (Espiritu 2008). Further, as Espiritu (2008) suggested, the characterization of Asian women as overtly sexual is another way to present them as object of desire to be possessed by white men. For example, when thinking about representations in the media, the sexualized juxtaposition of an Asian woman with a white man proves particularly relevant when examining the perpetuation of racialized and gendered images (Chito Childs 2009). In the next section, I will discuss the extent to which the production and development of non-white characters in the media are influenced by mainstream white ideologies.



## **Media Representations of South Asians**

### A Brief Overview of Media Studies

Scholars influenced by British Cultural Studies and the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies have long examined the significance of representations in popular media. These scholars have used the early works of Gramsci (1971) and Althusser (1971) to argue that media representations are the byproduct of power struggles between media producers and consumers, and create awareness of both the media text and the inherent message behind it. These media producers maintain their power through their pandering to middle-class and working-class whites. As Reena Mistry (1999) discussed, Gramsci's argument on the hegemonic forces behind class capital are particularly relevant when considering the production of media representations. She wrote,

It appears that Gramsci's theory of hegemony not only helps us to understand the motivations behind racist images in the media, but it is also part of a crucial process of demonstrating the inadequacy of white 'liberal' attempts at reform. In spite of well-meant ventures to present racial minorities favorably, white hegemony over the means of media production means that television and cinema continue to subjugate these social groups (1999).

In other words, media producers serve as the gatekeepers for representations of racial minorities in the media. While examples of these representations continue to increase today, the production behind these representations reinforces particular ideologies and stereotypes.

The measure of audience perceptions, better known as audience studies, is a popular and well-established methodology in the field of media studies. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, theories of media influence moved beyond the traditional hypodermic needle model that assumed a direct relationship between intended media messages and audience

perceptions (Hall 1980; Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi 1990; Morely 1980). The uses and gratification model was exemplified in Lazarsfeld's research on the 1940 election results (Lazarsfeld et al. 1948). This model rejected Frankfurt School scholars and employed a functionalist sociological model to present media representations as meeting the needs of media consumers through pleasure, information, or entertainment. It was this effect that created a sense of gratification (Merton 1946; Horkheimer and Adorno 2001).

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, audience usages of media images have been studied by many British scholars through the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS). Most notably, Stuart Hall (1980) developed a model of encoding/decoding. Hall moved beyond the idea that audiences are passive recipients by suggesting that media messages are encoded by media producers and decoded differently by different audiences. Hall was among the first to elaborate on the oppositional meanings that texts can have for different groups. In the process between media broadcast and individual perception, a media text gets distorted by a variety of factors, including its discourse, the context of the composition, and the technology of the medium itself. Additionally, receptions can get distorted by external social attitudes. Any differences in decoding by multiple audiences can be addressed by producers through the use of particular media techniques such as casting, media effects, and the genre of media in order to create a preferred general meaning. This intentional production of images creates more examples of the streamlined messages around race, ethnicity, gender, and class that mainstream audiences consume today.

In the 1980s, media ownership policies in the U.S. were severely deregulated. This allowed many large corporations to buy up the majority media outlets in a given metropolitan area (Bourdieu 1999; Bagdikian 2000; McChesney 2004, 2008). Today, large conglomerates including NewsCorp, Disney, Comcast, CBS, and Viacom can provide access to nearly all forms of news and media in a particular market. This concentration of ownership informs the kinds of images that audiences are exposed to. Specifically, media gatekeepers utilize pre-existing tropes of race/ethnicity, beauty, and attractiveness to inform character sketches and casting decisions. For example, contemporary South Asian characters tend to be played by the same type of actors. Not only does this maintain particular physical characteristics of what an Indian/South Asian looks like in American media, but also limits the access and ability of those actors who identify outside of these normalized representations. These dynamics will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 5.

Many audience studies scholars have utilized the model of encoding/decoding in their media text analyses. One classic example of audience studies is David Morely and Charlotte Brunson's research on audience perception of the British current affairs program, *Nationwide* (Brunson 1978; Morely 1980; Morely and Brunson 1999). These authors argued that regardless of any negotiated readings, messages remain structured in dominance. Many audience studies have focused on the pleasure that audiences gain from particular representations of drama and romance (Radway 1984; Ang 1985). Marie Gillespie (1995) conducted a study of how Punjabi/South Asian youth in Britain construct their cultural traditions through South Asian-centered television programming.

However, what many of these audiences studies have failed to do is to understand how mainstream white audience perceptions influence attitudes toward racial minorities.

As Stuart Hall (1997, 2003) further suggested, representations of racial and ethnic minorities tend to be characterized in either overtly or covertly racist ways. Historically, overt representations used negative and limiting stereotypes in their characterizations. On the other hand, the covert representations of today are more subtle in their stereotypical representation. This was discussed in great detail by Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis (1992) in their analysis of audience perceptions of *The Cosby Show* (Cosby et al. 1984). In their research, the authors found that while respondents described the fictional Cosby family as progressive and post-racial, many of them constructed “enlightened forms of racism” that conflated attitudes about the salience of class over race. This perception can have particular implications on the extent to which wealthy and successful racial minorities are seen over those who are less successful. Today, racial/ethnic minorities in mainstream media are integrated alongside white actors and characters, but remain secondary characters that have at least some stereotypical characteristics.

As many scholars have argued, overtly racist representations have been phased out for everything from consumer protests to perceptions of political correctness (Jhally and Lewis 1992; Entman and Rojecki 2000; Vera and Gordon 2003; Wilson et al. 2003; Gray 2004; Dave 2005; Larson 2006; Beltran and Fojas 2008; Cortese 2008; Chito Childs 2009). As Herman Gray (2004) discussed, minority characters tend to fall into one of three types of representations. First, assimilationist representations portray minorities in color-blind ways so that race is never an issue in the storyline. Second, in pluralist

representations, minorities are presented as successfully as whites, but dealing with their own racial, ethnic, and cultural issues on a very superficial level. Third, multicultural representations portray a group of multiracial characters as they would be within similar real-life social situations. As discussed in forthcoming chapters, my research examines the extent to which South Asian characters and the story lines are portrayed in ways that tend to be both pluralist and assimilationist/colorblind. In the next section, I discuss some of the key literature on South Asian media representations and discuss the relevance of my research and the intervention it provides on the research and analyses to date.

#### South Asians in American Media and Popular Culture

In popular media, particularly through online magazines, the increasing examples of South Asian characters and actors in American film and television have been of much interest to (mostly South Asian) journalists. In 2010, the online magazine *Slate* published an article entitled, “Beyond Apu: Why are there so many Indians on Television?” In this article, Nina Shen Rastogi wrote,

Yes, there are lots and lots of doctors and the occasional cab driver. But there's also a low-level government worker; a middle-American high-school principal; and a tough-talking, leather-boot-wearing, possibly bisexual Chicago investigator. If that's not progress, I don't know what is (2010).

By referencing such specifically examples as those characters in *Parks and Recreation* (Daniels and Schur 2009), *Glee* (Brennan et al. 2009), and *The Good Wife* (King and King 2009), Rastogi is making a point about the variety in representation. In the last couple of years, there have been many other articles on the Internet, particularly those covering the TV show *Outsourced* and Mindy Kaling's latest show, *The Mindy Project* (Lizardi 2011; Jacobs 2012). So, while the academic research on some of these

contemporary shows and contemporary South Asian characters is lacking, the interest in these shows, characters, and this overall relatively new phenomenon is enough to fuel coverage from journalists and bloggers. In turn, those individual consumers who are seeking out more information are able to find it online.

But in general, few scholars have written on media representations of South Asians in the United States for academic audiences. Most of those who have researched these representations have either focused on some of the trends of Asians in media and popular culture, or spent a brief amount of time discussing a particular character, film, or television show. For example, in her analysis of inter-racial relationships in film and television, Erica Chito Childs (2009) found that while white-Asian intermarriages are the most common in the United States, white-Black intermarriages are the most common in the media. This trend of representing Asians as outside members of the racial hierarchy has been common since the increase of Asian media representations in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Hamamoto 1994).

One example of a popular historic Asian media stereotype is the Fu Manchu, based on the “yellow peril” myth in which it is assumed that Asians pose a threat to white Americans and their national security (Marchetti 1993; Ono and Pham 2009). This representation is just one example of the long-standing threat of minorities against white women and a mainstream white American lifestyle. More recently, Asians have been represented in the media as the model minority. While this may seem to be a positive portrayal and one that has moved away from ideologies of yellow peril, Ono and Pham (2009) criticized this representation and argued that this characterization continues to

represent Asians as an (intellectual) threat to white American jobs, money, and status. As I argue in the proceeding chapters, many of the contemporary media representations of South Asians have been portrayed in ways that are seemingly devoid of any ethnic or gendered stereotypical characteristics. While the nuances of these representations will be discussed in further detail, I argue that these assimilationist representations reflect a colorblind ideology in which it is assumed that minorities are equal to whites on the surface, without acknowledging the inherent inequality underneath.

In general, Asian and South Asian women have long been presented in relation to white characters, particularly white men (Espiritu 2008; Ono and Pham 2009). In her work, Espiritu (2008) cited scholars who have studied examples of white-Asian pairings in television news broadcasting. The most noteworthy finding was that the overwhelming majority of these pairing are with white men and Asian women. Asian women are frequently portrayed through an exotic love gaze and at the mercy of the white male hero. Not only do these representations reproduce a white male hegemonic ideology, but they reproduce ideologies of race and masculinity through the fact that Asian women are hardly presented alongside Asian men or any other man of color.

In contrast to the conceptualization of the West, Asia possesses a Far East spiritual sensuality (Said 1978). Many scholars have discussed the problematic ways in which South Asians and South Asian culture have been portrayed in American media and popular culture (Marchetti 1993; Hamamoto 1994; Kalra and Hutnyk 1998; Maira 1998, 2002; Durham 2001, 2004; Sandhu 2004; Nguyen and Nguyen Tu 2007; Osuri 2008; Chito Childs 2009; Ono and Pham 2009). Many have critiqued the co-optation by

Western marketers of Asian culture through the commercialization of such items as mendhi and yoga, and the influence of Indian sounds in Western pop music.

For example, the song “Jai Ho,” created by Indian composer A.R. Rahman for the 2008 film *Slumdog Millionaire* (Boyle 2008) was remixed into an American pop version by the Pussycat Dolls in 2009 (Thakore 2012). The practice of utilizing a song from a film about India that became a runaway success in the United States and further extrapolating it for American popular culture maintains particular attitudes and perspectives about India and Indian culture as foreign and exotic (Thakore 2012:94). As Kalra and Hutnyk (1998) argued, the commodification and re-packaging of Asian culture in Western popular culture is comparable to colonialist practices of appropriating native goods to sell back to their own people. In fact, this re-packaging creates a whitewashed and Othered presentation of South Asian culture. As scholars as found, this can have detrimental effects on identity and intergroup relations for South Asian Americans (Ghosh 2003; Sandhu 2004; Maira 2007).

What all of these studies and analyses of South Asians media representations have in common is their emphasis on a traditional textual analysis and/or a presentation of the perspectives from an audience of one (i.e. the author). In fact, none of the studies to date have systematically analyzed audience perceptions of South Asian and Indian media characters by mainstream, mostly white, American audiences. This is my primary contribution to these intersecting fields of the media representations and the sociology of South Asian Americans.



### **Conclusion: Locating South Asians in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

In this chapter, I have discussed the extent to which the immigrant history of South Asians in the United States, the dynamics of immigration and assimilation for South Asians, the influences of media representations on people of color, and the existing literature on South Asians in the media to date all structure and inform my forthcoming arguments. First, I suggest that there are particular stereotypes that are associated with South Asian Americans that include the highly educated model minority, the working class small business employee, the emasculated and desexualized man, and the exotic and erotic ethnic woman with physical features that mark her as ethnic, but not *too* ethnic. The prejudices associated with these stereotypes along with the pre-existing American racial hierarchy can influence the extent to which South Asians can integrate into mainstream American society.

When examining representations of South Asians, many of those socially understood stereotypes are ever-present in American media. As long as pre-existing assumptions of South Asians are used to inform their characterizations, these representations will maintain and support the stereotypical and prejudiced ideologies within. Further, when examining those characters identified by my respondents, many of whom they classify as pluralist representations, on closer examination it is apparent that these representation also perpetuate assimilationist and colorblind ideologies. In the next chapter, I discuss some of the South Asian characters most commonly reported by my respondents in order to identify the types of encoded messages that are being produced and the ways in which these messages are being decoded by mainstream audiences.

## CHAPTER THREE

### ASSIMILATED OTHERS

In the previous chapter, I discussed the theoretical framework that informs my dissertation and my overall focus and interest in representations of South Asians in popular media. In this chapter, I examine responses to my online survey questions in order to understand the ways in which media consumers perceive both contemporary and historical South Asian media characters. In the survey, respondents discussed the extent to which South Asian actors and media characters are represented in positive and/or negative ways. From the responses, I identify the most frequently reported representations by all respondents to understand the types of South Asian characters prevalent in American popular media, the kinds of South Asian representations that resonate with survey respondents, and what both of these trends suggest about general social perceptions of South Asian media representations.

#### **South Asians in Popular Media**

Why are there so many Indians on TV all of a sudden?

-Nina Shen Rastogi (2010)

In June 2010, Rastogi pondered the above question in her article in the online magazine, *Slate*. The increasing number of South Asians in the media is hard not to notice. Among *TV Guide*'s top 15 television shows of 2010, four had a South Asian character or actor.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> These four shows were *The Good Wife*, *Glee*, *Community* and *Parks and Recreation* (<http://www.tvguide.com/special/best-of-year-2010/photogallery/best-tv-shows-1026089#1026090>).

As noted in *Slate*, there are about a dozen South Asian actors who have recurring roles on popular television shows today.

The South Asian population in the United States today reflects the entrance of two different groups of immigrants. The first group was comprised of highly educated technical migrants who came during the 1960s and 70s after the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act (Takaki 1989; Prashad 2000; Wu 2002). While many of these migrants were employed in high status professions, they were still perceived as Others in America (Saran 1985; Takaki 1989; Tuan 1999).

More recently, a smaller percentage of South Asian Americans have the characteristics associated with a model minority. Since the 1980s, there has been a decrease in the number of technical professionals from South Asia and an increase in those migrants who are family members of naturalized citizens. Most of these newer immigrants work in less professional jobs such as cab drivers or in motels, convenient stores and other small businesses (Prashad 2000:78-79; Dhingra 2012). As Rumbaut and Portes (2001) defined, second-generation immigrants are those children who are born to immigrant parents in the United States, and 1.5 generation immigrants are those who immigrated to the United States as young children. Today, a large percentage of South Asians in the U.S. are comprised of either the next generation children of immigrant parents, or newly immigrated family members of naturalized citizens (Prashad 2000; Maira 2002; Purkayastha 2005; Shankar 2008).

Most contemporary media representations have reflected these changing demographics. As Rastogi (2010) wrote, the popularity of the film *Slumdog Millionaire*

has helped propel Indians to becoming the next big ethnicity in popular media.

Additionally, most South Asians are used as the honorary white minority (Bonilla-Silva 2004) to round out colorblind social circles in popular films and television shows. South Asians are also a good stand-in for Arab and Muslim characters in this post-9/11 reality of fear (Nacos and Torres-Reyna 2007; Alsultany 2012). The only major requirements are experience and, of course, physical attraction.

In her analysis of representations of India in feature films during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Dorothy Jones (1955) found that most Indian representations were some variation of primitive tribesmen, cultured natives, or stalwart soldiers. As Jones wrote, “Motion picture stereotypes are particularly potent because they have an implied reality. ‘Seeing is believing’” (30). Overall, these portrayals of India in films perpetuated the same Orientalist understanding of the East as a mystical and mysterious land (Jones 1955). Said (1979) described Orientalism as the ideology held by the West toward the East that is based in racism, prejudice and dominance. Media representations today continue to adhere to these kinds of negative and dominating ethnic stereotypes. As discussed in Chapter 2, Asian women are portrayed in ways that perpetuate white beauty ideals (Collins 2000; Nagle 2003) and Asian men are portrayed as both foreign model minorities and asexual, subservient and nerdy (Larson 2006; Espiritu 2008).

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, there have been a few discussions of media representations among scholars of South Asian studies, such as through examinations of Bollywood and other diasporic media (Desai 2004; Desai 2005; Dudrah 2002; Dudrai and Rai 2005; Mishra 2002). One pivotal representation of South Asians in American popular

media was in the 1991 film, *Mississippi Masala*, which portrayed the relationship between a Black man and Indian woman in Mississippi. In the film, Meena (played by Sarita Choudhury) developed a romantic relationship with Demetrius (played by Denzel Washington), to the great disapproval of her migrant parents. Much of the film deals with the push back from both of their families, as well as the town and society in which they find themselves. Directed and produced by Mira Nair, this film was the first in America to represent a contemporary interracial relationship between individuals from these two minority groups. As Desai wrote, “[*Mississippi Masala*] explores the ways in which the racialization of (South) Asian-Americans is hidden by U.S. binary discourses of race as Black and white, simultaneously producing racial discourse framing South Asians as always foreign and as near-white model minorities” (2004:68). Similar representations include those in the 2003 film *Bend it Like Beckham*, which followed the struggles of a Punjabi-British teen playing professional soccer against the wishes of her parents. These examples are some of the first well-rounded representations of South Asians in American/Western media.

In the 2010s, the demographics of South Asians in the United States have been reflected in contemporary media representations. In addition to the increasing number of South Asian media characters and actors, there are recent examples of South Asian spokespeople in commercials for L'Oréal, T-Mobile, MetroPCS, FiberOne and Taco Bell.<sup>2</sup> As Cortese (2008) has suggested, the purchasing power of minority groups has become increasingly important for corporations, insofar as they are ready to cater to these consumers through the use of minority spokespeople (who fit white beauty ideals). These

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<sup>2</sup> It is noteworthy that almost all recent examples of South Asian spokespeople have been men.

trends perhaps not only reflect the growing South Asian population, but also the increasing purchasing power of this ethnic group.

As discussed in Chapter 2, there have been very few scholarly analyses of the trends in representation among the recent South Asian characters and actors in American popular media. My research here addresses this gap in the literature. This analysis is particularly relevant today as these representations are increasing and thus need to be further examined. Historically, South Asian in the media comprised the background as generic cab drivers or convenience store employees. Today, the characters run the gamut in their representation and characterization.

### **Survey Data**

Data was collected through an online survey targeted to individuals 18 and older. The original targets were students who were members of registered student organizations at Loyola University Chicago, but respondents were also recruited through Facebook, email listserves, and word-of-mouth. The data collection period ran from September 2010 to December 2010, and a total of 155 completed surveys are used in the analysis and discussion presented here. For a more detailed discussion of respondent demographics, see Appendix A. For the online survey protocol, see Appendix B.

In the survey, respondents answered open-ended questions that asked them to describe South Asian characters that came to mind, which of these characters they felt were portrayed positively and how, which of these characters they felt were portrayed negatively and how, and to what extent they felt any of these characters were similar or different to South Asians in real life and how. Respondents were also asked about their

media consumption habits, their favorite TV shows, movies, and actors/actresses, those contemporary (2000-present) and historical (before 2000) representations of South Asians that came to mind, self-perceived characteristics of those characters, and the extent to which respondents felt that media characters accurately portray South Asians in America. Demographics of survey respondents are displayed in Table 2 of Appendix A and their media consumption habits are displayed in Table 3 of Appendix A. The survey questionnaire is in Appendix B.

The majority of the survey sample is white, female, college educated, and born in the United States. Almost 54% of respondents report to watching entertainment on television at least four times a week, with 30% of respondents report to watching entertainment on television at least once a week. The majority of respondents reported watching movies at least once a month, with a significant percentage that also reported watching movies 1-3 times a month. These reports suggest that survey respondents overall regularly consumed a variety of popular media, and thus are providing well-informed responses to the online survey questions.

Table 1. Select Frequencies of South Asian Characters by Survey Respondents (n=155)<sup>3</sup>

	<b>Percent Reported (N)</b>	<b>N Reported as Positive</b>	<b>N Reported as Negative</b>	<b>N Reported as Positive and Negative</b>
Mindy Kaling/Kelly from <i>The Office</i>	<b>21.3% (33)</b>	16	8	3
Apu from <i>The Simpsons</i>	<b>19.4% (30)</b>	0	22	6
Dev Patel/Jamal from <i>Slumdog Millionaire</i>	<b>16.8% (26)</b>	18	1	0
Aziz Ansari/Tom from <i>Parks and Recreation</i>	<b>16.8% (26)</b>	15	3	2
Kal Penn/Kumar from <i>Harold and Kumar</i>	<b>16.1% (25)</b>	10	7	3
<i>Slumdog Millionaire</i>	<b>14.2% (22)</b>	6	2	4
Frieda Pinto/Latika from <i>Slumdog Millionaire</i>	<b>14.2% (22)</b>	11	0	0
Ben Kingsley/Gandhi	<b>13.5% (21)</b>	19	0	1

<sup>3</sup> Note: Not all respondents who reported a character described it as positive and/or negative.

Kal Penn/Kutner from <i>House</i>	<b>11% (17)</b>	12	1	1
Sendhil Ramamurthy/Dr. Suresh from <i>Heroes</i> (and <i>Covert Affairs</i> )	<b>9.7% (15)</b>	9	2	1
Naveen Andrews/Sayid from <i>Lost</i>	<b>9.7% (15)</b>	7	3	0
<i>Outsourced</i>	<b>9% (14)</b>	0	8	1
Aasif Mandvi from <i>The Daily Show</i>	<b>7.7% (12)</b>	11	0	0
Danny Pudi/Abed from <i>Community</i>	<b>7.1% (11)</b>	8	0	0
Kal Penn/Nikhil from <i>The Namesake</i>	<b>7.1% (11)</b>	7	1	0
Kunal Nayyar/Raj from <i>The Big Bang Theory</i>	<b>7.1% (11)</b>	4	5	0
Parminder Nagra/Jess from <i>Bend it Like Beckham</i>	<b>6.5% (10)</b>	6	0	3
Padma Lakshmi from <i>Top Chef</i>	<b>5.2% (8)</b>	5	0	0
Reshma Shetty/Divya from <i>Royal Pains</i>	<b>4.5% (7)</b>	5	0	1
Maulik Pancholy/Jonathan from <i>30 Rock</i>	<b>4.5% (7)</b>	3	2	1
Parminder Nagra/Neela from <i>ER</i>	<b>3.9% (6)</b>	4	0	2
Sanjay Gupta from CNN	<b>3.9% (6)</b>	4	0	0
Indian characters in <i>Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom</i>	<b>3.9% (6)</b>	1	4	0
Fareed Zakaria from CNN and Newsweek	<b>3.2% (5)</b>	5	0	0
Maulik Pancholy/Sanjay from <i>Weeds</i>	<b>3.2% (5)</b>	1	3	0
Archie Panjabi/Kalinda from <i>The Good Wife</i>	<b>2.6% (4)</b>	3	0	0
<i>Mississippi Masala</i>	<b>2.6% (4)</b>	2	1	0
Russell Peters	<b>2.6% (4)</b>	1	0	0
Ajay Naidu/Samir from <i>Office Space</i>	<b>1.9% (3)</b>	2	0	0
Dileep Rao from <i>Inception</i>	<b>1.9% (3)</b>	1	1	0
Mira Nair	<b>1.9% (3)</b>	1	1	0
Kal Penn/Raj from <i>National Lampoon's Van Wilder</i>	<b>1.3% (2)</b>	0	1	1
Babu from <i>Seinfeld</i>	<b>1.3% (2)</b>	0	0	1

In Table 1, I present the most frequently reported South Asian characters and actors in popular media by survey respondents. However, this is not an exhaustive list. For example, Bollywood actors and those characters and actors who are not South Asian are not included in this presentation of data. While those characters are interesting to analyze for many reasons, they are not discussed here because they are outside of the scope of this study. Some of the most popular characters of interest in this analysis include Kelly from *The Office*, the characters in *Slumdog Millionaire*, Tom from *Parks and Recreation*, and Kumar from the *Harold and Kumar* film series. In the next section



and in proceeding chapters, I discuss some of the most popular characters reported and the ways in which mainstream audiences perceive these well-known representations.

### **Findings**

In the next section, I identify and analyze the responses to some of the most frequently discussed South Asian characters and actors, examine the extent to which consumers perceived them positively and/or negatively, and determine whether audience perception trends conform to the intended messages produced in these representations. Specifically, I use audience perceptions of South Asian media characters to understand the relationship between audience perceptions and racial perceptions in American society.

#### Rags-to-Riches: *Slumdog Millionaire*

Doctors, lawyers, never get past 60 thousand rupees. He's won ten million. What can a slumdog possibly know?

–*Millionaire* show host

Among survey respondents, the most positively perceived representations were the main characters from the 2008 Academy Award winning film, *Slumdog Millionaire*. The film portrayed the life of Jamal Malik, played by Dev Patel, who is a finalist on the Indian version of the show, *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* In the film, we see Jamal's life as an orphaned young boy in the slums with his brother Salim and his childhood love Latika, played by Frieda Pinto. Various instances in his life are juxtaposed with his ability to correctly answer every question on the show. Jamal is portrayed as a sympathetic character whose tragic experiences allowed him to correctly answer questions that even the most educated person would have gotten wrong.



Figure 3. The three main characters of *Slumdog Millionaire* as children in the slums of Mumbai, India

In general, respondents described the characters in the film as positive by using key words such as nice, caring, kind, honest, moral, good, polite, innocent and looking for love. Frieda Pinto's character in particular was described as intelligent and beautiful. As the characters grow from children to adults, Latika and Jamal's lightening skin tones are obvious. For example, Latika develops into a beautiful woman with long, straight hair, light skin, and European features. I make this point because this practice is common in mainstream media and continues to perpetuate and promote white beauty ideals (Collins 2000). Light skin tone has long been the primary marker of beauty for women in Indian society (Glenn 2008). These types of characterizations and casting decisions for South Asians in Western media maintain particular assumptions about the kinds of physical characteristics that are more desirable and appealing for South Asian women to have.

In the survey, respondents referenced the characters' resourcefulness and ability to overcome oppression. This suggests that respondents are reacting to the characters as

they are placed within the story – as protagonists who faced challenges but succeeded in the end. In short, they are rooting for these characters because they are kind, honest and innocent. Those who described these characters as positive are actually describing the story itself as a positive story, specifically because these characters got the happy ending they deserved.

When asked to describe how the characters are portrayed positively, one respondent wrote, “Dev Patel's character is the hero of *Slumdog Millionaire*, beating out all odds against him to become a millionaire and get the girl” (Female, 29, East Asian). One respondent wrote, “Patel's character in *Slumdog Millionaire* overcame oppression, the bad influence of his brother, and the societal pressures around him” (Male, 19, Black). Another respondent wrote, “Pinto's character in *Slumdog Millionaire* is the love interest of Jamal. The happy ending of the movie isn't that he got the money, it's that he finally got the girl” (Female, 19, white).



Figure 4. Jamal (played by Dev Patel) and Latika (played by Frieda Pinto) pictured in an emotional scene in *Slumdog Millionaire*, filmed in Mumbai's famous Chhatrapati Shivaji train station.

Tangential to these perceptions are those that place these characters within the historical and political context of the story of the film itself. The story transpired in the slums of Mumbai, a very real and harsh reality for much of the Indian population. However, as one respondent wrote, “They are portrayed as believable characters who overcome hardship and stay honest and kind” (Female, 28, white). Another respondent wrote, “In *Slumdog* he was the good guy and you wanted him to win. He played a normal guy” (Female, 21, white). The assumption that this story is not only believable but also normal and common suggest that there is a disconnect between the perceptions of this film by mainstream American audiences and the realities of the story being told about India – a story that displays the realities of the slums but uses fantasy to essentially soften the blow.

Further, this kind of representation continues to reflect the Orientalist view of India and the East described by Said (1979) and Jones (1955), particularly in outsiders’ perspectives of India. As one respondent said,

I saw a news article of the young boy who starred in that movie and it struck me that he lived in a slum in India. The article showed his family home and what stayed with me is that in America we think of movie actors as being relatively well off (or at least if they are child actors, they might be middle class). This boy was living in a tent-like structure after the movie was made so evidently did not profit too much from his role in this highly successful movie [...] I suppose even though the news article I referred to showed him living in slums, he looked like a relatively happy kid in the picture they chose to use (Female, 44, white).

Overall, the characters in *Slumdog Millionaire* are perceived as Third World Others that have significantly different experiences than Westerners. As a result, the actual life circumstances of Indians in India who face extreme poverty, child exploitation and abuse is sugar-coated and ignored. In many ways, this kind of representation reinforces a

assimilationist representation where the portrayals of everyday life are presented through a white normative lens.

Forever Foreigner: Apu from *The Simpsons*

Today, I am no longer an Indian living in America; I am an Indian-American.

–Apu

One of the most recognized South Asian characters in American popular media, and one of the most identified in the survey, is Apu Nahasapeemapetilon from *The Simpsons* (Groening 1989). This long-running show revolves around the working-class Simpsons family and the cast of characters that make up their town of Springfield. Apu is the owner of the local Kwik-E-Mart. Respondents overwhelmingly described Apu’s character as a negative representation. For example, respondents used words and phrases such as convenience store clerk and business owner alongside words and phrases such as stereotypical, cheap, foreign, heavily accented, having lots of children, ignorant, stupid, dumb, and the butt of jokes. As one respondent said, “Apu is the stereotypical Indian [convenience] store owner. Will do anything to keep making money and take advantage of the customer at any cost” (Male, 31, white). None of the respondents in the survey described Apu as a solely positive character, but those who described him as both positive and negative pointed to his PhD in Engineering, his representation as a family man, and his sympathetic portrayal.

Respondents considered Apu as a negative character primarily because of his stereotypical characteristics, specifically as a convenient store owner and accented foreigner. This sort of exoticization of difference maintains white privilege by defining what white culture is *not* (Frankenberg 1995). One respondent pointed specifically to

some of the overt stereotypes present in this representation. As she said, “He is a convenience store owner which plays on the stereotype of Indians as owners of franchises. Also, he has a PhD in computer science, also relying on the stereotype that Indians are naturally computer wizards” (Female, 31, white). In addition to referencing some of these overt stereotypes, respondents characterized him as dumb, ignorant, and the easy target for ridicule.



Figure 5. Apu at the Kwik-E Mart in *The Simpsons*.

One respondent described Apu as, “Thickly accented, bumbling, owner of a dilapidated, marginal convenience store, clearly different in culture, appearance, and language from everyone else, at one point had something like eight kids all at once” (Male, 25, white/Latino). In fact, Apu is voiced by Hank Azaria, a white American man. The ways in which Azaria created a voice for Apu speaks to the use of accent and dialect in these kinds of portrayals. This overt accent perpetuates a racialized sensibility of South Asians that emphasizes the cultural capital of this group through their knowledge of the English language, but also their foreignness that maintains assumptions about the

citizenship of South Asians (Dave 2005). This overt representation also perpetuates assumptions of the forever foreigner (Tuan 1999) through this character.

Many respondents pointed to Apu as reflecting the cheap and shrewd nature of South Asians that they encounter in real life behind convenience store counters. Among those respondents who identified and discussed Apu, many of them also negatively described and discussed those South Asians in similar positions. For example, one respondent wrote, “They are bright, educated, well spoken, diligent, and hard-working. However, I must admit that I know many more who fit the stereotype of being rude, inconsiderate, and difficult to understand” (Male, 40, white). These negative perceptions of Apu as an immigrant and a small business owner suggest that perceptions of South Asians in these professions are generally negative. This corresponds to the kinds of attitudes that many Americans have toward immigrants, particularly those whom they perceive as foreign, ethnic, and most importantly, not assimilated (Alba and Nee 2003; Rumbaut and Portes 2006; Waters and Jiminez 2005). However, perceptions became more positive for those representations described as more assimilated.

#### Assimilated: Kumar

We should give this man some marijuana. Nurse! Get all the medical marijuana you can!

–Kumar

One South Asian character who many respondents generally described as positive was Kumar Patel from the *Harold and Kumar* film series. The first of these films, *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle* (Leiner 2004), followed the hilarious exploits of Kumar, an Indian-American prospective medical student, and Harold, a Korean-American finance

professional, on the hunt for marijuana and White Castle. The film received nods from many movie critics for its humor and the untraditional representation of these model minorities. As described by one respondent, “In *Harold and Kumar*, the filmmakers pointed out the ridiculous stereotypes of Asians and South Asians and made the two characters heroes” (Male, 31, white). The humor of Kumar’s character was described by many as positive. Among those who described him as positive, many also described his character as being, as one respondent said, “intellectual even though he was a pothead” (Male, 19, Latino).



Figure 6. Kumar (played by Kal Penn) and Harold (played by John Cho) in the film, *Harold and Kumar go to White Castle*.

Perceptions of this character as positive were also apparent in respondent descriptions of Kumar as a “regular guy.” Kumar was essentialized as a character that could have been portrayed as any race or ethnicity. One respondent described Kumar as “just like anyone else I know. No difference based on heritage” (Male, 31, white). Another respondent said, “Kal Penn in *Harold and Kumar* is just another regular college student who happens to be Indian. Except for the scene where he speaks Hindi, his



character could have been of any background or ethnicity” (Female, 29, East Asian). In many ways, Kumar is perceived as a character who was not generalized to his ethnicity. However, as other respondents discussed, there were still elements of this representation that maintained perceptions of this character as an ethnic South Asian.

Overt representations of ethnicity and stereotypes were also present through the representation of Kumar as a prospective doctor. As one respondent said, Kumar “played into many different stereotypes of South Asians. He played a 'silly Asian' character who was going to be a doctor” (Female, 22, white). The representation of Kumar as a medical student reflects the well-established stereotype of South Asians as model minorities (Takaki 1985; Wu 2000). As one respondent wrote, “his whole family [was] doctors, and therefore it portrayed the South Asians as being smart” (Female, 29, Latina). However, while it is assumed that South Asians benefit from the perceptions as the model minority, these stereotypes are problematic in their assumption of South Asians as a privileged non-white ethnic group (Chou and Feagin 2008; Wu 2002).

One element of Kumar’s character development was the culture clash he experienced with his family over attending medical school and becoming a doctor. As one respondent wrote, “the White Castle character is a [hero] but he seems conflicted with what his father wants him to do and what he wants to do with his life” (Female, 26, multiracial). The representation of Kumar’s struggles with his family over pursuing a career as a doctor speaks to the ways in which the model minority stereotype influences identity formation for the younger second generation children of South Asian immigrants (Bacon 1997; Purkayastha 2004; Shankar 2008). Not only is success encouraged by their

parents and families, but the external pressure of what it means to be “Indian” is also reflected off of them. As a result, education and profession become a part of South Asian identity. However, the absence of these “South Asian” characteristics influences audience perceptions of these characters as ethnic.

#### Americanized: Kelly and Tom

Diwali is awesome! And there's food, and there's gonna be dancing. And oh, I got the raddest outfit. It has sparkles...

–Kelly

Last time I was in India, I was 8 years old and I stayed inside the whole time playing video games.

–Tom

The most popular characters reported by survey respondents were those that did not have as many overt ethnic characteristics as the other characters mentioned previously. They were Kelly Kapoor, played by Mindy Kaling on *The Office* (Gervais and Merchant 2005), and Tom Haverford, played by Aziz Ansari on *Parks and Recreation* (Daniels and Schur 2009). In *The Office*, Kelly played a sales employee in a small paper company in Scranton, Philadelphia. Mindy Kaling, the actress who plays Kelly Kapoor, started as a writer and director for the show. She incorporated her character into the show early in the series for an episode on Diversity Day and has been a member of the cast ever since. Kaling had continued her roles as writer, executive producer and occasional director until 2012, when she left *The Office* for her own show, *The Mindy Project* (Kaling 2012) on FOX.

Tom plays an assistant in the Pawnee, Indiana Parks Department. Ansari himself is a comedian who has also had small roles in a variety of other television shows and

films. As one respondent said, “Aziz Ansari in all of his [roles] has never played any kind of stereotypical or negative character” (Male, 18, white). In *The Office*, Kelly comes off as celebrity-obsessed and boy-crazy. As one respondent said, “Instead of pigeon-holing her into a token racial-minority her character is more identifiable as a Nuevo valley girl or kinda ditzy everyday 20-something. She is funny and employed” (Female, 31, white).



Figure 7. Kelly Kapoor, played by Mindy Kaling in *The Office*.

What is most noteworthy is that respondents perceived both of these characters as positive, insofar as they broke some of the pre-existing stereotypes of South Asians as either accented foreigner or highly educated medical professionals. Additionally, these characters were those that respondents were most likely to describe as just like the South Asians they knew in real life. This suggests that these contemporary representations are reflecting new lived experiences, particularly for those second generation South Asians born in the United States – like Kelly and Tom (Purkayastha 2005; Shankar 2008).

Except for these few token references when necessary, these characters do not have any overt South Asian characteristics. This fact was picked up by many respondents

who described these characters collectively as Americanized. As one respondent said, “I grew up in an area with a lot of South Asian immigrant families, and their kids tended towards being pretty average, middle-class kids, not unlike the characters I listed as positive portrayals. In other words, they weren't two dimensional stereotypes” (Male, 31, white). Another respondent said,

I would say these characters are represented in positive way in so far as they are protagonists in the TV shows. Also, the characters are shown to be 'American', either born and raised or settled here and speaking without Indian accent. So, they aren't represented as foreigners or villains for the most part” (Female, 27, South Asian).



Figure 8. Tom Haverford, played by Aziz Ansari in the show, *Parks and Recreation*.

As these comments make specific reference to particular characteristics including a middle-class identity, there is something to be said for the extent to which these representations are perceived as positive for their nationalistic classification as American. By contrast, representations of Apu as overtly ethnic and representations of Kumar as having ties to his ethnicity do not compare to the representation of Tom and Kelly as “average.” This conclusion creates a perceptions of those positive South Asian media representation as having a quality that exists beyond assimilation, to near status as white (Frankenberg 1995).

While most respondents described these characters as positive because of their characterization as “normal” and “American,” some respondents were also quick to acknowledge the ways in which these characters are presented in ways to mark them as non-American. As one respondent wrote, “They are positive in that they are not portrayed as being mean or threatening. However they seem to be token roles for the most part and a lot of times they are portrayed as naive even if they are intelligent” (Female, 29, white). This suggests that while South Asian media representations are increasing and becoming more positive, these characters continue to maintain perceptions of South Asians as tokenistic and secondary. This is important when considering the place that South Asians currently occupy in the American racial hierarchy (Kim 1999; Bonilla-Silva 2004), and the extent to which this placement is influenced by media representations.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I examined audience perceptions of some of the most frequently reported South Asian characters in an online survey completed by a sample of popular media consumers. Through this analysis, I identified three degrees of characters that exist in the media today – the forever foreigner, the assimilated minority, and the average American. These findings are important for a few key reasons. When looking at the time period in which each of these characters premiered in their respective programs, a historical trajectory comes to light. It can be argued that representations of South Asians in popular media have undergone a racial formation in both their encoded characterization on the screen and their decoded perception by media audiences. This trajectory also speaks to the changing nature of stereotypes associated with South Asians.

While traditional representations relied on characterizations as either the foreigner or the model minority, more contemporary examples of these representations rely little on ethnic characteristics. In fact, these Americanized representations tend to acknowledge and play up the fact that these characters know little about their ethnic culture.

Audience perceptions are also based on the extent to which the characters have overtly ethnic characteristics. For example, a character like Apu with a thick Indian accent and a stereotypical career is more likely to be perceived more negatively than a character like Kumar who is a second-generation Indian American medical student. Additionally, a character like Kumar who is portrayed in ways that maintain particular stereotypes is more problematic than characters like Kelly and Tom who break the stereotypical molds. These Americanized South Asian characters are portrayed in ways that emphasize their assimilated identity through interracial relationships, diverse social networks, and American names.

However, in the same way that minority characters in the media have been found to reproduce particular racial ideologies, so too do South Asian characters today. For one, while respondents acknowledged the negative aspects of the foreigner stereotype, they failed to identify the problematic nature of the model minority stereotype. Additionally, while Americanized characters were deemed positive, the reflection of a racialized hierarchy through the portrayal of these characters as secondary compared to the (often white and male) lead is obscured. Physical difference in media representation by race also plays into the ways in which these characters are identified as South Asian. While it

appears that South Asian representations are improving, audience perceptions in general fail to acknowledge the ways in which racial inequality is reproduced in the media.

In this chapter, I have discussed some of the most frequently reported South Asian characters from American popular film and television. I have discussed all of the noteworthy characters and presented survey data that described some of the most popular characters and actors. In the forthcoming data analyses chapters, I will discuss audience perceptions of these and other characters from data gathered through interviews. In the next chapter, I discuss the ways in which South Asian representations continue to be portrayed in racialized ways.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RACIALIZED REPRESENTATIONS OF SOUTH ASIANS

In the previous chapter, I discussed data from my online survey and identified the most frequently reported contemporary South Asian media representations. Additionally, I discussed some of the characteristics of these characters and the ways in which survey respondents perceived them. In this chapter, build upon the findings from the last chapter and discuss common themes from my interview data that acknowledge those perceptions of South Asians in the media as racialized stereotypes. First, I identify the ways in which some of these characters are discussed as reflecting common South Asian stereotypes. Then, I discuss how respondents identified a shift in the nature of these stereotypes, specifically through perceptions that contemporary representations are breaking away from traditional characterizations.

As I argue, stereotypical representations of South Asians resonated among all respondents, but only to a certain degree. While respondents reported their awareness of South Asian stereotypes, they tended to reject them for their incompatibility with the characteristics of those South Asians they know in real life. In this chapter, I employ a critical perspective to argue that while respondents report that many of the South Asian characters and actors today lack any obvious stereotypical characteristics, these representations in fact maintain certain stereotypes in their representations as Others. As



a result, these representations perpetuate the notion that white values and white identity are the normative culture in the United States.

As discussed in Chapter 2, media representations of all racial and ethnic minorities have reflected the same prejudiced attitudes that these groups are subjected to by whites in American society (Omi and Winant 1995; Feagin 2000; Bonilla-Silva 2009). As Stuart Hall (2003) noted, minorities in the media are relegated to the roles of the slave/mammy, the native, and the clown/entertainer. For example, early representations of Blacks in the media possessed many of these traits through white men in blackface generalizing the dialect and (comical) body movements associated with free Blacks after the Civil War (Riggs 1986; Bogle 1999). While media representations of non-whites have increased insofar as there have been more quantitative examples since the 1970s, these representations still maintain Otherness by portraying non-whites as possessing those characteristics outside of white racial norms (Hall 2003; Vera and Gordon 2003). Even for critically acclaimed shows like *The Cosby Show* (Cosby et al. 1984) in the 1980s and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (Borowitz and Borowitz 1990) in the 1990s, in which the representations of Blacks were considered positive because of their representing as high class, these examples were anomalous and did not reflect the social realities for Blacks and other minority groups in America during these times (Jhally and Lewis 1992; Entman and Rojecki 2000).

Other ethnic minorities have been similarly Othered in popular media. For example, representations of Latinos reinforce the criminal stereotype and representations of Latinas are hypersexualized. What both have in common are their representations of

this group as native, foreign, and Other (Rodriguez 1997; Larson 2006). Asian characters have also been subjected to similar representations. For example, Asian men tend to be portrayed as desexualized nerds and Asian women are portrayed as hypersexual and exotic (Espiritu 2008; Ono and Pham 2009). As Gray (2004:85) noted, the portrayal of these assimilationist representations focused on common human traits of life and family over the actual social, cultural, and political experiences of minorities in America.

While there are increasing numbers of Latino and Asian characters, these representations continue to maintain an exotic characterization (Wilson et al. 2003). Contemporary examples in the early 2010s include Columbian actress Sofia Vergara from *Modern Family* (Levitan and Lloyd 2009), a sexy, fiery Latina with a heavily ethnic personality and accent to match, and Korean-American actor Ken Jeong from *Community* (Harmon 2009), a submissive secondary character who is frequently the butt of jokes for his odd personality. While strides have been made in the frequency of minority representation, these characters continue to be portrayed in ways that maintain their status as exotic and secondary members of society.

For media representations of South Asians in particular, these trends are very similar. As discussed in Chapter 2, the experiences of South Asians in the United States have followed the experiences of other immigrant groups, in that they have been subjected to the same societal pressures of acculturation and eventual assimilation (Park 1950; Alba and Nee 2003, Portes and Rumbault 2006). While it is assumed that South Asians benefit from the perceptions as the model minority, these stereotypes are

problematic in their assumption of South Asians as a privileged non-white ethnic group (Wu 2002; Chou and Feagin 2008). Further, these media representations maintain the strategic positioning of South Asians between whites and Blacks in the racial hierarchy (Kim 1999; Bonilla-Silva 2004). As discussed in Chapter 3, while it appears that South Asian media representations have moved beyond the stereotypical representations of a foreign convenience store owner to those that portray South Asians as educated, professional, and generally assimilated white collar employees, these representations are maintained as non-white, non-normative and Other through nuanced elements of their characterization and representation in the media.

In this chapter, I examine the shifting nature of these representations as discussed by my respondents. I conducted 50 interviews from May 2011 to January 2012. In these interviews, respondents were asked about their background, including the neighborhood in which they grew up, their schools and colleges, their social networks, their extent of television consumption as a child and adult, their perceptions of these shows, their perceptions of shows today, their perceptions of all characters, including South Asian characters and actors in popular media, and their perception on the future of South Asian race relations and media representations. For a more detailed discussion of my interview methodology and respondent demographics, see Appendix A. For my interview protocol, see Appendix C.

### Representation of a Stereotype

While stereotypes are social ways of grouping individuals (Allport 1954; Steele 2010), stereotypical sentiments are harmful for their generalization of individuals based on their group identities. Representations of Asian Americans in the media have fought with a long established ideology through an Orientalist white/Western Gaze has maintained perceptions of this group as Other (Said 1979). As Ono and Pham (2009) discussed, early East Asian media representations like *Fu Manchu* presented Asians as a “yellow peril” that posed a threat toward whites. One classic example of similar South Asian media representations are those Indians in the 1984 film *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (Spielberg 1984). In this film, Indiana Jones crashed his plane in a small Indian town where the local residents believed that he was sent by God to protect them from an ancient evil cult. As one respondent described the film,



Figure 9. A scene from the film, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*.

One thing that really stood out for me in that movie that people don't really talk about was just how helpless the good Indians were in that movie. Um, they seemed, they believed that Indiana Jones was sent to them by a god named Shiva [...] and I thought wow, that seems kind of...condescending towards Indians, I mean would they really believe that Harrison Ford is sent by God? [Laughs] [...] The bad Indians of course they ate snakes, they um ripped people's hearts out, uh but I gotta say [...] compared to like Apu who's really like the current stereotypes, are much better than Temple of Doom (Giles, male, mid 20s, white).

In this film, evil Indians were represented in condescending ways, and the good whites were presented in contrast to these bad savages. Indiana Jones specifically was portrayed in the role that Vera and Gordon (2003) defined as the "white savior" whose purpose it is to save helpless and submissive natives. While Giles identified the representations in the film as stereotypical, he suggested that these overt characterizations have been replaced today with the less offensive stereotype of Apu, the convenience store owner in *The Simpsons* (Groening 1989). As one of the most frequently reported South Asian media characters, Apu was discussed in a variety of ways by respondents. Many respondents used cultural characteristics to describe his representation on the show. For example, as these respondents said,

Um he was religious. He had a Ganesh statue in the back of the store. I think he was also vegetarian because when Lisa went vegetarian I think Apu took her up to the garden with Paul McCartney. And talked about being vegetarian (Elaine, female, early 30s, white).

I did see the, the episode where [Apu] got married. And I loved that episode! [...] That's my favorite part about Indian culture is that...he, can have a prearranged marriage but it's important that he falls in love with her too and like, the whole scene with like the wedding and stuff was really, really cute (Nina, female, early 20s, white).



Figure 10. A Hindu wedding between Manjula and Apu in *The Simpsons*.

Both Elaine and Nina described and discussed Apu in ways that focused on his identity as Indian and Hindu, such as his religion, his practice of vegetarianism, arranged marriages, and elaborate weddings. This type of representation not only maintains South Asians as foreigners (Hall 2003), but perpetuates an attitude by mainstream American audiences toward South Asians as possessing and maintaining a starkly different culture as forever foreigners (Tuan 1999). As Ruth Frankenberg (1993) argued, this sort of exoticization of difference maintains white privilege by defining what white culture *is not*. For these respondents, white culture is defined with an American cultural identity and a Christian religious practice. Thus, all other characteristics are presented dichotomously as evil and bad heathens (Clark 2003).

For many respondents, Apu's most noteworthy characteristics are those commonly understood stereotypes of South Asian immigrants. Specifically, his

representation as the owner of a convenience store plays into perceived assumptions about a particular segment of the Indian and South Asian American population. As respondents said,

Even the most stereotypical ones... there's somebody out there like that. So you mention like Apu. I mean not, he's a stereotypical character but there is some guy somewhere who owns a convenient store and you know... probably has a heavy accent. And you know, I mean plus he's not gonna be as, as comedic as the guy on an animated show but... yeah. Some slight truth to it maybe (Carl, male, early 50s, Black).

Unfortunately, the things I have seen, unfortunately what happens is, stereotypes like, the thick accent, the... different clothing are the things, or the fact that on TV shows you see a lot of um... you know, South Asians characters who are in the position of like...you know, they're cab drivers, they're cashiers, [they own] the like corner stores, you know like these are all stereotypes that get beaten like a dead horse, over and over and over and over again. And... um... it does not seem to be abating really, you know... (Walt, male, late 20s, white).

As both of these respondents suggest, the stereotypes are not universal, but there is some truth to the representation of South Asians in these particular professions. Further, these representations continue to be reproduced in popular media, even today.

These perceptions of South Asians/Indians as belonging to a particular profession mirror the findings in Millian Kang's (2010) work on nail salons in New York. In her research, Kang examined the interactions between upper-middle class white women and the working-class Korean nail technicians. In many ways, the experiences between South Asians convenience store workers and non-South Asian customers are similar to the experiences between Koreans and non-Koreans, through the ways in which this professional relationship is informed and determined by their cultural differences.

Most respondents also noted Apu's accent as a negative characteristic. As Rosina Lippi-Green (1997) argued, accents have often been utilized in popular media for comedic purposes. Apu's Indian accent in particular has become widely recognized by mainstream audiences as his marker of difference (Dave 2005). Additionally, the use of a heavy accent is another way to maintain the perception of Asians as forever foreigners in America, no matter their citizenship or immigration status (Tuan 1999). This element of Apu's representation was perceived negatively by some South Asian respondents. As one said,

I think the media portrays [South Asians] as having accent, not speaking English well um... I think there's like a, kind of a stereotype of them as being sort of like... I wouldn't call it the buffoon, but there's something else where, you know they have accents and there's this tilt of the head that happens and it's very like, kind of... mocking you know [...] I think the stereotype is that they're um, they work at a convenient store. Or [...] their own monetary interests come before anything else, you know. That they don't want to assimilate into American culture, that they don't want their kids to assimilate into American culture. That's, those are the stereotypes that I feel like I'm... I've been exposed to, like Apu from *The Simpsons* or something like that (Ila, female, late 30s, second-generation Pakistani American).

For this South Asian respondent, the stereotypical representations are apparent and obvious. In addition to some of the characteristics Ila identified, including the accent and the head-tilt, she also references those characteristics that relate to assimilation. For this respondent, the most pervasive media images maintain the characterization of South Asians as immigrant, foreign, and Other.



Russell Peters, a contemporary Indian-Canadian comedian, regularly uses an “Indian accent” in his stand-up routine to make fun of his Indian family and culture. As one respondent said about him,

Russell Peters um pokes fun at his accent and the um customs of um Indians, Indian culture. Um, whether or not his stuff is good or bad I don't know, I think he's hilarious, his observation of the Indian accents and Chinese accents and stuff like that. Obviously a lot of racial and ethnic accents, I think more um not so much mocking I would say but poke fun and make humor of everyone's ethnicity (Cris, male, early 20s, second-generation Filipino-American).

For this respondent, Peters' use of an accent to make fun of Indians is simply for the purposes of making a joke. Like another respondent's reference to his self-deprecating “tall jokes,” Russell Peters is seen as both self-mocking and an equal-opportunity offender. What these respondents fail to acknowledge are the extent to which this representation reaffirms particular stereotypes and ideologies. Specifically, the reliance on an accent is just another way to maintain Indians as Others alongside the perceived “normative accents” of white Americans (Dave 2005).

Some of my South Asian respondents perceived Peters in a negative way. As one said,

I feel like his comedy where he does use the fact, his ethnicity to talk about it I think that's, it was good for the South Asian community but I mean it just goes back to the whole, you know it's using that old comedy and sometimes [it] does cause problems (Pankaj, male, early 20s, 1.5 generation Indian-American).

For Cris, Peters' overt use of accents perpetuates an “old comedy” portrayal that essentialized South Asians and makes a joke based on Otherness and difference. In an interview with Priya, a second generation Indian-American, she discussed how the use of

ethnic characteristics to point out difference resonated with her on a personal level, recalling her experiences of being made fun of in elementary school by her mostly white classmates. It was through this lens that she viewed media representations of South Asians. When asked to discuss whether the character of Tom from *Parks and Recreation* (Daniels and Schur 2009) was a positive or negative representation, she said,

I feel like, I also don't think that...it's like a bad thing, I think it's just one, like I don't think of it badly. I think when you have an accent, it's like that's when people are mean, to like make fun of you. Cos when they don't [have an accent], I just think of it as like anyone else, growing up here (Priya, female, mid 20s, second generation Indian American).

For Priya, South Asian media representations that do not possess overt ethnic characteristics are not negative portrayals. In other words, those representations that are absent of obvious ethnic characteristics like accent and culture are positive insofar as they are “like anyone else” who has assimilated into white, mainstream, American culture. When comparing Tom to a character like Apu, Apu is stereotypical insofar as his culture *is* his character. On the other hand, Tom is discussed in terms of his *absence* of culture. Other examples of contemporary South Asian characters that are described as non-ethnic will be discussed in further detail later in this chapter.

When considering the resonance of a character like Apu, it is important to acknowledge the impact that the white habitus has for many consumers. As Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Carla Goar and David G. Embrick (2006) argued, residential segregation is so extreme that many communities in the United States have remained 100% white. In these areas, any information about minorities are gained from their stereotypical

representations in popular media (Entman and Rojecki 2000). In the white habitus, these stereotypes are fueled and perpetuated as a result. For example, one respondent noted,

I do remember when I was younger thinking about Apu's character and wondering what it was based off of. Because I...you know, I mean I understood the stereotype but [...] I do remember having...you know, thinking about it and you know trying to have like a dialogue like with my parents you know, they just didn't have much of a response, but like what was...what was that stereotype based off of because, you know, I guess when I was growing up you know, anybody I knew who was, you know, South Asian...weren't you know, weren't running liquor stores [...] I just remember just thinking like, I just felt like it was so...made up (Joseph, male, early 30s, Latino).

While Joseph did have interactions with South Asians in his habitus, these real-life South Asians did not reflect the particularly pervasive representation of South Asians in the media. On the other hand, many respondents perceived representations like Apu as reflective of South Asians in real life, but only to a degree. When asked to identify South Asian media characters that are similar to South Asians in real life, respondents said,

I guess um...Apu among people I've actually ever met but I can't necessarily speak, [...] there are people I guess that kind of you know, are like Apu going around you know to do, you know work you know, a 7-11 or Dunkin [Donuts] that you know, you run across, but in terms of people I know, you know not really (Mark, male, late 20s, white).

Not his personality but what he does for a living, that's something that I definitely see in the neighborhood. Um, so I could, I get it. Like, I'm sure there are people who live in certain neighborhoods who don't get outside the neighborhood who would think that's an accurate portrayal just cos they don't know, you know what I mean (Ayo, female, late 20s, Black).

Like many respondents, Mark noted that he personally did not know anyone like Apu who owned a convenience store or other small franchise. Additionally, Ayo identified this particular representation as reflecting a person and an assumption that most people

have today. As many of my respondents either personally know South Asians or have interacted with them through school or other professional settings, the distinctions that these respondents make between the character of Apu and the South Asians they know in real life are noteworthy. Conversely, it can be assumed that for those who do not know South Asians personally, a representation like Apu could be the only South Asian in a white habitus. This results in the creation and maintenance of particular assumptions about Indian identity, specifically as that identity compares to mainstream white identity.

Interestingly, for those who identified Apu as an accurate reflection of someone they encounter in convenience stores and gas stations, their interactions reflect the kinds of interactions that the fictional characters of *The Simpsons* have with Apu on the show. For many of my respondents, the stereotype is acknowledged and understood, but only to an extent. In general, respondents discussed how this specific stereotype does not reflect the characteristics of those South Asians they know personally. In the next sections, I discuss some of the representations beyond Apu and the extent to which mainstream audiences perceive these contemporary characters as more reflective of South Asians in real life.

### **The New Stereotype**

Asian Americans have long been stereotyped as the model minority, and it has been assumed that all members of this group are highly intelligent and successful (Takaki 1985; Wu 2002). Not only does this stereotype presuppose a racial hierarchy that is genetic, it fails to acknowledge educational and legal policies that once allowed only a

cross-section of educated Asians to migrate to the United States (Prashad 2000, Wu 2002; Purkayastha 2005). This stereotype has played an important role in the placement of Asians and South Asians into the honorary white category, assuming that these groups are better than Blacks but still not good enough as whites (Kim 1999; Bonilla-Silva 2004). As discussed in Chapter 3, South Asian characters serve as that acceptable and non-threatening diversity in white casts. In fact, this type of representation exists in many forms. As one respondent noted, there has been a marked shift in media representations of South Asians. He said,

Just the kind of dead actors you have here and there, you know playing a doctor you know, somebody who's been there for a scene or two, many times they'll have South Asians playing doctors in movies or something like that. Um... I think much more than... than other professions I mean sometimes you'll [...] see like uh, a South Asian who are um, represented as you know, taxi drivers or something like that too, but I guess at least from, from the representations that I can think of that I've seen or that have maybe stuck with me the most, it's more of like a professional class (Ethan, male, early 30s, white).

For some respondents, representations have moved outside of the traditional stereotypes of the accented foreigner to another popular stereotype that emphasizes a high professional status, usually in the medical field. As one respondent noted,

In *The Simpsons*, they show Apu like working at the Kwik E Mart, a lot of them have higher roles, like even in ER, one was a doctor [...] They are professionals versus before they weren't like that. I feel like you know now, like a lot of people here aren't like you know our parents [...] they're not like doctors or engineers, well some of them are engineers, but they aren't like doctors and things like now. And now a lot of people are becoming that and it's changing (Priya, female, mid-20s, second generation Indian American).

For Priya, this shift in representation reflects the upward mobility of the second-generation South Asian Americans that she knows personally.



Figure 11. Dr. Neela Rasgotri, played by Parminder Nagra in *ER*.

In the United States, the stereotype of South Asians as convenience store owners has been taken over by the stereotype of South Asians as doctors, exemplified by the character of Dr. Neela Rasgotri in the NBC show, *ER* (Crichton 1994). Not only is this reflective of what respondents suggested is occurring in American society, but it is also reflected in the kinds of social networks that my respondents reported having. As some respondents said,

I would say definitely in *Harold and Kumar*, Kumar's dad pushing him to be a doctor would definitely kind of fall into the, you know what I had talked about, everybody's parents pushing them to be you know um...you know, working in the professional doctor, lawyer kind of jobs (Lauren, female, mid 30s, white/Latina).

Dr. Suresh in *Heroes* is actually very similar to some of my friends who are going to um medicine and genetics, um who are also South Asian. Like my friend [...] who is going to [college] for, um medicine, and they kind of seem very similar in how they carry themselves and like, how intelligent they are in the fields of uh, biology and such (Raymond, male, late teens, white).

For Lauren, Kumar's characterization reflected the pressure to pursue advanced degrees that she perceived are being experienced by the younger generation of South Asian Americans.



Figure 12. Dr. Suresh, played by Sendhil Ramamurthy in *Heroes*.

In many ways, this family pressure is in addition to the societal pressures of living up to the model minority stereotype. Additionally, Raymond discussed the similarities between his Indian friend and the character of Dr. Suresh, a geneticist on the former NBC show, *Heroes* (Kring 2006). Specifically, Raymond felt that both his friend and Dr. Suresh were similar in their education and in their personalities. These comments suggest that audiences respond positively to media representations of South Asians as professionals, specifically through the ways these representations are more accurate reflections of the South Asians they know in real life.

However, some of these representations of South Asians as doctors/professionals still maintain some overt cultural characteristics. For example, one respondent described an episode of the USA show *Royal Pains* (Lenchewshi and Rodgers 2009) and the struggles experienced by the character Divya, an Indian-British Physician's Assistant. She said,

I remember because it was an episode with her parents and it was just very like [...] she was talking more about her traditions at home and like, her culture and she didn't want to be... um... this thing with her parents, she wanted to do like this line in medicine and they didn't think that this line of medicine was honorable and, there was a lot of that like, honorable talk um... and you know, a Southeast Asian woman and um, she had to be a certain way so it was like this, she was having you know, that... that age-old battle [...], Westernized versus being you know, true to her homeland and her culture so, I remember seeing that, and it seemed a little misplaced in the episode [...] I think her representation is... is fairly positive um... cos it shows her as a fully capable woman you know... but she's also... always stressed and like, you know, she always has to be perfect and I think that plays into this idea of you know... Southeast Asian, like a lot of other, you know Asian cultures, have these like strict you know... be honorable and be respectful and you know, always constrained by that (Leticia, female, late 20s, multiracial/Latina).



Figure 13. Divya, played by Reshma Shetty, with her boss Hank in *Royal Pains*.

In the show, Divya deals with pressure from her parents to go back to business school and to move forward with her arranged marriage. For Leticia, this representation of Divya reflected some of the overt assumptions and stereotypes of Asian and South Asian women in the West. In fact, Divya's representation is unique insofar as it is a contemporary professional representation with strong associations to Indian culture and



customs. However, in the same way that many of the other South Asian characters go against the stereotypical pressures of their traditional families, so too does Divya.

For some of my South Asian respondents, model minority representations like Dr. Suresh resonated in interesting ways. For example, Raheem (male, mid 20s, second-generation Pakistani American) discussed how he personally looked up to Dr. Suresh for pursuing a field like genetics that was outside of traditional medicine, but still highly skilled and came with the title of “Doctor.” Additionally, Pankaj (male, early 20s, 1.5 generation Indian American) not only enjoyed watching Divya on *Royal Pains*, but also liked the pro bono clinic on the show and discussed his interest in opening such a clinic after finishing medical school. For these aspiring South Asian professionals, these representations were particularly important and impactful. In the next section, I discuss another type of contemporary South Asian character – one that is absent of overt characters and is described by both South Asian and non-South Asian respondents as an accurate representation in American popular media.

### **Breaking Stereotypes, Breaking Culture**

Over the years, representations have moved away from the traditional and stereotypical examples of Apu to ones that embody well-rounded characteristics and, most significantly, are not identified by their ethnicity. These contemporary South Asian representations fit into Grey’s (2004) category of assimilationist representations, in which non-white characters are portrayed similarly to white characters in the lack of any overt references to ethnic culture. In fact, this theme was identified by many respondents and is

most exemplified by the Indian American actor, Kal Penn. Penn (real name: Kalpen Modi) has appeared in a number of television shows and films including *National Lampoon's Van Wilder* (Becker 2002), *The Namesake* (Nair 2006), and the TV shows *House M.D.* (Shore 2004) and *How I Met Your Mother* (Bays and Thomas 2005). Penn is best known for his character of Kumar in the *Harold and Kumar* film series. One respondent discussed Penn's many media incarnations. As he said,

Jumping off, predominantly off of *Harold and Kumar* and *Van Wilder*, my impression is that [Kal Penn] sort of really immobilizes the bridge between sort of traditional uh, I think Indian or traditional South Asian like um family focus and like the sort of uh, I sort of hate to say it, but like the kind of, not entirely, but at least partially assimilated um like frat boy kind of mentality of a... like you know, the sort of like really fratty South Asian that I know. Um I feel like that's what Kumar was sort of like, he was like self confident and assured and likes to use illegal drugs and blah blah blah. I feel like in *Van Wilder*, his character wanted to be like that, and so he was really playing on that you know, oh no I'm Indian, my parents want me to be a doctor, but I want to have fun and see tits and blah blah blah [...] But I feel like he's very sort of cognizant of those two [...] poles on the axis of um the presentation of South Asians and really sort of be able to combine that for a lot of personal profit, and ultimately I think uh probably a lot of good, just if he's able to prove that those roles can be flexible I think that's a victory. A kind of shitty minor victory, but it's a victory (Tim, male, mid 20s, white/Latino).

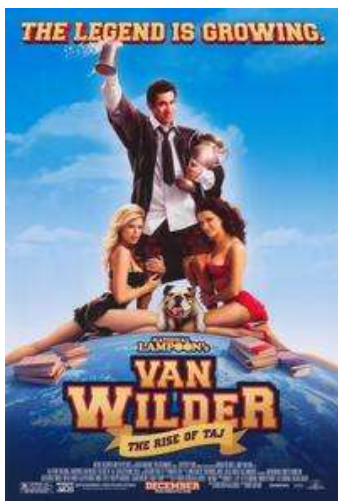


Figure 14. Taj Badalandabad, played by Kal Penn in *National Lampoon's Van Wilder*.

As Tim noted, there was a significant difference between the traditional characterization of Taj from the 2002 film *Van Wilder* and the character of Kumar that premiered in 2004. For many of my respondents, Kumar reflected the characteristics of the average 20-something Indian American college student whom they frequently encountered in their social networks. Similar to Kumar, these real-life South Asians were often described as dealing with the same family pressures to pursue a medical degree. In fact, respondents discussed how Kal Penn himself exemplified this relatively recent shift in the media representations. As one respondent noted,

I think [Kal Penn] is one of the earlier actors to kind of break in to mainstream. So as a trail blazer I really respect him. I think that he has done some like, you know even though *Harold and Kumar* isn't like the most intellectually ground breaking thing, it was one of the first perceptions of Asian Americans in the media that just shows Asian Americans just being ridiculous and living life, um and being hilarious. [...] I respect the roles that he's taken and I respect his, you know I think people are really hard on him for taking on some stereotypical roles, but I think that um as a trailblazer you often have to take the roles that you're given and kind of use that to build capital (Bijal, female, mid-20s, second generation Indian American).

In many ways, the 2004 release of *Harold and Kumar go to White Castle* (Leiner 2004) marked an important shift for Asians and South Asians in the media. This film was the first of its kind to represent Asians (through Korean-American and Indian-American actors) in ways that not only de-emphasized their ethnic identity, but also strove to portray these two characters as typical college-aged characters on the search for marijuana. As a result, this film resonated with a wide variety of audiences and was praised by many Asian critics for its non-traditional representations.

Respondents also identified similar characteristics in their discussions of some of Penn's other characters. For example, when discussing the character of Kutner from the FOX television show *House M.D.*, one respondent said,

I remember him not being like... you know quote unquote abrasively like Southeast Asian, like they, they made him you know, [...] American you know like he was, he didn't have the heavy accent he was like acculturated to the U.S., kind of thing so... I thought that was kind of cool how they didn't try to make him like overtly one thing um... to make him seem like quote unquote normal and not like he's from a different part of the world and not one of us, you know kind of thing (Leticia, female, late 20s, multiracial/Latina).



Figure 15. Kal Penn as Lawrence Kutner in the TV show, *House*.

Kutner was an Indian-American man whose biological parents were killed during a robbery in the convenience store they owned. He was adopted by white parents and given an “American” name. On the show, Kutner frequently countered those characters that made direct references to his Indian ethnicity. It is noteworthy that Kal Penn himself has played a variety of these characters over the years. In many ways, this speaks to the

extent to which certain actors are deemed “acceptable” stand-ins for South Asian Americans in American media. I discuss the relevance of casting decisions in Chapter 5.

Kelly Kapoor from *The Office* (Gervais and Merchant 2005) was another representation used to discuss the ways in which contemporary South Asian characters are no longer characterized by their ethnicity alone. As discussed in Chapter 3, Kelly was one of the most frequently discussed characters in the online survey, but most survey respondents felt that her character was a negative representation. However, interview respondents generally characterized her in positive ways, particularly in terms of her assimilated characterizations. For example, one respondent said,

Yeah she’s pretty cool. I know that um, she’s been in like a few different things, I’ve seen some movies lately. Um... she’s actually pretty awesome, her I’ve seen um... and it’s not just a typical, stereotypical [...] wife of someone [...] especially for um... a South Asian female. Um, her roles are kind of a pretty big deal, which is cool, it’s actually an improving, definitely, South Asian representation (Faith, female, mid 20s, Black).

For Faith, Kelly’s assimilationist representation is indicative of the improvement in contemporary South Asian media representations. Additionally, the assimilated character that Kaling plays in this television show is reproduced in the characters that she has played in films. However, as I discuss in Chapter 5, while Mindy Kaling’s casting success is interesting for a variety of reasons, it is important to note that she has produced many of the films and television shows that she has appeared in.

The character of Tom from *Parks and Recreation* is another example identified by respondents of a South Asian character whose ethnicity is significantly downplayed. In

real life, Aziz Ansari is well known for his stand-up comedy and small roles in other television shows and films. As one respondent said,

I guess [Tom is] sort of similar [to] *The Office* with Kelly's character, just kind of breaking stereotypes uh, from I guess what I've earlier, seen as mainly representations of what I've seen as South Asian, like I said as mostly, kind of serious professionals in the medical field, or like physics, or doctors things like that. So I guess positive in that way... (Ethan, male, early 30s, white).

For this respondent, Tom is portrayed as outside of stereotypical norms just as Kelly is.

Interestingly, both of these shows have been on in the same Thursday night lineup on NBC, sometimes even back-to-back. Viewers who watch that block of television are exposed to two very similar South Asian representations that exist in contrast to some of the more traditional stereotypical representations in other shows on other channels.

Many interview respondents identified Tom and described him as having both positive and negative characteristics. Interestingly, almost all of the respondents made no direct comment on his Indian American identity. In fact, some respondents actually classified him outside of the South Asian ethnic category. For example, one respondent said,

Well I mean he's just such a jerk, and kind of...I don't know there's almost a desperate and overkill of trying to fit in. Like, that's kind of why he's so douche baggy um...like because he, I mean he acts like you know, a really obnoxious white guy (Lauren, female, mid-30s, white/Latina).

Lauren was quick to note that she does not think of Tom as a generally positive character.

In fact, her characterizations of him as a “douche bag” and an “obnoxious white guy” suggest that Tom's characteristics exist outside of what she would identify as the

characteristics of a South Asian man. Another respondent similarly characterized Tom as someone who did not have the characteristics of a South Asian. As he said,

Yeah you know it's, it's... kind of funny cos... his character is like again, like the selfish he's kind of like, full of himself [...] I don't think... there's ever any um... indication that he's, these things because he's South Asian, I think he's these things who hap-, he's selfish and like... his character could have been played by any number of say, white comedians you know. Um... I think he's these things and he happens to be... played by um [...] Aziz Ansari, really, really funny guy um... and I think, and I think the common trend is that the most suc—, the most talented comedians are the ones that um... you know, they're so, their characters are so well drawn and they're such... good actors, that they don't really have to... create stereotypes out of that, for laughs [...] he's kind of got like dollar signs in his eyes, I think he wants to become this media mogul and things like that, again he's doing all these things and you just completely forget that he's South Asian, I mean you don't even notice it in the first place because he's [laugh] so funny and ridiculous to begin with, it doesn't matter that he's white or Black or South Asian or something like that (Walt, male, late 20s, white).



Figure 16. Tom and his Entertainment 720 business partner Jean Ralphio in *Parks and Recreation*.

For Walt, Tom could have been played by an actor of any race/ethnic because of the character's lack of overt South Asian characteristics. In many ways, this represents an

assimilationist and colorblind representation. Another respondent discussed Aziz/Tom in similar ways, but associated his character with another racial group. As she said,

He reminds me more of like a stereotypical Black guy than like an Indian guy, quote unquote, cos I mean he's always talking—like, he quotes a lot of rap music and stuff and always talking about gettin' paid, and trying to get paid via like drinks or something, you know. So yeah, so a lot of, I remember his standup, the joke that he did where he, I mean he was like at an R. Kelly concert like, *what?* I mean really, like who goes to an R. Kelly concert? Stop! Except for Black folk, like really and truly. Like yeah, he reminds me more of like some Black guy trying to get his hustle on more than like somebody who was like quote unquote Indian (Jane, female, mid-30s, Black, emphasis in original).

For Jane, this actor's and character's characteristics are not those most commonly associated with a South Asian guy. Rather, these characteristics associate him as a “Black guy” more than anything else. While this particular categorization runs counter to the placement of South Asians into the honorary white status, it may likely reflect three particular dynamics. First, the actor's skin tone is darker than most South Asian men in the media. Skin tone is one important trait that Bonilla-Silva (2004) identified as contributing to one's placement in the racial hierarchy. Second, Tom/Ansari may be practicing a form of cultural appropriation by using black culture in his own conceptualization of a second-generation Indian American identity. Third, Jane's reference to Tom's marketing company and Ansari's consumption of R&B music suggests that these traits in particular are understood as not only “Black culture” (Rose 1994) but *not South Asian* culture. For these three respondents, the absence of any obvious South Asian characteristics left this character open to be judged outside of the parameters of his ethnicity. Interesting, these respondents chose to describe him in terms



of his racial categorization. These examples suggest that a character like Tom is different from characters like Apu and Kumar, both of whom are described as Indian and identifiable as such through particular characteristics associated with that ethnicity.

On the other hand, some respondents discussed examples of popular media characters in terms of the extent to which these characters reflect the personality traits of South Asians they know in real life. When describing both Tom and Kumar, one respondent said,

I think for both of them they're just like very funny and fun. And I don't...the fact that they are South Asian is there but I don't hear it talked about as much. Like it's more of like who they are as people so they're just like funny and like to have fun. But it doesn't seem related to anything about being South Asian [...] because um a few South Asians I know, they seem like that, like they seem more natural. It doesn't seem like they're trying to put on a character like here I am, I'm Indian. It's just like, I'm just a regular person and sometimes some stuff comes up about me being Indian, some stuff comes up about me being a student, and not like over the top (Aliya, female, mid-20s, Black).

For Aliya, the common thread between these media characters and the South Asians she knows in real life is the lack of emphasis on their ethnicity. This suggests that the South Asians that she referenced (mostly through her graduate school program) are so acculturated and assimilated into American society that their ethnic identities remain covert (Park 1950, Gordon 1964, Waters and Jimenez 2005). This response suggests that contemporary South Asian media characters and South Asian in real life tend to behave in ways that align with normative mainstream white American culture (Frankenberg 1993).

It is important to note that not all respondents perceived these contemporary characters as accurate representations. For Raheem, a second-generation Pakistani-American male, characters like Padma Lakshmi on *Top Chef* (Serwatka 2006) and Aziz Ansari from *Parks and Recreation* were not reflective of the South Asians that he knows in real life. As he said about Ansari,

He doesn't include um cultural...uh references in his standup often at all, and also in his character on *Parks and Recreation*. I think he's a great comedian um you know but um, the only thing that people can relate to [...] he has brown skin and he has a Muslim name you know so um... jokes like I said they don't really refer to any cultural aspects or, and I think he's um, from South India too. Um so I really don't know like how I'd talk to him if I was in the same room with him. You know um...he definitely doesn't carry that image, he definitely doesn't um... carry himself that way either. I don't know how to explain it but I'm sure you understand where you know, Desi<sup>1</sup> they have this sort of like... the way they carry themselves is sort of similar for a lot of South Asians in the West you know, they have this air about them that...um...the way they look, the way they talk, um...you know, they way they act. It's all similar, they tend to be the same too but he doesn't, he doesn't come off that way at all, he comes off completely different, kind of crazy sometimes (Raheem, male, mid 20s, second-generation Pakistani-American).

For Raheem, Aziz Ansari does not represent South Asians in real life because of his *lack* of ethnic jokes and the lack of an “air” about him that Raheem identified as something associated with South Asian Americans. As a result, this respondent is unable to relate to this actor on a personal level. While many respondents including Raheem categorized Ansari's characters as positive representations for their non-ethnic characteristics, the extreme form of assimilation used to characterize these representations may lead to a disconnect among those South Asian American consumers who have strong ethnic ties.

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<sup>1</sup> “Desi” is a Hindi word for “people.” In the South Asian community, the word desi is used to describe fellow people who are of South Asian descent.

In the next section, I discuss the responses of those assimilated and acculturated South Asians about these representations in American media.

### Second-Generation Media Diaspora

The data discussed in this section point to a particular phenomenon that I am defining as a “second generation diaspora” that is evident in the consumption of South Asian characters on American television by South Asians audiences. Traditionally, the diaspora refers to ethnic migrants who move from their home countries but still have ties to their culture. For my respondents, assimilated representations of South Asians resonate on a personal level to the extent that these characters “feel like me” and they “get excited” about watching.

Previous literature has identified the extent to which media representations inform and influence diasporic identity (Gillespie 1995; Desai 2004; Durham 2004). My contribution to this topic is the focus on South Asian characters in American media. Through this, I suggest that 1.5 and second generation South Asians are moving away from images in Bollywood and other South Asian media and toward images in American media that tend to reflect their experiences of assimilation and acculturation. Interesting, these are the same images that also resonate positively with non-South Asian audiences.

While Raheem perceived Ansari as less positive because of his lack of overt Indian/South Asian characteristics, many of my other second-generation South Asian respondents perceived these kinds of representations in more positive ways. For example, many respondents discussed how these characters reflected their identity, and many of

the experiences that these characters went through on television reminded them of their own experiences. As one respondent said about such actors as Kal Penn and Aziz Ansari,

I feel like they're just kind of, feel like me or they kind of feel like my friends [...] You know, grew up in America and just kind of had very typical probably suburban upbringings kind of like me and my other South Asian friends did. And just kind of the same thing, probably had a lot of white friends growing up just like I did too and just kind of had that same kind of upbringing, went to college probably or something like that and you know, so I think, at least just from what I get from their characters, they seem very just typical [...] South Asian-American characters (Sheetal, female, late 20s, second generation Indian-American).

For Sheetal, such assimilationist representations as having a lot of white friends were accurate reflections of her own experiences. As a result, she was able to personally identify with these characters.

Many of the South Asian respondents in this study also discussed the extent to which the characters' lack of ethnic characteristics resonated with them on a personal level. While discussing the character of Kelly from *The Office*, one respondent said,

I never really thought of her as being Indian as like, I just thought her character was like, I mean she was fine, she was just stupid and annoying sometimes. And I don't know if like, cos I never got that like, that's how she was being represented because it's not like she has an accent or anything. And to me it's just like, someone who grew up here and looks like that. So I don't know if other people...got that from that (Priya, female, mid 20s, second generation Indian-American).

As Priya said, she identified this character in a particular way because of her own position as a second-generation South Asian American young adult. She was also quick to note that she was unsure if non-South Asian consumers would have similar perceptions. Additionally, Priya indicated that Kelly's lack of accent was the most salient characteristic that identified Kelly as not Indian.



Figure 17. Kelly (as Snooki) and her on-again/off-again boyfriend Ryan (as Justin Bieber) in a Halloween episode of *The Office*.

As Priya discussed in her interview, the stigma of having an Indian accent was especially impactful for her parents and many of her family members and friends. This likely explains her association between accent and the perception of foreignness.

Regarding the generational perceptions of contemporary South Asian media representations, one South Asian respondent discussed the perceptions of her parents toward two contemporary examples in American popular media. As she said,

My parents love [*Outsourced*] because it makes them nostalgic and they like seeing people in saris on American TV and they get excited about that. Um, you know like they get excited whenever an Indian person is on any TV show and they'll let me know. Um I think to them it's very affirming to see that. Um or even like lately when the trend is been on shows like *So You Think You Can Dance* do Bollywood numbers. They find that very affirming (Bijal, female, mid 20s, second generation South Asian).

As discussed in Chapter 6, *Outsourced* (Borden 2010) was a television show that appeared on NBC during the 2010-11 primetime season. The show depicted the life of a white call center manager whose job and office gets outsourced to India. In Bijal's

response, these examples of Indian characters and Indian culture on American television brought a sense of pride to her first-generation Indian immigrant parents. In many ways, this is similar to the sense of pride that Blacks had during the 1950s and 1960s during those few instances when a Black actor or performer appeared on television (Riggs 1986).

### **Conclusion: The Future of Representations**

When respondents were asked to discuss their perceptions on the future of South Asian media representations, the findings were mixed. On one hand, many respondents had a positive outlook. For example, many described the high likelihood of more South Asian characters and actors in the future. Further, respondents assumed that these representations would remain positive insofar as they were assimilated and non-ethnic.

As one respondent said,

I think it's only going to get better as well, you know I see less and less of you know the token Indian guy with the crazy, over exaggerated accent working at the Kwik E Mart I mean, I think a lot of the newer actors that are, you know of South Asian descent are [laugh] what people would consider normal, they don't have the accent um., you know especially with what you said with like *Harold and Kumar* and what's his name, Aziz Ansari, you know they just seem like cool guys that you would hang out with and drink a beer with you know, they just seem like you know, everyday normal people, and I think that's good and that's what um... will happen in media, start to represent the normal people versus you know, the token [South Asian] guy (Ricky, male, late 20s, white).

As another respondent said, it was his hope that future representations of South Asians would move even further away from the stereotypes. As he said,

I want to see it branch away from doctors, which would be nice. I don't want to see Kumar either, it's not like really, it's refreshing to see someone who's... moving kind of away, to somewhere except for the weird smoking thing [...] I

definitely see more moving forward, not everybody can be nerdy, not everyone can be this, you're gonna see like, the representation of a normal...average everyday person (Robert, male, early 30s, Black).

As Robert said, it was his hope that future representations would move beyond the stereotype of South Asians as nerds and doctors. Additionally, Robert suggested that future representations of South Asians would move toward a "normal" characterization. This compliance to normalcy would make these characters positive and forward-thinking. However, as discussed throughout this chapter, the perceptions of what is "normal" in American society presupposes particular characteristics that reflect a mainstream white American identity. These types of representations favor a colorblind perspective and ignore the history of racial inequality and racial apathy in American society (Forman 2004; Doane 2006; Bonilla-Silva 2009; Coates 2011).

On the other hand, those who were more critical of South Asian media representations today felt that the future of South Asian representations were bleak. As one respondent said,

Honestly, I don't see it getting any better. I mean I, I sound a little pessimistic saying that but, it seems to be you know, the best way to earn money in TV or movies to get a quick laugh, and the quick laugh will always be to go for the race joke. So, I think on the outside what's gonna happen is that we're gonna be so crazily PC that we're gonna piss everybody off, but on the inside we'll sit up there... we'll sit up there and you know laugh at [...] the guy who owns a convenient store, who can barely speak English...(Georgia, female, early 30s, Black).

While Georgia is critical of both representations of South Asians and representations of minorities in general, she is less optimistic that anything will change. In fact, she believes

that because such stereotypical representations resonate on a comedic level with mainstream audiences, producers will continue utilizing these stock characters.

While one respondent also discussed how South Asian media representations today have few ethnic characteristics, she also suggested that minorities will continue to play the role of secondary characters. As she said,

I think they'll continue to make progress where they'll...they're not as much of characterizations of the different types. But I think we can see even with like African American people or Asian people it's not, they're still portrayed by their culture a lot of times. It's rare that you find, it's not like a white guy whose the lead guy who plays just you know a normal role, rather than being like the stereotype of the white guy. And I think, so I mean will it improve? Yes, but will it be like equal? No. I mean, I know, I don't think I'll ever see it. I mean maybe but that's doubtful in the American media (Mallory, female, early 30s, white).

For Mallory, media representations for all minority groups will continue to be subjected to stereotypical characterizations. However, she also noted that while African Americans and Asians will continue to be represented in stereotypes, the stereotype of the white guy will not be utilized and referenced for white characters. Not only does this maintain the resonance of white culture as normative in the white habitus, it presupposes the ingrained notion of a racial hierarchy with whites at the top (Frankenberg 1993; Kim 1999; Bonilla-Silva 2004). Additionally, the acknowledgement of the intentional practices of the media suggest that at least some of the media consumers today are aware of these dynamics. These same respondents are further aware of how little can be done to break out of this status quo. The future of such trends are likely to stay the same, especially when considering the dynamics of concentrated media ownership and the trends of media



corporations to reproduce particular representations in order to maintain a racial/social status quo (Bagdikian 2004; McChesney 2004, 2008).

The analyses presented in this chapter identify the ways in which contemporary South Asian media representations accurately reflect the current stereotypes associated with this group and the current trajectory of these stereotypes and assumptions. In this chapter, I argue for the benefit of studying media representations in order to better understand racial attitudes. While my respondents identified a wide variety of South Asian characters and actors in popular media, their discussions of these characters indicates that many of these representations maintain and perpetuate a mainstream white American ideology. Further, the extent to which respondents identified characters as positive or negative also fits into this ideology with regard to what is assumed to be the most acceptable. This suggests that media representations do little to challenge the colorblind racial status quo, and that these assimilationist representations perpetuate a white normative social order. In the next chapter, I will continue to discuss interview respondents' perceptions of South Asian characters. Specifically, I offer critical analyses on audience perceptions of South Asian media representations with regard to gender, casting, and national identity.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE MORE THINGS CHANGE, THE MORE THEY STAY THE SAME

In the previous chapter, I discussed the ways in which South Asian media characters are represented in racialized ways. The extent to which these characters are represented as assimilated and non-ethnic inform audience perceptions of these representations as positive and “just like everyone else.” As a result, ethnicity is de-emphasized and South Asian characters are portrayed as having normative white American characteristics. However, audience perceptions of these representations are further informed by the ways in which gender, phenotype, casting decisions, and national identity are portrayed. In this chapter, I employ a more critical analysis to argue that South Asian characters remain secondary and Other in major American films and television shows. I identify three areas which this examination is relevant: in representations of South Asian women and men, in representations of South Asians as actors, and in representations of South Asians as American.

In Western society, perceptions of attractiveness derive from an understanding that white/Caucasian features are the most beautiful and the most ideal. These ideologies were first developed during European colonialism and out of the social and cultural tensions between colonizers and their colonized. (Jordan 1974). These European men deemed the native Africans as primitive, savage, and hypersexual when compared to the refined culture and behaviors of (wealthy) white Europeans (McClintock 1995; Forth

2012). In 21<sup>st</sup> century American society, ethnicity is slightly more fluid, but beauty is still judged for the extent to which it embodies Caucasian traits and features.

In many ethnic communities, there have been long histories of skin tone discrimination particular for women (Hall 1995; Glenn 2008, Ono and Pham 2009). In Latin-American societies, skin tone continues to determine one's place in the social hierarchy (Murgia and Saenz 2002; Bonilla-Silva 2004; Telles 2004; Villarreal 2010). In South Asian communities, (dark) skin tone can serve as a severe social stigma (Mazumdar 1989). Perceptions of skin tone and the preference for a "fair" complexion have been so internalized that these dynamics influence everything from self-esteem to spouse selection (Sahay and Piran 1997; Grewal 2009).

As Evelyn Nakano Glenn (2008) wrote, skin lightening creams and soaps have been big business for international companies in communities of color. In reality, these products are unsafe and often contain damaging chemicals like hydroquinone and mercury. Since there are no regulations on these products in many foreign countries,<sup>1</sup> many Western companies knowingly produce and market them. In many ways, the commercialism of these products reinforces the psychological "bleaching syndrome" (Hall 1995) that already exists in these communities. From one perspective, it could be argued that these companies are simply meeting a consumer need. However, this phenomenon maintains particular assumptions about light skin tone as a form of social capital and as one aspect of the definition of beauty.

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<sup>1</sup> Some countries have spoken out against skin-lightening products, including Japan where hydroquinone is outlawed (Miller 2006:36).

South Asian men tend not to be objectified in terms of their skin tone (although this trend is increasing in South Asia).<sup>2</sup> More often, perceptions of South Asian men as asexual model minorities lead to popular stereotypes of this group as both nerdy and effeminate (Espiritu 2008; Ono and Pham 2009). South Asian men are also subjected to ideologies around beauty and skin tone, although to a lesser degree than South Asian women. In American popular media, individuals who look *too* ethnic because of skin tone, coloring, physical features, or other characters are automatically marked as Other.

On one hand, there are benefits to looking just ethnic enough in Hollywood. In her research, Mary Beltran (2005) used many contemporary examples of multi-racial actors in Hollywood to argue for the fluid nature of race in mainstream American films. As she discussed, the racial identification of mixed-race actors becomes relevant when they are cast in particular roles. For example, ethnically ambiguous multi-racial actors such as Vin Diesel and Dwayne Johnson appeal to younger audiences in the 21<sup>st</sup> century because they reflect their mixed-raced peers (2005:54). As Beltran argued, members of the current generation are more likely to watch media with actors who are of a different race than them. This is particularly relevant when considering those demographic shifts that now make non-whites the majority of media consumers in the United States, as well as the relatively homogeneous demographic group(s) represented in my research.

In general, the second-generation children of immigrants are assimilating into American culture (Portes and Rumbault 2006). Assimilation is measured by such factors as high education and occupation, and strong intergroup communities. For Asians and

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<sup>2</sup> Whiteman, Hilary. 2010. "Vaseline Skin-Lightening App Stirs Debate." July 16. CNN. Available at <http://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/asiapcf/07/16/facebook.skin.lightening.app/index.html>.

South Asians, high educational and occupational status is an important factor that contributes to their placement in the middle of the American racial hierarchy below whites but above Blacks (Kim 1999; Yancey 2003; Bonilla-Silva 2004). However, the fact that Asians are physically identifiable as Others informs mainstream identification of this group as forever foreigners (Tuan 1998). Thus, to what extent can Asians and South Asians *really* assimilate into American media and in American society? In this chapter, I will discuss some of the dynamics identified by my respondents that maintain perceptions of South Asians as non-normative characters.

### **Reflections of Gender in South Asian Media Representations**

The characterizations of South Asians in popular media tend to differ by gender. As one respondent said,

In popular media when you see South Asians, um you know they're always kind of presented in a very one dimensional way I guess, so they're always smart you know, seen in you know, tech jobs or as being kind of the nerds or computer geeks [...] some of the male characters. Female characters, you know, again smart, in professional um positions, um...attractive (Ileana, female, early 40s, white/Latina).

In many ways, Ileana's perceptions correspond with mainstream perceptions of South Asian masculinity (as nerdy/effeminate) and femininity (as attractive/sexual).

Additionally, representations of South Asian women as attractive are further informed and influenced by mainstream ideologies that objectify and exoticize women of color. As one respondent described,

I believe it's called the exotic becomes erotic type, where you have someone who's just naturally beautiful. It shouldn't be such a big deal if the person's like of this ethnicity or this culture or whatever.... Because when we as Americans generalize a lot of things, we end up like, oh well she's from here oh, she's *gotta* be hot [...] I just want to say like no that person's just attractive, you tend to think

of it as like exotic becomes erotic because they are different and you know... and they're from another country and it doesn't make them hot just because of that, it comes from just being attractive because they're generally attractive (Robert, male, early 30s, Black, emphasis in original).

As Robert suggested, South Asian women are objectified because of a perceived assumption between ethnicity and beauty/attractiveness that is influenced by an Orientalist Western gaze. Many of my respondents addressed this gaze in their descriptions of South Asian women in the media. In the next section, I discuss the ways in which the perceptions by mainstream white American audiences of South Asian women as attractive for their "ethnic" features reproduces colonialist ideologies and stereotypes of South Asian women as exotic, erotic, and sexually available.

#### South Asian Women as Exotic

When respondents were asked to identify those South Asian characters and actors that they found "attractive," both men and women were most likely to identify a few specific characters. These included Padma Lakshmi from *Top Chef*, Frieda Pinto from *Slumdog Millionaire* (Boyle 2008), Bollywood actress Aishwarya Rai, and the character of Asha from *Outsourced* (Borden 2010). When respondents were asked to discuss what it was about these characters that was so attractive, the most commonly identified characteristics included skin, hair, and facial features. When grouped together, it is obvious that these actresses share particular physical characteristics, including light skin, light hair, and white facial features such as long faces and narrow noses that correspond with dominant ideologies of beauty (Collins 2004) and Orientalist perceptions of Asian and South Asian women (Said 1979; Durham 2001).

Additionally, dark coloring (contrasted on light skin) is a well-established characteristic of ethnic and exotic beauty for women (Beltran 2005; Beltran and Fojas 2008). Those actresses who have such features are marketable for a variety of reasons, including their perceived beauty and their less offensive skin tone. One respondent evoked this trend when discussing South Asian broadcast news anchors. As she said,

There are a lot of racially ambiguous women on the news anchor circuit that might be South Asian and I don't know it. Does that make sense? Like there's brown looking women I just don't know what they are. And that so and in a sense they're all interchangeable. That sounds horrible but you know, they're reading news. Sanjay Gupta goes on location and he has his own little specials and stuff sometimes and, but the women seemed to be more behind the desk and just kind of like...there, with like Anglo features but they're brownish (Farrah, female, late 20s, white).



Figure 18. Dr. Sanjay Gupta, medical correspondent on CNN.

The responsibilities of South Asian television journalists are determined by gender.

While South Asian men like Dr. Sanjay Gupta of CNN have more prominent and active roles on their networks, South Asian women are relegated to local news anchors that are literally on display for audiences. As Farrah suggested, South Asian women who are just ethnic enough will also find success in these industries for their ambiguous looks.

Perceptions of attractiveness within minority communities tend to align with mainstream white beauty ideals, but also acknowledge the value of natural ethnic characteristics. Just as Patricia Hill Collins (2000) noted, South Asian beauty tends to be appreciated in the Black community. This was apparent in the discussions by some of my non-white respondents. For example, one respondent described the character of Ali from the TeenNick show, *Degrassi: The Next Generation* (Moore and Schuyler 2001) as pretty because, “I think she looks African-American” (Aliya, female, mid-20s, Black). For this respondent, Ali’s non-white attractiveness resonated with her as a Black woman. Additionally, Ali has more overt ethnic characteristics. This suggests that darker skin and ethnic features are more attractive to non-white audiences than white audiences.



Figure 19. Ali, played by Melinda Shankar in *Degrassi: The Next Generation*.

For women of color, perceptions of non-white beauty are more challenging to conceptualize and discuss because of their own objectification in mainstream American society. As one Black female respondent discussed in her interview, white heterosexual men are more attracted to non-white women who have overtly ethnic physical characteristics such as dark skin tone, natural hair, and ethnic facial features. In fact, some scholars have justified this claim (Hill 2002; Hunter 2002; Jefferson and Stake



2009). When discussing the character of Divya from *Royal Pains* (Lenchewski and Rodgers 2009), she said,

I wonder sometimes like, is [Divya] the stereotype of what Americans and Europeans think is a pretty Asian, or pretty Indian woman. Cos I mean like, I know like, you know talking to Indians like, same skin complexion issues [as Black women]. Cos she's very pretty but she's dark, or darker, so I wonder if she's be pretty in India, or if she'd be pretty here cos that's what we want pretty Indian women to look like (Jane, female, mid- 30s, Black).



Figure 20. Reshma Shetty as Divya in a promotional shot for *Royal Pains*.

As Jane noted, the favor toward light skin is prevalent in both the Black community and the Indian community. While one could argue that Divya fits into an Americanized representation of a South Asian woman insofar as she has light skin, tall stature, a thin figure, and white/Caucasian facial features, Jane described her as “dark.” Although this respondent did not specifically identify a color or shade for point of reference, it can be inferred that Divya is an exoticized South Asian woman in American popular media based on her skin tone and physical features. In the next section, I discuss audience perceptions of South Asian women as exotic.

### South Asian Women as Erotic

When respondents were asked the question, “Are there any South Asian characters that you find attractive,” the majority identified those South Asian actresses who were either models or had model-like features, such as a tall stature, flawless skin, and thin figures.

Padma Lakshmi, a former model and the host of the reality cooking show, *Top Chef* (Serwatka 2006), was identified by many respondents as an example of an attractive South Asian in American media. For example, one respondent said,

Oh, Padma from *Top Chef*, is that her name? I can’t remember her name but she’s very attractive, plus she has scars which is pretty awesome [...] and Padma just because I--if that’s her name, just because she’s very like...uh, graceful like very like and not just because not, saying that she’s nice or whatever but just that she’s very like... you know she kind of floats on things, if that makes sense (Claude, male, late 20s, white).

As Claude discussed, he found Lakshmi attractive for a variety of reasons, including her physical attractiveness and the real-life 7-inch surgical scar on her right arm. However, his references to her as “graceful” and “float[ing] on things,” suggests a foreignness that is both exoticized and Othered (Said 1979).

Lakshmi’s fair skin and racially ambiguous physical features not only make her more appealing to the majority of American audiences, but also allow her an easier entrée into popular media. On one hand, her ambiguous ethnicity is problematic insofar as it fails to acknowledge her actual ethnic identity. While Lakshmi is 100% Indian and was born in India, one respondent assessed her identity as half-white and half-Indian. As he later said,

Her ethnicity was downplayed [on the show] [...] she’s very very...very Westernized only to the point where she was supposed to be very worldly. You know and that was the only like... utility of her having a non-white ethnicity. Um

because I mean...you know I think ever her...being a model and the way that she's put out there as this, this beauty symbol...um is that she... other than having like, slightly darker skin I think she appears very white [...] she has very European features and so her South Asian-ness [...] only presents itself as um, for utility (Joseph, male, early 30s, Latino, emphasis in original).



Figure 21. Padma Lakshmi, host of *Top Chef*.

Joseph identified two dynamics. On one hand, Lakshmi's lack of overtly ethnic characteristics made her an ideal actress to cast as the host of this popular/mainstream reality cooking show. On the other hand, her ethnicity was vague enough so that a presentation of Lakshmi as "worldly" could be used as a selling point on a show about cooking. As Anita Mannur (2005) discussed, Lakshmi's (exoticized) role as cultural cooking ambassador has been long established.

Other respondents were more critical of Lakshmi's representation on the show. For example, one South Asian American respondent who identified herself as a regular viewer of *Top Chef* was disturbed by her representation. As she said,

Well, I mean I think they... totally sexualize her on the show. I mean, and that's the attraction, they're using her to attract viewers and stuff but [...] they don't

really talk about her ethnicity but they...they wouldn't for her, they do more, with... the contestants, and I think on *Top Chef* people actually, cos they're so many like moments where they talk to the camera and they talk about what it's like being Asian American, or Asian and owning a restaurant or whatever, so I think some of that does um... does get addressed, but Padma's sort of like the sexy Indian... or exotic Indian you know, who will attract people to watch a show about food, even though she's very qualified to be on that show. [Sexualized how?] Her outfits uh, the way she talks, she's riding out on a horse, I mean, they don't [laugh] they had her on a horse like with *this* and it was like, wow (Ila, female, late 30s, second-generation Pakistani American, emphasis in original).

For Ila, Lakshmi's characterizations continue the trend of representing non-white women in sexualized ways (McClintock 1995; Nagel 2003). Lakshmi's position as the host of *Top Chef* and her prior experiences on cooking shows are countered with representations of Lakshmi in exotic, erotic, and sexualized ways. As Meenakshi Gigi Durham (2001) wrote, consumption of South Asian culture translates into consumption of the feminine and the Other. In her work, Durham referenced Spivak's (1998) discussion of subaltern subjects and their inability to critique the generalizations imposed upon them by their rulers. Women of color tend not to be in positions to change or influence the production of these images. As a result, South Asian women like Lakshmi continue to be represented in the media as exotic sexual beings through the white, heterosexual, male gaze (Mulvey 1975). All of these dynamics of beauty are particularly relevant when examining a popular, well-established, and darker South Asian American actress – Mindy Kaling from *The Office*.

#### The Case of Kaling

When *The Office* premiered in 2005, Mindy Kaling started as a writer and producer for the show. For the second episode of the first season, Kaling wrote a character for an episode on Diversity Day. In that episode, Kelly was portrayed a quiet and subdued

Indian woman in frumpy clothing who slapped her boss Michael Scott for his racist humor. As the season progressed, Kelly morphed from her original character into the loud, ditzy, celebrity-obsessed character that many of my respondents have discussed. While Kaling now stands on the producer side of things with *The Mindy Project* (Kaling 2012), it is important to note that Kaling herself was not subjected to the same sort of audition scrutiny like other non-white actors (Mulvey 1975). Specifically, any conversations about Kaling's attractiveness and marketability likely did not happen, or did not happen to the extent that they do for other South Asian actresses and characters. Kaling has essentially created characters that has been minimally influenced by (white, male) producers, and thus subverted the traditional influences of media executives (Entman and Rojecki 2001; Hall 2003). As one respondent said,



Figure 22. Kelly Kapoor (Mindy Kaling) slaps Michael Scott (Steve Carrell) for his racist comments in *The Office*.

[Kelly] plays this character who's completely... the word I guess would be ditz or flaky you know she's shallow, she's um, she's image-conscious, image obsessed you know, she's uh interested in romance at inappropriate times with inappropriate people, she seems very like you know, uh, light and fluffy and I, I

it's you know I think the reason, part of the reason it works is because I feel like that character's usually been reserved for the blondes, if you think about sitcoms [...] I know she's a writer on that show so she probably like cast herself as a way to like, cast against type and just kind of throw something new out there (Ileana, female, early 40s, white/Latina).

As Ileana said, Kelly later represented the character that is often cast by a white blonde woman, not a dark-skinned South Asian woman. However, Kaling's access to that character is due entirely to her executive role on that show. While Kelly Kapoor in *The Office* (Gervais and Merchant 2005) was one of the most frequently reported and discussed characters, she was less likely to be included in the list of South Asian characters considered attractive. The primary difference between Kaling and the other South Asian actresses is her physical appearance. Specifically, she has darker skin and a curvier body. One respondent reflected on the character of Kelly in ways that invoked her own self-reflection as an Indian woman. When comparing Kelly to other South Asian women, she said,

Mindy Kaling is darker, skin wise she's darker. Um her humor is definitely less innocent I think. [...] I respect the fact that she doesn't try to, she doesn't dumb herself down. [...] Mindy Kaling is definitely curvier than a lot of the other South Asian actresses on other TV shows but I mean that's not to say that one woman is more South Asian than another. I just, again, this goes back to like my own body image stuff that I like seeing someone who's curvier on TV because I am also (Bijal, female, mid-20s, second-generation Indian American).

For Bijal, Kaling's physical appearance resonated with her on a personal level. This is similar to the ways in which representations of other women of color are perceived by their audiences (Gauntlett 2008; Littlefield 2008). As Bijal said, it is obvious that Kaling's physical appearance distinguishes her from most South Asian women in American popular media.

Another respondent also commented on Kaling's marketability in Hollywood. As she said,

She's shorter, she's a little chubbier, she's a lot darker, and I think like it's almost, you need to be Halle Berry which is like just brown enough so we know, but don't be too brown or don't be too ethnic, if you want to be considered attractive like if, she's a comic actress so I don't think there's as many like restrictions and stuff but I don't really see her getting like you know, romantic leads, she's always going to be somebody's best friend, even though she's fantastic that's just going to be how they cast her (Jane, female, mid-30s, Black).

As Jane said, Mindy Kaling has played the "best friend" to the lead in a number in recent films, including *No Strings Attached* (Reitman 2011) and *The Five-Year Engagement* (Stoller 2012). Even though Kaling played a primary role in the creation of Kelly Kapoor, thus influencing her own standing in Hollywood, Kaling will continue to play secondary roles as determined by white male producers and executives. Even today, the resonance of the representations in *The Mindy Project* remains to be seen.

With regard to Kelly's perceived attractiveness, many respondents described her as they would describe Kelly the character. As one said,

I think she's attractive in that she's portrayed as this um innocent, um homely woman um, but at the same time um I think she's unattractive in that um she's [...] kind of portrayed as a bitch, [...] kind of as a teenager, um kind of downplays I think her talent (Cris, male, early 20s, second-generation Filipino-American)

While Cris was one of the few male respondents to identify Kelly/Kaling as attractive, his perception of her attractiveness had nothing to do with her physical appearance.

Specifically, Cris commented on her representations as both an attractive subdued woman and an unattractive bitch. This latter characteristic corresponds to those social perceptions of loud, boisterous, and bitchy African-American women (Littlefield 2008).

Overall, most respondents had little to say about Kaling's attractiveness. For example, when asking a respondent if he thought Kelly Kapoor was attractive, he said, "Uh... she uh, not, not particularly, not unattractive" (Alan, male, early 40s, white). Similarly, a respondent who previously described Bollywood actress and UK television star Shilpa Shetty (a model/actress who is tall and thin with light skin and white facial features) as attractive, said about Kelly, "I don't have a thing for her so I guess in the middle. Not unattractive" (John, male, mid-30s, white). Notably, while John was quick not to identify Kaling as unattractive, he failed to identify those characteristics that made her attractive, or at least "in the middle." Specifically, he did not reference any physical features as he did when discussing Shetty. While John did not state that Kelly was "not unattractive," his description of her attractiveness essentially placed her lower on the hierarchy of those South Asian women with white/Caucasian physical characteristics. In the next section, I discuss how gendered stereotypes influence the perceptions and representations of South Asian men.

#### Perceptions of South Asian Men

In many ways, representations of South Asian men have similar characteristics to those identified in the research on representations of Asian men. Not only are these characters portrayed as secondary to the white male lead, they tend to be portrayed in ways that characterize them as effeminate and weak (Espiritu 2008; Ono and Pham 2009). While conceptualizations of masculinity in the East acknowledge a variety of traits as masculine, such traits continue to be perceived ethnocentrically as feminine in American



ideology (Pan 2012). For example, when asked to discuss attractive South Asians in the media, one respondent said,

Hiro on *Heroes*, that was his name. He was like Japanese. He's cute but not in a sexually attractive way to me. And I think it was because the way they had him do his character was kind of like stereotypical in a way. Like he didn't speak very good English [...] and so I guess this speaks to my racial privilege in my racial identity for real because I didn't think of him as someone to date or anything like that. But Kumar and Harold I kind of did. It's different. I think they're...they made fun of the stereotypes but they weren't portrayed stereotypically [...] [Something about their portrayal was different?] Yeah but then now that I say this and I'm thinking about it, it could just be because they're more white seeming or whatever because they're speaking perfect English and all that kind of thing. So that could be my bias, 100%. I'm willing to admit that because now that I've said that, what I just said I can see that. I really can see that and it bothers me (Farrah, female, late 20s, white).

While Farrah eventually acknowledged her preference for Americanized characters like Harold and Kumar over overtly ethnic characters like Hiro, this suggests that sexual attraction for these characters are influenced by the extent to which a South Asian male character is portrayed as more masculine and even more “white” (Harris and Kalbfleisch 2000; Chin and Kaufman 2003).

Another South Asian representation discussed by many respondents was the character of Raj Koothrapalli from the show, *The Big Bang Theory* (Lorre and Prady 2007). This show follows the lives of four highly educated scientists working at the California Institute of Technology. Raj, a PhD in astrophysics, emigrated from India to work at the university. Overall, respondents described Raj as shy, awkward, and unable to speak to women unless he has been drinking. For some respondents, Raj was portrayed as a nerd, but this was a generally positive representation. As some said,

Raj is kind of funny cos most of the humor [...] dwells on his... you know, [he] misunderstands an American idiom or something like that but I think for the most

part the humor really comes more from um, that he's a guy who... when he gets drunk and communicate with women perfectly and when he's not, he can barely say a word to them, and I think that kinds of plays on the whole... you know, on kind of the whole nerd stereotype [...] he's kind of a good fit with the group (Mark, male, late 20s, white)

You know, it's always kind of self-deprecating humor whenever they have you know, nerds on TV cos it's just making fun of how nerdy they are and whatever, but I guess, so it's like, socially it's kind of a negative [laugh] negative portrayal cos they just show him not being able to, I... I don't necessarily know if it's... tied to the fact that he's South Asian or not, but more on the fact that he's a nerd and he can't talk to women or something but um I guess that would be sort of negative or whatever um, for comedic effect or something. But as far as being a successful guy um... you know, being a doctor and um, you know, I guess... doing breakthrough studies in science is pretty positive (Ethan, male, early 30s, white).



Figure 23. Raj Koothrapalli, played by Kunal Nayyar in *The Big Bang Theory*.

As Mark suggested, Raj's character plays more to the stereotype of the nerd than any other (ethnic) stereotype. Additionally, as Ethan suggested, the humor itself is more self-deprecating than anything that overtly references ethnicity. However, these perspectives maintain the colorblind ideology (Lewis 2004; Bonilla-Silva 2010) of the absence of racial stereotypes in media representations and fail to acknowledge Raj's overtly ethnic characterizations throughout the series. As one respondent said,

His character is more of a kind of very dorky um devoted physicist. And they actually do very much more play on his um uh racial background but um...they do it in a better way than it has been done in the past [...] They're not like

completely ignoring it but like they don't make fun of it too much. And he's just [...] handles it himself. So more of like, he's making fun of himself, so occasionally like I'll make tall jokes about myself because I'm tall and that's what I do as a person. So um and humor isn't really directed at him. It's more brought up by him and his character (Raymond, male, late teens, white).

While Raymond suggested that Raj's representation in the show is based on racial/ethnic stereotypes, he is also quick to suggest that since Raj is the one making jokes about himself, it is self-deprecating and thus less problematic. However, what Raymond fails to acknowledge is the fact that the representations in *The Big Bang Theory* are not created by a character but are created and produce by white male media executives who create and maintain this representation for purposes of Othering comedy.

In fact, many respondents did pick up on the fact that this particular representation used essentializing ethnic stereotypes of South Asian men. For example, one respondent said about Raj,

Pretty stereotypical Asian nerd, um...effeminate often, um...I think it's really just about how he can't talk in front of women. Uh, cos when he's not around women he's often like, he has great lines he's really funny and then when they introduce women into the mix he becomes ya know this...quiet, awkward, Asian man. Um yeah, like asexual almost (Bijal, female, mid-20s, second generation South Asian).

Bijal's perception of this character corresponds to the continued representation of Asian and South Asian men as awkward and effeminate (Espiritu 2008, Ono and Pham 2009).

Additionally, some respondents identified some of the overtly stereotypical and racist ways in which Raj was portrayed on this show. As Jane said,

He might as well be a eunuch or something like I mean, it's really, it's really odd that you can do that to a character on TV like, like a character of color and stuff, and maybe I wouldn't have noticed it if it hadn't been a character of color [...] But it just seems really weird that you have like... like, you can do that, like every time I watch that I'm like I can't believe it, like this is happening on television so

it's, I don't think it's a very positive portrayal, to be honest like, I feel like with the other characters there is some funny or there are some redeeming qualities but to me to like... basically like castrate a character that way is just, oh my God, like seriously, Indian people should be writing letters about that, like that's not acceptable (Jane, female, mid 30s, Black).

As Jane suggested, Raj is a negative portrayal for his negative racial and gendered characteristics. Additionally, this representation is problematic for the limited ways in which it portrays a person of color on network television. In fact, this representation is so problematic for Jane that she feels the Indian community should speak out against it.

Overall, those respondents who perceived Raj as a positive character without any overt ethnic characteristics concluded that his representation was that of a stereotypical nerd, not of a well-educated Indian immigrant. While other respondents identified some of the problematic elements of Raj's representation, this show continues to be one of the most popular shows on CBS. Based on the fact that the storyline revolves around four science PhDs, it makes sense that the producers of this show would cast a South Asian as their "diversity" character. This characterization in particular invokes perceptions of South Asians as the model minority (Takaki 1989; Wu 2002). In the next section, I discuss perceptions of South Asians actors in major television shows and films. As I suggest, the casting of South Asians are due in large part to the racial hierarchy and perceptions of the "acceptable" minority.

### **Perceptions of South Asians as Actors**

The decisions made by media producers to cast certain actors in certain roles are hardly arbitrary. Media producers are bound to the racialized and gendered ideologies perpetuated by media owners (Kellner 1995; Hall 2003). In the last 20 years, there have

been numerous examples of impossibly homogenous representations. For example, shows like *Friends* (Crane and Kaufmann 1994), *Sex and the City* (Star 1998), and *Girls* (Dunham 2012) have all been criticized in the media for their lack of non-white actors, even in the background. In 2012, an article on the online blog Racialicious uncovered the casting calls for non-white nannies in the HBO TV show *Girls*. These calls included requests for an overweight African-American woman who could speak with a Jamaican accent, a young and sexy Latina, and a grandmotherly Tibetan woman (James 2012). Comparably, in their research on the Korean-American character Sun from the TV show *Lost* (Abrams et al. 2004), Meyer and Stern (2007) noted that the actress Yunjin Kim originally acted so well in her audition for the (white) female lead that the producers decided to create a Korean character for her to play. These findings imply that an actress of color, no matter how good she is, can only find placement in certain types of roles.

The intentional decisions by American media producers to cast South Asians actors and characters have been picked up by respondents, either subtly or more directly. As one respondent said,

I hate to say it but I don't think there are a lot of movies and media where they act, where, you see a lot of prominent South Asian actors, in there. And if they are, they're as you know, the sidekick or, the friend or the...sage you know, the sage who provides wisdom for, to the, you know, lowly insecure white boy you see for about 2 minutes. Essentially what I'm saying is that it's like South Asians have become the new Black people [What makes you say that?] It's almost because it seems to me as this Hollywood cycle for what, through minorities it's seen to hope that supporting say, droll, and um... about 70 ago, it was th, you know, it was the aunt Jemima character, you know, 30 years ago it was, you know, it was Mr. Miagi, now it seems like [...] it's either Sanjay or Jay or Prakash or Priya or someone who was born here is the one who is giving the sage advice [...] why does it have to be like that? I don't know, I don't write for Hollywood (Georgia, female, early 30s, Black).

As Georgia pointed out, these racialized representations of South Asians exist in the same stereotypical ways as early representations of Blacks (Riggs 1986; Bogle 1999).

However, South Asian characters are almost always presented as secondary to the leading white characters. As another respondent said,

I think there's a lot of them, like Indian sidekicks going around nowadays, in like comedies. I don't know if that's just me. [Who comes to mind?] Um... I think his name is like, uh... Danny Pudi in *Community*, I guess he's not really a sidekick he's one of the group. Um, it's like another guy in... *Rules of Engagement* I think it's called. Um... there's another guy in... there's a new show, I think it's called *Whitney*. And... certainly, some of those characters seem all the same, it wouldn't matter. But... certainly not lead roles or anything (Donald, male, early 30s, white).

Since South Asians are seen as honorary whites in the American racial hierarchy (Kim 1999; Bonilla-Silva 2004), media producers present these characters as non-threatening minorities who are included over Blacks or Latinos for purposes of diversity. However, most of my respondents failed to identify the intentional choice by media producers and media executives to cast South Asian actors (as opposed to actors of a different racial/ethnic background) for a particular role. In fact, many respondents identified South Asian characters as one who could have been cast by any actor of any ethnicity. As one respondent said about the Kalinda, the Indian legal assistant on the CBS TV show, *The Good Wife* (King and King 2009),

I think Kalinda could be anybody, I just think they happen to cast someone that was South Asian, I don't think that there's anything... I love that they cast her the way they did, cos I don't think there are enough roles [...] I'm always happy when someone of a different descent is playing a character that could be any race, you know. I'm always happy about it, cos that's like, we need more, other people on the TV anyway. But I, so I guess there's hope, that she's on there, like the next generation will see more of those types of images [...] once they're old enough, they'll see that and... you know, it may make them think, oh... interesting (Ayo, female, late 20s, Black).

While Ayo found it refreshing to see non-white characters on primetime television simply, she believed that Kalinda could have been played by any non-white actress. This perspective fails to acknowledge the fact that Kalinda was cast by Archie Panjabi, a South Asian woman who possesses particular physical characteristics that maintain white standards of beauty (Collins 2000). Specifically, she is fair, thin, and has long hair. As I have argued, the choice to cast this particular actress in this particular role was calculated and intentional for her acceptable physical appearance and lack of overt cultural characteristics.



Figure 24. Kalinda Sharma, played by Archie Panjabi in *The Good Wife*.

Some respondents also discussed the extent to which South Asian characters are cast for purposes of diversity in the media. As one respondent said about Raj from *The Big Bang Theory*,

He just seemed like, like everybody else, they just... threw him in for diversity's sake. In the 90s he probably would have been Black. But you know, television a lot now, it's like... trying to become more diverse. You know, in commercials you see like, somebody of a different race and, I think they're definitely branches...like I felt like as a kid [...] it'd be all white kids and then there'd be like the Black kid thrown in there for good measure. To keep somebody from

calling in and complaining and now like, we definitely broke down that barrier on TV where um...there are a lot of like Black people, or African-Americans on TV and you know, nobody really bats an eye, it's fairly normal, so I feel like they're introducing uh, people from other races into the mix. You know, or make it more diverse and uh... you know obviously try to get more people of those races to watch TV, from advertising revenue, et cetera so, we can think of it as a conspiracy [...] (Mack, male, early 20s, white).

As Mack suggested, the decisions to cast South Asian characters on television move the portrayal of intergroup relations beyond white and Black. This sentiment was referenced by another respondent who discussed the decision to cast Rebecca Hazelwood as Asha in the television show *Outsourced*. When asked to elaborate on this character, which he described as attractive with very striking facial features, he said,

[...] She had darker...skin tone, um but I think that if she had lighter skin tone you wouldn't be able to tell that she was a person of color. And...um... <sigh> I guess to a certain extent, you know, kind of looking back on it [...] she didn't have what you could call typical...quote unquote like, like there's...she is...a person who has, been selected for that show, most likely based on some very specific features in that, she, it was probably because she... maybe could have been white, you know like, she had lighter skin or something like that, like she was kind of along those like [...] western tropes about what's beautiful. And I think to a certain extent she kind of fulfilled that like she was Indian but she... wasn't like, too Indian you know [...] (Walt, male, late 20s, white).

On one hand, Walt described Hazelwood as having a dark enough skin tone that could characterize her as Indian, but then characterized her as having a light enough skin tone so that she could be characterized as white. This is similar to trends used in cross-market advertising, where white spokeswomen are used for ads in white outlets and spokeswomen of color with white features are used in the non-white outlets (Cortese 2008). As Walt said, Asha had characteristics to make her appealing on the show, but at the same time was not “too Indian” to make her unappealing to white audiences.



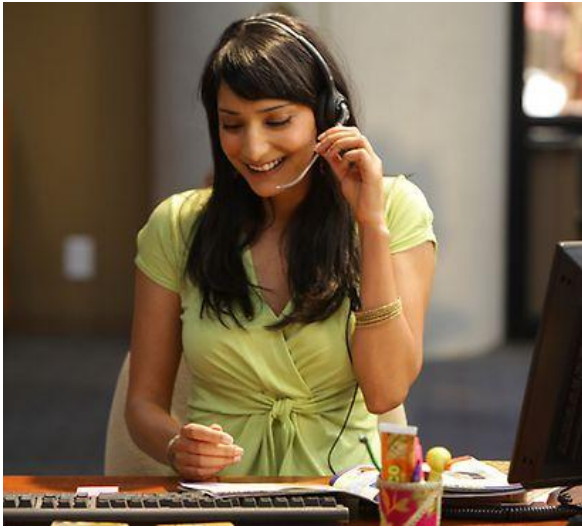


Figure 25. Asha, played by Rebecca Hazelwood in *Outsourced*.

The degree to which an actor can be “too ethnic” speaks directly to the intentional decisions made by American media producers when casting non-white roles. One respondent who is also an actor discussed the influence of the South Asian model minority stereotype in his profession. As he said,

I think they definitely push that [...] as an actor I have to look like, what are the roles I’m going to audition for based upon how the country casts Hollywood, and your cast of characters. In acting class when I have an Indian in my acting class, the job he’s getting is the intern at the hospital, like, he’s not going to get the... lead... in an action film. That’s going to take down some shit, unless it’s coming out of Bollywood, and typically that has to do with, with uh, India. [...] He’s not gonna be taking on the crime syndicates of New York (Samuel, male, late 20s, white).

Based on Samuel’s experiences as an actor on the casting decisions made by Hollywood, he is sure that South Asians will continue to occupy secondary roles in American popular media. Further, South Asians will never be able to play the lead roles in films and television shows as this would be unusual, unacceptable, and non-normative. However, as discussed in Chapter 4, South Asians in the media are increasingly playing characters

that are assimilated. In the next section, I discuss how representations of Americanized South Asians are still characterized as Others.

### **South Asian Americans as “American”**

Today, it is safe to assume that most middle and upper-middle class South Asians have been able to assimilate into American identity through their ability to achieve high educational and occupational statuses (Prashad 2000; Purkayastha 2005; Pew Research Center 2012). For many respondents, these dynamics have also led to a marked shift in media representations. As one respondent said,

I think there are two general categories that I think of. One of them is kind of a, very closer to like... first generation immigrants and things like that and the other one is very like, very Americanized. Um and very like...um...you know, very success driven and very like money driven and things like that. Um... and that's kind of, what, in my head I guess I have something like that. Um so...I... think that it was generally, I mean I don't know...I think that they probably were always family oriented but I mean, the second type of you know category that I'm talking about, probably less family oriented. Um... but I don't know, you know what I mean. Um...cos I, that's so that's kind of what I would see as like...I wouldn't say they've had that Americanized kind of thing for very long (Claude, male, mid 20s, white).

Claude identified two distinct categories of South Asian media characters, both of which are distinguished by immigrant status and level of assimilation. Specifically, the foreign immigrant is traditional and family oriented while the assimilated South Asian is professional, financially driven, and less family oriented. In many ways, Claude's perceptions not only reflect the trajectory in media representations that I discussed in Chapter 3, but also allude to the value placed by mainstream Americans on the embrace of American culture by immigrants.

When respondents described those South Asian characters they deemed positive, they emphasized the assimilated and Americanized characteristics. One character frequently referenced by respondents as an example of this was Dr. Kevin Venkataraghavan, an Indian-American psychiatrist played by Kal Penn on the CBS show, *How I Met Your Mother* (*HIMYM*) (Bays and Thomas 2005). As respondents said,

Like the guy in *HIMYM*. Um...just seemed like a normal person. Um... wow, normal person that's a hard thing to do. Nobody's really normal. But I mean just like...most of the people I meet whether they're Asian uh... or...whatever they are, the vast majority of them have some sort of similar backgrounds to me, that's why I'm meeting them... and I think some of those characters um...are just, just seem like you know, just like people...nothing specifically about their ethnicity is sticking out or...making me remember them because of that (Donald, male, early 30s, white).

The one that I can think of that... actually now that we're talking about these shows and I can really think is um, uh... the boyfriend, the psychiatrist on *HIMYM*. And how he's just like everybody else, like there's nothing odd about him, or that's kind of how I see like, it's nothing... different, it just is what it is. Like this is me and we all kick it, and that's just what it is (Amelia, female, mid 30s, Black).



Figure 26. Kal Penn as Dr. Kevin Venkataraghavan, a psychiatrist in *How I Met Your Mother*.

Both of these respondents emphasized the fact that Penn's character on this show is represented as *not* ethnic. For example, Donald identified how there was nothing about

Kevin that was overtly ethnic. Additionally, Amelia identified Kevin as a character that is neither different nor odd. In fact, both suggested that he was normal in a way that assumed the normativity of whiteness. One respondent also described Kelly from *The Office* in similar ways. As she said,

I think her character in particular is funny because it, it helps, like oh she doesn't have a lot of um...exposure to this or exposure to that, not... because of her... ethnic background or anything of that sort it's just like oh she seem very sheltered when she was growing up in relation to her... character but nothing... like I wouldn't think, oh she's South Asian and this is the way it is because of her being South Asian, that, that doesn't come to mind (Jeanine, female, mid 30s, Black).

This kind of representation corresponds to fundamental aspects of the extent to which an immigrant can become assimilated by disregarding their culture in order to become more accepted in society (Park 1950; Glazer 1971; Rumbaut and Portes 2001). As one respondent suggested, future representations of South Asians as assimilated would continue to be perceived as positive. When asked to describe this further, he said,

I guess in other words you know where people would say like oh that person has good values or that person um...you know, has similar thoughts to what I do. Um [...] where you find yourself like, not having anything in common with that person, people are going to have like negative thoughts or like, you know think negatively of you because [...] maybe your values are completely opposite of, of what...kind of like our predominant culture is... (Liam, male, mid 30s, white).

Again, for this respondent, future representations will be positive to the extent that assimilated South Asian characters follow the norms, morals, and values of what he described as the predominant culture in the United States. This reference to a “predominant culture” alludes to the perception of a normative American culture that is inherently white (Frankenberg 1995).

Additionally, one respondent discussed her hope that future representations of South Asian characters would embody a range of personality traits. When asked to describe what this might look like, she said,

Um...trying to think of an example...um...let's see...probably someone in like middle class, but...like he's working toward a higher like, a higher pay raise or something like that. Um...but...as far as personality traits like, they can be serious and they can be hilarious but...like, like any other person they have goals and they have fun time so I mean... so just trying to get everything in between there, and trying to figure out like...I'm not going to say like, the ideal Asian [laughs] or anything like that, but like trying to portray...like... someone who...is multi-faceted, versus someone whose one sided, or two sided (Nina, female, early 20s, white).

As Nina suggested, a South Asian character who reflects the American Dream of working from the middle class toward a higher occupational and financial status would not only be more positive, but also more of an accurate reflection of a South Asian in America. This prerogative perpetuates particular understandings about South Asians as honorary whites in the United States and their assumed ability to achieve the American Dream.

### **Conclusion: South Asians as Non-Ethnic**

In this chapter, I argue that the perceptions of South Asians in the media as positive are tinged by the ways in which these representations maintain particular ideologies about beauty, gender, casting, and national identity. For example, when describing South Asians in American media, some respondents discuss them in ways that suggest that these representations do not have overtly ethnic characteristics. This perception further perpetuates the assumption that these characters are not ethnic.

In the interviews, some respondents made references to a new South Asian character during the 2011-12 television season – Neal on the NBC show *Whitney*

(Cummings 2011). Played by actor Maulik Pancholy (who previously appeared in the Showtime series *Weeds* (Kohan 2005), the Disney series *Phineas and Ferb* (Marsh and Povenmire 2007), and the NBC show *30 Rock* (Fey 2006)), Neal is the fiancé to the title character's white friend, Lily. Toward the end of the season (after the period of data collection), Neal came out as gay and broke off the engagement. Below is a description by two respondents of a particular episode in which Neal and Lily go to an Indian restaurant:

There's actually talk about the fact that he's Indian and her trying... like she's marrying, the one episode I watched they were getting married and she... she felt like his mom slighted her about not being Indian so she was trying really hard to be Indian and he was just really annoyed with her, like they went to this Indian restaurant... and I appreciated that they actually talked about it, like that they brought it up that there was this... it wasn't kind of a given, a there's an interracial couple but it wasn't this given that everything just all hunky dory and she needs to be more Indian and he's like no, that's the whole point you know [laugh] and so... and I think that's a movement from where it was in the past, where things are discussed, where there's actual mention (Cathy, female, early 40s, white)

He's just been... he's represented as... more Ameri-, like he's represented as Americanized. Like, one [episode] that comes to mind [...] an engagement party or something and um... his fiancée wanted it to be more Indian and wanted to go to an Indian restaurant and wanted to like, do all these things and he was like why are doing this you know. [...] instead of just incorporating things in there like, she was just trying to like, incorporate like everything in there. And just him, he just seemed like he was more Americanized like, she made a comment, I want to say it was something like about he was from India and he was like no I'm from Cleveland or something (Jenny, female, early 30s, white).

Both of these respondents who watched the show and saw this particular episode referenced it as one example of how Neal was portrayed as Americanized. Even when his girlfriend made an effort to be more Indian for him, he reacted in a way to suggest that it was not necessary, and that he was just as less Indian as she. For both respondents, this

representation was positive insofar as it avoided any overt stereotypes. Additionally, as Cathy suggested, this type of representation reflects the experiences of those assimilated second-generation South Asian Americans who do not fully identify with their ethnic culture (Rumbault and Portes 2001; Portes and Rumbault 2005).



Figure 27. Neal, played by Maulik Pancholy, and his fiancée Lily in *Whitney*.

In the same way that Neal did not want his fiancée to express any overt Indian culture, media producers create this type of character to perpetuate a particular representation of a South Asian person in America – one who is not overtly ethnic and one who shies away from his/her ethnicity. This dynamic is further elaborated on by many respondents. As one said,

I would say that, you know, hopefully there's more roles where you know, maybe like you know like Padma or... Kal Penn in *HIMYM* where their ethnicity doesn't really, seem to come into play. You know, and doesn't... there just, it's sort of like they happen to be [...] South Asian [...] it's not an ethnicity that's cast into a role, but it's a person, you know, sort of moving... the personal traits are more important their ethnicity in terms of the way that they're... represented in, in the... in the, in that show or in that movie [...] that's my hope, I mean I, I really... I think that the stereotypes will, will continue, purvey, but I think that you know, the presence of character [...] that are not stereotypes will eventually pave the way for further [...] less emphasis on ethnicity in terms of... people being cast and things like that (Brent, male, mid 30s, white).

In other words, both stereotypical and non-stereotypical representations will continue to co-exist. As discussed throughout this analysis, representations of overtly ethnic characters maintain their characterization as other and are displayed as directly opposite to white normative culture. While many assume that contemporary representations of South Asians have moved beyond this characterization, I argue that there are still elements of these representations that mark these characters as Others.

In the next chapter, I discuss how representations of race and ethnicity played out in the 2010-11 NBC show *Outsourced*. This show chronicled the story of a white American male call-center manager whose job was outsourced to India. There, he meets his new employees – overtly Indian characters with overtly Indian characteristics. In my analysis, I will discuss the ways in which perceptions about this show, and its ultimate cancellation, relate to social perceptions on race, ethnicity, and the ways in which such representations are perceived by majority-white American consumers as forever foreigners.



## CHAPTER SIX

### WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH *OUTSOURCED*?

In the previous chapter, I discussed the ways in which even the most assimilated and normative representations of South Asians in the media reproduce particular assumptions about race, ethnicity, and gender. These representations play out those long understood stereotypes of South Asian women as overtly exotic and erotic, and South Asian men as effeminate and nerdy. There are also particular dynamics at play when media producers choose to cast South Asian characters today. Finally, these South Asian characters reproduce certain assumptions about the “American Dream” immigrant success story and normative white culture. In this chapter, I use the example of the 2010-11 NBC show *Outsourced* (Borden 2010) and take a deductive approach with audience responses to better understand the dynamics of these representations of Indian characters in India to American audiences.

Many BCCS and audience studies scholars have utilized television analysis in their research. Specifically, these scholars used audience perceptions of television shows to understand issues of identity and ideology (Morely 1980; Ang 1985; Gillespie 1995; Jhally and Lewis 1992). For example, Morely (1980) studied messages of dominance in *Nationwide* (Amoore 1969), a popular British current affairs program. Ang (1985) studied audience perceptions of femininity in *Dallas* (Jacobs 1978). Gillespie (1995) examined Punjabi-British diasporic identity through primetime broadcasts of the

*Mahabharat* (Chopra 1988). Jhally and Lewis (1995) identified intersections of race and class in audience perceptions of *The Cosby Show* (Cosby et al. 1984).

The examination of a television show may be considered outside of traditional sociological analysis. However, my analysis of audience responses to this particular show contextualizes this very important example of South Asian media representations. Specifically, I look at perceptions of *Outsourced* by both viewers and non-viewers to understand the inherent ideologies present in these representations, which are relevant when discussing the overt representations of culture in the show. In this chapter, my analysis of the representations in *Outsourced* situate South Asian representations in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century and, through the show's cancellation, outline the rise and fall of South Asian representations that simply did not work. These findings may also have the ability to speak to the eventual fate of the new show, *The Mindy Project* (Kaling 2012). In the next section, I discuss some of the literature on television case studies to discuss some of the established methodologies and findings and to contextualize my use of a close reading of audience responses.

### **The Analysis of a Television Show**

Robert Allen (1992) argued that the relevance of studying television programming is that it is literally everywhere. He argued that any systematic study of television requires an objective view of television outside of society and its social contexts. As N.D. Batra (1987) noted, the most efficient method for testing the uses and benefits of a television program is through a systematic and operationalized analysis of audience perceptions.

Batra (1987) outlined five critical approaches used to evaluate television programming. One of these, the sociological analysis, is concerned with audience perceptions of television shows. This analysis is based on a uses and gratification model between the television program and the audience(s) (Merton 1946; Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi 1990; Horkheimer and Adorno 2001). Additionally, the semiological-structural approach focuses on the use and meanings of texts and builds off the work of de Saussure (1966). John Fiske and John Hartley (2003) examined the semiotics/text of television programs in order to understand their bardic function, or relationship between the audiences and the production. (2003:64-66). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century today, the bardic functions of media texts are further fueled by social media and message boards on which communities develop to collectively watch shows and comment on them in real time.

In general, the half-hour sitcom is based around laughter and optimism. The cast of characters within a sitcom are so emotionally invested in each other that the group is presented as a joint and interconnected unit. The presentations of problems within a sitcom are solved in comedic and humorous ways. In general, this is the structure of most television shows. However, the use of the comedic sitcom set-up in *Outsourced* ultimately did not help it win fans. In order to better understand this dynamic, I employ a systematic and sociological analysis of audience responses to the show. In the next section, I outline the rise and fall of *Outsourced*.

### ***Outsourced: The TV Show***

The 2010-11 show *Outsourced* was based on a 2007 independent film of the same name. The film's director and co-writer John Jeffcoat wrote the story based on his experiences

studying abroad in Nepal. Jeffcoat and co-writer George Wing served as consulting producers for the show, which was produced by Universal Media Studios. The executive producers were Robert Borden (former producer of *The Drew Carey Show* (Carey and Helford 1995) and *George Lopez* (Helford et al. 2002)) and Ken Kwapis (producer of *The Office* (Gervais and Merchant 2005)), who developed the project through his company *In Cahoots* and also served as director.

The show began receiving news coverage in the summer of 2010, around the same time that many Americans were dealing with a declining job market while watching their jobs getting outsourced to India and China. In an interview with *Denison Magazine*, Jeffcoat addressed this controversy. As he said, “I think comedy has a great ability to tear down barriers, and *Outsourced* is no different [...] One of the best ways to attack a difficult subject is with comedy” (TheDEN 2010). By this logic, it seemed that *Outsourced* came at a good time to provide some laughter on this difficult but familiar issue.

One of the most noteworthy aspects of the show was the fact that the cast was majority-minority. All but three of the starring characters of the show were of Indian descent. Many of these actors were raised in America or England and had well-established acting careers before the show. Additionally, one third of the writing team was Indian-American (The Times of India 2011). For these reasons in particular, *Outsourced* was a revolution in primetime American television. The show premiered on September 23, 2010 on NBC in the 9:30pm Eastern/8:30pm Central time slot after *The Office*. Early on, *Outsourced* was renewed for a second season and the producers created

a full 22 episodes (Rowles 2011). Soon after, *Outsourced* was moved to the 10:30pm Eastern/9:30pm Central time slot – a slot that many in the television industry consider deadly because of the late timing (The Times of India 2011).



Figure 28. The promotional poster for the NBC show, *Outsourced*.

The show featured Todd, a white call-center manager for the American-based Mid-America Novelties whose job and department get outsourced to India. The first episode showed Todd traveling by black-and-yellow rickshaw through the crowded streets of Mumbai to the call center where he meets his new employees: Assistant Manager Rajiv (played by Rizwan Manji), who is less-than-pleased with Todd's arrival, Manmeet (played by Sacha Dhawan), who is equally enamored with American culture and sexually-liberal American women, socially awkward Gupta (played by Parvesh Cheena), shy and timid Madhuri (played by Anisha Nagarajan), and beautiful and outgoing Asha (played by Rebecca Hazelwood). In the first few episodes, Todd and Asha developed a love connection, but Asha was unavailable as she was following the wishes of her parents to pursue an arranged marriage. Throughout the series, Asha balanced her

uneasiness about her arranged marriage with Sunil while Todd developed a relationship with Tonya, a wild Australian call center manager who worked in his office building.

One of the most notable aspects of the film and the television show was the apparent culture clash for (American) Todd in India. Todd's blatant ignorance of Indian culture reflected a Western gaze (Said 1979) that most whites have about Indian culture and society. Additionally, the film was filmed in India and the TV show was filmed on a soundstage in Los Angeles. While it makes sense for the show to save money and film locally, these changes in scenery also reflected changes with the two sets of characters. For example, Asha in the film was played by Ayesha Dharkar, who was raised in Mumbai and has overt ethnic features like dark skin and big eyes. On the other hand, Rebecca Hazelwood, the actress who played Asha in the TV show, is half Indian and half white, tall, fair, and thin. In fact, both Asha and Madhuri, the lead Indian women in the television show, have much lighter skin than their darker female co-workers, some of whom do not even have speaking roles. These overt casting decisions reflect particular white beauty ideals that are imposed upon all women of color in American popular media (Collins 2000; Nagel 2003; Espiritu 2008; Glenn 2008).



Figure 29. Left, Asha and Todd from the 2006 film *Outsourced*; Right, Asha and Todd from the 2010-11 television show *Outsourced*.

At the start of the series, most of the laughs were meant to come from Todd's experiences in a foreign land and his reactions to certain elements of Indian culture. In the first episode, Todd offended one of his employees by referring to his turban as a "crazy hat." In another episode, Todd unconsciously pats a woman employee on the shoulder and is reported for sexual harassment. As a result of his personal clashes with the culture, the employees saw Todd as a running joke, perfectly characterized in the show's Halloween episode when Rajiv dressed as Todd and proclaimed, "Is this safe to eat? Where's football? Where can I get that toilet paper that has the lotion in it?" As I will later discuss, this tongue-in-cheek humor reflecting Americans' perceptions of India was picked up on by only some of the viewers.

As the season progressed, the culture clashes were replaced by representations of cohesive and comedic relationships among the characters. Storylines in the second half of the season included Manmeet balancing two women in America, and Gupta developing a friendship with Charlie, a Red-White-and-Blue blooded call center manager for a hunting catalog. The first season ended with a two-episode long wedding ceremony for Rajiv and his new wife Vimi. At the end of the season, we saw abandoned Asha and newly-single Todd hold hands and look lovingly at each other. Soon before the first season finished on May 21, 2011, NBC Entertainment President Robert Greenblatt presented the network's 2011-12 lineup to advertisers without *Outsourced* included (The Times of India 2011). In the following sections, I discuss audience perceptions of this show from the negative to the positive to better understand why the show did not continue.

### **The *Outsourced* Stereotype**

Overall, perceptions toward the show by my respondents were mixed. On one hand, many respondents identified the overt examples of stereotypes in this show. Allport's (1954) definition of a stereotype as, "an exaggerated belief associated with a category [...] to justify (rationalize) our conduct in relation to that category" (191) suggests that there is a direct link between audience perceptions of the show and perceptions by mainstream Americans of Indians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as call center employees. When asked to describe the behaviors and characteristics associated with South Asians, one respondent said,

It's like um associated with working at call centers, now that I think of it. Like I've heard people say I tried to call Dell and ended up at a call center in India. I hear that a lot. Which is probably part because our call centers are in India. But I think that's become a stereotypical characterization now. And now I should probably watch that *Outsourced* show to see what they do about it (Farrah, female, late 20s, white).

While Farrah had never seen the show, she was quick to make the connection between emerging Indian stereotypes and the representations in this show. One respondent found the show offensive because of the overreliance on this stereotype. As he said,

I never really got into it, my roommate who is Indian [...] tried to watch one or two episodes of it. I think in a way kind of mocked South Asians in general [...] how they work in call centers and how, and then frustrations then of how many whatever, we need technical support and they just reinforce the stereotype of that (Cris, male, early 20s, second generation Filipino American).

As both of these respondents suggested, the stereotype of Indians working in call centers is generally a negative stereotype. Additionally, this representation invokes the experiences that many Americans have had with heavily-accented Indian call center employees. This is reflected in both the film and the TV show when Todd provided his



Indian employees with lessons on American culture and how to speak with an American accent.

Some respondents were uneasy and unsure about the overt representations of these negative stereotypes. When asked about her thoughts on the show, one respondent said,

In general it can be funny. I think it plays on a lot of the stereotypes. And I've never been to India or know how that stuff works so I have no clue what it's like you know. I imagine, I don't know, I think it's a touchy show. Like, I feel like any show that takes a whole population and uses stereotypes to free their characters is kind of ridiculous. And whether I like it or not it like, permeates like, thoughts. And I don't watch it as much as I used to because I'm not sure if I like how it does that (Mallory, female, early 30s, white).

Mallory felt that the representations in *Outsourced* reflected negative characteristics about Indians. As a result of her perceptions of this show as stereotypical and even racist, she limited her consumption and reported to not watching it as much.

Another respondent discussed his perceptions of the jokes in *Outsourced* as racist.

As he said,

I think that one of the reasons I didn't watch *Outsourced*... was because um... I felt like there were times when... they were making... stereotypical... jokes [...] like, for them the race... and the stereotypes were the jokes they didn't provide the context for the jokes that followed [...] it's a fish out of water story, this guy comes from America to India and I think they could have really done a good job of capitalizing on... [...] maybe if they made the show about this guy who... thinks... you know South Asians are all the same, but in fact you know painting a nice character study on these characters that are now surrounding them, but I think they went the other way, they kind of drew a little too much on South Asian stereotypes [...] for one thing it, they work at a call center you know um they um, I guess, speak with what are typically considered to be very stereotypical accents [...] not to mention the fact that I think that... it's been done so many times like the oh my gosh this is a different culture, you know, it's gonna get wild and crazy in a second [...] I think they often drew too much on... stereotypes to, to tell those... stories they wanted to tell (Walt, male, late 20s, white).

As Walt suggested, the show relied too much on stereotypes. If *Outsourced* has focused more on the development of the characters in a way that was devoid of any overt Indian ethnicity, the show could have been much better. For both Walt and Mallory, their perceptions of the show as stereotypical and racist limited their consumption of the show and their exposure to any of the character development over time. In the next section, I present and discuss the perceptions of these stereotypical representations by my South Asian respondents.

### **South Asians' Perceptions of *Outsourced***

Overall, South Asians respondents were just as mixed about the show as non-South Asians. Interestingly, many of their perceptions were informed by their own experiences and the experiences of their South Asian friends and family with racism and discrimination. On one end, many South Asians perceived the show negatively for the stereotypical and one-dimensional representations. As one respondent said,

There are times where it was [...] insulting to Indian culture, but I knew personally growing up with being insulted and people making fun of me I just kind of like, whatever with it now. Which it's like, I can take it when people are being ignorant. But I know some people who did watch it and are from India, and they're really hurt by it and didn't want to watch it. [Do you have an example of some of the insulting stuff from the show that you were offended by?] Um, I think like just like how they would like make fun of [...] there would be one episode they didn't get Diwali off, and it's like, they made it seem like it wasn't a big deal. And then some of the stuff with like the gods, they would just kind of make fun of it. [...] Basically thinking that the culture isn't good and not really understanding it but like mocking the culture (Priya, female, mid-20s, second generation Indian American).

*Outsourced* resonated for Priya because Todd represented the ignorance of Indian culture by Americans. In her response, Priya referenced the culture clashes that she and her Indian friends and family have experienced in American society. The ways in which

Todd diminished and devalued Indian culture are experiences all too familiar for her. Priya's reaction to the show hit a personal nerve that reminded her of the status of Indians and South Asians as secondary who are teased and insulted by majority (white) Americans. For her, representations of the show maintain perceptions of Indian culture as Other (Said 1979).

One South Asian respondent through the show was funny, but one-dimensional.

As he said,

I saw like the first 3 episodes [...] I didn't have time to finish it [...] the first episode was really good. Um... I was laughing a lot, I thought that the, that the one uh...Sikh guy with the big turban, that would just stare at him and walk away every time his boss was right next to him [Laugh] I thought that was hilarious. [...] there were things that were stereotypical about that show. Just, like with some of the food um, curries you know, untouchable caste system I mean come on. Very first episode they were talking about that, like where she's only here cos they have to have her, but she'll be fired in, anyway because she's an untouchable. I'm like you know the caste system at least in urban India is completely like not in existence [...] people need to, to get their stuff straight before they make representative, you know, historical episodes of an ancient culture. You know, um...but for the most part you know, I real did enjoy it, it was funny um...uh...I want to say I probably found one or two things racist about it but I can't remember what exactly now (Raheem, male, mid 20s, second-generation Pakistani American).

For Raheem, the humor of the show came from the overt disapproval by Indian employees of Todd's simple-mindedness. It was through these representations that Outsourced "did a good job." However, Raheem also found the show stereotypical in its reliance on particular assumptions about Indian culture. For example, references to the caste system or other attributes automatically associated with India continue to portray Indian society in a particularly one-dimensional and Othering light. This dynamic was similarly discussed by another second-generation South Asian respondent. As she said,



Figure 30. Todd says, “You guys have got some pretty crazy looking hats yourselves” in a scene from *Outsourced*.

I'm pretty neutral when it comes to *Outsourced*. Like I'm glad that they're looking outside of the borders of the U.S. to cast a show but...I'm waiting to see if they develop some of the characters a little bit more. Go somewhere else with that and kind of break out of the really tired story lines of arranged marriages and stuff (Bijal, female, mid-20s, second generation Indian American).

While Bijal is pleased with a minority television show on a major American network, she is less enthused about the perpetuation of these overtly cultural characteristics. In general, the producers and writers of the show relied on stereotypes about India to portray and convey Indian society to majority white American audiences. This type of representation is problematic insofar as it perpetuates these understandings and maintains particular stereotypical attitudes toward this ethnic group both in America and abroad.

As mentioned previously, some South Asians perceived the show positively for its accurate representation of the ignorance by Americans of Indian culture. One respondent, an Indian-American undergraduate student, discussed the ways in which some of the culture clashes between the Indian employees and their new American manager reflected his own experiences in American society. As he said,

I think one thing that they did really well was like the American perspective of Indian culture and how kind of almost ignorant it is [...] and then using the main character's kind of perspective of that culture and then slowly show assimilating him into the Indian community or culture. And I think that's the story [...] I was so interested in you know, because like there was a lot of moments in the show where like ha that's how one of my [non-Indian] friends would react. [...] Because I mean they only know what they see or what's being portrayed in the media, you know. Unless they have friends who are South Asian or actually do go out of their way to learn about it (Pankaj, male, early 20s, 1.5 generation Indian American).

For Pankaj, the representations were not offensive and in fact were reflective of his experiences as an Indian in American society. Many of my South Asian respondents discussed how this mocking of Indian culture resonated with them on a personal level based on their experiences. Additionally, Pankaj reported that the representations of cultural misunderstanding by Americans toward Indian culture were accurate. Some non-South Asian respondents also discussed similar perceptions as a result of watching the show with their Indian friends. As one said,

I actually enjoyed it and I actually did watch that um episode last week, happen to catch it with a few of my Indian friends. And uh we all enjoyed it. Um...but it seemed to play like a *little* too much on stereotypes. I mean that was the whole pilot of the show is um guy's working, to go work at a call center um in India which is a very like, stereotyped thing. [How did your Indian friends feel about the show?] Um I remember they, they really enjoyed it. Um my friend [...] thought it was hilarious, and he actually recommended we watch it (Raymond, male, 19, white, emphasis in original).

It could be assumed that Raymond's Indian friend also enjoyed the show because it was an accurate representation for him of the American gaze toward India and Indian culture. While Raymond picked up on the negative stereotypes portrayed in the show, he also noted that he and his Indian friends enjoyed it together. Another respondent also discussed watching the show with his South Asian friend. As he said,

She said it was one of her favorite shows and she thought it was really funny and she's like, you know I think a lot of people who think this is all like stereotyping are kind of missing the point cos actually if you look at the dialogue in the show, it's actually kind of mocking the Americans more than the Indians [Laugh] and like we kind of thought about it and were like yeah it's them (Mark, male, late 20s, white)

For Mark, it took his South Asian friend to describe these representations in such a way in order for these white American consumers to no longer consider it *as* negative and stereotypical.

While many mainstream, non-South Asian viewers found the show offensive and perceived it as mocking Indians (a dynamic that I discuss later), many of my South Asian viewers perceived the show in a positive, or at least not negative way for the extent to which these representations were accurate reflections of their experiences. While non-South Asians found the show offensive, South Asian viewers found the show accurate. Additionally, for many of the American-born South Asians, some of these representations of culture clash were very familiar to them. As one respondent said,

I don't think I find [*Outsourced*] as like, mortifyingly offensive as a lot of people do. It's not one of my favorite shows but I think I find it pretty entertaining. Um this is coming from my perspective [...] I feel like my American identity is really salient when I watch [...] the show. Because from my American perspective I see a lot of...I'm trying to figure out how to say this. So when I go to India um I feel like I read things a lot of the same way that the show does, um which from an Indian perspective look very different. So I understand what the writers um are seeing when they decided to take from that and film the show. But I also understand where truth then becomes negotiable. Um, my parents love it because it makes them nostalgic and they like seeing people in saris in American TV and they get excited about that [...] they get excited whenever an Indian person is on any TV show and they'll let me know. Um I think to them it's very affirming to see that (Bijal, female, mid 20s, second-generation Indian American).

For Bijal, representations of the culture clashes in the show made her experiences as an assimilated second-generation Indian American more salient. Additionally,

representations of Todd in India reflected her own experiences as an Indian-American in India. It is likely that many of the Indian American writers referenced their own experiences for the show (The Times of India 2011). Bijal also noted that her parents enjoyed the show for their portrayal of South Asians and South Asian culture. As discussed in Chapter 4, not only does this reflect the diasporic consumption of South Asian American characters in American media (Gillespie 1995; Desai 2004; Durham 2004), but it also speaks to the extraordinary appreciation that South Asian Americans have for those instances in which they are present in American media (Riggs 1986). However, the messages in these representations are negotiable for all consumers insofar as different groups will perceive them differently. In the next section, I focus in detail on perceptions of *Outsourced* by my non-South Asian respondents.

#### ***Outsourced* from the Outside: Perceptions by Mainstream Audiences**

When examining mainstream perceptions of *Outsourced* by respondents who were mostly white but also African American and Latino, respondents fell into a range of perceptions from negative to positive. Of those positive perceptions, some pointed to the subtleties of the show beneath the overt and stereotypical representations. As one respondent said,

When I first started watching it, it was like... very, I think stereotypical, and honestly think they kind of went their writing, I mean like, they were trying to establish them in this place, and this different culture, and here's this, the whole point of it, and actually it was based on a movie that I saw too, which is the same story. Um... but it was like, I don't know if they had to establish, like here's this guy in this whole different world, and it was kind of stereotypical but as it went on it actually, each person developed a personality. And... like it was just getting to the point where they each were the individuals and you weren't thinking of them as like... ok, they're from this country, it was here was this whole thing, but

they ended up cancelling that show. But it got better as it went on (Carl, male, early 50s, black).

Just as was identified by other respondents, Carl felt that early representations in the show were based too heavily on stereotypes. But as the show progressed, these representations became more nuanced and moved away from representations of overt stereotypes and culture clashes. Other respondents reported similar changes in their perception of the show as it went on. As they said,

I thought you know, it, it was at times... funny, to you know, there was the whole...um, concept of, of outsourcing that I think a lot of people in this country have been talking about, or... some of them have been angry about [Laugh] you know, and I thought it was interesting to sort of uh, even though it's probably a completely caricatured comedy version of it, to sort of think about it from the other end of things. Um...and I thought, you know, that's another show that... at least had some depth to some of the characters as far as it wasn't, you know, one... one random, whether it's going to be an Indian guy or some other ethnicity that's in the show, just sort of be there, was a much different characters which was interesting to see (Donald, male, early 30s, white).

So when I first watched it, I was kind of torn, because I wasn't even sure if I wanted to watch it because I was like oh this could be a really... over the top um... parody of people's lives. And, but at the same, I was working in a space where there are actually call centers [...] in India, um... and so I thought I'd, I'd watch it... and... I cringed at the first couple episodes but I kept watching it cos there was something appealing about it, and I really ended up liking it, you know I can't say it was perfect and it wasn't as nuanced as...it could have been, but I think it got better over the season and I was really disappointed that they... they cut it after one season because I think it had a lot of potential by the end of the season um... because the characters were pretty stock characters up front and you know, there was the... the young guy who...you know...ended up with, two girlfriends at one time or you know, really kind of.. this oversexed young guy and then there was the... the, Gupta, Gupta was hilarious but you know he's very much the clown character, and there was the very strict assistant... manager and then the... meek one, so they played these stock characters but they got more nuanced kind of throughout the show and I think there was a lot of room to grow that they didn't allow it to...allow it to grow, [...] so I kind of had mixed feelings about *Outsourced* cos I was afraid it would be too much...and I think there was a little bit of that, a little bit of Americans like oh look at these, stupid, these silly holidays they have here in India, but they seem to have... gotten a little bit passed



that toward the end and I think they could have gone a lot more... um... with that in the future (Cathy, female, early 40s, white)

In his response, Donald discussed enjoying the show for its perspective of the “other side.” He also enjoyed the show for the depth and variety in the characters. For Cathy, the show had its problems for depending on particular caricatures and stereotypes. However, she felt that the show got better at this throughout the season, and had the potential to break out of this further in the future.

As Cathy later discussed, her co-worker (a first-generation Indian-American) said that the characters in the show reminded him of people he knew in India. Donald also noted that the representations were less about race and more about characterizations. This corresponds to Herman Grey’s (1995) discussion of multicultural representation, through the representations of these characters developing their own personalities and storylines.

One respondent who identified many South Asians that he knew through his job and through church thought that *Outsourced* was a positive show for its representations of India. As he noted, people might think that it is a negative show for the underlying message about jobs getting outsourced, but he thought it was “funny” and “cool.” In addition, he talked about the ways in which it exposed him to different customs and culture. When asked to discuss an example of this in the show, he said,

I thought it was just kind of cool in, just from...um, talking to people that have maybe, that have lived in other countries [...] they would like, try to be... sort of quote American. And how much they...um, kind of...um, not really like idolized but how they looked up to this guy, that who was their boss um...who came from the United States [...] There was an episode too, where there was some sort of celebration, um I forgot what it was about, but it was just kind of cool learning about that and...um...you know just...learning more about the different...um, you know celebrations, I know there was an episode that was all about, you know,

an arranged marriage. That was interesting to learn about as well (Ricky, male, late 20s, white/Latino).



Figure 31. The *Outsourced* co-workers perform a dance at Rajiv's wedding.

Ricky liked watching *Outsourced* because it exposed him to a different culture – one that he may have been aware of through his social networks, but only on a superficial level. Interestingly, the aspect that most resonated with him was his perception of Todd as someone that the Indian employees looked up to. This conjures up images of colonialist relationships between white superiors and native servants (Jordan 1974; Said 1979; McClintock 1995). Additionally, this suggests a particularly ethnocentric perspective of how Americans view Indians viewing America.

In many ways, the portrayals in *Outsourced* presented a view of India and Indian culture that Americans are comfortable and familiar with – it matched many of their preconceived notions and did not challenge their perceptions or their attitudes. This is illustrated in one respondent's discussion of the choice made by producers on where to set the show. As he said,

And I'm sure that when... you know... discussing what the setting of the show should be, the creators never once said, oh well this should be, in a lawyer's

office, or this should be in a police station, or this should be in a hospital... we're going to make, we should make this in a call center, because this is what Americans all think they're experiences with Indians have already been (Walt, male, late 20s, white)

On one hand, those respondents who watched the show and watched the show over the whole season liked the show for two main elements. First, the development of the story and the characters over the course of the first season diminished and even eliminated many of the negative stereotypes and perceptions. Eventually, the cast of characters became a cohesive unit with many interconnected stories and punch lines. Second, the seemingly accurate representation of India and Indian culture are important to note. However, many respondents also perceived *Outsourced* in very negative ways. In the next section, I will discuss and analyze these negative perceptions.

### ***Outsourced as Offensive***

Many of the respondents reacted very negatively to *Outsourced* based in large part on their assumptions about the show. One respondent never saw the show but was familiar with the advertisements. When asked to discuss her perceptions of the commercials that she had seen, she said,

I saw it and was like awww [...] what do I think about it? I think it's not going to last at all. Um...I don't think it's really funny because I think that, I feel like not even the punch lines but I feel like the clips they show, I feel like are like making fun of that sense, primarily. Um, and I just feel weird that like the people would even act on it in the way that they do. Like, that makes me kind of sad. But the show in general I don't think it will last (Erika, female, mid-20s, white).

Although Erika had never seen the show and is only basing her assumption on previews, she was convinced that the show was negative insofar as it portrayed problematic representations of Indians. In essence, Erika assumed that the representations poked fun

and maintained Othering portrayals, but she had little concrete evidence as her perceptions were based on a few commercials.

Indeed, the respondents who were the most vocal about the negative aspects of the show had actually not really seen the show. Below are two examples of such comments:

[...] I heard about it. And I had no clue how that ever got on TV. [What did you hear?] Cos that was... I saw the preview and it was clearly racist! Because it's just like...oh, I don't even know how to describe [...] I was just watching it and I was like how does, how would any-, how did this get on TV? Why would nobody complain? How did this do well at all? And like, cos you think they're going to put a TV show on television, they would have a focus group, and that show the focus group must have been like oh this is hilarious, we love this, and they must have just got like the worst group of people ever, cos it's just like, looks completely... it's just like... taking the whole minority typical thing to another step, like a stereotype about.. um...like, outsourced tech support and how they're awful and they, they're bad at English and they read a prompt and it's just like, they're taking that which is unfortunate and then they just like, making fun of it, it's just like... I don't know, it was just so much wrong with it, that I didn't, I've never, I've never seen it once so I could be totally wrong, I could have misjudged that show like crazy but, that's just what it seemed from what I heard about it (Mack, male, early 20s, white)

It felt exactly like...you wrote a pilot just like me and two of my white friends sat down and wrote a pilot and then focused group it only in Kansas and South Dakota and Iowa. Um...and then...at the same time, I mean and this is really literally based on about six minutes of watching it, but at the same time from the focus group after the focus group managed to amp up both the, the fear of jobs moving away and the um...oh look how funny they are because of they're differences. And we'll just bring some white people in to observe them and be amazed and shocked at what they do. Um I don't think I made it [to] a commercial [...] Every joke just felt so broad and so um...um...xenophobic is a little strong but I'll go with that. Um it just felt like, it felt at least influenced by xenophobia. It wasn't, it didn't seem like a joke that the characters might make to each other as people. It seemed like a joke that...you know that some focus group in Kansas, in the 300 hundred person town I grew up in you know would think was funny. Well look at that funny food. Um so yeah I thought I didn't care for it (Alan, male, early 40s, white).

Interestingly, both Mack and Alan referenced hypothetical focus group data that would have allowed the show to get on air in the first place. Both respondents adamantly

disagreed with the show and the representations, although both also admitted to have never seen it. In many ways, these respondents used their disdain for the show to distance themselves from the hypothetical focus groups that enjoyed it. This separation of themselves from those seemingly racist viewers who enjoyed the representations illustrates a sense of moral and race-conscious superiority by recognizing the show as racist and recognizing themselves as not racist by not watching it.

However, this superiority is largely misplaced for a few important reasons. First, neither of these respondents had seen the show. Second, their primary critiques of the show were the overt displays of accents and other forms of culture. What these respondents failed to acknowledge was that it was a show about Indians in India. Third, the portrayal by the show of the culture clashes for an American in India is viewed not for the humor of an American who is unable to get along in India, but for the problematic ways in which he denigrated and dismissed the culture. Thus, it appears that these respondents should have been more offended by the practices of the white American call center manager who was overseas than the Indians who were acting as they would in India.

Some respondents who did report seeing the show similarly reported perceptions of racism and Othering in these representations. In particular, many mentioned or alluded to an Orientalized characterization of Indians as simple-minded, foreign, exotic, and otherwise one-dimensional. As one respondent said while referencing my research study,

I was kind of interested when I got the notice [for the online survey] because I think I had just seen a show on one of the major networks and it was a pretty horrific portrayal. I forget the name but it was like *Outsourced* or something like that. And that, I guess they were presenting South Asians in South Asia, but it's just so... orientalist. Just, I felt like blatantly racist in a way I couldn't believe was on television. [What were some things about the show that you found racist or

offensive?]) It's like look at these funny foreign people with their funny ways of doing, how different they are to the white American. Um, how dismissive they were of this cultural characteristics and ignorance about them. Not that I know a whole lot but I knew enough about them (John, male, mid-30s, white).

For John, the overt representations of the culture clash between Todd and his employees were racist and offensive. Specifically, this was based on what John perceived as the representation of Indians as different and inferior to the white manager. What this suggests is that representations of cultural differences were not used for representations of the culture clash, but of the culture as Other. Other respondents also alluded to this kind of representation, even if they were unable to articulate it as Orientalist. As one respondent said,

So I watched a couple of episodes of *Outsourced*, and I, what I didn't like about it is that... I don't know how true it is, like I really feel like American can be a very arrogant culture, it's so... for...there to be this fascination with American culture and oh we're so amazing, you know, we sell things where you fart in the toilet and it makes a sound or whatever, and you know, it, because the show, you know [...] they sold all of these gimmicky things...and oh the freedom of Americans and I kind of felt like they, they kind of...uh...took a culture that had...uh, a purity to it and...a nobility and kind of tried to dirty it up, like oh you guys are too simple, you know what I mean. And so I kind of feel like there's either this...um... comical...uh, uh pecking of fun at the simplicity of that culture, or it's like...you know...um...almost um...there's a weird quirk that you wouldn't find in any other kind of character (Amelia, female, mid 30s, black)

As Amelia discussed in her interview, representations of India in *Outsourced* as a country and culture obsessed with kitschy joke items sold in their novelty store contrasted against what she perceived as a pure and noble culture that was being dirtied up by these influences. Further, she identified this as one of two things – either represented for purposes of making fun, or illustrated to identify and exemplify difference between Indians and Americans. In another part of the interview, Amelia also discussed her

uncertainty about whether the jokes in the show were against the characters or against the culture, and thus was unsure about what was funny and what to laugh at. This also suggests that her inability to identify her perceptions may have limited her consumption of the show.

Additionally, one respondent discussed her perceptions of Todd's behavior as an American in India. When asked for her thoughts on *Outsourced*, she said,

I didn't think it was funny. Um, and...like I said, you cannot do a show like that with Black people [Laugh] like you *really* couldn't. And I understand like, I've read articles and stuff on it from an Indian person's perspective that's a lot more positive and embracing of the show, but to me just on the surface it just seemed to be a lot of like, you know, stereotypes and stuff, and could, honestly that could be a function of the fact that it's the first season, and you kind of have to establish your universe that you're in and blah blah blah and kind of do things that people are familiar with. But, I just... I don't think you can do a show like that that's like, you know, a person comes in and doesn't know basic shit. Like, it really, that was like a really, weird thing about the show, that if you're, you're a guy and somebody's telling you ok, we have to move you to India, you don't go to Wikipedia and find out what Diwali is. Like I didn't understand, and I realize like, his ignorance sets up comic situations but...I just could never get passed that like, I know what that stuff is! But, you know, and that's not even from like any intimate experience, that's probably from watching like an episode of the *Office* where they might have had it, or like, it was mentioned in a *Harold and Kumar* movie, it's not because like I'm an expert on other cultures, it's just like...you know, I don't know but, I really do feel like...you couldn't do a show where people, were that ignorant about each other, with like any other ethnic group. [...] And I didn't like that the girl was going to end up with the white guy [...] on the show she had an arranged marriage and she was going to walk away from all that, I said you were going to walk away from like you know, centuries of culture for this dude who didn't even bother to Wikipedia your country [Laugh] before he came over! He is not that cute! (Jane, female, black, mid 30s, emphasis in original).

For Jane, there were many dynamics that informed her dislike of the show. Here I will focus on two. First, she felt as though the representations of Indians were so stereotypical, to the extent that if a similarly stereotypical show was created around

Blacks it would be socially unacceptable. This dynamic is interesting as it suggests that overt stereotypes against Indians are more acceptable than overt stereotypes of Blacks in American media. Additionally, this response speaks to the ways in which media producers and media corporations serve as gatekeeper for the kinds of (racist, stereotypical, and/or offensive) shows that can come on television. Second, Jane took issue with the representation of an American who moves to India for work and spent no time researching his new home. While the humor and the intended production purpose is not lost on Jane, this kind of representation is problematic for her and, to a large extent, represents the kind of uninformed views that most Americans have of India. This is further elaborated on by another respondent who viewed the show, did not like it, and was critical of the representations. As she said,

Yeah that show was horribly racist! [laugh] [What about it was racist to you?] Well... <sigh>... well here's the sad part, I thought it was horribly racist but it was, a lot of it was accurate. You know a lot of people in America got offended they were saying that no American is that ignorant of their cultures, yes they are. They are that ignorant! We, *we* are that presumptuous to think that we are the *shit!* We have absolutely no, you know, we have absolutely no concept as, you know, our culture is only 225 years ago and we're doing, just we're now you know, we supplant this guy from Kansas of all places to you know, a country whose culture is 8,000 years and just, the fact that he was going around asking for burgers, I just hit myself in the head so many times. Yeah but I mean as far as the uh, but as far as the Indian representations... there were a couple that I just found I'm like ok, these are, these are almost like watching, like watching caricatures from vaudeville [...] (Georgia, female, early 30s, black, emphasis in original).

For Georgia, *Outsourced* was a racist portrayal, but also an accurate portrayal of a typical American's reaction to India and Indian culture. In general, the ways in which Americans respond to Indian culture with an ignorance, disdain, misunderstanding, Othering, and stereotyping is true and accurate. This was the perception that many Indian respondents



also had. Georgia's comments about the presumptions by Americans toward India suggests that most Americans perceived *Outsourced* as racist because they were offended with the representation of America more so than with the representation of Indians. Further, some of the more extreme representations of Indians reminded her of those vaudeville representations of Blacks that invoked those overt stereotypes for purposes of ridicule (Riggs 1986; Bogle 1999).

### **Conclusion: *Outsourced* as Too Soon?**

Based on the data in this analysis of *Outsourced*, there are a few common themes. First, the representation of a call center in India has become the new stereotype of India in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Second, South Asian American respondents were mixed in their perception of the show as negative or positive, but nearly all agreed that the representations of white Americans' perceptions of Indian culture were accurate. Third, the majority of respondents who saw most or all of the first season agreed that the show progressed in its representation of characters in multidimensional ways and deemphasized those over differences. Fourth, the majority of respondents who found the show offensive did so because they had either not seen the show, or were reacting to their own beliefs about what they considered racist.

In general, the attitude about the show was that if the producers had started the show differently, it might not have been perceived as so offensive and stereotypical. As one respondent said,

If the writing was smarter, I mean I know nothing about, this is just my opinion on it you know, but I think they could have taken it a lot of different directions, beyond the [...] wow they're so different and, and I just think it... it kind of put a bad taste in my mouth, to tell you the truth. I was glad to see, a cast I mean, this

was, almost an all non-white cast, on a prime time show, in a prime time slot on a Thursday night when television's very popular and... I think they kind of swung at it and missed, cos they had a lot of opportunities to do a lot more with it than they, ended up doing (Walt, male, late 20s, white).

Some respondents did appreciate the show for being an example of diverse programming on television. As Robert said,

I thought [*Outsourced*] was really funny; it was funny in its own way, for what it was. It could have been more serious, the film was so... I know it had some funny elements, but mostly it's played out as a drama. Not as much drama but kind of comedic drama with like some romance or something like that. And you kind of remember the way you wish it would have gone, but with more of a serious tone, while it was on the air. Um... I mean, given I guess sort of the subject matter so... besides dating in the workplace different things, it should have gone...more, to some extent more serious in tone [...] and I hate that you... the phrase of it being like, oh it's like an affirmative action show but like I said, I look at the track record of NBC, the only other...uh...culturally diverse show like that was like, in recent memory I can think of NBC was like the *Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, and then... you had that kind of gap between things. In the process to me, that show was like a racially diverse cast that you've never had in the show, that's it's like, one, given one direction like that isn't predominantly white at the time so. That's why I kind of miss *Outsourced* actually, that's one of the reason I do miss it, it was nice to see... something that branched out more (Robert, male, mid 30s, black).

When asked to discuss why he thought the show was cancelled, Robert said,

Um...where does one begin with that one? Um... the, first of all, I know... the main source of cancelling it, I want to say... is on the critics, critics hated *Outsourced*. Like I've seen like a handful of really good reviews on *Outsourced*, I've only seen a handful or quite a few but for the most part critics didn't like *Outsourced*. It just for reason assumed of stereotypes for reasons of...not finding it funny whatever, most people didn't like it, and then there's a ratings situation [...] I think *Outsourced* would have survived in a different time slot. [...] *Outsourced* should have been the 7:30 show, cos then it would have been sandwiched between *Community* and *The Office*. I think would have been, definitely survived. I mean it was funny enough show it should have made it um...but being like I said, it was ratings and critics, basically killed *Outsourced*. [...] *Outsourced* got actually lasted an entire season, it actually landed a pick-up of all 22 episodes which said in itself they had faith in the show, they won't give you the whole season unless they actually have faith in the show [...] I think if the show came on this season it would have been on [...] but it's more timing

with that show [...] might be a show before its time, for all we know, most shows are, and those shows get cancelled after one season [...] (Robert, male, early 30s, Black).

On one hand, respondents who found the show offensive were likely glad to see it go. For those who enjoyed the show, some presumed that it was cancelled for other reasons, such as production or time slot. However, based on the analysis here, I suggest that *Outsourced* relied too much on stereotypes throughout the first season. While they began to break away from these characterizations through character and plot development, it was too little too late. As a result, most who watched the show in the beginning soon became alienated from it. Further, the extent to which mainstream American viewers self-identified with some of the culture clashes and the limited knowledge about Indian culture also made many consumers not want to watch it in the first place. Based on the data from South Asian responses, most of these viewers would agree that the representations of Americans as ignorant were accurate.

It is safe to presume that producers of *Outsourced* simply didn't do it well enough for its intended audiences. Even though NBC has supported the show and signed it for a second season during its early weeks, negative press and negative perceptions by viewers likely forced NBC to cancel the show. Who knows what would have happened to the progression of the show – would it have sustained a base like *The Office*, or of other overly-ethnic South Asian representations like those in *The Simpsons* (Groening 1989), *Royal Pains* (Lenchowski and Rodgers 2009), or *The Big Bang Theory* (Lorre and Prady 2007)? In 2012, *The Mindy Project* is the new canary in the cave to determine whether

mainstream Americans are ready for Indians on television. In the next chapter, I discuss the conclusions of my research and findings.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### CONCLUSION

Throughout this dissertation, I have discussed the many nuanced ways that mainstream audiences perceived 21st century representations of South Asians in American media. As I argued at the start, representations of South Asians in American popular media are greatly informed by the contemporary demographics of this group. These findings have larger implications for the nature of race in the media images of this new era. In order to better understand contemporary South Asian representations, it is necessary to employ an informed discussion of both South Asian immigration trends and of historical representations of other racial and ethnic minorities in American media. Additionally, a methodology that emphasizes audience perceptions over content analysis not only provides insight on the resonance of these images in American society, but also prove another worthy exercise of this methodology in sociology and media studies. In this conclusion, I discuss all of my findings in the preceding chapters and emphasize a few salient points regarding the significance of the research, limitations of my study, and potential policy implications.

#### **A Summary of Data**

In this research, I examined audience perceptions of South Asian media representations. Data was collected in two waves: first, through an online survey administered between September 2010 and December 2010, and second, through in-depth interviews that took

place between May 2011 and January 2012. In addition to asking interviews respondents about examples of South Asian characters in the visual media they currently consume, respondents were also asked about specific examples of South Asian characters that I deemed well-known and significant from my online survey results. Thus, this research paints a picture of a particular cross-section in time. I imagine that as the number of South Asian characters in American popular media increases, so too will the variety of examples and the perceptions associated with each new example. However, even as a cross-section of data, the findings in this research prove significant in identifying the perceptions associated with the kinds of representations that are increasingly more common and will eventually inform future representations.

In the Introduction, I introduce my topic and its relevance by discussing the new show *The Mindy Project* (Kaling 2012) and recent data released by the Pew Research Center on the state of Asian Americans in the United States. In many ways, *The Mindy Project* will become a window to the future of media representations. Created by a notable and established actress, and coming on the heels of the cancelation of *Outsourced* (Borden 2010), the future of this show will determine how ready mainstream American audiences will be for the story of a successful Indian American woman's trials and tribulations with career, life, and love.

In Chapter 2, I introduce the framework that informs both the characterization of South Asians in American popular media and audience perceptions of these characters. First, I discuss the history of South Asian immigration to the United States to discuss the extent to which media policy informs our two most common South Asian stereotypes – of

doctor or small business owner. Second, I discuss the literature on race, ethnicity, and gender in order to discuss the extent to which South Asian fit into the American racial hierarchy and gender hierarchy. The extent to which racialization in the United States categorizes South Asians will determine the impact and prevalence of the stereotypes and prejudices toward this group. Additionally, the extent to which gender and race intersect further perpetuates a white supremacy that Otherizes South Asians and South Asian culture. Third, I discuss the literature on media representations to understand how concentrated media ownership in the United States inform the kinds of images that get aired and the kinds of messages/characterizations that are attached to them. The trends in South Asian representation suggest that many of the gendered and racialized stereotypes and the ideologies of society are reproduced.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the findings from my online survey. I present this data first for two particular reasons. First, I identify the most frequently reported characterizations provided when respondents were asked to name contemporary and historical South Asian representations. This contextualizes the topic by creating a list of the most popular and recognizable representations to date. Second, the discussion of responses around these representations, particularly if respondents perceive them as positive or negative, presents one of the primary arguments that I make in the following chapters. Specifically, I argue that South Asian representations have been on a trajectory. While early representations in the 1980s and 1990s focused on portraying South Asians as immigrants, foreigners, cab drivers, and small business owners, representations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have move to portraying South Asians as professional, highly educated, and assimilated.

In the following chapters, I move to a discussion of the themes found in my interview data. In Chapter 4, I focus my discussion on the ways in which interview respondents discuss the racialized ways in which South Asian characters are portrayed. This discussion moves from these older representations of South Asians as savage and foreign to a professional representation and to a representation that is assimilated. The more contemporary representations are in fact the ones that most resonate with respondents and the ones that most remind them of South Asians in real life. These perceptions are important for understanding the extent to which particular racial ideologies of South Asians are perpetuated in the media.

In Chapter 5, I used a critical lens to analyze the ways in which interview respondents discussed South Asians representations as assimilated and Americanized. The majority of respondents discussed contemporary South Asian characters and actors in very positive ways. Specifically, these representations often did not employ stereotypical cultural characteristics but in fact created characters that were assimilated and with just the right balance of both American and South Asian culture. However, in an examination of these responses through the critical lenses of gender, beauty, casting, and assimilation, I find that many of these characters maintain the representation of South Asians as Other and existing outside of mainstream white American ideology. The ways in which gender and beauty are essentialized, the ways in which media corporations and producers make specific choices about who they cast as the South Asian character, and the extent to which South Asians are portrayed as assimilated, but never as the star of the



show suggest that South Asian representations might be increasing, but are still subjected to the same limited types of representations.

In Chapter 6, I discuss perceptions of the 2010-11 NBC television show, *Outsourced*. In general, I compare responses of South Asian viewers with non-South Asian viewers, and responses of those who watched the show with those who did not. The representations of an Indian call center in *Outsourced* reflect what many respondents identified as the new stereotype of India in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is in contrast to the stereotypical South Asian American, represented in such ways as professional, highly educated, and generally assimilated. While those who watched *Outsourced* appreciated the show's eventual foregoing of Indian stereotypes that led to representations of the characters as well-rounded individuals, those who did not watch the show immediately characterized it as racist and offensive for its stereotypical representations. However, as South Asian viewers suggested, the portrayal of the culture clash between the American Todd and his Indian employees reflected their own experiences with mainstream whites in American society. The show was likely cancelled for the perceptions by others as racist, but in reality the show was revolutionary for having a majority-minority cast and perhaps was just ahead of its time.

In the Appendix, I discuss my data collection methodology and processes of data analysis. Based on the various analyses and conclusions that I present in this dissertation, I argue that my data collection and data analyses are useful and enlightening in so far as I was able to develop the following themes in this dissertation. I also discuss some of the benefits and limitations of my research methods. Overall, I conclude that data used for

this research helped me to make the sound connections between audience perceptions of South Asian media representations. In the next section, I discuss the relationship between those producing these representations and those whose representations are being produced.

### **(South) Asian-Orientated Representations**

There have been many efforts by the Asian American community to address some of the problematic and stereotypical representations in American media. In particular, these efforts have been to promote more critical representations that are made by independent media entities. As Ono and Pham (2009) discussed, many of these representations are based on some form of mimicry or mockery. Referencing the work of Homi Bhabha (1994), these authors suggest that mimicry may serve as a strategy to reinforce colonialist ideologies between (white American) colonizers and their (Asian) colonists. The most salient way in which such an ideology is reproduced is through an overt representation of an Asian character as other. Within these representations, there is still space and opportunity for those who are represented to resist the messages.

However, concentrated media ownership determine the kinds of images that appear in the media and limits the opportunities for those who wish to produce images outside of racialized ideological norms. Additionally, as Ono and Pham (2009) pointed out, reactions against racist and stereotypical representations may become more reactive than proactive (2009: 112). With this in mind, it is important for Asians and South Asians to create independent media outlets in which they have ownership of these images and the kinds of messages associated with them.

But, at the end of the day, mainstream media corporations continue to rule and continue to reach the largest segment of the American public. In this research, I specifically focus on the ways in which mainstream viewers perceive these shows. While I did incorporate some discussion of self-perceptions of these images by South Asian Americans, my number of South Asian respondents was relatively small. Future research would actively recruit more South Asian respondents for purposes of comparison. As discussed throughout this research, the negotiated messages that mainstream viewers pulled from these images inform the extent to which these messages either met or challenged pre-existing stereotypes. In the next section, I discuss the ways in which my findings challenge the literature on stereotypes.

### **Implications on Stereotypes**

As I have discussed throughout this study, South Asian media representations today no longer embody the overt stereotypes associated with this group: savage foreigner, heavily accented new immigrant, and cheap small business owner. Rather, respondents describe and discuss contemporary representations to indicate that they are portrayed as assimilated and even “Americanized.” However, as I have argued, while media representations of this minority group are described as conforming to American norms, these characters actually do little to challenge the racial status-quo in American society, particularly through the perpetuation of these representations as overtly ethnic and not entirely assimilated.

These findings have larger implications for the extent to which these images both complement and challenge mainstream audience perceptions of South Asian stereotypes

in American society. For one, many of the representations of South Asians in the media today are informed by such stereotypes as the model minority or the Indian call center employee. In fact, there is a value for media owners to reproduce stereotypical characters, specifically in perpetuating an ideology that serves their best interests as they are wont to do. Even though the stereotype of the professional/model minority might be perceived as a positive characterization, it is still harmful insofar as it is a limited representation of *who* South Asians are in American society and how mainstream Americans perceive the members of this ethnic group.

In the last 20 years, South Asian representations have morphed into a characterization that is overall more “positive” than they were historically. However, as I suggest, these characters are still limited in their representation. Of all of the shows and characters discussed by respondents in this study, none of the characters were the stars of the show (except for Mindy Kaling, whose show premiered after my period of data collection and whose fate remains to be seen). Additionally, these representations continue to maintain a perception of these individuals as Other. While it is reassuring that the number of these representations are still increasing, it continues to be problematic that nearly all of them reflect the same racialized and gendered ideologies established within American society. On the surface, it may seem that racial inequality has been equalized insofar as there are so many minorities on television. However, when examining these representations from a critical perspective, we can see that representations have increased, but so too have the problematic instances within these representations. These

representations continue to maintain a white normative identity in this increasingly diverse society.

In the future, will both extremes of the South Asian stereotypes continue to co-exist? Or will all representations continue to have elements of both historic and contemporary stereotypes? What is confirmed is that stereotypes are now changing from what they used to be. Today, the professional and assimilated representations resonate the most. But within those representations there are deeper embodied messages that perpetuate particular ideologies. In terms of race, these representations maintain a white-non white divide and also maintain an assimilation that makes them honorary white. In terms of gender, white beauty ideals remain a driving force for representations of women of color. The current exception, Mindy Kaling, comes on the heels of *Outsourced* and only time will tell if her non-normative beauty will be trumped by her talent. However, representations in that show maintain the same ideologies influenced by media corporations. As a result, true critical interpretations of South Asian characters are not only rare, but rarely successful. It remains to be seen.

APPENDIX A

METHODS

While there are a number of scholarly works on both content analysis of media representations and on audience studies as a methodological approach (Jhally and Lewis 1992; Rodriguez 1997; Vera and Gordon 2003; Nacos and Torres-Reyna 2007; Chito Childs 2009; Ono and Pham 2009; Alsultany 2012, etc.), there are significantly fewer contemporary books on audience perceptions of U.S. media representations and likely none that specifically examine perceptions of South Asian representations. For example, in her book, *African American Viewers and the Black Situational Comedy* (2000), Robin R. Means-Coleman examined the historical trajectory of Black characters on television and the perceptions of 30 Black viewers to understand how these characters are represented in the media, how these representations relate to whiteness, and the perceptions of these representations that inform Black self-identity. Means-Coleman suggested that most viewers were easily able to acknowledge the ways in which these representations were filtered through a lens of racial dominance.

In her book, *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural* (2003), Lynn Schofield Clark conducted 269 interviews with teenagers and parents over six years to understand how their religious beliefs informed their consumption of fictional television shows that dealt with supernatural topics. Clark classified these viewers in five groups, ranging from those who distinguish their strong religious beliefs from their consumption of media fiction, to those who associate their religious ambiguity with stories about the supernatural. The author concludes by suggesting that the vast majority of U.S. media images are veiled in normative (evangelical) Christian beliefs.

In his book, *Watching with the Simpsons: Television, Parody, and Intertextuality* (2005), Jonathan Gray discussed representations of parody in *The Simpson*. In the first half of the book, the author discussed how the intertextuality of the show allowed it to exist in a forum outside of others, where there was more freedom to pull off these parodies. In the second half, Gray pulled from interviews with 35 viewers to argue that the dynamics of these interpretive communities of audiences, including their demographics and their viewing habits, will determine the success or failure a particular portrayal of parody.

What all of these studies have in common with my research is their use of audience perceptions to examined particular examples of media texts. However, my research addresses audience perceptions of South Asian representations – a classification of media texts that have not been systematically studied. In the same ways as the scholars above discussed, my research addresses the extent to which media texts perpetuate particular ideologies. But, there are a few key differences. For one, my reliance on data from two independent sources – online surveys and in-depth interviews – provides a much richer context to my analyses. Additionally, while the research by Means-Coleman and Clark examine the extent to which media consumption informs and is informed by the identity of the consumer, my research examines how audience perceptions inform social perceptions of South Asians as an ethnic minority group.

My dissertation is a systematic study on mainstream insights a South Asians in the media. It offers another layer to the larger argument about the problematic nature of minority representation in popular media. My findings and conclusions also have larger



implications for U.S. race relations. Specifically, my acknowledgement of the increasing number of South Asian media characters speaks to larger social perceptions related to the increasing demographics of South Asian in the United States. Additionally, my research provides a context which most readers (who are not South Asian) can understand on a personal level.

### **Dissertation Data**

For my dissertation, I conducted two rounds of data collection: an online survey and semi-structured interviews. The online survey was administered in the fall of 2010 and interviews were conducted from May 2011 to January 2012. My survey sample was drawn from a population comprised primarily of undergraduate and graduate students at an urban university where students will likely have interactions with individuals from a variety of racial and ethnic groups. In fact, I found this in my research, as a significant percentage of respondents had relatively diverse social networks, including South Asian friends and acquaintances. Thus, their interactions and perceptions are particularly unique.

I recruited members of my social networks, primarily through Facebook and my own sociology department. This drew a particular cross-section of respondents, many of whom are highly-educated and diverse. As I argue below, this cross-section is one benefit of my research, specifically in that my sample pulled from a highly educated and articulate group who also consume a variety of social media, including television and films. In total, I received 155 quality responses. Most significantly, these responses

informed the characters and initial perceptions that I had toward my data – audience perceptions.

Additionally, the quotes in my online survey responses inform the ways in which respondents conceptualize media representations and characterizations of South Asians. For example, many respondents refer to “stereotypes,” both in positive and negative terms. It was responses like that which informed my follow-up interview questions and probes. In total, I interviewed 50 respondents, approximately half completed the survey and the rest were recruited through word-of-mouth. These interviews additionally informed the formation of my interview questions, particularly in terms of stereotypes, representations, and perceptions.

### **Online Survey**

The first phase of data collection was an online survey from September-December 2010 targeted to individuals 18 and older that was advertised primarily through registered student organizations at Loyola University Chicago, as well as through Facebook, Chicago-area listserves, and word-of-mouth. Respondents were asked about their media consumption habits, their favorite TV shows, movies, and actors/actresses, those contemporary (2000-present) and historical (before 2000) representations of South Asians that come to mind, self-perceived characteristics of those characters, and the extent to which respondents feel that media characters accurately portray South Asians in America. Specifically, respondents answered open-ended questions that asked them to describe those South Asian characters that come to mind, which of these characters they feel are portrayed positively and how, which of these characters are portrayed negatively

and how, and to what extent they feel any of these characters are similar or different to South Asians in real life and how. Key demographics of online survey respondents are reported in Table 2 and media consumption habits of this sample are reported in Table 3.

Table 2. Key Demographics of Online Survey Respondents (n=155)

	Frequency	Percent
<b>Age</b>		
18-24	73	47.1%
25-34	62	40.0%
35-44	12	7.7%
45-54	4	2.6%
55+	2	1.3%
No Answer	2	1.3%
<b>Mean Age</b>	<b>26.64</b>	
<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>8.702</b>	
<b>Race/Ethnicity (multiple answers allowed)</b>		
White	104	67.1%
South Asian	16	10.3%
Black	13	8.4%
Latino/a	9	5.8%
Some Other Race	7	4.5%
East Asian	6	3.9%
Southeast Asian	5	3.2%
Other Asian/Pacific Islander	5	3.2%
Native American	3	1.9%
Middle Eastern/Arab	1	0.6%
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	120	77.4%
Male	34	21.9%
<b>Self Education</b>		
High school or equivalent	27	17.4%
Some college/Associate's	38	24.5%
Bachelor's	33	21.3%
Master's	46	29.7%
Doctorate or equivalent	9	5.8%
Don't Know/No Answer	1	0.6%
<b>Parents' Education</b>		
Less than high school	2	1.3%
High school or equivalent	18	11.6%
Some college/Associate's	24	15.5%
Bachelor's	37	23.9%
Master's	48	31.0%
Doctorate or equivalent	24	15.5%

<b>Respondent Born in U.S.</b>		
Yes	140	90.3%
No	13	8.4%
<b>Respondent's Parent Born in U.S.</b>		
Yes	119	76.8%
No	35	22.6%

Table 3. Media Consumption Habits of Online Survey Respondents (n=155)

	Everyday		4-6/week		1-3/week		1-3/month		<1/month		Never	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
<b>How often do you read newspapers/magazines (in print)?</b>	10	6.5%	15	9.7%	36	23.2%	52	33.5%	36	23.2%	6	3.9%
<b>How often do you watch news on TV?</b>	21	13.5%	27	17.4%	34	21.9%	31	20.0%	30	19.4%	12	7.7%
<b>How often do you watch entertainment on TV?</b>	45	29.0%	38	24.5%	46	29.7%	10	6.5%	8	5.2%	8	5.2%
<b>How often do you watch/read news (online)?*</b>	55	35.5%	31	20.0%	36	23.2%	21	13.5%	9	5.8%	2	1.3%
<b>How often do you watch/read entertainment online?***</b>	27	17.4%	28	18.1%	48	31.0%	26	16.8%	19	12.3%	4	2.6%
<b>How often do you watch movies?</b>	2	1.3%	5	3.2%	57	36.8%	70	45.2%	21	13.5%	0	0

\*One respondent (0.6%) did not answer this question.

\*\*Three respondents (1.9%) did not answer this question.

### Online Survey Recruitment

The majority of respondents were recruited through registered student organizations at Loyola University, as well as secondarily through Facebook, Chicago-area listserves and word of mouth. Registered student organizations are listed on Loyola University's Office of Student Activities and Greek Affairs website. In early September, I targeted only those student organizations that were categorized under "cultural/ethnic" groups. I did so in order to increase my recruitment of racial and ethnic minorities, specifically Asians and

South Asians. These organizations included those targeted to African American, Latino/a, Middle Eastern, Muslim, Hindu and other Asian groups. I sent these organizations a recruitment letter and link to the online survey to the contact member of the student organization, with a request to share the link with members of their group. All aspects of the research had IRB compliance. I re-contacted these same organizations after one month. However, I realized that this self-selection might limit my number of respondents overall. In late-October, I emailed the contacts of all registered student organizations at Loyola, regardless of category. This recruitment helped increase my number of respondents to some extent.

Additionally, I created an Event page on Facebook for my survey. This consisted of an event, scheduled for the period during which my survey was live (September-December 2010). For my social network on Facebook, this appears as an Event on their own Facebook pages, for which they can mark “Attending,” “Maybe Attending” and “Not Attending.” Unless individuals choose Not Attending, this Facebook event regularly showed up on their own Facebook home pages. In the description, I included more information about my research project and a link to the survey. I also encouraged members of my social network to share the survey with their own Facebook friends and colleagues. I would also regularly post reminders about my survey in my own status updates, which would show up in the News Feeds of my Facebook friends.

I also asked a number of individuals to complete the survey and to share the survey with their friends and colleagues. Most of these individuals were personal friends with whom I was not connected through on Facebook. Some of these individuals were

colleagues in my graduate program at Loyola University who were teaching undergraduate courses during the fall semester. My request to them came with a request to share the survey with students in their classes.

Finally, in an attempt to recruit South Asian respondents, I targeted a number of South Asian listserves in the Chicago area. These list serves are targeted to the South Asian-American community and share information about such things as upcoming events and functions, relevant news stories, and job openings of interest. Since my number of South Asian survey respondents was relatively small, this may have not been a fruitful outlet as compared to the recruitment to Loyola student organizations, my personal social network, and through colleagues who distributed it to their undergraduate classes.

### **In-depth Interviews**

In the survey, respondents had the option of including their email address to be contacted in the future with more information on a follow-up in-depth interview. I conducted 50 interviews between May 2011 and January 2012. Demographics of this group are in Table 4. In the interviews, respondents were asked about their background, including the neighborhood in which they grew up, their schools and colleges, their social networks, their extent of television consumption as a child and adult, their perceptions of these shows, their perceptions of shows today, their perceptions of all characters, including South Asian characters and actors in popular media, and their perception on the future of South Asian race relations and media representations.

Table 4. Descriptive Data of In-Depth Interview Respondents (n=50)

#	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Profession/Field
1	Adam	23	Male	Latino/Multiracial	Master's Student
2	Alan	40	Male	White	Computers/IT
3	Aliya	26	Female	Black	PhD Student
4	Ally	31	Female	White	Service
5	Amelia	31	Female	Black	Counselor
6	Ayo	29	Female	Black	Graduate Student
7	Bijal	24	Female	Indian	Higher Education
8	Brent	36	Male	White	Higher Education
9	Carl	51	Male	Black	Writer
10	Cathy	41	Female	White	Researcher
11	Claude	27	Male	White	Researcher
12	Cris	22	Male	Filipino	Master's Student
13	Dana	30	Female	White	Administrative
14	Donald	31	Male	White	Administrative
15	Dorothy	69	Female	White	Retired
16	Elaine	32	Female	White	Researcher
17	Erika	23	Female	White	Master's Student
18	Ethan	31	Male	White	Higher Education
19	Faith	24	Female	Black	Unemployed
20	Farrah	29	Female	White	Higher Education
21	Giles	25	Male	White	PhD Student
22	Gina	31	Female	Black	Administrative
45	Ila	38	Female	Pakistani	Researcher
23	Ileana	42	Female	White/Latina	Unemployed
24	Jane	34	Female	Black	Researcher
25	Jeanine	34	Female	Black	PhD Student
26	Jenny	30	Female	White	Master's Student
27	John	34	Male	White	Editor
28	Joseph	31	Male	Latino	Higher Education
29	Lauren	34	Female	White/Latina	Marketing
30	Leticia	28	Female	Latina/Multiracial	PhD Student
31	Liam	34	Male	White	Social Worker
32	Mack	23	Male	White	Undergraduate Student
33	Mallory	30	Female	White	Researcher
34	Mark	28	Male	White	Unemployed
35	Natalie	30	Female	White	Self-Employed
36	Nina	20	Female	White	Undergraduate Student
37	Pankaj	20	Male	Indian	Undergraduate Student
38	Paul	19	Male	White	Undergraduate Student
39	Peter	29	Male	White	Management
40	Priya	24	Female	Indian	Master's Student

<b>41</b>	Raheem	25	Male	Pakistani	Computers/IT
<b>42</b>	Raymond	19	Male	White	Undergraduate Student
<b>43</b>	Ricky	29	Male	White/Latino	Sales
<b>44</b>	Robert	31	Male	Black	Performer
<b>46</b>	Samuel	29	Male	White	Performer
<b>47</b>	Sheetal	29	Female	Indian	Administrative
<b>48</b>	Swati	66	Female	Indian	Retired
<b>49</b>	Tim	26	Male	White/Latino	Unemployed
<b>50</b>	Walt	28	Male	White	PhD Student
	<b>Mean Age</b>	<b>31</b>			
	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>9.7</b>			

All interview protocols were approved by Loyola University Chicago's IRB. Interviews ranged in time from approximately 1 hour to 3.5 hours long and were recorded using a digital voice recorder. Interviews were conducted either in-person, on the telephone or through Skype. In-person interviews were arranged either at the respondent's residence, in a public location (such as a coffee house) or in a private room at Loyola University. In-person interviews were recorded with the voice recorder placed in between the interviewer and respondent, with the microphone facing the respondent. Telephone and Skype interviews were arranged either for those who lived outside of the Chicago-area, or with those for whom it was more convenient to do so. Skype is a voice-over-Internet technology that can be used between two or more parties with a computer microphone and with or without a web camera. Skype interviews were recorded similarly to in-person interviews, with the voice recorder placed next to the computer speaker.

#### Coding and Inter-Rater Reliability

I transcribed most of the interviews, and some were transcribed by an undergraduate student working on the project. All interviews were protected by the researcher and



shared only with undergraduate students who worked on the project. Coding of interview took place during the interviews and after all interviews were transcribed. During the interview, I would informally code respondents' responses by taking notes. In many instances, the notes that I took during the interview helped inform my questions and probes for following interviews. After interviews were transcribed, they were printed and then analyzed thematically through an iterative process. Themes were constructed primarily around those themes presented in these chapters – including stereotypes, assimilation, race, gender, and *Outsourced*. Additionally, I had two graduate colleagues with expertise on race at Loyola analyze a random sample of 10% of the interviews (n=5) for purposes of inter-rater reliability. My two colleagues read the transcripts and analyzed them all for themes. In total, we conducted two meetings in which we discussed their themes, my themes, any crossover in themes, and any differences in themes. I discussed my themes with my colleagues to see if they agreed with my perspective. Additionally, my colleagues each presented their themes and I discussed with them whether I agreed and disagreed and why. Generally, all the themes developed individually by my colleagues and I are included in the analyses presented here. The benefit of this process of inter-rater reliability is to ensure that all of the themes that I, as researcher, am identifying are not biased by my own opinions and my own media consumption. My colleagues, both of whom were not as aware of some of these media representations as I was, helped me to develop my larger themes around the nature of these representations and extent to which these representations reflect social hierarchy and inform social interactions today.

### **Limitations of Methodology**

It is important to note that there are potential limitations to the research methodology and study design. For example, there are sampling issues associated with online survey recruitment, specifically when considering the “digital divide” between those who have computer skills and Internet access (such as young adults, those in the middle and upper class, the highly educated, and whites) and those who are less likely to have Internet access (such as working class and poor groups, minorities, and the elderly) (Schement 1996, DiMaggio et al. 2001). There can also be a major disconnect between researchers and respondents, such as the extent to which a respondent will acknowledge an email invite from someone they do not know, or the extent to which respondents will fully understand survey questions (Evans and Mathur 2005). However, online surveys have fast turnover, cost less to administer and can reach a much wider audience than traditional paper or snail-mail surveys (Evans and Mathur 2005, Wright 2005). Additionally, scholars who have compared various types of survey administration suggest that there are particular methods to increase online survey response rates, such as incorporating a stylish survey design (Vincente and Reis 2010) and creating tailored email initiations and sending regular email reminders (Schonlau et al. 2002, Trouteaud 2004, Porter and Whitcomb 2007).

The use of in-depth interviews is in contrast to other sociological studies that have used focus groups to measure audience/social perceptions. The reviews on both methodologies are mixed. On the one hand, focus groups encourage a dialogue through which respondents can build upon each other’s thoughts (Agar and McDonald 1995).

However, this can also be a detriment, especially when topics are sensitive in nature and the purpose of the research is to draw out an individual's true feelings (Kreuger 1995).

Additionally, Fern (1982) compared focus groups responses to aggregated interview data and found that each focus group participant produced only 60% to 70% as many ideas as they would have in an individual interview.

### **Benefits of Methodologies**

The primary strengths in my methodology lies in the fact that I rely on two sources of data – an online survey and in-depth interviews, and that I had the analysis of two other people. My sample pulls primarily from a university in a major metropolitan city. Thus, the respondents who are represented in this analysis were more likely to be highly educated, more articulate in their responses, and were also more likely to have social interactions with South Asians in their social circles, at Loyola, and in their own communities.

The findings from my online survey greatly informed the directions I needed to go in the development of my follow-up in-depth interview questions. In particular, I was able to identify those characters and actors that were most frequently mentioned, the ways in which respondents talked about South Asian characters and South Asians in real life. I used this information to develop my questions around on particular characters and around social networks, South Asian friends and colleagues, and the perceptions of Asian and South Asian stereotypes. This data in particular is outside of the scope of this dissertation but will be analyzed in the future.

The use of two different sets of data allowed me the ability to analyze one set of data while collecting data for the second set. Specifically, I was able to analyze the online survey results while developing my questions for the follow-up interviews. This proved fruitful, specifically through the completion of my first dissertation analysis chapter.

I was also able to build on the interviews that I had conducted over time to tweak my questions. Specifically, I was able to eliminate redundant and unnecessary questions, rephrase questions that were confusing, and most importantly, add questions and specific prompts that I felt were important for my overall arguments. For example, after completing approximately half of the interviews, I began to include prompts on certain types of South Asian media representations and probed respondents on those. I asked respondents about the films *Slumdog Millionaire* and the *Harold and Kumar* series, the television show *Outsourced*, and the Bollywood film industry. This was in lieu of waiting for respondents to bring up these key examples themselves, as it was often the case that respondents may have forgotten about these representations or their viewing of them.

However, data from my online survey pulls from a relatively homogeneous group. For one, the majority of this sample is pulled from students who attend Loyola University Chicago – a private, Jesuit university located in Chicago. From this, one could infer that the majority of these respondents are educated, upper-middle class, below 25, and white. In fact, these demographics are apparent as presented in Table 2 of this Appendix. Additionally, the majority of survey respondents are women – which support the general claim that more women than men complete surveys. Thus, one argument could be that my online survey findings are limited insofar as they represent the opinions of this

particular group. However, I contend that this group is important to study because not only has it not been studied in this context before, but the findings of this group can illuminate the general findings of this type of group that is highly educated, wealthy, and attending a college where there is a substantial Indian and South Asian student population.

On the other hand, my sample of interview respondents is much more diverse. Exactly half are white and half are non-white, and exactly half are men and half are women. This provides a diverse discussion among the respondents that are represented in the data. Additionally, many of these respondents are highly educated, live in major metropolitan areas, and have at least some South Asians in their own social networks. This suggests that their perceptions of media images are informed even at the slightest level by people they personally know.

The original intention of this study was to include more South Asian respondents in order to compare audience perceptions of both South Asians and non-South Asians. As it turned out, recruiting South Asians was much more challenging. While there are some South Asian interview respondents ( $n=7$ ), this percentage is not large enough to make any overarching conclusions on the perceptions of these images by this group. However, my sample does provide a unique perspective on mainstream American viewers of the television shows and films discussed throughout.

APPENDIX B  
ONLINE SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

This survey was completed by the first wave of respondents between September 2010 and December 2010.

1. Are you currently a resident of the United States? (Yes/No/Don't Know)

Please indicate how often you participated in the following activities on average *in the last year*: (Never/Less than once a month/1-3 times a month/1-3 times a week/4-6 times a week/Everyday)

2. Read newspapers/magazines (in print)

3. Watched news (on TV)

4. Watched entertainment (on TV)

5. Watched/read news (online)

6. Watched/read entertainment (online)

7. Watched movies (in the theater or at home)

8. Please list some of your favorite TV shows? (open ended)

9. Please list some of your favorite movies? (open ended)

10. Please list some of your favorite actors and actresses from these TV shows and movies? (open ended)

The next few questions are about your perceptions of contemporary characters and actors in American media who are South Asian (i.e. those characters and actors from Southern Asia, including India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan).

("Contemporary" is defined as those characters and actors who were in the media from 2000-present)

11. Please list those contemporary actors and characters that come to mind who are South Asian. (Examples of responses might include specific characters and actors from popular TV shows and movies, as well as the news media, popular culture and advertising). *You are free to list as many as you can remember and provide as much detail as you know about the characters, such as the character's name, the actor's name, and the TV show or movie in which they appear(ed). (You may repeat any answers from the last page, if applicable).* (open ended)
12. Of the contemporary South Asian characters and actors that come to mind, please list those who you think are portrayed in a positive way. (open ended)
13. Please describe how these characters are portrayed in a positive way? Be as specific as possible. (open ended)
14. Of the contemporary South Asian media characters that come to mind, please list those who you think are portrayed in a negative way. (open ended)
15. Please describe how these characters are portrayed negatively? Be as specific as possible. (open ended)
16. Of the contemporary South Asian characters that come to mind, please list any similarities you think that these media characterizations have with South Asians you know in real life. (open ended)
17. What are some of the ways that South Asians in real life act like these contemporary South Asian media characters? Be as specific as possible. (open ended)



These next few questions are regarding your perceptions of historical characters and actors in American media who are South Asian. (*"Historical" is defined as those characters and actors who were in the media from before 2000*)

18. Please list those historical characters and actors/actresses that come to mind who you believe are South Asian. (Examples of responses might include characters and actors from TV shows and movies that you remember watching when you were younger, as well as other representations in the news media, popular culture and advertising).  
*You are free to list as many as you can remember and provide as much detail as you know about the characters, such as the character's name, the actor's name, and the TV show or movie in which they appeared. (open ended)*
19. Of the historical South Asian characters that come to mind, please list those who you feel were portrayed in a positive way? (open ended)
20. Describe how these characters were portrayed positively? Be as specific as possible.  
(open ended)
21. Of the historical South Asian characters that come to mind, please list those who you feel were portrayed in a negative way. (open ended)
22. Describe how these characters were portrayed negatively? Be as specific as possible.  
(open ended)
23. Of the historical South Asian characters that come to mind, please list any similarities you think that these media characterizations had with South Asians you know in real life. (open ended)

24. What are some of the ways that South Asians in real life acted like these historical South Asian media characters? Be as specific as possible. (open ended)
25. Age: (open ended)
26. Race/Ethnicity: (select all that apply): (White/Black/Latino/Native American/Middle Eastern or Arab/East Asian/South Asian/Southeast Asian/Other Asian or Pacific Islander/Other)
27. Sex/Gender: (Female/Male/Other)
28. Religion: (Agnostic/Atheist/Buddhist/Christian/Hindu/Jewish/Muslim/None/Other)
29. What is your highest level of education completed? (Less than high school/High school or equivalent/Some college Associate's/Bachelor's/Master's/Doctorate or equivalent/Don't know)
30. What is the highest level of education completed by at least one of your parents or guardians? (Less than high school/High school or equivalent/Some college Associate's/Bachelor's/Master's/Doctorate or equivalent/Don't know)
31. What is your family's annual income? (Less than \$30,000/\$30,000-\$50,000/\$50,000-\$100,000/\$100,000-\$150,000/\$150,000-\$200,000/More than \$200,000/Don't Know)
32. Were you born in the United States? (Yes/No/Don't Know)
33. Was at least one of your parents or guardians born in the United States? (Yes/No/Don't Know)
34. What is your current zip code? (open ended)
35. If you would like to be contacted for participation in a follow-up interview on the topics discussed in this survey, please write your email address below. If you are

contacted, you will have the option to either schedule an interview or to decline further participation. *The information you provide below is solely for the purpose of this research and will not be shared with anyone.* Email (open ended)

APPENDIX C  
INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

Below is the interview questionnaire administered to participants between May 2011 and January 2012.

Demographics

1. What is your age?
2. What is your current job/major?
3. What is your racial identification?

First, I want to ask you about your background and growing up.

4. Tell me about the neighborhood you grew up in?
  - a. Probe: What was the racial makeup of your neighborhood?
  - b. Probe: What types of jobs did your neighbors around you work?
  - c. Probe: Did you feel comfortable growing up in your neighborhood?
5. Growing up, what type of job(s) did your parents work?
6. What was their educational background?
7. Was this a similar background to your grandparents
8. Do you have any siblings? Tell me about them.
  - a. Probe: What type of job(s) do they currently work?
9. Thinking back to your elementary and middle schools you attended, do you recall the racial/ethnic breakdown of your classes?
  - a. Probe: Was your school public or private?
10. Thinking about your closest friends during this time, what were their races and ethnicities?

- a. Probe: How did your parents feel about you hanging out with minorities when you were in elementary school?
  - b. Probe: What kinds of jobs did their parents work?
11. What were some of the activities that you and your elementary school friends did together?
12. When you were in elementary school, what were some of your favorite TV shows?
- a. Probe: Who did you watch with?
13. What was it about these shows that you liked?
14. Do you remember TV shows while you were in elementary school that you didn't like?
- a. Probe: What about them didn't you like?
15. Thinking back to your high school, what was the racial/ethnic breakdown of your classes?
- a. Probe: Was your school public or private?
16. Thinking about your closest friends during this time, what were their races and ethnicities?
- a. Probe: What kinds of jobs did their parents work?
  - b. Probe: How did your parents feel about you hanging out with people of a different background with you?
17. Did you date in high school? Tell me about some of the folks you dated.
- a. Probe: What was their race?
  - b. Probe: What kind of jobs did their parents work?

- c. Probe: How did your parents feel about this person?
18. What were some of the activities that you and your high school friends did together?
19. When you were in high school, what were some of your favorite TV shows?
20. What was it about these shows that you enjoyed?
- a. Probe: Who did you watch with?
21. Do you remember TV shows while you were in high school that you didn't like?
- a. Probe: What about them didn't you like?
22. Thinking about your college(s), what was/were the racial/ethnic breakdown of your classes?
- a. Probe: Was your school public or private?
23. Thinking about your closest friends during this time, what were their races and ethnicities?
- a. Probe: What kinds of jobs did their parents work?
24. Did you date in college? Tell me about some of the folks you dated.
- a. Probe: What was their race?
  - b. Probe: What kind of jobs did their parents work?
  - c. Probe: How did your parents feel about this person?
25. What did/do you and your friends do for fun?
26. What were/are some of your favorite TV shows during this time?
27. What was it about these shows that you like so much?
- a. Probe: Who did you watch with?
28. Do you remember TV shows while you were in college that you didn't like?

a. Probe: What about them didn't you like?

29. Besides family, tell me about the 3 people you talk to the most these days (their age, race and job).

Now I want to know about your thoughts about TV shows

30. What are some of your favorite recent television shows?

31. What is it about these shows that you enjoy?

a. Probe: Who do you watch with?

32. Are there any popular shows that you don't watch?

a. Probe: What is it about these shows that you don't like?

33. Are there characters or actors from any of the shows that you mentioned or any of the other shows out there right now who you think are really attractive?

a. Probe: What it is about them that is so attractive?

34. Are there any characters who you think are less attractive?

a. Probe: What is it about them that is not attractive?

35. Do you think any South Asians in popular media are really attractive? Who are they?

a. Probe: What is it about them that makes them attractive?

36. Are there any South Asians in the media that you think are less attractive?

a. Probe: What about them makes them unattractive?

Now I want to ask you some questions about South Asians (i.e. Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan, Nepali, etc.) in America.

37. Do you know any South Asians from work or school?



- a. Probe: Do you know the country their family is from? What about the region or city?
  - b. Probe: Do you know if they were born here or elsewhere?
  - c. Probe: What is their job?
  - d. Probe: Do you know what their parents jobs?
38. What about any South Asians in your neighborhood or in the places you frequent?
- a. Probe: What types of interactions do you have at the convenient store, etc?
39. Do you remember any experiences with South Asians in your childhood neighborhood, in school or in places you went in your neighborhood?
- a. Probe: What were your feelings toward South Asians growing up?
40. In general, what are some of the behaviors or characteristics that you associate with South Asian-Americans today?
- a. Probe: Have South Asians in the US always had these kinds of behaviors?
41. What are some of the behaviors or characteristics that you associate with South Asians in popular media today?
42. How do the behaviors and characteristics of South Asians in media today compare to the behaviors and characteristics of historical representations of South Asians in the media?
43. What are some of your perceptions of each of the South Asian characters in the shows you watch? (probe for all popular characters)
- a. Probe: Did you watch Slumdog Millionaire?
  - b. Probe: Did you see the Harold and Kumar films?

c. Probe: Did you watch Outsourced?

d. Probe: Do you watch Bollywood?

44. Of the South Asians in the media we discussed, to what extent do you think they are similar to South Asians in real life? Or different?

45. Many people believe that Asian Americans in general tend to be smarter and more educated than other folks in society. What do you think about that statement?

46. Do you think any of the South Asian we discussed fit or don't fit into that characterization?

a. Probe: Is this characterization reflected in the media, or not?

Finally, I just have a few questions about your perceptions on the future of American society

47. Compared to other racial/ethnic groups, how do you think South Asians will get along in American society in the future?

48. On an individual level, how do you think South Asians will live and interact with everyone else in the future? (social interactions)

49. Where do you see media representations of South Asians going in the future?

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## VITA

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To date, Bhoomi has presented at numerous conferences and has published a variety of papers. Her publications have appeared in such forums as the journal *Humanity and Society*, and the books *African Americans on Television: Race-ing for Ratings*, and *Social Exclusion, Power, and Video Game Play: New Research in Digital Media and Technology*. Currently, Bhoomi is a Research Associate at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine and is working on a qualitative social science research project funded by the National Institute of Health.