Bollywood Movies and Identity Construction Amongst Second Generation Indian Americans

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Abstract

Indian cinema has been one of the most dominant and distinguishing features of the subcontinent’s culture for the past sixty years. And, as Indians continue to seek out jobs and educational opportunities worldwide, they are bringing these cultural artifacts with them. Previous research suggests that Indian Diaspora may use these types of media products as a form of cultural maintenance. This article explores the role of Bollywood movies in constructing and maintaining the cultural identity among second generation Indian Americans. In particular, this study seeks to demonstrate how Bollywood film viewing practices of the second generation Indian Americans intersects to create a notion of “Indianness.” Discussions generated across in-depth interviews (N = 8) and Focus groups (N = 8) about the process of participants cultural identity construction and maintenance showed that the cultural identity of second generation Indian Americans depended on various interpersonal and mediated communication activities. Interestingly, the study found that though social factors such as family and peer groups have played a dominant role in constructing the Indian identity, Bollywood movies appeared to have a significant influence on second generation Indian Americans in maintaining those identities. Bollywood movies not only act as a bridge between home and Diaspora, but they help transmit the culture and traditions that play a crucial role in maintaining the “Indianness,” among second generation Indian Americans.

In today’s world of global movement and cultural hybridity, ‘true “identity”’ has become a fundamental and yet significant issue in one’s life. According to Basu (2004), in this globalized world, preserving and maintaining ones own culture and identity has become a great challenge.
However, with technological advancements like satellite TV, Internet and cell phones, diaspora communities are able to stay connected with their homeland and maintain their self-identity.

Electronic media has been the essential tool for the diaspora in re-rooting their identities (Appadurai, 1996). While commenting on the influence of electronic media on the diapsora community, Appadurai argued that “because of its sheer multiplicity in which they appear (films, TV, internet and telephones) and because of the rapid way in which they move through daily life, electronic media provide diapsoric communities with resources for self-imagining that help maintain the identity (Appadurai, 1990, p.4)”.

With increasing popularity of electronic media and the phenomenal success of Hindi movies (also known as Bollywood) among the Indian diaspora (Dudrah, 2006, Uberoi, 1998), it is important to study the role of Bollywood movies in the identity construction of the Indian diaspora.

Indian cinema has been one of the most dominant and distinguishing features of the subcontinent’s popular culture for the last sixty years. The Indian cinema industry, also called Bollywood, is the world’s largest film industry in terms of the number of films produced (Dwyer, 2006). To satisfy around 14 million Indians who go to cinema everyday Indian film industry produces over 1000 films compared to Hollywood, which only produces about half that number. Table 1 compares the size and global reach of the two most prolific film industries.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Indian Film Industry</th>
<th>Hollywood</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Films Produced*</td>
<td>1,100</td>
<td>800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tickets sold</td>
<td>4 billion</td>
<td>3 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Wide revenues**</td>
<td>U.S $ 2 billion</td>
<td>U.S $ 56 billion</td>
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Indian cinema has always found a market overseas with limited number of films being exported to countries such as Soviet Union, Middle East, parts of Africa, South-East Asia, the Caribbean, USA, Australia and the Great Britain (Srinivas, 2002). Down the years, Bollywood, whose annual output of over 400 films a year with 3.6 billion audiences across the world, has become a necessary comfort (Chopra, 2007) especially for South Asian Diaspora communities. Through its rich cultural textures and images, Bollywood cinema has facilitated a platform by which the South Asian Diaspora can stay connected to the homeland.

As Rajadhyaksha (2003) notes, “there is a craze for ‘Bollywood’ movies that quite exceeds anything we have seen before (p. 24).” This fondness for Bollywood cinema began with films like DDLJ (Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge, 1995), DTPH (Dil To Pagal Hai, 1997), Taal (1999), Lagaan (2001) and Kal Ho Na Ho (KHNH, 2003), which achieved not only a stupendous success in overseas market, but also stayed among top ten grosser of the year in US and UK (Rajadhyaksha, 2003). Since then, India’s movie exports increased automatically from $10 million a decade ago to U.S $2 billion last year. The following are some of the reasons for Bollywood’s ever increasing popularity.

One of the significant reasons for the raise in popularity is due to the change in producer’s attitude towards motion picture business. Film producers like Ronnie Screwvala and Aditya Chopra have begun professionalizing the cinema business, bringing in outside investors and aggressively marketing films with novel plots. Their production companies have successfully cut the old format of three-and-half hour movies to a fast-paced 120 minutes and have hired Hollywood scriptwriters to make films more appealing and watchable.
Secondly, Indian movie industry started enjoying an impressive boom due to the improved Indian economy with significant number of Indians getting wealthier and spending more on entertainment. Lovgren (2004) observed that telecommunications revolution and Information technology explosion witnessed an all time growth in the Indian economy, which propelled the middle class life style into newer heights. A study by McKinsey Global Institute also discovered that Indian consumer spending increased from $250 billion in 2004 to $400 billion by 2007.

Another important reason for Bollywood’s popularity can be attributed to the growing Indian population overseas. According to the 2005 census, the Indian population around the world is estimated around 25 million consisting of both Non Resident Indians (NRI) and Persons of Indian Origin (POI). The Indian community in the United States alone increased from 1.68 million in 2000 to close to 3 million in 2005 (Joseph, 2005). New media technologies like Satellite, Internet and DVD’s have opened new doors to bring Bollywood into the living rooms.

Finally, Bollywood exports play an important role in Indian film industry’s growing popularity overseas. The era of globalization effectively placed Indian film industry on a global platform. This essentially popularized Bollywood movies in countries like United States, U.K, New Zealand, and Australia. Cohen (2006) observes that roughly half of Bollywood’s estimated $2 billion annual revenue comes largely from these overseas markets where Indian communities provide a great number of audiences for theatrical releases and DVD sales. According to the Internet Movie Database, films from India do more business in the United States than films from any other country (Joseph, 2005).

The aforementioned reasons make Bollywood films a much sought after entertainment source for Indians living in India as well as abroad. With popular Indian television channels
playing Bollywood movies, it is safe assume that Bollywood movies are becoming an integral part of Indian Diaspora through which they can stay in touch and maintain Indian traditions and culture. Considering the popularity of Bollywood movies amongst the Indian Diaspora, particularly in United States, the current study investigates the identity construction process of second-generation Indian American students and details the role of Bollywood in maintaining their identities.

**Literature Review**

The concept of cultural identity is deeply rooted in cultural studies and, so, this research study is designed basing on cultural studies framework. Cultural studies combine sociology, film/video studies, and cultural anthropology to determine cultural phenomena in industrial societies. Cultural studies are the way to analyze and understand the systems and values of our daily lives. In today’s global world, mass media play a significant role in representing and even projecting a society’s culture. Supporting the idea, Hall (1997) observes that the images and the values of a society would be provided by mass media, especially electronic media. In keeping with this perspective, Hall (1982) explains the role of media in the society as functional.

No matter what the audience perceive about the content of mass media, consciously or unconsciously, social ideology will always be present in the culture. However, it does not create new culture or a social phenomenon but it repackages and reforms cultural practices. Hall (1997) suggests that the audience could learn other cultural values through media and so they might recognize that they live in different cultures. Accordingly, they could get other cultural perspectives through mass media so that they might realize that the culture they are living in differs from other cultures.
However, understanding the process of culture and identity construction is a complex activity and so, this research study tries to adopt a few elements from a cultural studies framework called ‘circuit of culture.’ Circuit of culture suggests that to study a cultural text or artifact, one needs to look at its representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation (du Gay et al., 1997). They suggest that combining these five elements completes a circuit and to examine or analyze how cultural processes are accomplished in our daily lives, one must take this circuit into consideration if it has to be studied adequately (du Gay et al., 1997).

As seen earlier, the circuit of culture has five major moments: Representation is the first stage of circuit as it is a process by which cultural meaning is generated and given a shape. As Hall (1997) suggests, cultural meaning is socially constructed through symbolic system. So, visuals and language play a predominant role in the process of representation. At the moment of identity, it examines how people find similarities with themselves and messages encoded during production. Production is pursued on the basis of targeted audience and at this stage we are concerned with understanding how various meanings are encoded in messages. Consumption deals with how these messages are decoded and what they mean to the consumers. On the final moment of Regulation, it examines how cultural messages affect consumers in their daily lives.

The meaning of any cultural text or artifact can be examined and understood from these five interdependent elements of circuit of culture. Since the present study attempts to examine the process of identity construction among second generation Indian Americans and the role of Bollywood, the cultural process will be examined on the basis of circuit of culture framework, mainly focusing on the elements of representation, identity and consumption.

*The Concept of Ethnic Identity*
With the advent of Globalization and new media technologies like the Internet and satellite television, Diaspora communities are being able to stay connected with their ethnic roots as often as possible and restore the old traditions and value system. Scholars define ethnic identity in different ways and interestingly there seems to be no distinction in identity literature when it comes to defining racial, ethnic, and cultural identity (as referred in Jung and Lee, 2004). Jung and Lee (2004) observe that the definitions provided by past researchers with respect to ethnic, racial and cultural identities are almost similar if not identical.

Of all the various definitions, Kelly’s definition is the one most researchers agree with. Kelly (1996) defines ethnic identity as “a group’s or individual’s cultural construction of their ethnic past which is grounded in an historical context but which also responds to changes in the lives of both groups and individuals (p.82).” It is safe to assume that ethnic groups express their identity by choosing ethnic symbols such as ethnic clothes, ethnic festivals, ethnic language, and most importantly through consumption of ethnic food and media. Hall (1997) clearly emphasizes that elements like family and peer groups play a significant role in the formation of individual’s identity.

Also, communicating with in-group and out-group members play a dominant role in identifying with ones ethnic culture (Durham, 2004). He suggests that there is a difference between interacting with in-group members from out-group members. While in-group members help individual maintain the culture, out-group members constantly remind him of his own identity. Thus, cultural identity is defined, produced and maintained through various social interactions inside and outside ethnic communities.

Apart from family and peer group interactions, cultural identity of ethnic groups can also be constructed and maintained through their constant interactions with media technologies like
the Internet, satellite television and DVD. Hall (1997) suggests that mass media acts as a linkage between dispersed public and the homeland of cultural life that helps to create a sense of identity among the media consumers. Chances are that new media technologies create ample opportunities for minority communities to find a new sense of connection and revive their identities. For example, consumption of ethnic news and entertainment through satellite channels and DVDs by ethnic minorities could serve to maintain the culture and traditions. The current research highlights the role of Bollywood movies, which facilitate the cultural contacts by erasing geographical boundaries and thereby influence ethnic group’s identity construction and maintenance.

**Cultural Identity of Asian Americans**

Researchers have found that cultural identity of Asian Americans to be largely influenced by family and social relationships (see Jung & Lee, 2004; Babrow & Shi, 2007; Durham, 2004). This reflects the importance of family togetherness to Asian culture in comparison to the individualistic approach of Western cultures. In the study of ethnic identity formation process among second generation Korean-Americans, Jo (2000) has found that Korean culture, associated with strict parenting style, age hierarchy, and faith in religion, is a strong force behind the identity negotiation process.

Hennick, Diamond, and Cooper (1999) have found that the cultural identity of Asian teenage girls in Britain depends on their social activities and interactions. Many teenagers from the study have reported that mixing with Asian friends, attending language classes, and watching Asian films helped them stay connected to the home culture. Importantly, they have opined that Asian films mirrored the true culture and traditional aspects, attitudes, and behaviors of many Asian societies that helped reinforce cultural values. This suggests that apart from
family and religious institutions, peer group interaction and entertainment industry also play a crucial role in defining the ethnic identity.

Mass Media has been used as a useful communication tool for cultural identity construction and maintenance among first generation immigrants and their children. Jung & Lee (2004), in their ethnographic study on Korean American students, have found that young Korean Americans most often rely on the distance shrinking communication technologies such as mobile phones, Internet, and satellite television to create new social realities and cultural identities within the Diaspora Korean community context.

Lee (2004), in his study of Korean Immigrants and role of satellite television, has found that satellite television programs played an important role reinforcing the connection with Korean culture and society. The study has also revealed that satellite television acted as a good education tool for children to learn Korean language and culture. Thompson’s (2002) study of media use and Diasporic identity among Immigrants and their children in U.K has found that joint viewing of ethnic television and films are extremely important in the construction of cultural identity.

The Internet has also begun to play an important role in constructing and maintaining the cultural identity of ethnic Diaspora. Melkote & Liu (2000) have found that Chinese ethnic Internet sites, tudou.com, helped integrating all the Chinese students and scholars in the United Sates. The study suggests that the Chinese ethnic Internet sites provided a way for Chinese to stay connected with their culture and preserve the cultural values. This is an ample indication of Internets role in shaping and reinforcing the cultural identity.

Gillespie’s study (1989) on the other hand examines the role of the video recorder in the construction of ethnic identity among Indians in England. Interestingly, he has found that the
extensive use of VCR at home to watch Indian films represented a significant means for parents to maintain links with their country and culture of origin, whereas second-generation children resisted the Indian traditions and customs shown in films. Most parents have used Indian films to cultivate certain traditional cultural values, attitudes, and belief system in their children apart from teaching the Indian language.

In summary, previous studies have shown that the cultural identity construction amongst second generations depends on various negotiation processes through a combination of interpersonal and mediated communicative interactions. Those studies, however, have not sufficiently discussed the role of Bollywood movies apart from interpersonal interactions in the identity construction of second-generation Indian Americans. Therefore, this research will try to examine the role of Bollywood in constructing and maintaining the cultural identity among second generation Indian Americans with following research questions:

**RQ 1:** *What role do mass media play in second generation Indian Americans identity construction?*

**RQ 2:** *What role does Bollywood in particular play in the process of identity construction among second generation Indian Americans?*

**Methodology**

Qualitative methods like *In-depth interviews* and *Focus Groups* are conducted to understand the role of social institutions and Mass media in general and Bollywood movies in particular in the Identity process. This study has conducted 8 In-depth interviews and 1 Focus Group session to examine and analyze the identity construction process among second generation Indian Americans. More specifically, a major focus of the study is to examine the role of Bollywood movies in constructing and maintaining Indian identity in the said group at Texas Tech University, Lubbock.
All individuals are contacted initially by sending personal emails to the members of South Asian Students Association (SASA), a university recognized group at Texas Tech, requesting to participate in the study. The researcher has also attended few general body meetings held by SASA to explain about the purpose of the study and hire interested participants. A total of 16 second-generation Indian American students are hired and interviewed in the department of Mass Communications at Texas Tech University, between Feb 15, 2008 and April 20, 2008. Both the in-depth interviews and focus group session is conducted for an hour and is digitally recorded. All the respondent’s names have been changed to conceal the identity and the data thus obtained is transcribed and analyzed by the researcher to check for common themes and ideas that cut across the discussion.

Findings and Discussion

While exploring the media habits in general and Bollywood viewing habits in particular, most of the respondents claimed that they watch at least one Bollywood movie a week. The following table lists the demographics of the participants and their reported Bollywood movie viewing frequency, again all the names have been changed and respondents have been assigned with a pseudonym:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Gender of Parent(s)</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Working</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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The following section examines what being “Indian” means to second-generation Indian American Students in Texas Tech University.

Constructing Identity

All research participants have said that they are either Indian American or Indian, but not American. This suggests that although participants were born and brought up in America they still identify with their ethnic roots and keep the “Indianness” alive in them. All of them visited
India at least once and learned about Indian traditions and culture. Asked what it means to be an Indian, Rahul (male, 23) has responded as follows:

I see myself as Indian/Indian American because though I was born here I was still brought up as if I was from there. I have all the cultural similarities, same religious views and attitudes. My parents pressed the culture upon me and I try to keep the traditions alive and pass it on to the next generation.

All the interviewees and focus group participants have associated the Indian culture with family togetherness, religion, festivities and weddings. They have expressed that maintaining the culture and traditions is very important and it is something that they definitely want to pass it on to their children. Asked why it is important to maintain the culture, Puja (female, 22) has said the following:

I think maintaining culture is extremely important to me because that’s who you are and always will be even if you live the rest of your life here in America. I know that I want my children to be Indian and want them to know values and beliefs that I have been raised with.

All respondents have shared similar views on the importance of maintaining the culture, and these comments clearly reveal that most of the second generation Indian American participants try to stay connected with their home culture and traditional values. The research also shows that ethnic distinction plays a critical role in constructing Indian identity among Indian American students. For example, Rupa (female, 25) has remembered discovering her identity as Indian through her interactions with other ethnic group members. She says “interacting with out-group members constantly reminds me of being an Indian, since nobody really recognizes me as an American.” This response suggests that though Rupa was born and
brought up in America and speaks English like any other Americans she will never be accepted as an American because of her ethnic background.

Interactions with both “in-group” and “out-group” members play a significant role in inter-cultural identity negotiation process and most importantly remind second generation Indian Americans of their ethnic roots and cultural background. Accordingly, most of the Indian American students, despite their being born in America and fluent in English, do not veer away from Indian culture due to their interactions with peer group members and taking part in almost all cultural events.

*Media*

With regard to media influence on cultural identities, Lee (2004) argues that media play a significant role in constructing and maintaining cultural identities, in that, information regarding various ethnic groups is being documented and commented by the media today. This is found to be true in case of Second Generation Indian Americans as well. The following section details how the media such as Newspapers, Radio, television, Internet and Movies, shapes Indian American identity.

Although the interviewees did not read ethnic newspapers regularly due to language barriers, some found them to be valuable sources of information especially about sports and movies. However, very few interviewees have admitted that they read Indian English newspapers and magazines to check out information on films and sports. “I hardly read Indian newspapers because I do not understand the language fully, but I read English newspapers like “The Hindu” or “Times of India” to check out the cricket scores and read Bollywood news because everything else is about politics, which I am not interested in,” says Rupa (female, 25).
All the participants listen to Indian radio stations when they are available and liked listening to Bollywood music and Indi pop albums. They state that Indian music played through these stations does remind them of India and the culture in a subtle way. Asked how different the Indian music is, Rupa (female, 25) has responded in the following:

I love listening to Indian radio channels because they play Hindi music all the time. It is just kind of calm and peaceful and reminds me of India. I think you can learn about traditions like arranged marriages because half the time most of the songs talk about arranged marriages and religion.

Very few interviewees have mentioned that they listen to religious talk shows and programs about traditional celebrations on radio and learn about customs and values. Puja (female, 22) said the following: “One of the time slots is about religion and they will do like mythology stories. We always turn that program on and listen to the stories and it’s really about values and traditions.”

However, one interviewee, Deepa (female, 23), has a different take on these radio channels and especially about RJ’s (Radio Jockey). “All these radio channels play hindi music but again the radio jockey’s have American accents which is weird. Though they spoke Hindi and Gujarathi they still have fake accents when it comes to English”,

Despite lack of research work on Indian American radio, the above responses suggests that though radio channels play Hindi music for majority of time, they still open a few spots to focus on religion and traditions. Most of the participants stated that they learn few things about culture and traditions through radio and it keeps their Indian side alive and active.
Television plays a pivotal role in bringing the Indian culture and traditions into the living room through various programs and movies. All interviewees and focus group participants have subscriptions to satellite channels like Zee, Sahara, Gemini, Teja, Star plus and Sony, however, they only have access to these channels at home. All the participants have maintained that their parents were the primary consumers of Indian television channels but they made the respondents watch Indian programs and movies that are culturally rich. Aishwarya (female, 22) has said the following:

My parents watch all the Indian channels and I watch with them whenever I am at home. They are some cool programs like Mahabharata, Who wants to be lakhpathi etc, which reminds me of Indian culture.

All the participants from interviews and focus groups have expressed that the television channels try to teach Indian American students a lot about family values, importance of religion and traditions. Participants have remembered that their parents used to tell them about the culture and traditional values through Television programs when they were little. Sharukh (male, 21) has said the following:

I guess, you can actually learn about family values and to respect your in-laws and older people. I guess television is our way to stay in tune with the Indian culture while we are here. Half the stuff gets broadcast from India and you get to see parts of India, which helps a lot in keeping that part of us alive.

Gowri (female, 22) observes that “television programs throw a lot of culture and traditions at you and they try to teach us all kids about values and traditions through some of their programs. I think we can definitely learn about family values, religion and also language”, when asked about her impression on Indian television channels. Most of the participants have
noted that they don’t go online to check information regarding the Indian culture. Hritik (male, 21) has said that “Basically the only Indian website I have ever gone on to is movie websites and music sites.” However, he has expressed that going to those sites reminds him of India just because of the Indian movies and music. All the participants from interviews and focus groups have stated that they don’t learn about Indian culture through the internet because they would rather ask their parents or friends if they do not understand something than going online and reading about it.

*The influence of Bollywood movies on cultural identity*

Among many different entertainment channels, movies play an active role in any given society, which transmit ideas, traditions and culture through its variety of plots and characters. Ghahghaei (2007) states that Hollywood movies play a major role in identity formation among Americans. He further continues saying that importance has been given to religious believes such as, attending church and celebrating Christmas, and national values and culture.

All the participants have observed that Bollywood movies play a crucial role in cultural identity maintenance. Participants have stated that on an average they watch Bollywood movies once or twice a week and mostly with friends and family. It is found that Indian American students at Texas Tech rent Bollywood film DVD’s from local Indian stores, most of which are produced and circulated in India at the same time.

Everybody has preferred watching movies on DVD’s to a theatre because movies on DVD have subtitles and are easy to read. Few participants have observed that it is irritating to watch movies in theatres with subtitles on because half the time they cannot read the subtitles. They have further added that most of the times, Indian movies are played in mediocre theatres,
where it is harder to read the subtitles. However, participants have associated Indian movies with strong family values, song and dance sequences, religion and moral values, and traditional Indian weddings.

According to Bipasha (female, 22), Indian movies focus on family values and they try to show that parents are important and they are always right. This is the common view shared among all the participants of interviews and focus groups. They believe that movies with strong traditions and cultural values help few ABCD’s (American Born Confuse Desis), who veered away from the Indian culture, to come around, understand and embrace the culture. Most of the participants have mentioned Kabhi Kushi Kabhi Ghum, Kuch Kuch Hota Hai, Dilwale Dulhania Lejyenge, Swades, and Rang De Basanti (See Appendix A for plot summaries) as their favorite movies and stated that they learned a lot by watching these movies. Gowri (female, 22) said the following:

I actually identify with Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Ghum, because it focuses on what’s really important to Indian people, like acceptance of family, moral values and traditions. I think it is important because I have been raised with same values and morals and I agree with the things they show in movies. I look up to these movies and it is heartwarming to know that this is true and this is right.

Most participants from both the interviews and focus groups have stated that they identify a lot with Indian movies and its narrations. Sandeep (male, 22) has said, “I identify a lot with these movies. I mean I have couple of friends who married to an outsider and not being accepted by the family and you see this all the time in Hindi movies where parents are not accepting of it. This teaches you that family is very important and you are not supposed to go against their wish.” Interestingly all the other participants have shared the same view as Sandeep (male, 22).
Participants have also expressed that Indian movie’s doing a decent job in portraying a true Indian society and culture. Deepa (female, 23) said the following:

I think they are really good and a doing a great job in portraying Indian culture and traditions. Most of them show values, culture and religious things like visiting temples, praying etc. I think they in a way help me keep my culture and traditions alive because all these movies usually has something to do with festivals or religion and they do things that help me remember and maintain it.

Participants have noted that there is not much of a difference in watching movies with parents and friends because they watch it for entertainment and fun. However, all participants from interviews and focus groups have stated that they feel really awkward if there’s a kissing scene or sex scene in a movie whenever they watch with parents. Asked why they feel awkward, Amir (male, 22) has responded as follows:

I was watching this movie “Salaam Namaste” with my parents and then there was this scene in which Saif and Perity having sex and I was like O’ my gosh they are having sex, I felt weird, I flipped out and fast forwarded the movie. I mean that’s something you don’t talk about with your parents and it’s really weird to watch when your parents are around because they don’t believe in pre marital sex and also do not approve of it. I mean if I was watching with my kids I would fast forward it because it is weird. But you don’t have to feel awkward when you are watching it with your friends.

Participants have noted that they all learned a lot about festivities and weddings as most of the movies have plots and themes that revolve around these cultural elements. Religion and togetherness are the other things they learn through Bollywood movies, observes most of the participants from interviews and focus groups. Rupa (female, 25) has said the following:

Culturally the biggest thing I probably learned through movies is festivities and weddings, because my parents are not really big about participating in these events. So I learned
a lot about festivities like Holi, Diwali and Raakshabandhan watching it in movies. It gave me an incentive to involve more in it. And then there is religion, it seems big in almost every movie. I got enough religious aspects out of watching it in movies.

Sree (male, 24) observes that “Most of the Hindi movies have to show some form of wedding and I guess that is kind of cool because we miss out on these big family gatherings and weddings and it’s great to watch it in movies. It helps me stay connected to the culture and ethnic roots.” Everyone has expressed that Bollywood help them keep their traditions and values alive by showing those things in movies and reinforcing the importance of maintaining and passing it on to the future generations. Puja (female, 22) has stated the following:

One thing that I have noticed is that Indians have close knit families and all the neighbors always know each other and that’s the kind of values brought in through movies and that is really important for all these Indian Americans, because they get to learn something and will be able to pass it on to their kids.

Most of the participants have said that whenever they watch movies with their parents, either mom or dad will try to explain things and ideas behind a particular theme. They have also maintained that their parents talk about traditions and values whenever they watch Indian movies, which help Indian American’s become aware of Indian culture and traditions.

Finally, majority of the participants have observed that the culture and traditions portrayed by Bollywood movies are precise and true to what’s being practiced among the Indian families. However, few participants from both interview and focus group sessions have argued that the Bollywood movies are becoming more and more westernized in respect to public affection, more revealing clothes, and general life style. Deepika (female, 22) observes that:

Bollywood is really pushing towards the American way. They are kind of showing more affection’s in the movies like kissing scenes and love making scenes. They also show these
characters talk in English, drug use, violence and all kinds of crazy stuff that they never showed before. This observation may imply the gradual spread of hip-hop culture in the Indian society and that globalization may have led to the westernization of Bollywood movies that causes the loss of distinguished culture and traditions. Still, majority of the participants expressed that Bollywood is one of the better ways to learn about Indian culture and how they are being practiced in the society. This suggests that among different mediums, Bollywood movies in fact have a great influence on second generation Indian Americans in learning and maintaining the Indian culture and traditions.

Conclusion and Limitations

Our research results suggest that identity construction and maintenance in second generation Indian Americans is an ongoing process, which reflects various social and cultural factors. Television plays a crucial role in bridging the connections between Indian Americans and home culture through various entertainment programs and movies. Indian Americans have watched cultural shows like ethnic dance forms, Bollywood movies and other ethnic programs that have created an ample opportunity to stay connected with the Indian culture and traditions. Parents have made Indian Americans watch ethnic programs and mythological serials like Ramayana and Mahabharata that taught morals and value system. As suggested in the literature, Television did play an important role in identity construction and maintenance process.

Bollywood movies appear to serve as the most influential communication medium in constructing and maintaining the cultural identity of the second-generation Indian American students. They seem to consider Bollywood movies as a vehicle for showcasing Indian culture and traditions. By consuming Bollywood movies, Indian American students have learned about Indian traditions and customs, which help them in maintaining the Indian identity. Watching
these movies, second generation Indian Americans have associated Indian culture with Family
togetherness, strong sense of religion, festivities, and attitudes and behaviors. Interestingly,
second generation Indian Americans are able to identify with Bollywood movie characters and
scenarios that remind them of their identity.

The new communication technologies like satellite Television, the Internet and DVD’s
have played a tremendous role in constructing and maintaining the cultural identity as they
facilitate an easy access to Bollywood movies. The findings suggest that second generation
Indian Americans have grown up consuming Bollywood movies and have constructed and
maintained the cultural identity by learning values and traditions that are reflected in these
movies. It is safe to assume that Bollywood movies act as an additional push in identity
construction process amongst second generation Indian American students. Thus, Bollywood
movies along with other social communicative contexts like family, religion and peer groups
have enabled second generation Indian Americans to construct and maintain their “Indianness.”

However, all is not well with the current Bollywood trend. Indian American students do
not like the idea of Bollywood movies deviating from Indian culture and becoming more
westernized. They have liked the Bollywood movies that depict family togetherness and other
cultural aspects, which are otherwise considered to be clichéd by many Indians. This suggests
that movies with high family values and traditions may have a greater affinity with Diaspora
communities compared to the movies that are influenced by western scripts.

The cultural identity of the second generation Indian Americans living in Diasporic
intercultural contexts is an ongoing process, which is defined by social interactions and media,
especially through Bollywood movies. In other words, this research study has found that apart
from family and friends, media, especially Bollywood movies have played an influential role in constructing and maintaining the identity of second generation Indian Americans.

Despite many important findings, the research study has its own limitations. First of all it is very difficult to generalize the results because the research is based on qualitative studies and is conducted only in one university with a relatively few number of participants and for a short length of time. The study should have administered more than one focus group session to get diverse views and ideas on Bollywood movies and cultural representation. Another drawback of this study is that participants are frequent consumers of Bollywood movies and results may have been different if the study has also looked at Indian Americans who watch Bollywood movies not so often. Though utmost care is taken to not let researcher’s bias influence the study in any kind, his Indian identity may in fact have influenced few desired responses. The final drawback of this study is that the volunteers may have participated with predetermined mindsets and shared biased opinions.

In further research, some form of quantification techniques needs to be administered to support the findings and generalize the results. To produce more consistent results, extensive research, both in-depth interviews and surveys, needs to be conducted at more universities, with a large number of participants. Ethnography of second generation Indian Americans will throw more light on their daily activities that maintain cultural identity. This study may be a good starting point to focus more on second generation Indian American students in areas like gender difference in understanding culture, Bollywood narratives and their influence in maintaining the identity.

References


Bollywood Movies and identity construction

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