

**Two Worlds Collide:  
Brown Meets White America**

By

Sumayra Khan

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Accepted:

\_\_\_\_\_, Sponsor  
Isabel Jijon

\_\_\_\_\_, Second Reader  
Lisa Jean Moore

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***Abstract:***

Cultural assimilation is when new members of a community begin to mirror the performances of the dominant group within that community. Assimilation for South Asians can be extremely difficult since Western traditions are different than Eastern cultural practices. To carry out this project, I conduct in-depth interviews and explore how American values influence the ways South Asian youth perform their identities in order to fit in with both South Asian and American culture. I argue that they face dual exclusion because they struggle to fit in either culture due to strict gender role expectations from their heritage culture, and discrimination from U.S culture.

***Preface:***

As a South Asian American, I have struggled to fit in because South Asians are not well perceived in America. South Asian men and women are expected to carry out different roles by their parents, which makes it difficult for me to blend in with American culture, since both cultures expect me to behave differently. For instance, as a South Asian woman, I have been conditioned into performing the roles of a housewife from a young age. I remember being told to help the women in the kitchen whereas the men in my household were able to drink chai (tea) and socialize. However, being exposed to Western culture has helped me identify the different gendered roles performed in my family. Through my research, I aim to bring attention to the gender and racial identity struggles that South Asian youth face while growing up in the United States.

***INTRODUCTION***

There is little research on how misperceptions of South Asian people can shape the way South Asian youth view themselves and perform their gender and racial identities. The South Asian region is filled with people from many different backgrounds, however, South Asians, or brown people, are often depicted as “awkward Indians” or “terrorists” and as a result, they assimilate to Western culture in order to be accepted by others. For instance, Apu from *The Simpsons*, whose character was voiced by a white man, was given a stereotypical Indian accent that many people found comedic. Furthermore, after the tragic event that took place on September 11th, 2001, the Western media contributed to the poor portrayal of South Asian people as terrorists. Although many South Asians are not Muslim, many people from the West believe that all South Asians practice the same religion. Because of this, South Asian youth

begin to believe that all Americans expect them to behave like the people they see on television. In order to avoid being seen this way, they try to shed parts of their cultural identity to be accepted by others. The racist portrayals of South Asians can lead to internalized racism, making it difficult for South Asian youth to accept certain parts of their culture and identity.

As consumers of Western popular culture, South Asian youth are exposed to Western social ideals. They begin to censor themselves from appearing “too Eastern” and they try their best to perform these ideals. As a result, they end up rejecting parts of their culture while embracing parts of another culture. This process is difficult since most of their parents expect them to still engage in their heritage culture’s traditions. South Asian women are conditioned into becoming “pure housewives” whereas South Asian men are pressured into becoming the financial providers for their family. These gendered expectations are extremely damaging to men, women, and gender nonconforming people. However, once they exit their homes, many perform identities that their parents are unaware of. They are able to pursue romantic or sexual relationships, dress however they want, receive psychotherapy, and perform their identities without filtering themselves. Despite being exposed to social environments that allow them to present themselves however they want, South Asian youth are aware of how their racial and gender identity can impact the way others view them, preventing them from being comfortable with themselves. For instance, they might fear that people will view them as terrorists, or people they wouldn’t want to associate themselves with.

The purpose of my research is to bring attention to the struggles that South Asian American youth face within the United States, and how a gendered value system can impact their identity formation. This study illustrates how racism, sexism, and misogyny influence the ways in which South Asian youth both form and perform their identities as they transition into

adulthood. Furthermore, it highlights that a person of color's gendered experience is different than a white person's gendered experience. My study explores how South Asian youth navigate conflicting cultural pressures from their heritage cultures and mainstream American culture. To carry out this project, I conduct in-depth interviews with South Asian Americans who were born or raised in the United States from a young age. I ask them how they respond to gendered expectations from their parents and racist discrimination from the surrounding American culture to forge their own identities as they age into the early stages of adulthood. I argue that because South Asian youth face racial discrimination in the U.S, and struggle to conform to strict gender expectations of their heritage cultures, they can experience dual exclusion. In other words, their identities remain fractured because they must hide pieces of themselves as they traverse various social spaces.

### ***LITERATURE REVIEW***

#### **Performing Race and Culture from an Eastern and Western Gaze**

Race is a social status used to label a group of people and identify those that are not a part of the dominant racial group as the *other*. In the United States, the differences between white and black have been strictly enforced on people for centuries. White is associated with racial purity, and those who are interracial are labeled as "mixed" and are seen as people of color (Omi & Winant 1986). By being white, people are given better social, economic, and political access, whereas minority groups are less privileged. Race is merely a social status that often involves elements of performativity.

Racial performance is one element of social performance that people of color manipulate as they move from one social sphere to another. Goffman (1956) first explored the idea of performance of self when he theorized that people changed their behavior based on their

immediate audience. Individuals greatly rely on the way's others view them, making them perform certain acts only to please those around them. He compares everyday presentation of the self to theatre performance. The individual is divided into the character and the performer. The character is created based on the experiences of the person and how those experiences shapes the ways they view the world. The performer plays out the character—it uses all the experiences, and all the information gained from those experiences, and carries out all the actions. However, the performer can act differently depending on the circumstances of the situation. The self is created through the interactions that people experience and the different roles that they are expected to play (Goffman, 1956). For instance, a South Asian person cannot perform the role of an American student without communicating with their teachers and classmates in English. Additionally, they cannot perform the role of a South Asian child without referring to their parents as “mom” or “dad” in their native language. Thus, everyday interactions create different meanings for individuals—a person cannot exist without these interactions.

While Goffman's theory highlights the different ways people must perform to fit in a certain setting, Du Bois focuses on the ways internalized racism can shape the ways people perform in their everyday life. In his theory on the “double consciousness” Du Bois writes that race will always be present in a person's life, and this influences how people view themselves. Double consciousness is when the individual internalizes the racism that they face, and they view themselves the way their oppressors view them. He writes about the veil, and how this separates people of color from whiteness. The veil contributes to oppression of people of color because only one side of the veil has access to benefits, while the other side faces discrimination and oppression. He argues that those who are on the oppressed side, don't see any potential in themselves because of the veil. They don't try to move to the other side of the veil, the white

side, because they don't think they are worthy enough; they have internalized racism so much that they believe that they are incapable of being as successful as white people (Du Bois, 1903). This can apply to young South Asian people who have internalized much of western culture by growing up in the U.S. Because they barely see any positive representation of their cultures on television, they believe that their racial identity can stop them from living the American dream.

Much like Du Bois, Chandra Mohanty (1984) theorizes that race influences social performance and behavior, and she further argues that race intersects with gender to complicate understandings of self. In her book, *Under Western Eyes*, Mohanty argues that mainstream western culture positions women from the East as "third world wom[e]n" and thus contributes to internalized misogyny and sexism. Mohanty argues that the West makes judgments about another culture from the perspective of their own cultural system. As a result, they try to change the cultures of the East only because they fail to understand the differences from their culture (Mohanty, 1984). For that reason, the oppressed begin to understand themselves in the ways that their oppressors expect them to behave. In the case of South Asian youth, they may respond to these perceived notions of themselves by conforming to Western beauty standards, or by refusing to speak in their native language in front of non-South Asian Americans and rejecting other parts of their native culture.

I argue that theories of social, racial and gender performance can be applied to my research. The racial background of South Asian youth often prevents them from being seen as American citizens, so they present themselves in a way that would be acceptable to the Western gaze. The belief that Western culture is superior to Eastern culture makes South Asian people believe that they should not perform certain cultural activities in order to prevent being ostracized by Western communities. While some do not intentionally plan on letting go of their

cultural traditions, they find it difficult to preserve their cultural practices without being stigmatized as “the other” due to the stereotypical images portrayed in the media.

Because race operates as a master status, it impacts how people interact and how they perform various social roles during social interactions. A South Asian person’s race and skin tone can affect the way others view them, making them perceive themselves the way others do. As a result, South Asian youth may perform ideal characteristics that are best suited for a situation in order to prevent themselves from getting shunned by other members of their coethnic community, as well as the surrounding predominantly Anglo-Saxon community.

### **Intersectional Pressures Surrounding Gender, Race, and Culture**

Although a person’s race impacts the ways people view them, it operates differently for people of different genders. White privilege gives people access to better political, social, and economic opportunities than being a person of color. However, a white cis man has better access to these opportunities, while everyone else has less social power than him. While all South Asian people are marginalized for their racial identity, South Asian cis men have more social power than women and gender nonconforming people. Thus, I take an intersectional view as I discuss how South Asian youth navigate their racial and gender identities.

In her theory of gender performativity, Judith Butler analyzes the ways people perform their gender identity. She argues that gender identity has been socialized throughout time—one has been constructed into one’s gender role (Butler, 1988). Gender is constructed and sex is biological, but people assign different gender traits to people of different sexes once they are born (Butler, 1988). More simply, when a person is born female, they are conditioned into performing feminine traits, that only people within their gender must perform. This contributes to the gender binary, enforcing the belief that only women can exhibit soft characteristics and



appearances, whereas men must appear more dominant. Thus, gender is a performance, since the characteristics associated with gender are learned once a person is born. I apply this theory to my research by arguing that South Asians perform their gender differently depending on the situation they are placed in. For instance, South Asian women may present themselves in less modest attire around their friends than they would around their family. Due to different cultural backgrounds, gender expression is different for South Asian Americans than other Americans.

Similarly, Patricia Hill Collins looks at the performance of gender, but from the perspective of a woman of color. Collins explores how race, class, and gender act as a “matrix of domination”—they all interlock and cannot be looked at separately (Collins, 1990). She argues that you cannot take away the blackness, the poverty, or the woman in someone (Collins, 1990). While black women experience racism due to the color of their skin, they also experience sexism like white women do (Collins, 1990). Though Collins’ theory focuses on the impact of sexism on black women, this theory applies to my research on how being a woman of color influences the ways people view South Asian women, and how they view themselves. In other words, young South Asian women may experience a type of gender-specific racism in which people in mainstream Western society mostly see them as subservient and disempowered due to intersecting racism and sexism. In contrast, a young South Asian man may be more likely to be viewed as a potential threat or terrorist. As a result, South Asian women and men might try to perform the opposite of what is expected, so the West does not view them in a negative light. Much like Mohanty, Collins calls attention to how a person’s race influences the behavior of people of all genders, whether it is a man trying to shed the stereotypical images of South Asian men, or women fighting against racism and sexism.

## **Navigating Intersectional Pressures During the Transition to Adulthood**

As South Asian youth struggle to get through their everyday life as a marginalized group in America, they are exposed to Western ideals that their parents were never brought up with. They are exposed to different clothing styles, dating, Western parties, and more. This can be extremely difficult for them since their parents disapprove actions that are unfamiliar with them and their culture. South Asian youth must not only contend with racism and sexism from the West but must also navigate similar gender-based expectations from their parents and surrounding coethnic community.

When one is immigrating from an Eastern country to the United States, it is difficult for them to blend in with Western culture. Because of this, it is often hard for immigrant parents to let go of their cultural traditions. In a previous research study, Deepak (2005) argues that immigrant parents impress their cultural values on their children in order to prevent them from losing touch with their culture. The results of this study show that South Asian parents, also referred to as Desi parents, believe that American behaviors, such as dating before marriage, dating interracially, drinking and socializing outside of their homes, are unacceptable, while South Asian behaviors are ideal. Furthermore, the Desi woman is depicted as the center of the family, so she must carry out all of the ideal traits. As a result, South Asian women, in particular, end up monitoring the way they behave in public in order to protect their parents (Deepak, 2005).

Similarly, Mehrotra (2016) explores how first and second generation South Asian women in the United States are socialized into their gendered experience within familial contexts, and how they perceive this socialization. More specifically, Mehrotra writes, “As participants talked about the centrality of messages about marriage to their gendered experience, they overwhelmingly voiced that they grew up with an understanding that marriage was ‘inevitable,’

and would happen by a certain age” (Mehrotra, 2016, p. 358). Marriage values have been ingrained in the minds of young South Asians, so that they grew up being aware of how to behave in order to seem ready for marriage. The participants of the study performed different gendered behaviors and surveilled themselves so that they become ideal candidates for marriage. While both Deepak and Mehrotra argue that immigrant parents enforce cultural values on their children in order to prevent them from losing touch with their culture, their studies can relate back to Patricia Hill Collins’ theory, as South Asian youth often construct their gendered experience to fit with what their parents consider ideal. However, as they interact in Western social spaces, and particularly as they age into the early stages of adulthood, they may begin to question these ideals. They may begin to question their parents’ beliefs on dating, gender performance, and education, which can lead to intergenerational conflict as well as internal strife. Due to fear of disappointing their parents and causing trouble, youth eventually start to hide pieces of themselves both at home and in public.

Due to cultural values being so ingrained into the minds of South Asian youth, Subramanian (2013) explores how young women internalized cultural pressures to perform gender on the internet and off the internet. Her interviewee, Heera, a Muslim woman, stated that men and women should be treated equally, and that her culture and religion enforce patriarchal values. However, she also argued that certain expectations should be enforced in order to keep a good presentation of religion and ethnic community. Heera, along with others, had participated in belittling other Muslim women online for not presenting themselves in a conservative way (Subramanian, 2013). The belief that a woman with any religious affiliation must appear pure to prevent damaging the reputation of their culture and religion shows how parents’ pressures have

been so enforced onto children. This mentality causes internalized misogyny and has led to hate being spread online, and the belittling of other people's behaviors.

The theme of a person performing their gender, while also enforcing misogynist beliefs, reappears in Thangaraj's (2015) ethnography on South Asian men who played basketball to perform their masculinity. They participated in the club scene in order to shed the identity of the asexual, geeky man. In order to reclaim their masculinity, they presented themselves as "players" and competed for women in the club scene, even though many of them were married. While their wives had the ability to fulfill both the caregiving and sexual needs of these men, these men only associated their wives with purity. Their wives represented family and a home; therefore, they helped these men maintain a heteronormative life. Regardless of having a wife who had the ability to fulfill their sexual desires, these men achieved more power by having sex with other women. By having sex with "impure" women, they were able to perform the norms of masculinity (Thangaraj, 2015).

Western standards of sexuality influence South Asian men to present themselves in misogynist, hypermasculine behaviors, so they are seen as "American enough". In a study conducted by Salam (2005), Salam interviewed 60 South Asian men and women to explore how being raised in the United States shapes the identity of South Asian Americans. Salam argues that second-generation children are expected to perform traditional ideals at home, such as speaking in a South Asian language, practicing their religion, and cooking their traditional food. Once they leave their home, they are expected to conform to American ideology and perform a different set of norms (Salam, 2005). These social performances allow youth second-generation South Asians to navigate life within and outside their parents' homes and co-ethnic community spaces. Recalling Goffman's theory of everyday performance, the behavior of second-generation

South Asian youth at home creates interactions that label them as a South Asian, while they perform differently outside of their homes to be seen as an American. Shifting their behavior outside the home allows South Asian youth to participate in social cultures that their parents may not understand.

Likewise, Hickey (2017) interviewed 90 South Asians within a Midwestern state to highlight the importance of family within South Asian culture and to illustrate how children experience acculturation differently than their parents. South Asian parents disapprove of mix-gender interactions among adolescents and unmarried adults, and encourage their children to participate in arranged marriages, or semi-arranged marriages since love marriages are often portrayed as marriages that would end up in divorce. Additionally, parents believe that they know what is best for their children and want to find them partners that fit their expectations (Hickey, 2017). Similarly, in Kibria's study on second generation Bengali immigrants, many of the interviewees revealed that the importance of the "good family" has been stressed on children from a young age. The parents who were interviewed, revealed that the "good family" was a way to reach high social capital. Although the second generation expressed frustration towards the idea of the "good family," they still looked for marriage partners that would be suitable for their parents, such as someone of the same religion (Kibria, 2009). Most of the children in these studies accepted the parental restrictions placed on them by looking for future partners that their parents would approve of because they have been taught to always prioritize their family. Thus, even though South Asian youth may perform different everyday behaviors outside the home, they often nonetheless adopt some of their parental beliefs, perhaps in order to maintain family cohesion.

Although South Asian children often strive to please their parents, they also find ways to adapt their parents' beliefs to a more Western context, or at least find ways to hide some of their more Western behaviors from their parents. The "good family" is important to receive high social status, and the way a woman behaves is significant to the "good family." Thus, young South Asian women, especially, must carefully maneuver their own wishes in balance with the expectations of their parents. For example, Bacchus (2017) found that South Asian families valued women's virginity and associated it with the honor of the family. Additionally, she found that dating before marriage is prohibited in most South Asian families because it is associated with sex. Out of the sixteen women who participated in this study, many had told their parents about their serious boyfriends only when they imagined a future with their partners. However, their parents were unaware of their sex life, which made their relationships appear acceptable. The participants looked for South Asian qualities in their sexual partners so that they would justify their sexual relations with them and feel less guilty about engaging in an activity that their parents would be disappointed about. Additionally, the women in this study who engaged in lesbian encounters concealed their sexuality in order to avoid being ostracized by their family and the South Asian community. In another study conducted by Patel (2019), interviewees stated that they participated in LGBTQ activities as queer women but presented themselves as heterosexual to their families. These studies bring attention to the pressure placed on a woman to preserve her family's honor while adapting to a Western lifestyle.

Despite engaging in dating and sexual acts before marriage, South Asian women make sure they present themselves in a way that is culturally acceptable. Although they are committing acts behind their parents' backs, they are still restricting themselves from doing something that would be considered too taboo. This all relates back to *izzat* (Gilbert, Gilbert, & Sanghera, 2004),

the importance of maintaining family honor to prevent being shamed. South Asian women are not ashamed of themselves for participating in these acts, but they are aware of the disapproval they would face by members of their community. As a result, they create justifying scripts to convince their parents, but also themselves, that they are maintaining their parents' standards and expectations.

Similarly, in a study about second generation youth, Lee (2001) reveals living in the U.S gives better access to education, preventing women from getting married at a young age. Because attitudes regarding education and marriage have changed, many parents expect their daughters to come home directly after school in order to regain some control over their daughters. Many of the interviewees expressed how unfair it is for them to do all of the household chores while their brothers are allowed to socialize outside of their homes. As a result, teenage girls often go behind their parents backs and date, but girls who are caught are pressured to get married, unlike boys who are allowed to get away with things. Furthermore, in a study conducted by Talbani and Hasanali (2000), the interviewees revealed that there are double standards in many South Asian families—men have more freedom and are more likely to be allowed to stay out longer and participate in mix-gender interactions, whereas women are expected to stay at home. Men do not get in trouble for their actions and women are expected to be kept pure, so parents require that their daughters stay at home rather than socialize. Both studies identify the double standards that second-generation immigrant women face due to cultural pressures. As they transition into adulthood in the United States, they are exposed to many beneficial opportunities for their mental and social wellbeing, however, this can cause conflict within their families because it is seen as foreign and unfamiliar to their parents.

Although women are more likely to face pressure from their parents, men face pressure from surrounding Western culture. In order to disassociate themselves from demeaning words, such as nerdy and terrorist, South Asian men perform their masculinity in ways that the West would approve of. In *Desi Hoop Dreams*, Thangaraj (2015) analyzes the construction of South Asian American masculinity by exploring how basketball allows South Asian American men to fit into American culture. They do not want to be called derogatory names such as the word, FOB (“fresh off the boat”), so they play basketball instead of cricket, a common sport in South Asia. Through this they assert their dominance on the court in order to appear “manly”. In addition, the straight men on the teams belittle their gay teammates because they appear “too feminine” and are not considered “manly enough” for them (Thangaraj, 2015). Through gender performance, these South Asian men perform traits that place them in the bigender system as a man. They perform dominantly and disassociate themselves from anything feminine to be seen as manly, and American enough.

As shown in Thangaraj’s study (2015), South Asian gay men face exclusion from their ethnic groups because they are not performing the gendered scripts they are expected to perform. Many South Asians who identify as queer or are a part of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual (LGBTQIA) community, face dual exclusion from both queer spaces and their ethnic communities. In Jaspal’s study (2017) many of the South Asian participants expressed that they were hoping to make new friends and possibly find a partner in queer spaces, however, these spaces were predominantly White, and White men seemed to hold stereotypes about Asians. They believed that these men were insecure about their identities and that they were all “messed up” (Jaspal, 2017, p. 178-179). They did not try to understand the cultural circumstances that prevented South Asian men from coming out, so their



refusal to come out was viewed negatively by White men—they believed that Asian gay men were not committed to their gay identity.

Coming out is not an easy process for many South Asian people, due to how heteronormative their culture is. They knew they would experience homophobia and other forms of abuse from their ethnic communities. As a result, many queer Brown people face dual exclusion—their racial identity is not accepted in queer spaces, while their queer identity is not accepted in their ethnic spaces. In a study conducted by Choudhury et al. (2009), 77% of participants expressed that they felt like they were living a double life, and 72% expressed feeling isolated from their communities. The impact of dual exclusion weighs heavily on queer South Asian youth, and can often cause mental health issues, as many of them do not feel accepted by groups that make up their identity.

The lack of queer South Asian representation in Western media has contributed to the narrative that “Brown girls can’t be gay” (Patel, 2019, p. 419). Many participants expressed seeing gay aesthetics, such as short hair and dressing masculine, being applied to white women and some black women, but never brown women. The beauty standards do not apply to South Asians, since many are expected to have long hair due to their religious beliefs, and their traditional attire is different than Western attire. The notion of passing as feminine or masculine is looked at through a Western lens—South Asian women are expected to assimilate to Western normative performances of queerness in order to be identified as queer. If gay aesthetics were not predominantly white, and there was positive representation of queer South Asians, not only would they feel more accepted in queer spaces, but also their ethnic communities might be more open to queer identities.

Cultural expectations create an identity struggle within the South Asian American community. Parents often force their children to behave a certain way, making it difficult for them to participate in American culture. Their gendered expectations make women internalize sexism, while enforcing sexist beliefs in men. Parental and cultural pressures can unintentionally push children into living a double life, one that their parents are unaware of. They engage in premarital sex, club culture, and other taboo activities behind their parents' backs. Since they are aware of their parents' views on sexuality, those part of the LGBTQIA community have to conceal their identities around their family and perform strict heteronormative roles. While many of the studies I examine look at the impact cultural pressures have on women, these pressures influence men's behaviors, and illustrate the double standards applied to South Asian women that South Asian men do not have to face day to day.

### ***METHODOLOGY***

The participants of this study are 16 self-identified South Asian people from New York State, aged 18 or older who were born or raised in the United States from a young age. I interviewed South Asians from six countries of South Asia: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Pakistan, Nepal, and Afghanistan. Because I am embedded in this community, there may have been blind spots, which could have been a potential limitation of this research. However, this can also be beneficial because it gave me better access to the South Asian community and people may have been more comfortable sharing their experiences with someone of South Asian descent. I recruited people via convenience and snowball sampling, classroom announcements, and social media postings.

I used qualitative research methods to better understand the experiences and opinions of my subjects. They were asked open-ended interview questions so I could collect in-depth

information, and so participants could bring up discussions of their own. By analyzing in-depth interviews, we are able to access and analyze a person's emotions, which is not accessible if participants take a survey with preselected answers. Interviews provide us with more information on a person's beliefs, their interpretation of their cultural practices, and how their actions are influenced by cultural expectations (Pugh, 2013, p. 50-53). I asked participants about their upbringing in the United States, their experiences with racism and discrimination, their relationships, their feelings about gender roles and expectations surrounding their sexuality, and possible tensions between their parents' beliefs and expectations and their own beliefs and hopes. I then coded the interviews by looking for discussions of racial performance, parent-child tension, gender performance, and dual exclusion, as well as noting other themes that arose organically in conversation. Thus, the research combines elements of inductive and deductive research.

Interviews lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes each and took place in a setting of the participant's choice. To protect the confidentiality of respondents, I replaced all names with pseudonyms.

### ***FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS***

As found in the literature, South Asian American youth face all sorts of pressures, whether it comes to their dating life, their relationship with their family, their social life outside of the home, or coming to terms with their identity. But as a result of their different identities, many can face these pressures differently and can often find themselves in a double bind within their communities.

#### **Cultural Upbringing in a Western Setting**

First generation South Asian immigrant parents leave their native countries in hopes to live a better life for themselves and for their children. Although parents are aware of how American culture can influence their children, they fear that their children will forget about their native cultures. As a result, they impose values of their native culture onto their children, so their children can remember the culture that their parents are from and share the same beliefs as them. However, being raised in a Western setting, exposes children to their own independent beliefs, causing them to struggle to create a balance between their own beliefs and their parents' beliefs, while satisfying the needs of their parents.

South Asian parents introduce these beliefs and values to them with the best intentions, but their definition of a successful life may be different than their child's definition of one. They want their child to grow up with the same beliefs as them because that's what they are familiar with. According to interviewees, anything new to their parents is frightening and they're afraid of not having the answers to any questions their children may have. Many South Asian immigrant mothers did not receive higher education, so they were raised from a young age to become housewives and nurturers. Consequently, they begin to pass these characteristics down to their daughters, even though their daughters are being raised in a completely different environment. In my interview with Palzom, a Nepali American, she expressed appreciation towards what she has learned when it comes to doing household chores because it has helped in her transition to adulthood, but she doesn't agree with it only being prescribed to women. Whenever guests enter the household, it is often the women who go into the kitchen to prepare tea and food for guests, whereas the men of the household entertain visitors. Because of these experiences, many participants who are women or grew up socialized as women, felt that chores

should be equally divided, and people shouldn't be dependent on women to carry out household responsibilities.

While gender roles place a lot of pressure on women and threaten their autonomy, men face an enormous amount of pressure to become the “breadwinners,” or the financial providers of the family. Many of my participants stated how they had witnessed their fathers struggle to provide for them, thus internalizing to provide for their family as well. Abdul, whose family is from Bangladesh, has two sisters, but he argues that he faces more pressure than his sisters to financially provide for his family. He did notice that his younger sister, who is only 14 years old, even cooks for the family sometimes, something he did not know how to do at that age. Additionally, Asad, an Afghan American, expressed an immense amount of pressure to find a job because he saw how much his father, a taxi driver, struggled to provide for his family, especially after Uber became more popular. His father's struggles had encouraged him to excel in his classes so he can one day have a high paying job and help his family with their finances.

Even though their parents had no issues with the way they carried out their own lives, their children internalized their behaviors and it translated into the way they performed their roles. But when these children grew older, they started to question these gendered roles. Why can't women go beyond the traditional housewife role and excel financially as well? Why are men expected to only pay their bills and not be taught how to clean and cook? And how do these gender roles apply to gender nonconforming people if everything is stuck within a binary? Shouldn't these roles be more fluid, so everyone feels included? As a consequence, these gendered roles translate into how men and women should behave in the future, how a marriage should work, and what a partnership is. Afghan Muslim American, Fatima, mentioned how she envied boys because girls were expected to sit on the swings and “look pretty,” while boys were

able to play rough. It taught her that women need to appear presentable 24/7 for their future husbands, whereas men were able to behave however they wanted.

Similarly, Mira, a Bengali-Pakistani American who identifies as gender fluid, mentioned that as a child, they were expected to play with dolls. Their mother even showed them wedding magazines at a young age, telling them how they'd look so pretty as a bride. As a child, these narratives that they're being encouraged to live, unconsciously forces them into following the heterosexual, cis-gendered narrative. Therefore, many queer South Asian Americans repress their identities because they're afraid of being alienated for not participating in normative behaviors.

Along with gender roles, there is a pressure that comes with being a child that participates in more than one culture. The family is the first social institution a child is exposed to, so naturally, its initial behaviors are learned inside their homes. But when a child enters school, exposure to children from other family backgrounds can make children question themselves. Rani, who is from a Kashmiri Muslim household, had mentioned not being allowed to watch American television shows like SpongeBob and would often feel excluded by her classmates when they would talk about it. Fatima remembered being told to avoid wearing her traditional Afghan clothing and to eat with a fork outside of her home. Zriab, whose family is from Pakistan, mentioned taking a kebab for lunch to school, and his classmates would make fun of the smell. So, when he entered high school, he decided to join in on the jokes and make fun of other brown people, in order to avoid getting made fun of. There were others who also hated the smell of their ethnic food; Samir recalled feeling too embarrassed to invite his friends over to his Bengali household and hated when his mother would cook because he didn't want to leave the house smelling like curry. These experiences all resulted in internalized racism, and made them

hyper aware of their brown identity, resulting in them rejecting parts of themselves. They didn't realize they were "different" because of their cultures until they were told to suppress certain behaviors outside of their homes, and their peers questioned their behavior or belittled them.

The mistreatment of brown youth by their classmates, for simply being of a different background, heavily impacted their mental health, leading them to unconsciously neglect different parts of themselves. Their parents never intended for their children to feel alienated by their Western peers, they only wanted to raise them in a way they were familiar with. But being a part of more than one culture can be hard for a child to handle at a young age, because they soon start to internalize being othered, which will later translate into their future behaviors.

### **Family Pride**

A common theme reported is how family honor is prioritized over everything. Samir mentioned his parents always kept a sense of class even though they aren't wealthy. He states, "We were never meant to feel poor," implying that being poor makes you appear as uneducated and dirty. Although most immigrant parents do not come to this country with much money, they make sure that they are able to show off wealth. For instance, participants mentioned how big family parties would be. Palzom stated, "When we throw a party it's not for us. Everything is community-based. So, our celebrations are for the community instead of for the people getting married, or for whoever's birthday it is. You have to be the best in front of other people's eyes, so you don't give them anything bad to talk about." Appearing wealthy to impress others prevents people from being vulnerable. This can lead to internalized classism, in which people may interpret their identity as the poor or working class as shameful, or it could stop them from seeking financial help because people can look down on them.

Additionally, Palzom remembers being raised in Nepal with her grandparents for most of her childhood, so her parents could focus more on making money for her future. The first five years of her life were spent in Nepal, and when she came back to America, she looked at her parents as strangers. Building an emotional connection with her parents was obstructed, and she still feels tense around her parents to this day. Prioritizing wealth creates a disconnect between children and their parents because they feel like they're unwanted, or that they can't go to their parents for certain things because they've never had an emotional bond.

Family reputation and honor don't just come from showing off how wealthy and educated one is, it also comes from children following the same cultural or religious norms as other South Asian families. My participants stated how religion was always used to discipline and parent them, making them have a difficult relationship with religion. Abdul recalled being hit and forced to take Islamic classes because his father saw other children going to Islamic school, and he didn't want people to say he was a bad father for not introducing him to religion. Although Abdul started to enjoy his religious classes because he learned a lot and made friends from it, the reason why his father forced him to take lessons was mainly so he can maintain a good reputation within their community. Additionally, both Sim and Zriab, who were born into Muslim families, shared how they were taught to fear religion instead of embracing it. Sim was told that if she didn't dress modestly, she would go to hell, and if Zriab ever made a mistake or questioned anything, his father would use religion to punish him. If children were to go against the beliefs of their parents, they would be instantly shamed for not being a good devout of their religion and being a bad child.

Furthermore, many interviews mentioned how important it is to respect elders within their community, which they don't agree with. Elders are expected to be served food first or are



expected to be served tea whenever they come to visit. Tulsi questioned the Indian values she was taught by arguing that respect has to be earned and if an adult is disrespecting her, then why should she be kind to that person just because they're older? But if children were to disrespect an elder, then their parents' parenting skills would be questioned, and children would be shamed by everyone around them.

Family pride also plays heavily on gender roles. Women reported the family's pride being associated with how pure she is. Sim mentioned that as a girl she has to carry the weight of her family's pride. She states, "Girls in our community—if we can't produce capital, or we can't produce from man, we're worthless. So, if we're not going to school to then produce capital for society, the only thing that we're worth is in how we can serve a man." And it isn't just any man, it has to be their husband, or serving any other men in their family through household chores. Moreover, because a family's honor relies so heavily on a woman, Pishai, a Pashtun American, says that her parents deny the sexual trauma she and her sisters faced from a close relative. Her parents claim it was all just a "dream" that they had. In addition, they are still forced to interact with that relative in family events, making them relive their sexual trauma over and over again. This makes Pishai and her sisters feel uncared for, but also, they blame themselves for what has happened since their relative was never punished for his actions. Her parents were more worried about their own honor than the honor of their daughters. Not only were they not given mental and emotional support from their family, but this also prevented them from sharing their experiences with other people or seeking professional help, due to fear of "ruining their family's honor" by speaking up.

Family pride and preserving a family's honor comes with great mental stress. Children aren't able to do certain things because they fear that it'll bring shame to the family. They have

to appear perfect at all times, and an ounce of vulnerability makes them seem weak. And women, or those who were socialized as women, expressed facing more pressure than cis men in order to appear flawless, since their family reputation heavily relied on their actions. As a result, family pride can heavily impact the relationship between parents and their children and can contribute to children keeping secrets from their family.

### **The Influence of Western Media**

Although children are pressured to present themselves as the perfect South Asian child around their family, they also struggle to be seen as a normal American all due to the influence of Western Media. When asked if they felt represented in Western media, all of my participants answered no within a second. Some even laughed and said, “absolutely not” or “god no.” Every single one of them mentioned that every South Asian role they’ve seen is stereotypical. If there were media representation of South Asian people, they’d be the token brown kid. If it’s not a terrorist, it’s someone who plays the role of a stereotypical nerd with an accent, struggling to deal with their overbearing parents, which enforces stereotypes.

Fatima mentioned that when there is a Muslim girl in a show, it is often a Muslim girl who needs saving by white men, eventually leading her to take off her hijab. Other people mentioned that the media is predominantly white people, and this led to them feeling like they could never see themselves on TV, as the smart and attractive students. Mira wanted to pursue a career in theatre, but seeing the lack of positive South Asian representation, stopped them from going after their dreams. Abdul even said, “Seeing mainly white people on TV just made it seem like they were the main characters of the world and we (South Asian people) are like the side characters. I didn’t think I could be on Disney Channel with the other kids.” People were so used to seeing white children on television that they felt like they were not good enough to be seen on

the screen. They felt like white people were superior to them because they were given more opportunities than them. Other interviewees also mentioned how interracial couples barely existed, which made them feel left out because they were either biracial or were dating people of a different culture.

I remember my father changing his last name because he would get stopped at the airport, he said that even before 9/11 there was always a negative portrayal of Muslims/South Asians in the media. But when 9/11 occurred, Muslims were targeted even more and stopped at the airport for their last names. For instance, Sim remembers her relative being approached by TSA and taken to a private room to be “searched.” A handful of the people interviewed mentioned being mistreated for their appearances/and being Muslim. Pishai recalls being told to go back to her country, and Mira mentioned how even their teachers called them a terrorist. Moreover, Stefani and Sim noticed from a young age that the white students were more likely to be placed in the advanced classes, excluding the people of color, which led to them feeling othered.

Many participants recall seeing South Asians who weren't even Muslim being targeted and harassed because of their similar cultures and features. Asad stated, “If you ask someone on the street, ‘What do you think about Afghanistan?’ they're like ‘oh it's a bunch of terrorists.’ Even the news highlights the country and it'll be a guy in a turban in the background. I feel like it's very streamlined in the way people think about us. When in reality, the Middle East and South Asia, they're very distinct cultures throughout each different country. I don't feel like the media does a good job in emphasizing that difference.” The media has done a poor job in representing how diverse South Asia really is—it's composed of many different religions, and ethnic groups. But by portraying all South Asians as the same, the media opens doors for more shaming and belittling. There were other South Asians who have had parents change their last

names to assimilate better, such as Jharna, a Nepali Hindu American. She recalls her parents saying living in America would be easier if Westerners could pronounce her name better.

When it comes to media representation for the LGBTQIA+ community, Tulsi mentioned how this helped her come to terms with her bisexuality. However, she never saw someone who looked like her play a gay character, and it made her feel different around those in her community. Samir stated that growing up the only gay representation he saw was in “Dawson's Creek” or “Will and Grace” and now there is way more representation, but many shows only portray white queer actors, excluding the queer person of color’s narrative.

Due to the influence of Western media, people internalize that white people are the only ones who deserve to be positively represented, who can be seen to live their dreams, and aren’t mocked for their skin tone or their religion. White people have been glorified and portrayed as those who should be adorned, while South Asian people were always laughed at or looked at as criminals. For these reasons, many participants mentioned how scared they were around white people or how they never felt pretty enough. This perpetuates this idea that South Asians aren’t as good enough as white people and should appear more Western in order to seem less threatening. Sim stated, “The hottest white boys in school, all the girls were fawning over them, were behind us, and I heard one of them say, ‘Yeah, I don't like brown people.’” When one hears that at a young age, they begin to think that there is something wrong with something they have no control over. They wonder what could have influenced this boy to say that he doesn’t like brown people, because you don’t just dislike a group of people with no reason, you’re taught to dislike them. Western media has the power to make people laugh at brown people, make them feel othered, and mistreat them. It alienates them and they’re not seen as approachable or as

worthy enough to people. This contributes to the harassment of brown people, and then it leads to internalized racism.

Despite having a hard time accepting their brown identity, many participants expressed how connected they feel to the South Asian celebrities out there, such as Hasan Minhaj, Lily Singh, and others. They see someone who looks like them, understands their culture and has successfully made it as a Desi person in the United States. Many participants mentioned how these people have given them hope because they finally see positive representation of people like them in the media. Unfortunately, it isn't enough because there is a major difference in how many white people are represented over brown people, and how there is more stereotypical representation in the media than positive representation.

### **Code-Switching: Secrecy in the Transition to Adulthood**

Both Mira and Pishai referred to their life, and the lives of other brown youth, as the Hannah Montana life because of the double life they live—they perform the identity their parents expect at home, and once they leave their homes, they present themselves as however, they want.

Children grew up knowing that their parents would want an arranged marriage for them. Arranged marriages aren't forced marriages, both parties must consent to it, but it's a marriage that is arranged by the parents. For South Asians these days, it might not be the traditional arranged marriage that many people think of, but they are still expected to marry someone their parents expect them to marry. Jharna mentioned that she knew from a young age that she'd be having an arranged marriage by observing her parents and those around her. This has to do with how oversexualized relationships between men and women were, and also the preference for their children to hang out with other desi children.

Many interviewees expressed facing great pressure from their parents to marry the opposite gender, and within the same culture. Hyder, who comes from a Gujarati family and is dating a Bengali woman, stated, “Ultimately they do want me to settle with a Gujarati girl. And I've told them repeatedly it's not happening and walked away. They have their dreams, their aspirations, and I've told them repeatedly dreams and aspirations don't always come true.” Similarly, Imtiyaz has hidden his girlfriend of over 6 years from his parents because she is not Bengali or Muslim and is a lot older than him. He plans on marrying her but knows his family will not approve of the marriage. Participants state that their parents are aware that they are no longer in their motherlands and that their children are going to be exposed to more dating options in America, but are afraid of their culture being forgotten, so they pressure their children into finding future partners who fit their criteria. Some even stated that their parents were more comfortable with the idea of their children dating when they got older, but it should be able to lead to potential marriage.

Palzom’s relationship with her long-term boyfriend has hindered her relationship with her mother because he is not of Nepali/Tibetan ancestry. Palzom expressed in great distress, “My mom found his family on Facebook and she was going to call them and threaten them to keep my boyfriend away from me... She says, ‘you know, he doesn't deserve you. You're not supposed to be with him. He's not from our country, not from our culture, you don't eat the same food, you don't sleep the same, you don't die the same. What are you going to do when it comes to death? You don't marry the same. You don't have the same language.” Although her mother’s anxiety was because she feared her daughter’s relationship wouldn’t last because his beliefs and upbringing were different, she is asking her daughter to choose between her family and her significant other. South Asian youth’s autonomy is tested when it comes to dating because their

parents' fears create family tension, but it also affects everyone mentally. Similarly, Rewa, who is Bhutanese and Nepali, expressed how she is afraid of being disowned for dating someone who isn't of the same cultural background as her. She said, "I recently told my mom about my boyfriend after I graduated, and she was like, 'okay, you can date him, but you can't marry him.'" South Asian parents are afraid of change because it could lead to the discontinuation of their cultural practices, and a marriage resulting in divorce because both partners failed to understand each other's backgrounds. A divorce will hurt the family pride and will lead to gossip, so their parents are more afraid of what people would think, than their children's damn happiness.

Unfortunately, the narrative that many parents want their children to live, exclude people from the LGBTQIA+ community. Mira believes that they are living a lie because their parents expect them to be cis-gendered and heterosexual, which they are not. When the narrative that their parents want them to live is one that excludes their identity, children don't feel safe in their own homes. Zriab even asked his father how he feels about gay people, and his father thinks they should burn in hell. As a result, Zriab repressed so much of his identity, it was hard for him to ever be comfortable with himself.

The exclusion of queer people from the Desi community results in children denying important parts of their identities in order to satisfy their parents and prevent being disowned or straining their relationships. Jharna is aware of how angry her parents would be if they ever found out about her relationships with women, so she stated she would have an arranged marriage just to make her parents easy, but also make it easier for her younger sister to live a better life. Jharna is so afraid of ruining things with her parents and is scared of making her sister's life hard, that she will sacrifice her life to make everyone happy. South Asian queer youth

are denying parts of their identity to keep their parents happy. They are forced to put other people's needs before their own because they are afraid of losing their loved ones, no longer receiving financial support. and mental and emotional support.

Furthermore, both Tulsi and Stefani are Indian, but they are also biracial, so their parents do not expect them to marry within the same culture, but they do expect them to have a heteronormative marriage. Stefani is terrified of being kicked out for being queer, so they learned how to lie to their parents to stay safe. Tulsi eventually came out to her parents, but they still fail to recognize queer relationships as legitimate relationships.

Much like Tulsi, Rani and Samir have also come out to their parents, and their parents still fail to recognize their identities. Samir's parents are aware of his fiancé, but his parents stated that they can't accept or understand what gay marriage is like, so they can't be a part of it and don't want to be a part of it." Furthermore, Rani stated, "My mom's biggest struggle with me coming out is this idea of marriage, or a niqah (Islamic marriage). She was like, 'it is a celebration of a sexual union, between a man and a woman. Same sex is wrong.'" Both Rani and Samir mentioned that ever since coming out, their parents have encouraged them to go on dates with the opposite gender. Samir's mother even suggested having sex with a woman, even though before he came out to her sex before marriage was looked down on. As a consequence of coming out, their parents start to push them to participate in heteronormative dating culture because they don't want to accept that their children aren't like them. Although their parents fail to understand their queer identities because they are unfamiliar with them, their parents are still expecting their children to conform to their own beliefs of romance because they are afraid of accepting change.

Both queer and heterosexual South Asians face the pressure of satisfying their parents' needs because their parents are scared of change, and a relationship that may end on a bad note.



This contributes to secrecy, and their parents being unaware of their children's behaviors outside of their homes. Another reason why parents are afraid of change is that it would hurt their family pride. Many people stated the phrase, "Log kya kahenge?" or "Manoosh ki bolbe?" which translates from Hindi/Urdu and Bangla to "what will people say?" Not only do they fear their parents' disapproval, and their parents disowning them, but they are also aware of how their actions can affect a family's reputation, which puts a lot of pressure on them. If they were to be caught in an interracial relationship, queer relationship, or dating and having sex before marriage, people would automatically shame their parents for not raising them the "proper" way. Many referred to these people as "aunties and uncles", who probably have their own children who participate in the same behaviors, but are unaware of what their kids are doing, and wouldn't want their children to be "as bad as the others."

Although their romantic and sexual relationships are one of the biggest things being kept hidden from their parents, they also have to hide other parts of their identity. Tulsi dyes her hair when she's living on campus and gets tattoos in areas her parents won't be able to see. Many people even admit to hiding the clothes they wear from their parents. Mira hides their binders, which is a piece of clothing that minimizes the appearance of breasts, from their parents, and changes outside of their home. Similarly, many participants expressed how much freedom they got by living on campus or using college as an excuse to leave their homes. Zriab is more comfortable wearing his hair down on campus, or walking around with nail polish, whereas at home his family would shame him for having long hair and aren't aware of him wearing nail polish or else they'd make fun of him and call him "gay." Pishai found freedom in being able to dress however she wants and no longer dressing conservatively.

Many participants stated that they started smoking marijuana to help cope with anxiety, which their parents are unaware of. Not only is marijuana looked down on by many communities, but mental health is also stigmatized within their cultural communities and using any sort of substance to cope with anxiety would infuriate many Desi parents. When mentioning mental health to their families, they refer to therapists as people who deal with “the crazy people.” If their aunties and uncles were ever to find out about their mental health problems, they would call them crazy, and if they found out about their use of medicine or weed to cope with their issues, they’d be seen as a drug addict.

While it is refreshing to be able to participate in certain parts of their social identity outside of their homes, it could lead to dangerous and mentally damaging situations. Mira expressed that they cannot share their whereabouts with their parents, because they would never approve of what they are doing. As a result, Mira can’t openly express their traumatic experiences with their parents because it has to do with their queer and sexual identities, and their parents would judge and shame them. Similarly, due to being shamed, and because of how taboo it is to address mental health, Pishai eventually used self-harm as a way to handle her emotions, which her parents are unaware of.

Keeping secrets while carrying out their adult lives is not a life that they asked for, but South Asian Americans have to subscribe to this way of life to protect themselves, and their parents.

### **The Double Bind**

South Asian Americans struggle to feel connected to their culture because the adults in their lives are unaware of the social aspects of their life, which they would deem as “too Western.” However, they also struggle to feel connected to their Western settings, despite being

born or raised here from a young age. Jharna describes this as, “Too brown at school, and too white at home.”

Rani described never being able to fit in anywhere because her home life was so different compared to her social life. “Home is a total Kashmiri household, and going to school, I didn’t fit in with the white girls, but I wanted to. It was hard trying to assimilate. I can pinpoint so many little things. Like iCarly for example, my mom didn’t let me watch that and that’s all my friends would talk about.” Although she wanted to watch these children’s shows, her parents did not expose her to Western television at a young age because they were scared, she would eventually forget the values of their culture. However, this affected Rani’s school life because she wasn’t able to share the same interests as her peers, often making her feel like an outsider at school, but also at home because she wanted to be exposed to Western shows.

Many participants expressed how they grew to hate their skin tone, and it has led to a lot of self-esteem issues. According to my subjects, in South Asian communities, darker skin complexions are looked down on, and people are even encouraged to buy skin lightening creams such as “Fair & Lovely.” Pishai mentioned how even some of the songs she heard while growing up, was about a woman being as white and as beautiful as the moon. Because there has been such a strong emphasis on lighter complexions being more desired, she internalized negative feelings about her appearance. Despite being more comfortable with her appearance now, Pishai recalled trying to burn her face at a young age because she hated appearing so dark. Additionally, Samir stated how foreign he feels at home for being the darkest in his family and for being darker than others in Western social settings. Not only are white people seen as superior in Western media, but South Asian media and beauty businesses play a huge role in shaping the ways South Asian Americans feel towards themselves.

Even though they were raised in the same culture, subjects expressed how not only do they fear to disappoint their parents, they are also othered by other South Asian people of their generation. Imtiyaz is looked down on by his cousins for not practicing Islam anymore and for eating pork. Although his decisions are not affecting anyone except himself, those around him have expressed how uncomfortable it makes them when he eats pork. He also mentioned how his cousin once made a speech about how marriage should stay within the religion and culture, making Imtiyaz feel bad for his interracial relationship with a partner who does not practice Islam. According to Imtiyaz, his cousins don't look down on their friends who weren't born Muslim for eating pork, but they would shame their cousin, someone who no longer practices Islam, for eating pork. The constant belittlement of his own beliefs led him to feel alienated, and as a result, he is uncomfortable to perform his identity around other brown people. Unlike Imtiyaz, Fatima is a devout Muslim, but even her brown and Muslim friends would pull off her hijab in middle school as a "joke." These experiences were humiliating for her, but others never saw it as a big of a deal. She even recalls her friend saying, "I miss you wearing pants," in regard to her abaya. These instances caused her to be hyper aware of her appearance and made her feel othered by others.

Queer South Asians also expressed how people were quick to judge them based on their decisions. Sim stated, "I know the straight Desi girls just will not understand me. They'll understand me in terms of being Desi and being a girl. But I do get afraid to say that I'm gay in front of straight Desi girls because they're going to start looking at me differently and think that I'm weird, creepy, or too Western. And I can be in these spaces where people understand what it's like to be gay but not to be Desi and gay. Especially white gays, no matter how much they try, they will never comprehend my experience." Instances like these can be alienating to people

like Sim, because members of their community make them feel excluded for parts of their identity. Similarly, Zriab's own siblings would make fun of him and call him gay or a woman for the way he behaved, which affected the way he viewed his own gender for the longest time. He stated, "It got to the point where anything I did if we fight or the way I hold back or the way I walk or talk, they're just like 'you're a girl'." Many other participants, such as Stefani and Mira, expressed how they didn't come to terms with their sexuality and gender identity for the longest time because they did not want to be excluded by others in their community. As a result of expected gender and heteronormative cues, participants began to internalize and hide parts of their own identity.

As people who are a part of more than one culture, South Asian Americans face immense pressure to conform to the different cultures they were raised in. However, they fear of being seen as too Western by other South Asians, or as too brown in their Western settings, thus placing them in a double bind.

### **Finding a Place Within the Pressure**

Living in America as an immigrant or a child of immigrants can be extremely challenging because their upbringing is unlike others. Participants voiced great anxiety when it comes to all aspects of their social life and being able to be the perfect child. However, as they grow older and come to understand the generational gap between themselves and their parents, they are able to find different coping mechanisms to help cope with their identity struggles.

Many admit that it's an everyday struggle, but they have become more comfortable with balancing the different parts of their identity. Tulsi stated, "I've had to learn to not subscribe to Indian ideologies regarding sexuality and mental health and relationships. But at the same time, I want to hold on to my Indian identity more—I don't want to lose that part of myself. It's like a

balance. Something you need to keep from your culture and then some things that you need to understand, that you need to teach yourself.” Much like Tulsi, many participants highlight the importance of focusing more on their mental health while also embracing their cultural identities. By bringing attention to the importance of a stable mental health, and being vulnerable, participants are breaking generational cycles. People have learned to embrace the beauty of their culture, while also critiquing it and being the generation to challenge and change toxic beliefs.

Similarly, Palzom said, “I think identities do change from time to time. I think the mental stability of someone is such a key component to their livelihood. I have my identity as a partner and one as a daughter. But being a Nepali, Asian American, is never going to change. These are the identities that I hold deeply and my cultural values and just my life, but I think everything else changes consistently, depending on where I am.” Participants are learning to adapt to certain situations, without changing the parts of their identity they find the most important.

By focusing on their mental health, many have learned to accept the parts of their identities they have suppressed. Jharna used to tell people she is from India instead of Nepal, because she found it easier to not explain the difference to people. But now she enjoys sharing her Nepali identity with others. Sim came to terms with the racism and homophobia she has internalized and has started to embrace her Bengali culture and queer side, while also having more empathy towards her parents. “Even though my relationship with my parents is bad, I try to see it from their point of view. They're immigrants. I got to grow up here and eventually assimilate, that's not something they were able to do. They had a whole community in Bangladesh, and they don't have that here. And I want to give them my empathy while breaking the toxic cycles that are going on. This is how I can reaffirm my identity.” To feel less resentment towards her parents, and for the sake of her own mental health, Sim has learned to

understand things from her parents' perspectives, which helps their relationship with each other. Likewise, Samir has also begun to understand the generational gap between him and his parents and is working on introducing them to more American things. By mixing both of his cultures together, he hopes his parents would also gain a better understanding of him. He even invites his friends over for Eid or wears traditional Bengali attire to formal events. To him, it is important to mix the two cultures together, because it allows him to embrace both sides of him, while teaching those around him about his identity.

Although many have found ways to balance the different parts of themselves, some mentioned how much of a struggle that is. Mira refers to herself as a connector, "I tend to develop my identity by being that bitch who talks to everyone because I am part of no one." They have the ability to connect with multiple people because they can relate to them by being an outsider who is composed of many different identities. Zriab also mentioned feeling a state of loneliness, but he finds joy in being there for others during their times of need, so he has something to look forward to. To them, it is an everyday learning process to help manage loneliness, but having friends and finding people to connect with, has been beneficial their mental health.

Living in a country where people shame and belittle diverse cultures can be mentally damaging to immigrant families. Children are taught to code switch from a young age, which would make them question which parts of themselves they should embrace. But as they grow older, they begin their own journeys in finding the beauty behind their diverse backgrounds, breaking generational cycles along the way.

## ***CONCLUSION***

This study sought to understand how South Asian American youth form their identities while living under immigrant households in a Western setting. The findings demonstrate that subjects face dual exclusion, as they are placed in positions where they must mask certain parts of their identities, while adapting to the situation that they are placed in. Because of this, they repress parts of themselves, and internalize racism, misogyny, homophobia, and classism. Parental pressures lead to family conflict, and secrecy, which can place South Asian American youth in dangerous, and mentally damaging situations. Children must hide their appearance and certain parts of their social life. For participants of the LGBTQIA+ community, many must conceal themselves around their family due to fear of being disowned, or many experience their parents denying their identities, and pushing them to conform to heteronormativity. Additionally, with the little positive representation in the media, South Asian Americans are now hyper aware of how they may appear to others in Western settings, ultimately leading them to believe that they are inferior to white people. Although it is a hard process, many subjects revealed that they are learning to embrace the different parts of themselves, and found spaces for them to feel comfortable in. Moreover, the individuals in this study confirm that although it is difficult to perform their identity and be themselves, they aim to be the generation that breaks toxic cycles, making it easier for future generations.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

My research adds to current discussions of South Asian youth, immigration, and dual identities. One potential limitation, however, is the small sample size and that all participants are based in New York. There needs to be further qualitative and survey research done, in many



different Western countries, to better understand the identity formation of people who come from a South Asian immigrant household.

It can also be useful to further consider how cultivating a dual identity within the framework of western-social influence further contributes to feelings of alienation from South Asian culture. It is also important to recognize the differences between South Asian cultures across the countries of their origin. How factors such as religion, ethnicity, caste-systems, rural versus urban habitation, and more lead to nuances in culture creating differences in upbringing amongst the South Asian diaspora as well. More clarity and more research also allow for better representation in the media. It could prevent misrepresentation, which often leads to South Asians being othered and alienated.

This research can be helpful for various organizations that focus on particular issues. For organizations focused on the LGBTQIA+ community, these findings can shed light on the different experiences across ethnic groups, which can further be used when considering policy proposals targeting specific issues faced by the community. Likewise, South Asian organizations can use this information to not only have a more holistic understanding of members of their own community but recognize the specific issues and areas of concern they can target. Understanding cultural nuances is always helpful in developing communities, and is not only useful to social science disciplines, but economists and political scientists who are constantly attempting to reach out to specific groups and become more involved in the subsequent development of their socioeconomic conditions.

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