

## Popular Culture, Media, and Globalization

Globalization, propelled by advances in communication and transportation technology, the integration of global markets, and the privatization and deregulation of media outlets in much of the world, has intensified the role of media and **popular culture** in shaping our communication with and understanding of cultures different from our own. While TV programs, celebrities, and music videos are often perceived as simply innocent and fun entertainment, these and other forms of popular culture are powerful transmitters of cultural norms, values, and expectations. While the United States continues to dominate production and dissemination of popular culture globally, numerous media circuits today originate from India, Latin America, Nigeria, and China; thus, a central dynamic of intercultural communication is how global media and distribution of popular culture alternately promote strong desires for inclusion in global culture and also mobilize intense resistance to cultural imperialism.

Media and popular culture serve as primary channels through which we learn about groups who are different from ourselves and make sense of who we are. As the authors in this chapter assert, the stories we are exposed to shape who we are, how we live in the world, and what we dream is possible. Just as limited and negative representations produced through media and pop culture promote and reinforce stereotypes impacting perceptions of others and ourselves, diasporic and migrant communities reconnect and remember home through popular culture as they resist full assimilation and otherness.

In Sheena Malhotra's longitudinal study of the impact of media and neoliberalism on youth in India, she asks how global and intercultural fluency gained through exposure to Western media impacts youth's worldviews. Her case study explores the shifts and changes in Indian youth's dreams, goals, and imaginations, particularly in relation to gender, nation, and culture, as the current generation is increasingly exposed to new consumer and media landscapes. In her personal narrative, Chigozirim Ifedapo Utah shares what she calls "migrant moments" to investigate the intercultural tensions, ruptures, visions, and possibilities of living in **pop-culture nation**. Combining stories and theory from her hybrid transnational experiences, she invites us to engage with the struggles of others, have honest conversations, and honor the humanity in one another.

## Reimagining a Nation: Neoliberalism and Media's Impact on Youth's Imaginaries in India

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India witnessed great economic and cultural changes post-1991. This case study provides a longitudinal understanding of how notions of gender, nation, and culture have changed since India's economic "liberalization" and neoliberal policies took effect in the 1990s. Globalization not only entails increased flows of media and technology but also movement of capital, changes in national and global policies to accommodate that capital, and the accompanying changes in cultural practices. Based on a longitudinal comparison between focus-group interviews conducted in 1993 and 2011, this essay outlines shifts in the imaginaries amongst urban youth in India.

### BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

India gained her independence from British colonial rule in 1947. Given that the region consisted of hundreds of small independent kingdoms precolonization, discussions about what it meant to be an independent nation-state—focusing on uniting a people with close to 30 distinct languages, hundreds of dialects, and several religions—were ongoing. India's film industry (often referred to as "Bollywood") evolved its own genre to appeal across different language groups, using simple storylines with "over-the-top" acting, songs, and dances that could be followed and appreciated without knowing the language. Hindi-language films of the 1950s and 1960s often had nation building as their theme, defining Indian culture through their narratives as a newly independent and self-sufficient nation, valorizing values of self-sacrifice for the good of the community, celebrating farmers and the working poor as true heroes, and emphasizing values of social justice and caring for one another over materialism and wealth.

The influence of Mahatma Gandhi and other national leaders during the struggle for Indian independence resulted in efforts to form a more equitable society, loosely based on socialist principles. From 1947 to 1991 (44 years), India developed a protected economy, where the government owned and operated many industries (airlines, hospitals, schools, television networks, telephones, etc.). Eventually, only Indian nationals could own and operate businesses in India, an approach designed to encourage entrepreneurship in a young nation. However, the economy struggled, and India underwent a balance-of-payment crisis. To address the crisis, India borrowed capital from global bodies of governance such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. These loans came with conditions to adopt neoliberal economic policies.

In 1991, India's economy was "liberalized," which means the nation moved from a protected, socialist-leaning approach to an "open" economy divested of government holdings in various industries. The grand shift in the economy created a sea change in

the Indian landscape, nowhere more apparent than in the urban centers. The sudden influx of Western corporations into India rapidly changed India's commercial districts from primarily locally owned stores to large multinationals such as Nike, Apple, Coach, and other name brands that tried to grab a foothold in India's large and quickly growing middle-class market. It was a poignant moment in Indian history, wherein a former colonial state renegotiated its cultural and national identities in the context of neocolonial/neoliberal forces represented by multinational media corporations and framed by global bodies of governance.

Perhaps one of the most far-reaching changes of the 1990s was the shift in the television landscape in the nation. Television in India prior to the neoliberal shift consisted of one state-run, public network, popularly known as DD (or Doordarshan), with an educational and public service mission. In the afternoons, DD broadcast "educational" programs on topics from basic math to farming and civic engagement. Evenings had "entertainment programming," but even these programs were designed with a "social message" (e.g., the evils of dowry, national unity, or religious tolerance).

In the 1990s, within a span of just a few years, the landscape changed drastically when a plethora of private and public commercial television channels with both Indian and Western content were introduced. MTV, NBC, CNN, and many other Western networks began broadcasting in India. But often even more popular were the homegrown, private networks such as ZEE, SONY, STAR, and COLOURS that adopted the glossy styles of the West but kept the storyline and content Indian. The main goal of the private channels was to increase viewership, a goal that resulted in sensationalist news and reality shows, as well as sexualized and entertainment-oriented soap operas and drama series. These rapidly changing "mediascapes," in Appadurai's (1996) terms, and fears of U.S. hegemony have profound implications for questions of gender, nation, and culture in India. **Cultural hegemony** refers to a dominant and potentially oppressive cultural order adopted by a majority of people due to the ubiquitous nature of the mass media and advanced capitalism. An example would be the media ideal of the feminine body. A model's figure is unachievable for 97% of the population, and yet it is held up as the ideal for all women to strive for and be judged against. While the cultural hegemony of U.S. media is evident in the shifting narratives of many films in the 1990s and post-2000 (see Malhotra & Alagh, 2004), Hindi and regional-language films continue to be a powerful media force in India.

Media representation is critical in the construction of gender, nation, and culture. The stories a culture generates are one of the primary ways we come to think about gender roles, belonging, patriotism, and how we learn our cultural realities. India has long struggled with reconciling different identities. Partha Chatterjee's (1989) study of the independence movement in India revealed contradictory impulses for freedom fighters who were often caught between narratives of modernization and progress advocated by the British and the more traditional cultural norms or rituals often equated with nationalist and patriotic identities. This contradiction was often resolved by equating women with the "home" and "inner" spiritual spheres, making them the keepers of tradition and culture and thereby allowing men to adopt "modern" and Westernized forms in the "outer" and public sphere, which were deemed necessary for the progress of the nation. These sorts of conflicting narratives (progress vs. conservation; modern vs. traditional) are often present in periods

of rapid cultural change. In the case of India, they have found particular expression in the divide between Western/colonial/modernization and Indian/indigenous/cultural traditions.

Currently, a whole generation of urban Indian teenagers and college-age students have never known anything but a world populated by the connected global mediascapes of MTV-India, the simultaneous release of Hollywood films in the United States and India, and a level of comfort with Facebook that other generations had with the telephone. This is a generation as conversant with the latest happenings on *Gossip Girl* as they are with the newest Bollywood film release. How does this global and intercultural fluency impact their worldview? Homi Bhabha (1994/2003) coined the term **hybridity** in his analysis of the colonizer/colonized relations to note the creation of “transcultural forms” within colonial histories and relationships (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1998). According to Bhabha, cultural identity and cultural systems are constructed in the “Third Space of enunciation” (p. 37), wherein the **ambivalence** and interdependence of the colonizer and colonized construct **hybrid cultural identities** (Ashcroft et al., 1998, p. 118). Are youth in India developing hybrid subjectivities, in Bhabha’s terms? In particular, how will this exposure transform young people’s imaginaries regarding gender norms and their understanding of culture and nation?

## METHODOLOGY

In 1993, I conducted four focus groups in Bangalore to explore the impact the privatization of television in India had on notions of gender, nation, and culture.<sup>1</sup> Acknowledging that gender roles are often in flux, culture is never static, and the nation is not monolithic, it was still important to capture the changes as viewers were being exposed to new stories. The focus groups I conducted consisted of 3 to 10 participants, ranging in age from 16 to 22. Two focus groups were women only, and two focus groups were mixed.

Based on the 1993 focus groups I conducted, along with interviews with television executives and content analysis of programming, my coauthor and I found that there was an appropriation of Western culture by many of the networks (see Malhotra & Crabtree, 2002). We highlighted the *ambivalence* (Bhabha, 1994)—defined as a love/hate relationship between the colonized subject and colonizer—generated among television audiences by such appropriations. We also found a degree of cultural hegemony being articulated by the executives (celebrating consumerism, in their notions of “progress,” etc.) who produced the programming, as well as in the audiences consuming it. However, our most compelling insight from the studies conducted in the early 1990s was the contradictory construction of gender roles for Indian women; they were expected to be both superwoman (Westernized, working, good consumers) and submissive housewife (upholding traditional Indian culture). This phenomenon was indicative of the competing ideologies of Western consumerism and Indian nationalism that emerged in India at the time (Malhotra & Crabtree, 2002).

In 2011, I returned to India to conduct focus-group interviews with students in Bangalore. I conducted six focus-group interviews, the first of which consisted of high school students. The other five focus groups were at the same two colleges I had visited in 1993 (St. Joseph’s and Mount Carmel College).<sup>2</sup> In essence, I was accessing a similar student population but

18 years and a full generation later. All names have been changed to protect the identities of the participants in the 1993 and 2011 focus groups. There were 30 participants in the 2011 round overall, ranging in age from 16 to 22. The focus groups at St. Joseph's consisted only of men, and the ones at Mount Carmel consisted only of women.

The questions driving my research in the second round of focus groups centered on changing norms in terms of gender, culture, and nation for participants who are growing up in a globally connected media landscape. I asked urban youth who their heroes were and what cultural values guide the new urban Indian identity. How did their fluency with Western programming and their highly mediated upbringing impact the gender and cultural worldviews of today's college-age generation? Are there any anxieties or disconnections emerging, or are they able to synthesize the changing mediascapes with ease, folding them into their own understandings of gender, nation, and culture?

### Urban/Rural and Linguistic Divides

It is key to emphasize that the population I spoke to is not representative of large portions of India. I interviewed urban students who were in English-medium educational institutions. These students were from Bangalore, which is a large city with a population roughly equivalent to that of Los Angeles. Most of these students were considered middle or upper-middle economic class. Obviously, the experiences of students who grow up in rural India or its villages or are economically disadvantaged will differ vastly. Yet, given my focus on the impact of English-language programming on Indian youth, an urban, English-speaking population provided a good starting point for study. Students from these spaces are often the opinion leaders of tomorrow's urban India and are positioned well to become prominent players in Indian industry. Therefore, gaining insight into their notions of gender, nation, and culture at this juncture advances an understanding of an influential segment within the broad diversity of Indian youth.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

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India is coming of age in the post-2000 era. The country went through a metaphoric "drunk adolescence" in the 1990s, where the nation suddenly opened up to the world and made tremendous cultural shifts overnight, often binge-drinking Western consumerism and other Western values. It was a time when anything seemed possible, and anything that could go did! In the post-2000 era, a maturing is occurring as the country works to absorb the onslaught of neoliberal economic policies, Western corporate influences, and Western media into its mediascapes and econoscapes, resulting in new articulations of cultural identities in different strata of Indian society. In the intervening years since the interviews conducted in 1993, I find there is a significant and new acceptance of how notions of gender, nation, and culture are shifting. Dreams and realities of transnational mobility permeate and contend with local, bounded notions of national identity; Indian youth accept and embrace hybridized cultural identities, and expanded, less rigid gender roles are viewed as normal.

## Shifting Heroes, Shifting Stories

We learn so much about our world and how to make sense of it from the stories our culture tells. There are often multiple narratives within any cultural tradition. Those narratives compete for dominance, and the meanings are contested by power structures that amplify or diminish their reach. These competing stories and narratives reflect, constitute, and transform our lived cultural experiences. Yet how are we—and particularly youth—impacted when our stories are no longer generated from within the culture to which we belong, or when we no longer pay attention to the stories our culture produces?

I asked the focus-group participants in 2011 the percentage of English-language versus Hindi- or local-language television programming they watched. The majority (about 60–65%) of participants reported that as much as 80% to 100% of the programming they watched was in English. This revelation was significant. Only 10% to 15% of participants said they watched more Hindi- and local-language programming than English programming (see Table 11.1). These findings show that students in the focus groups watched a preponderance of Western programming, even though the most popular shows in India as per ratings were still Hindi-language shows, produced by Indian networks. This may illuminate a degree of disconnection between English-speaking youth in middle-class homes and the rest of the country. It was obvious that they overwhelmingly preferred Western programming and were conversant in the latest happenings on those shows, which informed their ideas about gender and culture considerably.

Given the kinds of programs focus-group participants watched, it was no surprise that when they were asked to name their favorite star, the names Johnny Depp, Brad Pitt, Tom Cruise, and Robert Pattinson emerged. When coaxed to name favorite female stars, once again, names such as Angelina Jolie and Sandra Bullock were offered first. Names of Bollywood stars such as Shah Rukh Khan, Aamir Khan, and Kajol were mentioned, but those came up later and often only in response to a specific question about Bollywood stars. Only when naming sports stars did they mention Indian cricketers before Western sports stars. If our heroes often become our role models, this idolization of Western stars and English programming will likely lead, over time, to role models and worldviews that are more Western than Indian within this population.

**Table 11.1** Percentage of English- Versus Hindi- or Local-Language Programming Watched

Kind of Programming Watched	Percentage of Focus-Group Participants
Mostly English (80–100%)	60%
50/50 mix	25%
Mostly Hindi/regional (60–90%)	15%

The first focus group I conducted in 2011 consisted of 16-year-old high school students. The group had a high level of energy, and their answers seemed earnest as they reflected on media's impact on their lives and culture. They all said they watched 99% or 100% English television programming, and maybe 1% Hindi. That proportion shifted to 60% and 40% when it came to Hollywood and Bollywood films, so there was still a young audience for Bollywood films. The participants in this group spoke effortlessly about streaming the latest Western television programs and discussed the pros and cons of Facebook and Instagram, and every single one of them said they wanted to study or live "abroad." Samara was emphatic when asked where she wanted to be in 10 years: "Somewhere *not* in India, doing something that's *not* an everyday job. I have no idea what I want to do. But I don't want to wake up every day and go to a 9-to-5 job" (Focus Group 1, 2011). The traditional emphasis of middle-class Indian families on their children becoming doctors, engineers, or IT professionals in the quest for well-paying jobs appeared to be sidelined here. Samara definitely imagined a nonnormative future for herself, a future she hoped was somewhere outside of India.

In another focus group, one young woman directly pointed to her television viewing preferences as the source of her new aspirations. Sonam told me that previously she wanted to go to the United States to teach differently-abled students because there was "a lot of scope there" for special education teachers. However, she had a new ambition. She said,

Thanks to *Bones* and *CSI*, I want to become a criminal psychologist now. There's also the CBI . . . no, the FBI. I really want to work for the FBI. So I think I'm going to work there. (Focus Group 6, 2011)

Sonam's slip from CBI to FBI is revealing. CBI is the Central Bureau of Investigation, which is the premiere law enforcement agency in India, akin to the FBI in the United States. Influenced by U.S. programming, Sonam seemed to discard the Indian agency for its U.S. counterpart. I asked her if the FBI allows non-U.S. citizens to join. She replied that she could "if I become a U.S. citizen. My uncle is a U.S. citizen." Her friend Tara asked twice if she wanted to become a U.S. citizen. Sonam replied, "But I think it allows noncitizens too. I don't want to become a U.S. citizen, but I want to work there. It gives you good work experience" (Focus Group 6, 2011). Sonam's shifting imaginary about what she wanted to do with her life was directly connected to whom she idolized and the stories she absorbed. She was driven by an idea of the work she wanted to do, and although she didn't want to become a U.S. citizen necessarily, she was willing to do it if that path would allow her to work in the job she wanted. Both she and Samara represented one segment of the 2011 participants who manifested transnational mobility, at least in their imaginaries. It was a mobility built around neoliberal subjectivity—autonomous, individualized, independent, and flexible to meet workforce demands—produced by the desires the programming evoked. They imagined themselves as global citizens who could work where they wanted, shifting nationalities and allegiances, in service of living the life they wanted most. Just as the programming they watched 99% of the time crossed borders effortlessly, they, too, imagined for themselves a life unbounded by borders and nation.

Yet, when long-term living plans were considered, the majority of the participants actually articulated a desire to return to and settle down in India. A hint of nationalistic pride and a resistance to leaving “for good” was expressed across most of the focus groups. The attitude was characterized by one participant, Sanjana, who said she would like to study abroad but was very firm about returning to India. “But settling [there] is a bad idea. I would want to come back, open a firm here, and help my country grow, rather than helping *their* economic growth” (Focus Group 5, 2011).

She was clear about what she wanted to do, the sequence (study abroad, return to India to set up a firm), and the value of her contribution (helping the Indian economy grow). She also articulated a deliberate choice about helping her own country rather than helping the economic growth of the United States, indicating a strong sense of belonging to India’s future. This sentiment was echoed over and over again by a vast majority of the participants. Most wanted to work or study abroad, but most also wanted to return to India in the long term. Through media, youth’s **transnational identities** and neoliberal subjectivities are constructed, challenging and reshaping notions of national identity.

### Changing Cultural and Generational Shifts

In the 1993 focus groups, a great deal of anxiety was expressed about the changes that Western programming and liberalization were bringing. One of the respondents remarked, “It’s very alien to us. Especially all this sexual openness on MTV” (Kamini, Focus Group 3, 1993). Another respondent fretted about whether Indian culture was ready for it, while yet another remarked how she did not like watching Western programs with her parents because it was “a real culture shock” (Roma, Focus Group 4, 1993). These respondents were grappling with exposure to Western television and culture at an entirely new level. And they were worried about implications for their world.

Eighteen years later, a change in the level of anxiety was evident. While some participants spoke about not wanting to watch with their parents any content that had sexuality in it, there were many who said that they were comfortable as long as their parents liked the same shows.

**Vidya:** My mother used to be all weird before. But now that we’re getting exposed to different cultures, my mother is OK with me watching . . . perverted stuff and all.

**Sheena:** Perverted stuff?

**Vidya:** She sends me “sick” messages on the phone and all. We share a bond like this because we don’t have anything to hide. Before, if I got some sick joke, I had to be like, “Oh shit, my mom’s here.” Now I can just forward the message to her. (Focus Group 6, 2011)

Vidya’s newly developing comfort with her mother allowed her to increase her exposure to content. “Sick” is a colloquial, euphemistic term used to denote sexual content. “Sick joke,” for example, is often used as a way for women to refer to a sexual joke. Jokes, texts,

and programming that include anything sexual (e.g., kissing or other PG-13-type content) used to be taboo. Now, apparently, it is more and more accepted and shared amongst urban Indians and even across generations. Bollywood, too, has lifted its 70-year-old avoidance of any kissing or physical contact and is becoming bolder in its portrayals of sexuality. Another focus-group exchange reflects the same changing reality between the young adults of the 1990s and those of today.

**Rahul:** They've grown with us. [Rahul is referencing his parents here.]

**Arjun:** In the beginning they never accepted all that. But now they're changing toward that. What's happening in the world. There's a change, so they're ready to accept that. (Focus Group 3, 2011)

The anxiety about cultural shifts and generational divides in 1993 morphed over the intervening 18 years to an acceptance of what is seen as an inevitable Western influence in Indian society. Tara told me she thinks "it's helped us become more open-minded" (Focus Group 6, 2011). Her sentiment was echoed by Vidya: "It [Western programming] gives us a broader view about how the world is" (Focus Group 6, 2011). The nation's middle-class taboos are being challenged with a growing acceptance of previously taboo topics across generations.

Sometimes that acceptance is accompanied by pride that the influence is not unidirectional and that India is fast becoming a player on the global stage. Sanjana, a young woman who insisted that although she would like to study abroad she wanted to return to India to settle, noted with some nationalistic pride, "India is a growing country. They say that maybe in another 10 to 15 years, it's going to be in a top position. So yeah, people are coming from everywhere. You know, it's a golden [laughs] . . . egg" (Focus Group 5, 2011). She observed that they didn't have "all these things" just 5 years back and she thinks it's "slowly coming up." Her friend Aparna remarked, "I think it will be on par with the Americans. Because going at this rate . . . I mean people are changing, drastically changing every day. So it will be Westernized" (Focus Group 5, 2011). Aparna saw the cultural changes as "drastic" and appeared to be quite accepting of their inevitability. Her friend Sanjana continued her train of thought:

We are going on par with the Americans. And the Americans are taking in the Indian trends. So maybe there'll be a reversal. They'll go to the spiritual aspects, and yoga. And we start going to the discotheques [clubs] and the malls. (Focus Group 5, 2011)

Her friend Aparna observed that it's already happening, and both of them chuckled a bit at the changes. India's growing economy and growing middle class (a prime market for multinational goods) have put India on the global stage. In 1993, while focus-group members seemingly embraced some aspects of Western freedom, they did express concerns about the consumerist ideology that Western media and the new Indian economy were introducing. By 2011, there appeared to be an acceptance of widespread consumerism, although most participants still felt that what was more important was maintaining their

values (however each person articulated those values). At the very least, though, consumerism and Westernization were no longer anxiety producing. In fact, indicative of cultural hegemony, consumer culture and Western culture were read as signs of progress and as desirable. India's ability to have "all these things" meant that it was "slowly coming up" (Sanjana, Focus Group 5, 2011). The young women's views and statements contour a transition toward neoliberal subjectivity.

Opinions varied about whether the culture was changing more rapidly than is normal, as well as about what those shifts mean for India. Yet there was also a confidence that something quintessentially Indian remains untouched by shifting mediascapes. Perna insisted that we remain Indian even today: "I think it's just our values. In no other place will you still find children touching their grandparents' feet. And we're also friendly and open [laughter]" (Focus Group 1, 2011).

Perna was not alone in this thought. Her point was echoed by many in various focus groups. Aparna articulated the most common position: "We need to understand that if we take in the Western culture, we don't have to forget our Indian culture also" (Focus Group 5, 2011). When I asked them to articulate what Indian culture meant to them, many participants pointed to festivals, holidays, emphasis on family, respect for elders, and a nonindividualistic orientation. Some said that it was most tangible during holidays and festivals. Others mentioned "ethnic wear" days at school as another expression of culture. Negotiating hybrid cultural identities, participants held a "both/and" approach to the question of being Indian or Westernized. They took in a great deal of what the West has to offer, and they held onto a sense of their culture and their belonging, as Indians, to the Indian nation. They were invested in claiming their Indian identity, in whatever way each of them individually articulated and imagined it, revealing neoliberal influences toward individualism and autonomy even as they avowed a collective cultural identity.

## Reimagining Gender and Work

The focus groups conducted in 1993 revealed anxieties not only about culture but also about the impact of Westernization on gender roles. One participant, Kunal, fretted about it when he said, "The bra-burning attitude is coming now. . . . After 3,000 years' suppression, you cannot expect a bird to fly, OK? It needs to see the world outside, take a few faltering steps before it takes off" (Focus Group 1, 1993). Kunal expressed some of the anxieties about how women might deal with their newfound freedom, worried that women would go too far too fast. His concern was echoed in public discourse at the time. In contrast, women expressed a sentiment of hope about the example that images of working women would provide women in India. One participant said, "It makes the woman more aware, you know. The woman of India, she's now more aware about things" (Priya, Focus Group 2, 1993). However, tremendous confusion about expectations for women was evident. One participant said,

I feel like, you know, I feel a little confused. I feel a little caught between two worlds. Because when I go back home, I have to really act a little more decent, and control my tongue a little more, control my ideas a little more . . . and then when

you come here [to the city], you're expected to behave completely different. You're supposed to dress up . . . like they do on MTV!" (Neha, Focus Group 2, 1993)

Neha's statement exemplified the competing expectations that many young Indian women, living in the larger Indian cities, were expected to satisfy. While their dress, jobs and career expectations, music preferences, and ways of thinking could change, they were still expected to maintain and uphold Indian cultural traditions that teach women to be selfless and self-sacrificing. These expectations were adamantly transmitted through repeated media images pre-1990. In their comprehensive study of gender roles on Indian television, Krishnan and Dinghe (1990) found that one of the predominant images of women on Indian television was the submissive, self-sacrificing wife and mother. Even as some Indian cultural traditions may be viewed as confining and limiting for women, most Indian women interviewed did not believe the answer lay in completely denouncing Indian culture. Neha's confusion signified a moment of rupture in the construction of traditional gender roles for Indian women. At such moments, dominant (patriarchal) interests compete most fiercely with the interests of nondominant groups to create hegemonic ideologies that serve them best. In response to the changing ideas of gender, the Bhartiya Janata Party, a political party that espouses a Hindu-focused, right-wing philosophy, and a flurry of regressive television programming, which became highly popular, called for a return to sexist traditions where women were subordinated to men, presenting it as a "reclaiming of 'our' culture" or a "return to the 'Golden Age' of Hinduism." However, at precisely such moments of rupture, when everything is in flux, gender norms and associated meanings can be renegotiated and envisioned in a different manner. The promise of that possibility was very much present when the interviews were conducted in 1993. However, by 2011, those possibilities were, for the most part, co-opted into expressions of freedom through consumerism, as was fitting for a neoliberal subject, and appropriated as overt objectification and sexualization of women, rather than nurturing more independent and truly free possibilities.

If there were worries from the men in 1993 about changing gender roles, and more mixed feelings from women, there appears to be much more awareness and acceptance amongst today's young men and women. In an all-male focus group, Rahul said, perhaps hyperbolically, "In every part of India it's changing. Women have their own rights" (Focus Group 3, 2011). His friend Ishaan corrected him: "I don't think women have equal rights yet. But it's getting there. Especially in urban areas, rather than in rural areas" (Focus Group 3, 2011). They talked about what their sisters were studying; one was planning to be an engineer, another wanted to go into an MBA program, another could "be whatever she wants to be." That short discussion, perhaps, illustrates one of the more revealing attitudinal shifts toward young girls and women in urban India. In the 1993 interviews, the idea that *perhaps* women might consider careers was a question. At best, there was a sense of hope, from the women interviewed, that women with careers would become more and more common. In present-day discussions, there is no doubt that they will. Not a single woman in any of the focus groups talked about wanting to get married and "settle down" without a career. Every single female participant assumed that she would be working, as exemplified by this brief exchange in Focus Group 1: I asked, "So you all *do* want to work?"

Almost in unison, they said, “Yeah” or “Of course” or “Yes!” Samara followed up with a bit of disbelief, and the exchange that followed was telling:

- Samara:** Do we have a choice?
- Sheena:** I don’t know. Do you have a choice?
- Samara:** To not work? [Incredulous tone]
- Sheena:** Yeah.
- Samara:** How?
- Anjana:** Just marry someone.
- Samara:** Just marry someone? No! That’s stupid!
- Prerna:** That’s bad [laughter from all]. (Focus Group 1, 2011)

I was struck by how much the imaginary of young women had shifted within the previous 18 years. Not only did they assume that they would work and have careers in the future, but they couldn’t imagine how one could possibly *not* have a career! This was a very different imaginary than just a generation prior, when the emphasis on marriage for women was imperative and pervasive and careers were considered unusual or secondary at best. This may not be the reality for many parts of India, but it was for the young women in the focus group. I believe their attitudes, which are the products of shifting cultural attitudes toward gender, as well as global hegemony of **neoliberalism**, herald a larger change than we have seen up to the present moment.

## CONCLUSION

Put simply, the genie of Westernization is out of the bottle. Urban India, almost 20 years after the first round of interviews, is a transformed landscape, peppered with shopping malls, multiscreen cinemas, increasingly visible wealth, and a consumer class. Perhaps even more striking than the visual changes are the attitudinal changes, the transformation in the imaginaries of urban Indian youth. The stories they grow up with today are not the same as the stories of a generation ago. These new mediascapes have transformed their dreams, their goals, and what they imagine as possible. An increasing acceptance and normalization of Western influences creates both hybrid and transnational subjectivities, even as a sense of belonging to the nation and being Indian is held dearly. Perhaps the most striking changes over the 18 years between focus-group interviews concern imaginaries regarding gender roles and work. The discussion moved from whether women should work or not to an assumption that they will obviously work and have a career. Now, it is more a matter of what they might choose to do and where. Urban youth increasingly understand their identity as framed by consumerism and the global workforce. As discourses of women’s liberation are co-opted and women are reduced to their economic value as consumers

and flexible workers in a neoliberal global economy, the production of neoliberal subjects is complete. Little or no conversation about women being truly independent on their own terms or for their own sake was evident in the focus groups. The rapidly increasing consumerism and rising cost of living in Indian society has necessitated two-income households, a new phenomenon in middle-class India, contributing to the normalization of a growing neoliberal workforce.

While these transformations do not yet impact all levels of Indian society, they are striking within this particular segment and notable for that reason. We certainly cannot attribute all the transformation to changing media exposure; media are just one aspect amongst many in a changing Indian and global neoliberal culture. However, media are undeniably powerful purveyors of images, ideologies, and imaginaries in the context of neoliberal India.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## Migrant Diaries: Communicating in Pop-Culture Nation

Chigozirim Ifedapo Utah  
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North 27th Street, Lincoln, Nebraska, is an unexpectedly rich *mélange* of culture. Mexican, Ethiopian, Vietnamese, Mediterranean, and European grocery stores and restaurants speckle the roadside, and included in that mix is a Nigerian grocer that makes me feel as though I've been beamed out of Lincoln and into the old Tejuosho market in Lagos. The smell inside is reminiscent of my mother's kitchen after she prepares a pot of egusi soup. Nigerian music is playing in the background, and the latest Nollywood DVDs are displayed on a wall. I smile at the melodramatic titles such as *Clash of Destiny* and *Scent of Passion*. I can tell by the storeowner's accent that we are probably the same ethnicity.

"How are you, my sister?"

"I'm fine, uncle."

"You go to school here . . . work?"

"UNL . . . I'm getting my PhD."

I receive an approving smile. Nigerians value education highly. Later that day, overwhelmed with feelings of kinship and homesickness, I settle down on the couch with a plateful of "rice and stew" and

golden-brown fried plantains, wishing I was home for Christmas. A Nollywood movie acquired from YouTube provides a cherry for the top of my nostalgic cake. Familiar scenes unfold.

"Leave my son alone!"

"Mama, I don't understand . . ."

"So you think I don't know what you and your fellow witches are planning?"

"But Mama . . ."

"SHUT UP! Who is your mother? I will kill you before you kill my son!"

It is impossible to stay sad with the quintessential cries of "I am warning you!" "God punish you!" and "What is this rubbish?" ringing in my ears. It feels good to feel a little closer to home.

The landscape of contemporary popular culture is dotted with rich points of intersection between the local and global. Coke products in glass bottles are available on the "international" aisle at Super Saver, children code-switch between English and Hindi as they play derivatives of tag in the park, and Gangnam Style has taken its place amongst wedding-reception group-dance classics such as the Electric Slide, the Cupid Shuffle, and the Wobble. I refer to this fascinating web of cultural junctures and disjunctures produced by the simultaneous global movement of people and popular culture as pop-culture nation—the fragmented space of global popular culture where people and their cultural expressions and artifacts converge and diverge in novel ways. In my undergraduate days, I remember studying with a Mexican friend in a 24-hour computer lab, hopped up on candy, energy drinks, and agonizingly strong Mexican coffee. I had been taking Spanish, watching telenovelas, and practicing dialogue, and was eager to show off. My attempt to converse in Spanish was met with laughter.

"What's so funny?"

"You!"

"What do you mean?!"

". . . Never heard a Nigerian speak Spanish before!"

In this narrative, I share many more of what I like to call "migrant moments" to highlight the dynamic relationship between intercultural communication and popular culture in the global context. I offer these stories as illustrations and as an invitation to self-reflexivity, *not* as a criticism of the United States or definitive conclusions about Nigerian or U.S. culture.

## GLOBALIZATION AND (POPULAR) CULTURE

Through diverse processes, our globalized world is tremendously interconnected and interdependent (Tomlinson, 2007), characterized by increasingly liquid and multidirectional flows of people, objects, places, and information (Ritzer, 2010). This results in interesting

cultural configurations such as “Chocolate City” in Guangzhou, China, where many African businessmen reside (Bodomo, 2010), and China Town in Lagos, Nigeria. About 74 million (nearly half) of the migrants from developing countries reside in other developing countries (Ratha & Shaw, 2010, p. 2), which contradicts the popular belief that *everyone* is migrating to the West. The tendency to place Americanization and Westernization at the epicenter of *every* discussion of globalization reinforces the cultural imperialism that many scholars decry. While its influence is undeniable, “the United States is no longer the puppeteer of a world system of images but is only one node in a complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 31). The study of popular culture and intercultural communication on the global scale must attend to the multiplicity of cultural linkages that exist in a networked society.

Globalization contradicts the very idea that culture is bound to specific regions (Goodman, 2007). It also challenges the idea of culture as a unified set of norms. How can one possibly identify the values and customs of more than 7 billion people? However, an analysis of global culture does not require the identification of homogeneity, shared values, or social integration; rather, it requires the identification of a set of practices that *constitute* a cultural field within which struggle and contestation occur (p. 335). Alternatively, if we view culture as shifting tensions between the shared and the unshared (Collier, Hegde, Lee, Nakayama, & Yep, 2002), we uncover dynamics such as the interplay between integration and fragmentation that characterize global relations. *Likewise, the fragmented space of pop-culture nation (i.e., global popular culture) can be understood as perpetually unfolding tensions and struggles that occur when multiple cultural systems and artifacts flow into and away from one another.* When I joined the abundant stream of Nigerians migrating for university education at the age of 17, I became more aware of my movement within this space and was often alarmed at the tensions that surfaced as I encountered different systems of knowing, seeing, and being in the world. Next, I will share these tensions in tandem with four interconnected themes that reflect some of the ways popular culture shapes intercultural communication. Popular culture is a resource in identity construction and consequently enables and constrains intercultural communication. It also disrupts cultural identities leading to resistance (Sorrells, 2013, p. 126) and forges hybrid transnational cultural identities (p. 126).

### **(MIGRANT) IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION: CONNECTION AND DISCONNECTION**

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After I left home, activities such as dancing *Azonto* at Nigerian weddings, reading lifestyle blogs such as Bella Naija, and laughing at terrible contestants on *Nigerian Idol* became a haven. For migrants, both the politics of adaptation to the new environment and the stimulus to move or return are deeply affected by a mass-mediated imaginary that frequently transcends national space (Appadurai, 1996, p. 6). Thousands of miles away from the sights and sounds that constituted my identity, Nigerian popular culture provided an alternate space for identity performance, quelling feelings of otherness. Shome and Hegde (2002) poignantly describe a similar dynamic:

The highly sentimental movie plots churned out by Bollywood (as the Bombay cinema industry is popularly termed) gain a new function in the lives of immigrants, who are thus connected through song and dance to lives left behind; watching Indian movies in the transplanted context of the U.S. is an expression of ethnic desire and identity. (p. 183)

I discovered that these cultural artifacts were not entirely my own. They were part of a global system of cultural meaning, centuries in the making, and I shared them with others through similar colonial histories and political and social experiences. This realization had a profound effect on my identity, fostering a deeper sense of belonging and connection, not just to my home country but to a broader network of people and places. *But pop culture is not a panacea.*

Born and bred in the diverse, chaotic, and exciting city of Lagos, Nigeria, I hadn't expected my migratory experience to be so discombobulating. I had been exposed to the music, cinema, literature, and cuisine of different cultures, and several family members had studied abroad. Nigeria's lingua franca is English, so I did not anticipate language barriers. My naïve confidence was shattered as soon as I got lost in Atlanta's sprawling international airport.

"Please, I am looking for this gate." My itinerary was briskly inspected.

"Go north a little ways, hang a left . . ."

I listened politely, hiding my confusion behind perfunctory nods. I didn't have the foggiest idea what she was talking about! Thankfully, after minutes of bemused wandering, I found my gate. When I reached Houston, I boarded a Greyhound bus. I sat ramrod straight, clutching my handbag, afraid that I would fall asleep and miss something important. My cultural repertoire proved to be sadly deficient. *Gone With the Wind*, Bill Cosby, and pop-locking to American Christian rap at summer camp had not prepared me for the strangeness of transplanted reality. I mentally rifled through my bag of communicative tricks and found nothing useful. Retrospectively, my romantic imagination had probably conjured some image of arriving in America, walking in time to Natasha Bedingfield's "Unwritten." I must have looked really pathetic, because a man nearby offered me a sympathetic smile and a round, red candy. I accepted, attempting to forge an expression of gratitude that would simultaneously discourage further interaction. I popped the candy into my mouth, expecting an explosion of artificial, cherry-like sweetness. Instead, the overpowering taste of cinnamon spread down my tongue, and I spat out the candy when he wasn't looking. Focusing on the road, I stilled my anxiety-ridden thoughts by counting the number of pickup trucks, a considerable task in Texas. After a horrifying 10 hours, I reached my destination and almost burst into tears when I saw my sister's smiling face through the window. My notions of my own intercultural competence and redefining myself "by myself" had been drastically altered.

## INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: "DO YOU REALLY KNOW?"

Popular culture functions as a resource in shared meaning making. Being able to laugh at Chuck Norris and Mr. T. jokes, and chime in on humorous banter about *Coming to America*

with African American friends was like balm to my foreign soul. I noticed stylistic parallels between *makossa* and salsa, similarities between Nigerian pidgin and Jamaican patwa, and that my Indian friends also called their elders auntie and uncle out of respect. Conversations with Mexican friends clarified why the family-centered plots and intrigues in telenovelas such as *Rosa Salvaje* and *Los Ricos También Lloran* had resonated so strongly with the Nigerian audience in the '90s.

However, popular culture can constrain intercultural communication and understanding as much as it enables them. When we take popular culture to be reality rather than representation, the result is an "illusion of knowing." I recall my fledgling days with both mirth and embarrassment. I thought I was culturally "plugged in" because I had watched some movies, music videos, and documentaries, and taken special pains to be friends with an American exchange student at my secondary school. I was summarily knocked off my high horse with every awkward silence caused by my brash comments. I avoided feelings of inadequacy by retreating into schoolwork, which caused my grades to soar and my spirits to plummet. It took an embarrassingly long time to realize that the poorly formed schemas, stereotypes, assumptions, and expectations I had woven out of my encounters with American popular culture were insufficient and bordering on ridiculous. Much of what "we think we know" about people, places, and ideas is obtained and confirmed by popular culture. Invariably, this finds its way into our evaluations of others and communicative choices. Do we announce to friends and family that we are "sponsoring" an international student from a "Third-World country" when all we did was volunteer to host the student during a holiday? Do we congratulate fathers for caring for their children and judge mothers for postpartum depression? Do we jump to the conclusion that religious friends are stuffing their beliefs down our throats when all they did was make a reference to God? Do we constantly push a friend who is a stay-at-home mother to pursue a vocation, assuming that she must be repressed and unfulfilled? Encounters with others through the mass-mediated space of popular culture are helpful but not a substitute for genuine conversations, relationship building, and self-reflexivity about our positionality.

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## DISRUPTION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY: TO RESIST OR NOT TO RESIST

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The misconceptions we adopt about others can be disruptive to their sense of self because identity encompasses not only how we see ourselves but how others see us. I have encountered many strange misconstructions of my "Africanness." One is particularly humorous.

"What were you thinking!?"

"What do you mean?" I was baffled.

"How could you tell your whole class that you have malaria?!"

My decision to speak had been motivated by my mounting frustration with the negative valence of discourse about African countries in Western popular culture. I often felt

conflicted, wanting to use my voice to “sound the alarm” on social issues. Still, I felt the need to resist the dominant discourse and prove that there was more to Africa than war and suffering—that it was full of funny, intelligent, and *unique* people, not homogenous masses of nameless, faceless victims who all seemed to live in a jungle or desert. Weary of hearing Africans talked about like cultural specimens, I offered a redress. I argued that the framing of malaria in our textbook was incomplete and endeavored to explain how malaria reoccurs after periods of dormancy. I also mentioned that I had had malaria several times. I never imagined my spirited attempt to rip the veil of victimhood would incite concern about my “disease” and that my friend would hear about it from a coworker.

“You can’t say things like that. People won’t understand.”

I was perplexed at his irritation and intrigued by how quickly my identity had become attached to malaria. I wasn’t “living” with malaria, in the same way that you don’t live with influenza.

I was often surprised at how little my classmates and friends knew about my country, assuming that they had grown up immersed in my culture as I had in theirs. I still remember my after-school cartoon lineup: Jim Henson’s *Muppet Babies*, *Sesame Street*, *Battle of the Planets*, and *Voltron*. I rapped along to the theme music for *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* and laughed with my family at the shenanigans of Sheneneh on *Martin*. My heart broke when Atreyu’s horse was sucked into a bog in *The Never Ending Story*, and I idolized Boyz II Men and Mariah Carey so much that I spent hours in my room trying to sing *exactly* like them. On the flip side, few Americans grow up idolizing Nigerian pop stars or watching Nigerian shows. I must admit that I was often impatient, defensive, and hurt by what I interpreted as dismissiveness. How could an educated person possibly think that Africa is a country? While our globalized world is characterized by “rapidly developing interconnections and interdependencies” (Tomlinson, 2007, p. 352), these interconnections are still quite asymmetric, reflecting contemporary and historical global power dynamics. Colonial discourses about “Third-World” backwardness still linger, drowning out the diversity of experience in various locales. Hence, people from stigmatized parts of the world sometimes find themselves caught in a double bind: Speak (and be shoved even further into a neocolonialist box) or remain silent.

## HYBRID TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITIES: CONVERGE OR DIVERGE

Cultural identity transcends continental, national, and regional boundaries. In the context of globalization, it is a colorful tapestry of transnational experiences and interactions. Initially, I found this distressing, not wanting to admit that in many ways I was becoming Americanized. My accent is currently an odd mix of Lagos swag, Texas twang, and, as one of my students pointed out, “Valley girl.” On a recent trip home, my accent thickened as soon as I touched down in Lagos and stayed thick for a week after my return to the United States, much to the amusement of a dear friend.

“So wott haaz beeeeen happooning?”

“Wow . . .”

“Wott?”

“You sound all . . . African! I haven’t heard this Chigozirim before.” She started laughing her head off at my expense.

“Wotteva,” I retorted, suddenly conscious of every syllable and stressed consonant.

I tried to hold on to the accent for as long as possible, remembering times when I was just “Chigozirim-Ifedapo-Igbo-Yoruba-Nigerian-Utah.” It eventually slipped away, reappearing as always in conversations with other Nigerians and in bursts of road rage. I have come to accept the strangeness of the transnational experience, and I enjoy the rich texture of contemporary popular culture. Still, I am among those who worry that the culture of my country will be swept away by the agendas of powerful culture industries. I feel complicit and ashamed because I know more Spanish than my native tongue. I often marvel at the lilting musicality of Hausa, the richness of Yoruba, and the phonetic assertiveness of Igbo, wishing I could be a part of it—wishing that the number of Nigerian children who do not speak their ethnic tongue wasn’t increasing.

However, in the past decade, there has been a resurgence of national pride and identification. Nigerian pop and hip-hop are often a mix of Nigerian languages, Pidgin, and English. Nollywood movies have continued to incorporate locally relevant themes such as family life and spirituality into their plots. Nigerian fashion designers have reached back in time, celebrating and modernizing traditional vintage styles such as *oleku*. National and regional media have gained a stronger foothold, reflecting the patterns Jeremy Tunstall (2008) highlights in *The Media Were American: U.S. Mass Media in Decline*. It has been wonderful to hear more Nigerian artists on Nigerian radio, and there is an increased acceptance of the arts as a legitimate career path.

The hybridization of Nigerian popular culture holds many possibilities for achieving shared meaning on the global scale and provides a sense of comfort that all is not lost. In this sense, hybridization can be interpreted not as a sully of cultural purity but as a form of resistance against complete domination (Hegde, 2002). Nevertheless, I am wary of the increased commodification of the “young, rich, and fabulous” Nigerian in lifestyle magazines, blogs, fashion, movies, hip-hop, and advertising that in many ways has fostered the growth of celebrity culture and the entertainment elite. Popular culture always reflects the interests of its producer and, as such, should not be romanticized but scrutinized.

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## CONCLUSION

Considering intercultural communication in the global context sensitizes us to the complex systems of meaning that impact our communication daily. In the fragmented space of global popular culture, our identities are shaped and reshaped as we communicate across difference and make decisions to resist and comply, diverge and converge. By my

sophomore year, my culture shock was more or less resolved. I discovered a diverse student body, a thriving international student community, and American students who battled with similar feelings of displacement. I got involved not out of a conscious effort to be “multicultural” but from a genuine interest in the struggles of others. Defensiveness and sarcastic rejoinders gave way to a passion for educating others about my culture. As I opened my heart to others, endless novelties and surprises were an everyday reality. I also encountered distressing differences that I had to learn to navigate, not by ignoring their existence but by learning how to have honest conversations that honored the humanity of others.

I remember with fondness one of my first college instructors. She was kind and tolerant of the fact that I contributed a little too much in class. My education in Nigeria had been rather “top-down,” so I became overly excited at the opportunity to engage in intellectual discourse. One day, we were asked where people go to talk about their emotional problems.

“An agony aunt.”

“A what?”

“Aah-go-nee anntt.”

“Can you say that again?”

“AGONY AUNT! AGONY AUNT!”

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand.”

Embarrassed, I gave up, and I wish I hadn’t. Intercultural communication can be messy, requiring a certain measure of vulnerability and a willingness to take risks. Embrace the awkwardness! We live in exciting times where the opportunity to learn about others is limitless. Yet we are often so afraid of looking foolish that we miss opportunities to genuinely engage. This is why college campuses are paradoxically some of the most diverse *and* segregated places on earth. Never underestimate the value of trying out new cuisine or dress, attending international student showcases at your university, or reading the celebrated literature of another culture.

Culture industries are making an attempt to acknowledge a wider range of human experience, and **diversity** is the buzzword of the century. Hypocritically, I have consumed certain types of popular culture and attended certain events to prove how multicultural I am while still remaining unwilling to shatter the limits of my comfort zone. It is rather like keeping a minority friend around to prove that you aren’t racist or blasting Lil’ Wayne from your car stereo to show that you’re “down.” Is the move toward diversity and **multiculturalism** producing more openness and compassion, or are we hiding behind it? Have we conflated the consumption of certain types of popular culture with progressiveness? Do we automatically think of Lady Gaga fans as more open-minded? Would your “openness” to another person change if he or she watched only MSNBC or Fox News? Popular culture is now an undeniable part of our everyday meaning making, and being savvy about the conclusions we draw from it is a crucial part of intercultural competence in the global context.

## KEY TERMS

ambivalence 209	hybrid cultural identities 209	pop-culture nation 206
cultural hegemony 208	hybridity 209	popular culture 206
diversity 225	mediascapes 208	transnational identities 213
	multiculturalism 225	

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Malhotra's case study highlights changing gender norms, roles, and expectations, particularly for women, in India over the past 20 years as a result of consumption of Western media. Identify the changes as outlined in the case study, and compare these with changes in gender roles/expectations in the United States and at least one other country.
2. Define *cultural hegemony* in your own words. Based on Malhotra's case study and your personal experience, provide examples of cultural hegemony. What is the impact of cultural hegemony, and how can it be resisted and challenged?
3. Utah's personal narrative addresses the junctures, struggles, and contestations of global pop culture—what she calls *pop-culture nation*. Using examples from Utah and your personal experience, discuss the impact of pop-culture nation on cultural identities and intercultural communication.
4. Malhotra uses terms and phrases such *hybridity*, *hybrid cultural identities*, and *hybrid subjectivities*, and Utah echoes with *transnational hybrid identities* and *hybridization of popular culture*. Discuss common ideas represented by these terms/phrases, as well as the nuanced variations among them. How are these terms particularly indicative of the constraints and possibilities of globalization?

## NOTES

1. All interviews conducted by Sheena Malhotra in Bangalore, India, June 1993.  
*Focus Group 1:* Mixed-sex focus-group interviews conducted at St. Joseph's College  
*Focus Group 2:* Women-only focus-group interviews conducted at Mount Carmel College  
*Focus Group 3:* Mixed-sex focus-group interviews conducted at St. Joseph's College  
*Focus Group 4:* Women-only focus-group interviews conducted at Mount Carmel College
2. All interviews conducted by Sheena Malhotra in Bangalore, India, January 2011.  
*Focus Group 1:* Women-only focus-group interviews conducted with participants invited through personal networks  
*Focus Groups 2 and 3:* Men-only focus-group interviews conducted at St. Joseph's College  
*Focus Groups 4, 5, and 6:* Women-only focus-group interviews conducted at Mount Carmel College