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# **Bollyville, U.S.A: The Commodification of the Other and MTV's Construction of the "Ideal Type" Desi**

**Murali Balaji**

*When the Music Television Network launched MTV Desi in 2005, it promised to bridge the divide between South Asian Americans and their counterparts in the Indian subcontinent.<sup>1</sup> This study looks at how MTV Desi tried to create an "ideal type" South Asian American through its programming, presenting an image of South Asian Americans as loving "Bhangra but also Shakira... MTV but also Bollywood." The author seeks to articulate the political economy of identity by describing MTV's attempts to define and commodify "Desi-ness." The author also attempts to explain why MTV Desi ultimately failed and how marginalized audiences can resist commodification by rejecting corporate-defined identity.*

**I**n its 25-plus years of existence, the Music Television Network has been one of the primary forces in shaping global youth culture and cultivating youth identity.<sup>2</sup> The Viacom-owned network's influence has been so expansive that MTV programs are now a staple of youth consumption in every corner of the world.<sup>3</sup> MTV, in many ways, *is* popular culture, indulging its viewers with the lavishness of consumerism and breeding a loyal following among an age group that varies from impressionable pre-teens to middle-age voyeurs. MTV in the United States has traditionally targeted white, suburban teenagers, and as its content paradigm has shifted away from music videos and into new "reality"-based programming, the network has expanded its reach into movies and even books. In many ways, the network has evolved into an "all-encompassing 'lifestyle' channel for its young targeted audience."<sup>4</sup> MTV's success in shaping culture has been so prevalent that the network itself is synonymous with cool. As John Seabrook notes in his book, *Nobrow: The Culture of Marketing – The Marketing of Culture*, "MTV dramatically closed the feedback loop between culture and marketing and made it much harder to tell one from the other, or which came first."<sup>5</sup>

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But MTV's monopoly on youth culture does not end with the United States and with suburban white teenagers, as the network has made exhaustive efforts to tap into local and international population segments that have yet to be colonized by MTV's culture formula. The MTV-ization of youth cultures in other continents is evident in the prevalence of the network and local channels that replicate its model.<sup>6</sup> Political economists such as Robert McChesney and Sut Jhally, as well as critical cultural scholars such as Stuart Hall have noted that MTV has been able to consolidate the global youth demographic by re-presenting the same message in different ways.<sup>7</sup> McChesney notes that MTV has successfully masked itself as an agent of conformity by presenting itself as a champion of youth individuality.<sup>8</sup> In regards to minority expression, MTV has framed the representation of diverse groups in such a way that non-white, non-American youth ultimately have to reference the white American standard of cool – and buy the products and ideology that white American youth consume – in order to accept themselves and be accepted.<sup>9</sup>

MTV's influence has also grown globally, particularly in the Indian subcontinent, thanks to the availability of MTV India in the early 1990s. As Kuldip Rampal notes, the network became the most watched channel among Indian youth by the late 1990s.<sup>10</sup> But when MTV turned its attention to Americans of South Asian descent, it would find more complications marketing to a demographic segment that is arguably more diverse and harder to define than any other group in the United States.<sup>11</sup> This paper looks at MTV's attempts to cultivate an "ideal type" image of South Asian Americans – and by doing so, an untapped market of consumers – through its offshoot channel, MTV Desi. The network's programming and its construction of images of second-generation South Asian youth can be examined at the intersection of corporate interests and identity politics, and the clash between commodification of subculture and counterhegemonic resistance. Through a textual analysis of two MTV Desi shows, *Baap of Bakra* and *Top Ten Desi Countdown*, I intend to show the replication of images from MTV programming and the way the network constructed images that supposedly reflected "authentic" second-generation South Asian Americans.

## Conceptual Framework

In an era of globalization and the prevalence postmodern perspectives on intercultural communication, media corporations' impact on identity cultivation has seemingly taken a backseat.<sup>12</sup> While cultural studies scholars such as Hall, Edward Said, and Paul Gilroy have written about the "pitfalls of identity" that arise when examining the Other, it should be noted that cultural identities – particularly those that have been traditionally disenfranchised – have become commodities in the same way as cultures themselves.<sup>13</sup> Identities have become marketable, as exhibited by large media corporations seeking to brand multiculturalism and "sell" Others as products in the global mainstream. As John Fiske writes, "while the multiculturalist will talk of diversity and difference, the multinational CEO turns the coin over and talks of product diversification and market segmentation."<sup>14</sup>

Conceptualizing diasporic populations has also become problematic, both for

scholars of identity and corporations seeking to use identity politics as a means of cultivating consumers.<sup>15</sup> As Jolanta Drzewiecka notes, “Diaspora groups play an identity game legitimating their *in between* position in two different national contexts,” which helps to bolster their claims of collectivized authenticity in both their “new” land and their “homeland” – the latter being either a physical or psychological one.<sup>16</sup> Diasporic identities have emerged as a battleground in countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, where media corporations have sought to commodify marginalized groups such as Asians and West Indians while presenting discourse on homeland as a seemingly monolithic experience.<sup>17</sup> Very little attention, in fact, has been given to South Asians’ place in the hierarchy of labor and as racialized Others in the lands to which they have immigrated.<sup>18</sup> An op-ed piece in the *Chicago Tribune* authored by an Indian-American raved about how the election of Bobby Jindal as governor of Louisiana showed how Indian-Americans could actually transcend race and emerge as neutral in the politics of color.<sup>19</sup>

Sadly, modern postcolonial theory has been complicit in framing the second-generation South Asian population as model minorities in mostly white countries such as the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom because of its collectivized insistence that racial politics and global capitalism are not impositions upon identity. Moreover, South Asian postcolonial writers such as Gayatri Spivak, Arjun Appadurai and Homi Bhabha have failed in many respects to address the standard of whiteness by which Othered identities are judged. As Malini J. Schueller writes, “the interpretation of race in the writings of South Asian postcolonialists might unwittingly reproduce the racism of a liberal multiculturalism that effaces power relations.”<sup>20</sup>

South Asian American identity is a contested terrain because of its diversity and its uniqueness in experience from other Diasporic and immigrant populations.<sup>21</sup> As Yoav Hammer notes, culture can be both consuming and limiting to those who identify with a certain label. “Culture has a largely unconscious enveloping effect on members of the cultural group, defining the horizon of possibilities open to them, from amongst which to choose their course of action. Culture is a type of language shared by members of the cultural group. It defines the meanings they attribute to objects and actions and forms their identity.”<sup>22</sup> Using this meaning, it is nearly impossible to define a common South Asian American culture. Though the very idea of a culture of Desis (the Hindi colloquial for “local”), in many ways, is an aberration – cultural critic Vijay Prashad would argue further that culture itself, at least the notion of cultural purity, is a fallacy – the prevalence of consistent images relating to Indian and to Indianness have led to a media-created notion of identity.<sup>23</sup>

Another complicating factor in articulating and representing Desi identity is its use as a means of entry into a dominant culture, its aesthetic value and its counter-cultural purpose. The first use is primarily associated with the immigrant generation of South Asians in the United States, though this is the identity most often constructed in mainstream media to fit the whole. The emasculated and heavily accented South Asian male, represented in cartoon character Apu in the *Simpsons* or Kal Penn’s minstrel character Taj in the *Van Wilder* movie series, are just a few examples of how South Asian American identity has been caricatured and conflated

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with the “worthy” immigrant ideal. Another depiction of Desi-ness that fits along neoliberal notions of identity has come through the portrayal of the South Asian model minority, which supports the outdated claim of the “melting pot” thesis. Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal, conservative intellectual Dinesh D’Souza, and Pepsico CEO Indra Nooyi are just a few examples of how Desis have been defined as people who are willing to work within Anglocentric frameworks. However, Desi-ness has also emerged as a response to impositions by Anglocentrism (particularly in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom), whether through performative or aesthetic measures.<sup>24</sup> In the last articulation, Desi-ness is defined by cultural practice, resistance and an emphasis on the style of identity.<sup>25</sup> For second-generation South Asians that identify with or as the Other, this could mean a stylistic subversion through clothes and jewelry that represent the Subcontinent as both a physical and psychological space.<sup>26</sup> Desi as identity in practice could also be a political statement through music and the arts, a manifestation of liberation more than representation.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the complexities of who Desis are and what Desi identity entails, MTV attempted to create “Desi-ness” according to *its* parameters, and by doing so, tried to sell a commodified identity to South Asian Americans and non-Desis alike.

### **A Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing: The Political Economy of MTV Desi**

The brilliance of MTV’s cultural imperialism is its persistence at claiming authenticity. William Sonnega writes that by “‘coming to you ... wherever you are,’ MTV thus identifies itself as a producer rather than an element of culture; a transnational corporate entity operating in a global rather than local societal matrix.”<sup>28</sup> MTV’s decision to start Desi followed an “Indian invasion” in the United States in the early 2000s. Films such as *Lagaan* and *Bend it Like Beckham* enjoyed commercial success (and Mira Nair’s *Monsoon Wedding* enjoyed critical acclaim) here among Indian and non-Indian audiences while Indian music was sampled regularly in rap songs. Indian pop culture emerged as a valuable commodity in American media, and conglomerates were eager to package and sell it to Western audiences. As Vamsee Krishna Juluri notes, “The cruelest irony is that it is precisely this ease in appropriating the other that is bandied about to signify the wonders of globalization.”<sup>29</sup> By 2002, the South Asian commodity fetish was in full swing. Pop singers like Gwen Stefani wore bindis as fashion statements, while rap songs by Missy Elliot, Truth Hurts, Erick Sermon – just to name a few – heavily sampled Hindi songs while ignoring international copyright.<sup>30</sup> The commodification of South Asian culture – more specifically, Hindi pop culture – became a new opportunity for U.S. media giants to capitalize upon. Indian-style clothing began to hit major department stores while dance instruction centers began to offer Bollywood dance lessons. In 2004, the London-created musical, “Bollywood Dreams,” debuted on Broadway, spawning a media blitz about the “Bollywoodization” of American culture.<sup>31</sup> South Asian culture and lifestyle – neatly framed by Western media as a mix of Bollywood, bhangra music, bindis, male minstrelsy, yoga, tandoori and (after the 2005 movie, *Bride and Prejudice*) Aishwarya Rai – became sellable to an Ameri-

can audience. In other words, it was, in many large metropolitan areas, “hip to be Desi.”<sup>32</sup>

As Eileen Meehan notes in her book, *Why TV Is Not Our Fault*, paying attention to an audience is not corporate citizenship as it is corporate colonialism. The bottom line nature of media conglomerates, Meehan writes, means that “we may need to rethink assumptions about program content and popular culture.” Instead of media producers’ attention towards South Asian Americans being some sort of cultural outreach, Meehan argues that “programs are designed as brands [and] their content is tied to the owners’ internal markets.”<sup>33</sup>

To cultivate consumption, media must first construct an audience that will consume. Oscar Gandy Jr. writes that this type of audience segmentation and subsequent social construction is “part of a complex process through which the great variety that sets us apart as individuals is cast off, or ignored in order to emphasize the similarities that help to shape and define us as members of groups.”<sup>34</sup> Framing “Indianness” not only made the identity more sellable for media conglomerates, it also opened up new avenues of consumption for non-Desis as well. As mentioned earlier, bindis, henna tattoos, bhangra dancing lessons and the growing number of Indian “fusion” restaurants are just a few examples of how Desi identity has been transformed into a line of merchandising.

Though numerous scholars have noted the existence of a strong South Asian American subculture in cities such as New York, Chicago and Los Angeles, it should be noted that much of these cultural frames of reference for young Desis – including bhangra/hip-hop parties spun by the legendary DJ Rekha, the evolution of Desi “b-boy and b-girls,” and the growing Desi hip-hop scene led by groups such as Karmacy – were subterranean and geographically limited.<sup>35</sup> However, media companies, entranced by the possibility of making money off young Desis, bought into this notion and used the New York and Los Angeles “chic Desi” – described eloquently by Maira and Sharma in their works – as a basis for marketing to the entire South Asian American community.<sup>36</sup>

For marketers and advertisers, Desis became the replacement for a previously “hot” commodity – Latinos. Corporate America’s rush towards Indian-Americans had less to do with the diversity of South Asian American culture and media companies’ genuine desire to accurately portray a long demonized, exoticized and minstrelized minority and more to do with the bottom line – \$76 billion, the amount of disposable income the country’s 2.5 million South Asian Americans have.<sup>37</sup> The 2000 U.S. Census – and the 2004 update – was equally eye-opening to advertisers. Desi median household income is \$64,000 (among Indian-Americans alone, \$68,000), making the community the richest demographic by income in the United States.<sup>38</sup> Dollars were to be made, but with a paucity of products and representation on American airwaves, media companies quickly jumped to action. Cable giant Comcast signed a deal with London-based Eros Entertainment to launch a Bollywood on Demand service. Not to be outdone, Time Warner cable signed a similar agreement with BODVOD to establish a full Bollywood pay-per-view channel.

Much of this sudden interest and explosion of commodified “Desi-ness” had to do with the perception of a rise of a South Asian American economic elite as well as the emergence of India as a capitalist hub. The framing of Desi identity in the

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United States was tied to an assumption of who Desis were: rich, upwardly mobile and willing to spend dollars on media products. In other words, Desi became conflated with a certain class of South Asian American, and marketers made sure to cater products and images reflective of a rising bourgeois identity in the subcontinent and the established white-collar bourgeoisie that existed in the United States. The construction of an ideal type image of South Asian American consumers – both by corporations and South Asian American political and economic interest groups – has played up the doctors, business owners and engineers while excluding immigrant service workers, cab drivers and other low to middle-income professions. As Prashad and Maira note, South Asian American group identity has ignored class dynamics, especially in representing South Asians as model minorities and willing consumers of the American Dream.<sup>39</sup>

Enter MTV and Viacom. As Jeff Chang notes, “there’s no way to talk about pop culture these days without looking at how it’s implicated in capitalism. If you really get down to it, what’s coming out of Viacom... is a very narrow slice of this broad range of representations that are being made.”<sup>40</sup> Hall adds that “MTV is quite extraordinary” because “it takes fragmentation, the plurality of signification, to new heights.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, Bollywood, bhangra and rap – the pillars on which MTV would launch its “Desi” brand – were commodifiable and “consumable” for a non-South Asian American audience. The South Asian party culture that scholars have focused upon was seemingly easy for MTV to market – and sell – to because of the perceived affluence of the young Desis, their supposed willingness to spend for supposedly representative images of themselves, and their acquiescence to typecast roles (e.g. Kal Penn’s fame as a buffoonish sidekick or Aishwarya Rai’s marketability as an “exotic” Revlon model).<sup>42</sup>

### **Branding “Desi”**

McChesney notes that “modern marketing is clearly the greatest attempt at psychological manipulation in all of human history.”<sup>42</sup> MTV arguably pioneered the politics of identity marketing by “branding” its content: selling you something because it’s *for* you.<sup>43</sup>

When MTV launched its South Asian American channel, it marked the co-option of the term Desi by media conglomerates. The term, which many Americans of South Asian descent identify with, speaks to the idea of cultural ownership. Many young Desis, as Gregory Dietrich points out, seek to live through the term, despite the variation of what Desi actually means.<sup>44</sup> The concept of “Desi-ness,” then is manifested through partial or total incorporation of music and other benchmarks of socialization, providing South Asian Americans “both a self-affirming and empowering bond of commonality, and a public statement of their place in mainstream American youth culture, in effect as ‘cool.’”<sup>45</sup> While Dietrich overstates the impact of a common Desi identity by focusing his study on Indian-Americans in Chicago, his assessment is somewhat accurate: Indian-Americans do affirm their identities and judge themselves in comparison/contrast to dominant Anglo culture. While many South Asian progressive intellectuals have tried to stress South Asian

American relations to the “Other” – African Americans – the standard of acculturation for Desis continues to be whiteness; in other words, Desis judge their Americanization – and Indianization – by their level of acceptance by or alienation from the dominant Anglo culture.<sup>46</sup> The term Desi itself defies the geographic, political, social, age and cultural diversity of the South Asian American community. When MTV named its South Asian American channel Desi, its ostensible reasoning was an acknowledgment of the tremendous progress that people of South Asian descent have made. In reality, MTV reconstructed the term into a brand,

Branding Desi seemed appropriate at the time for MTV, since it accomplished several goals simultaneously. First, it allowed them to fit into a label a diverse diasporic community, many of whose members already felt comfortable with the label. As Jorge Schement notes, “Americans, like people everywhere, form their identities through groups and feel the need to label themselves, just as much as they feel the need to label the groups with which they come into contact.”<sup>47</sup> Second, it allowed them to focus their production and programming costs on one identity instead of trying to grasp the vast – and often irreconcilable – differences within the Desi population. Third, and most importantly, in trying to present MTV Desi as a one-stop location for the second-generation South Asian community, the network was able to use programming produced locally and in India. “Its aim,” Brad Nemer of *Business Week* glowingly wrote, was “to ‘super-serve’ Indian Americans born in the U.S. or raised here. The first-generation Indian American, according to [MTV World General Manager Nusrat] Durrani, wants ‘old-school Bollywood and cricket culture.’ MTV Desi targets the bicultural kids who want the same experiences as other native-born Americans. They love Bangra but also Shakira; they've grown up with MTV but also Bollywood.”<sup>48</sup>

### **White Skin, Brown Masks: Reversioning in MTV Desi**

The premise of MTV Desi was consistent with the network’s motto of “glocalism” – thinking globally and acting locally.<sup>49</sup> MTV and Viacom also pledged to support their foray into the Asian American audience regardless of initial numbers. Van Toffler, president of MTV Networks, told the *New York Times* that MTV Desi and its counterparts wouldn’t “live or die by the size of their crossover audience.” In other words, Desi’s success hinged upon the buy-in from young South Asian Americans.<sup>50</sup>

The marketing of MTV Desi was typical MTV: going to where the audience is. Hoping to hook the Desi urban party subculture first, MTV officials made sure every South Asian party promoter, web blogger, news editor and musician knew about the venture.<sup>51</sup> The network’s hope was to generate enough word-of-mouth interest to make the network appealing enough for young Desis to pay for it as part of a premium service packaged that included Chi and K. The bottom line, after all, was to cultivate a paying audience who would inevitably flock to MTV and MTV Desi products: shows, web content and events sponsored by the network. Multiculturalism, at least for those in charge of content production and distribution, conflated identity with audience demand for a product.<sup>52</sup>



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To bring back Meehan's idea that media corporations create false demand, one need only take a closer look at the programs MTV Desi aired. For this article, I chose two programs that MTV Desi advertised regularly on the channel - *Baap of Bakra* and *Top Ten Desi Countdown*. I watched two episodes of each show that aired on the network in 2006.<sup>53</sup> I looked for similarities between the MTV Desi programs and ones that aired on MTV during the same period, specifically *Punk'd* and *Total Request Live: TRL*. I took notice of dress styles, behavior and linguistic tropes that the MTV Desi programs used to identify with the second-generation audience that supposedly identified with "bhangra and Shakira."

One of MTV Desi's mainstays, *Baap of Bakra*, is an Indian version of *Punk'd* that involved host Cyrus Broacha pulling pranks on unsuspecting guests. The show was produced for MTV India, and much of the dialogue between Broacha and the participants in the show is in Hindi. In one episode, Broacha interviews American-born Indian tennis player Sunitha Rao. The segment opens with heavy rock music (à la *Punk'd*) and slow motion shots of Rao practicing tennis and training. In the "fake interview," Broacha is asking Rao questions in English, but sporadically interrupts the interview to yell at various "crew members" (who are revealed to be actors) in Hindi. There are several staged physical confrontations between Broacha and his "crew." Rao looks exasperated as Broacha repeatedly halts the interview to complain about various problems with lighting, sound and the facial expressions of his crew members. The segment ends with Rao about to walk out and Broacha announcing that she has been set up for the prank.

In another episode, Broacha sets up Indian cricketer Parthiv Patel, which would have been amusing if we were to assume that most second-generation South Asian Americans know much about cricket, let alone the names of specific cricket players. The scene begins with Patel pulled over by an Indian policeman, who confiscates Patel's license and tells him he is not allowed to drive. The entire dialogue in the segment is in Hindi, and there are no subtitles. Patel gets into the back of his car, and someone else (assumed to be a stranger) begins driving. With the camera focusing on the backseat, we hear the dialogue between Patel and the driver. There is a laugh track that cues what is supposed to be funny, but without English subtitles, one who does not speak or understand Hindi cannot follow the punchline. Finally, Patel's car stops, and the driver tells him he's been "Bakra'd." Like Ashton Kutcher in *Punk'd*, Broacha runs out and hugs the shocked Patel. Patel is laughing and telling something to Broacha in Hindi, but without any English context, the joke is on the audience.

Most of the songs featured in the Top Ten Desi Countdown were in Hindi, meaning that if a South Asian American whose linguistic background was Bengali, Tamil, Urdu, or Telugu, just to name a few, the audience member would have no idea what the songs meant. The manner of dress in all of the videos reflected the often fantastic and flamboyant styles of a Bollywood film, and three of the Top Ten were, in fact, from Hindi movies. For instance, the most requested song on the countdown during my first viewing was from the Bollywood film, *Hum Ko Deewana Kar Gaye*.<sup>54</sup> The song, *Tum Saanso Mei*, shows several shots of the protagonists in the film running to each other across a glacier; in other shots, the actors are

surrounded by scantily clad female dancers, the visual accoutrements that have become standard fare in Bollywood films.

One of the popular English songs that ranked third and sixth, respectively, during my viewings was a group called The Bilz, who mixed bhangra with English lyrics. Their video, "Spanish Fly – *O Meri Rani*" features scantily clad women, a club setting and the men in the group flashing fly poses at the camera. One of the most interesting things about the video is how The Bilz are made to appear like a cross between Bollywood protagonists and American hip-hop stars. While the crossover intent is evident in the video, it also appears that the group's "Americanness" is shown through a formulaic representation in commercial rap videos.<sup>55</sup>

In my second viewing of the countdown, U.K.-based bhangra group The Kray Twinz were the most requested group.<sup>56</sup> Their single, "What We Do," features American rapper Twista and U.K. rapper Lethal Bizzle and is set in a club. Twista and Lethal Bizzle rap over bhangra beats, thereby legitimating the Kray Twinz as part of the hip-hop scene in the same way that Jay-Z added credibility for Punjabi MC to an American audience in the 2003 hit, "Beware of the Boys."<sup>57</sup> In the video, the Kray Twinz saunter around the club while Twista and other members of his crew are surrounded by scantily-dressed Indian women. While there are no real elements of "Indianness" in the visual imagery, the Twinz do maintain their Sikh identity by wearing headwraps.

While most of the Top Ten videos did fall into the bhangra and dance categories, one video that did make the Top 10 reflected the Indian-American hip-hop subculture that has formed in cities such as New York, Chicago, and the Bay Area.<sup>58</sup> "Horizons," a video by California-based rap group Karmacy, one of the pioneers of the South Asian American hip-hop movement, was seventh on the countdown. The four-member group's video is simple, as they are dressed in black and surrounded by an all-white background. However, the simplicity of the video gets the viewer to pay attention to the lyrics of the song, which is rapped in Hindi, Gujarati, Spanish, Punjabi and English. The group's message of social consciousness and political action was unique on a countdown dominated by sexually suggestive dance songs or soundtrack videos from Hindi movies.

When taken together, *Bakra* and *Top Ten Desi Countdown*, reflected more Indian (Hindi) and Indo-UK (Punjabi) content than images of salience to second-generation South Asian Americans. The programs relied on imported material and banked on viewers being able to understand the subcultural messaging and the "inside jokes" prevalent in *Bakra*. Moreover, *Bakra* and *Desi Countdown* were re-versioned content of MTV programs, merely substituting the white faces that dominate the programs in the United States with South Asian ones. The channel also relied heavily on Bollywood-inspired programs, including *Bollywood on Ice* and *MTV 123*, an MTV India import that featured a Bollywood Top-Ten countdown. Other imported shows included *Kya Baat Hai* – and talk program for youth in India – and *D-Tour*, a show featuring Asian models traveling throughout the continent; the latter was strikingly similar to MTV's long-running *Road Rules*, a reality drama series that pit dysfunctional young adults against one another in competition.

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The images on MTV Desi also did not come close to reflecting the diversity and complexity of the diasporic populations. Young Desi men on programs such as *Bakra* and *Roadies* (another Indian version of Road Rules) had to play comic and exaggerated buffoon roles while women in shows such as *D-Tour* and the Bollywood videos predictably played up their sex appeal. In essence, MTV Desi, while promising to move away from stereotypical images of South Asians, merely amplified existing stereotypes and operated on assumptions of Desi consumption based on a limited sample of the South Asian American community and an overstated connection – linguistically, culturally and generationally – to “Mother India.”<sup>59</sup> As Meehan notes, media producers do not need to be original or representative in their programming if there are no alternatives to the content being produced. Moreover, she writes, “the more branded and franchised a media product is, the less surprising and creative it will be. A branded product promises that the entertainment therein holds small novelties enmeshed in familiar formulae over a wide range of formats.”<sup>60</sup> Because of MTV Desi’s novelty, the programs did not have to be original as long as they presented South Asian faces. Moreover, MTV – using its clout as a brand name of youth culture – sought to legitimize the content as what the second-generation community wanted and what it was.<sup>61</sup>

As Mita Banerjee notes, the network’s conceptualization of Desi-ness is a kind of minstrelsy that is ultimately controlled by whites. In her analysis of *Rush Hour*, she argues that the film “is predicated on the mainstreaming of immigrant cultures and races accomplished through minstrelsy” and “the process of Americanization through the ubiquity of American popular culture.”<sup>62</sup> The construction of South Asian American identity on the channel and the way “Desi” was branded by MTV fit more with the network’s advertising goals.

### **Kyaa Hogai? (What happened?)**

As it turned out, MTV Desi overestimated its ability to attract second-generation South Asian American consumers. Its narrow content of bhangra, Bollywood and imported Hindi language programs from MTV India did not reflect the diverse population of South Asian Americans, especially those from parts of India where Hindi is not the dominant language, other countries in the Subcontinent and the greater diaspora (Guyanese, Trinidadians, etc.), and the great number of second-generation South Asian Americans who could not speak another language besides English. Additionally, the success of established networks such as *Namaste America* and the *Asian Variety Show (AVS)*, which relied on localized Indian advertising, made it nearly impossible for MTV Desi to replicate the same kind of community rapport in the markets it was targeting. Though MTV did not release the number of subscribers for Desi, one journalist noted his exasperation, “because I couldn’t find anyone who watched the satellite channel: no college students, no twenty-somethings with spare change. And it wasn’t just me. All the tastemakers I interviewed - DJs, other music types - said they didn’t know any Desi subscribers either.”<sup>63</sup>

In February, 2007, MTV announced it would halt MTV World, which include Desi, MTV Chi (for Chinese-Americans) and MTV K (for Korean-Americans). MTV could not get viewers, and more importantly, it could not get advertisers to buy into its attempt at colonizing the South Asian American population. In a terse acknowledgment of defeat, the network noted that finding advertisers and subscribers “for MTV World proved more challenging than we anticipated in this competitive environment,” but vowed to remain “steadfast in superserving multicultural youth.”<sup>64</sup>

## Conclusion

MTV’s attempt to cultivate the second-generation South Asian American audience into loyal consumers of its Desi brand – and the products marketed on the channel – failed because of the network’s attempts to homogenize a diverse diasporic population. The network tried to play identity politics and ultimately lost; it could not “sell” Desi because its programming gave second-generation Desis – as an expansive and diverse collective – very little to identify with. As Drzewiecka and other scholars of identity note, mediated images, whether constructed in popular media or created through discourse, must have salience with their intended audience. The subcontinent’s complex religious, cultural, linguistic and geographic history, as well as the fact that India was a diasporic destination prior to and during the South Asian diasporic periods of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, makes the very concept of collective “we” uniquely problematic.<sup>65</sup>

The disconnect that second-generation South Asian Americans often feel with a larger nationalistic identity has in many ways helped them resist the kind of generalized compartmentalization and commodification that has occurred among other minority groups in the United States.<sup>66</sup> This lack of coherence and structure makes it harder to “package” the South Asian American audience as a commodity, but it also provides Desis with a tool for emancipation from the attempts to be categorized, to be compelled to consume, or to be consumed.<sup>67</sup> If, as Stuart Hall notes, the audience continues to be a site of struggle for interpretation and consumption, wherein lies a battle between the cultural producers and the besieged receivers, then MTV Desi’s failure to capture the second-generation South Asian American audience is a small victory for the latter.<sup>68</sup> Even if many young Desis are unaware of their successful resistance to MTV’s proselytizing of ideological and consumption conformity, future critical scholarship should focus on ways to make audiences more aware of the methods by which they can free themselves from commodification.<sup>69</sup> If we do not, then media conglomerates such as Viacom will continue to find new and innovative ways to define and commodify marginalized minority groups under the guise of “authentic” identity.<sup>70</sup>

## Notes

1. I use Indian-American and South Asian American interchangeably, but in both cases, I am referring to those whose ancestry is the Indian subcontinent (India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka).
2. John Seabrook, *Nobrow: The Culture of Marketing, the Marketing of Culture*, (New York: Vintage, 2001); Sut Jhally, "The Political Economy of Culture," in *Cultural Politics in Contemporary America*, ed. Ian Angus and Sut Jhally (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), 65-81.
3. William Sonnega, "Morphing Borders: The Remanence of MTV," *The Drama Review* 39 (Spring, 1995), 45-61.
4. See Jack Banks, "Video in the machine: the incorporation of music video into the recording industry," *Popular Music* 16, No. 3 (October 1997), 293-309.
5. Seabrook, *Nobrow*.
6. See Jhally, "The Political Economy of Culture"; Sonnega, "Morphing Borders."
7. See Jhally, "The Political Economy of Culture"; Robert McChesney, *The Problem of the Media: U.S. Communication Politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004).
8. Robert McChesney, Interview transcript from Frontline, "Merchants of Cool." 2001. Retrieved from: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/interviews/mcchesney.html>.
9. Banks, "Video in the Machine"; McChesney, "The Merchants of Cool."
10. Kuldip Rampal, "Cultural Bane or Sociological Boon?: Impact of Satellite Television on Urban Youth in India," *Razon y Palabra*, 31. (February/March, 2003)
11. See Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Sunaina Maira, *Desis in the House: Indian American Youth Culture in New York City* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002); and S. Mitra Kalita, *Suburban Sahibs: Three Immigrant Families and Their Passage from India to America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2003).
12. See Raka Shome and Radha S. Hegde, "Culture, Communication, and the Challenge of Globalization." *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 19 (2002), 172-189.
13. See Jhally, "The Political Economy of Culture"; Wimal Dissanayake. "Globalization and the Experience of Culture: The Resilience of Nationhood," in *Globalization, Cultural Identities, and Media Representations*, ed. Natascha Gentz and Stefan Kramer (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006), 25-43; Stuart Hall, "Cultural identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: community, culture, difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford. (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990);
14. John Fiske, "National, Local? Some Problems of Culture in a Postmodern Word," *The Velvet Light Trap* 40 (1997), 59.
15. See Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, "Rewriting the African Diaspora: Beyond the Black Atlantic." *African Affairs* 104 (2005), 35-68; Jolanta A. Drzewiecka,

- “Reinventing and Contesting Identities in Constitutive Discourses: Between Diaspora and Its Others,” *Communication Quarterly*, 50 (Winter, 2002), 1-23.
16. Drzewiecka, “Reinventing and Contesting Identities in Constitutive Discourses,” 18.
  17. Paul Gilroy, “British Cultural Studies and the Pitfalls of Identity,” in *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, ed. Houston A. Baker, Jr., Manthia Diawara, and Ruth H. Lindeborg. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press), 223-239; Shome and Hegde, “Culture, Communication, and the Challenge of Globalization.”
  18. See Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk*.
  19. Jay J. Chaudhuri, “That’s Bobby, not Barack: GOP Trailblazer has a life story to rival Obama’s,” *Chicago Tribune*, p. 4, November 4, 2007.
  20. Malini J. Schueller, “Articulations of African-Americanism in South Asian Postcolonial Theory: Globalism, Localism, and the Question of Race,” *Cultural Critique*, 55. (Autumn, 2003), 37.
  21. See Kalita, *Suburban Sahibs*; Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk*.
  22. Yoav Hammer, “Multiculturalism and the Mass Media,” *Journal of Law & Ethics of Human Rights*, 1 (January 2007), 172.
  23. See Prashad *The Karma of Brown Folk* and *Everybody was Kung-Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002).
  24. See Mira Nair’s *Mississippi Masala*, directed by Mira Nair (1991; Mirabai Films) and *Monsoon Wedding*, directed by Mira Nair (2001; USA Films).
  25. See Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1981 and 2002); Nitasha Sharma, “Claiming Space, Making Race: Second Generation South Asian American Hip Hop Artists” (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 2004).
  26. See Gregory Dietrich, “Desi Music Vibes: The Performance of Indian Youth Culture in Chicago.” *Asian Music* 31 (Autumn, 1999 - Winter, 2000), 35-61.
  27. See Ajay T. Nair and Murali Balaji, “Introduction,” in *Desi Rap: South Asian Americans in Hip-Hop*, ed. Ajay T. Nair and Murali Balaji (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, in press).
  28. Sonnega, “Morphing Borders”, 51.
  29. Vamsee Krishna Juluri, “Why MTV Digs India?” *IndiaStar*. <http://www.indiastar.com/juluri>
  30. In 2002, Hindi singer Lata Mangeshkar sued Truth Hurts and her label, Interscope – owned by Universal Music Group – for \$500 million for using Mangeshkar’s vocals without permission. A judge ruled in February 2003 that all copies of Truth Hurts’s album needed to properly credit Mangeshkar.
  31. There have been numerous articles and TV stories about Bollywood’s influence in the United States, but some noteworthy stories include: Ranjan Roy, “Hindi is Hip: The West is starting to notice movies from Bollywood.” *Associated Press*. September 17, 2002; Michael Sommer, “Shakalaka Tasty.” *Newark Star-Ledger*. April 23, 2004; “Musical captures spirit of Bollywood.” *Bergen (N.J.) Record*. April 30, 2004; Chris Jordan, “Indian Films’ Influence Spreads.” *Home (East Brunswick, N.J.) News Tribune*. April 30, 2004.

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32. In numerous newspaper articles I have written about South Asian Americans, this was one of the most common expressions used by young Desis.
33. Eileen Meehan, *Why TV Is Not Our Fault*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 122.
34. Oscar Gandy Jr., "Audience Construction: Race, Ethnicity and Segmentation in Popular Media." Paper presented at the 50<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the International Communication Association, June 1-5, Acapulco, Mexico, 10.
35. See Nitasha Sharma, "Musical Crossings: Identity Formations of Second-Generation South Asian Hip Hop Artists," ISSC Fellows Working Papers, 2005; Sharma, "Claiming Space, Making Race"; Sunaina Maira, "Indian Dub: The Paradoxes of an Indian American Youth Subculture (New York Mix)" *Cultural Anthropology*, 14, 1. (February, 1999), 29-60; and Dietrich, "Desi Music Vibes."
36. See Maira *Desis in the House* 2002).
37. Barbara Kiviat, "Chasing Desi Dollars." *Time*. July 11, 2005. Figures compiled by the Selig Center for Economic Growth at the University of Georgia.
38. U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 and 2004.
39. Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk*; Maira, *Desis in the House*; Kalita, *Suburban Sahibs*; and Kiviat, "Chasing Desi Dollars."
40. Jeff Chang, "Rap, Race and Black-Asian Relations" (panel discussion at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, February 1, 2006).
41. Lawrence Grossberg, "On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10 (1986), 50.
42. McChesney, *The Problem of the Media*, 32.
43. See Joseph Turow, *Breaking Up America: Advertising And The New Media World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997)
44. Dietrich, "Desi Music Vibes."
45. Ibid.
46. Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk*; Sharma, "Claiming Space, Making Race"; Schueller, "Articulations of African-Americanism in South Asian Postcolonial Theory."
47. Jorge R. Schement, "Thorough Americans: Minorities and the new media," in *Investing in Diversity: Advancing Opportunities for Minorities and the Media*, ed. Amy Korzick Garmer. (Washington, DC, The Aspen Institute), 93
48. Brad Nemer, "How MTV Channels Innovation," *Business Week*. November 6, 2006.
49. Deborah Sontag, "I Want My Hyphenated-Identity MTV" *The New York Times*. June 19, 2005.
50. Ibid.
51. MTV Desi sponsored a "Desi Hip-Hop" panel at the South Asian Journalists Association Conference in July, 2006.
52. Fiske, "National, Local?"
53. Because of MTV Desi's cancellation in February 2007, I had to watch the shows that were archived on [www.mtvdesi.com](http://www.mtvdesi.com) and available on You Tube. The show airings were listed in the captions on MTV Desi's web site.

54. The original Top Ten Desi Countdown episode aired in June, 2006, but my viewing was in October, 2007.
55. *Hip-Hop: Beyond the Beats and Rhymes*, DVD, directed by Byron Hurt (Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation, 2006).
56. The group Kray Twinz is named after a notorious 1950s and 1960s London underworld family led by twin brothers Reginald and Ronald Kray.
57. The song is known outside of the United States as "Mundian to Bach Ke."
58. See Sharma, "Claiming Space, Making Race: Second Generation South Asian American Hip Hop Artists"; Maira, "Indian Dub," and Dietrich, "Desi Music Vibes."
59. Murali Balaji, "When the Music Stopped." *Little India*. March, 2007, 48.
60. Meehan, *Why TV Is Not Out Fault*, 113.
61. Sonnega, "Morphing Borders"; Balaji, "When the Music Stopped."
62. Mita Banerjee. "The *Rush Hour* of Black/Asian Coalitions? Jackie Chan and Blackface Minstrelsy," in *AfroAsian Encounters: Culture, History, Politics*, in eds. Heike Raphael-Hernandez and Shannon Steen. (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 204-221.
63. Arun Venugopal, "Obit: MTV Desi." Comment on South Asian Journalists Association forum, [http://www.sajaforum.org/2007/02/obit\\_mtv\\_desi.html](http://www.sajaforum.org/2007/02/obit_mtv_desi.html).
64. Ibid.
65. Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk*; Prashad, *Everybody was Kung-Fu Fighting*; Gilroy, "British Cultural Studies and the Pitfalls of Identity"; Drzewiecka, "Reinventing and Contesting Identities in Constitutive Discourses; Dietrich, "Desi Music Vibes"; and Hall, "Cultural identity and Diaspora."
66. See Gandy, "Audience Construction."
67. See Mike Budd and Clay Steinman, "Television, Cultural Studies and the 'Blind Spot' Debate in Critical Communications Research," in *Television Studies: Textual Analysis* (New York: Praeger, 1989), 9-20.; Meehan, *Why TV Is not our fault*.
68. Hall, "Brave New World," *Socialist Review* 21 (January-March 1991), 57-64.
69. See Budd and Steinman, "Television, Cultural Studies and the 'Blind Spot' Debate in Critical Communications Research."
70. Gandy, "Audience Construction," 8-9.

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