TYING THE KNOT: A DISCUSSION WITH INDIAN AMERICANS ON ARRANGED MARRIAGE THROUGH BOLLYWOOD

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By

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ABSTRACT

Bollywood films have a strong presence in the lives of Indian Americans. Previous studies show that they play a significant role in shaping cultural identity. A salient theme in Bollywood films, particularly of the 90’s and early 2000’s, is love. A common narrative of these films features the protagonist choosing between love and arranged marriage, a metaphorical representation of the modernity versus tradition debate borne of the liberalization of the Indian economy in 1991. This very conflict transcends into the lives of several Indian Americans.

Taking into account the pervasiveness of Bollywood in the lives of Indian Americans, this paper asks “how do today’s dating-age Indian Americans talk about arranged marriage through the romantic Bollywood films that they grew up on?” This question is addressed through two qualitative studies; first, a qualitative content analysis of nine Bollywood films released between 1994-2004 to establish the negative bias towards arranged marriage in cinema, and second, ten in-depth interviews with Indian Americans to understand how their views on Bollywood and arranged marriage intersect. The interviews are analyzed through two frameworks of Stuart Hall, Encoding/Decoding and Circuit of Culture. This study shows that while Bollywood has a strong presence in their lives, the Indian American youth filter the messages of love and arranged marriage through their own life experiences.
DEDICATION

To anyone looking for love - arranged, independently, or otherwise.
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To my advisor, Dr. Jeanine Turner - Thank you for all your guidance in my academic journey and for serving as exemplary role model.

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Anjali, an Indian American woman born and raised in Chicago, just turned 29. She has so much going for her, a successful job at a prestigious law firm, a beautiful apartment, and a number of loyal friends. As happy as she is with her life, she feels a great desire to be in a relationship and eventually get married. The problem is, she is having a hard time making this happen. All of her friends encourage her to talk to the co-worker she has been eyeing for the past couple of months, but she is unsure how to communicate her interest. After all, growing up, her parents always said “don’t talk to boys,” and “no dating.” How would she magically develop the skills to do so now? Now that she is at the cusp of 30, her parents are panicking that she is not married and warn about her ticking biological clock. They offer her the idea of an arranged marriage in hopes that she will comply and let them step in. This concern for Anjali’s love life extends beyond the four walls of her parent’s home. “Aunties” and “Uncles” of the Indian community in her hometown in express their worry and offer to play matchmaker. “You know, my friend’s nephew is a handsome doctor, I think you would make a good pair” says one of Anjali’s mother’s friends. Another family friend says, “The minute you hit 30, the number of prospects go down. I can still introduce you to many eligible bachelors if you are interested.” Anjali pushes back on all of the offers stating emphatically that she will find someone on her own.

She goes to bed at night, her mind swirling with the marriage rhetoric of the day. Is it that important to find someone on her own? She always did aspire to have a love story like the one in her favorite film, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (1995)*. But now that she has encountered someone she likes at work, and they are not magically communicating their interest through their
eyes, she is not sure if something will come of it. She entertains the thought of her parents finding her a match. After all, they had an arranged marriage and are the happiest couple she knows. Perhaps her mother can finally introduce her to that Aunty’s friend’s nephew. Maybe he would be cool. Maybe he is her Mr. Right and she is simply rejecting him to escape the label of arranged marriage. And what does an arranged marriage mean today anyway?

This story is not uncommon. Marriage has always been an integral part of Indian society and is considered the means to a fulfilled life. The very root of the Hindi word for marriage, “shaadi,” comes from the Persian “shad,” meaning happiness (Sharma, 2005, Preface). In India, marriage has traditionally been a family affair (Gupta, 1976, 81). When their children came of age, parents and extended family members began the search for a partner who comes from a family that would mesh well with their own. Factors of compatibility include religion, community, education, occupation, and sometimes caste. When a suitable match was found, the soon-to-be couple would either meet for a few minutes or in some cases, they would meet on the day of their wedding. But the trust in the system kept them moving forward. With the advent of time, the practice of arranged marriage met with the competition of “love marriages.” A “love marriage” is a term predominantly used in South Asia and refers to a marriage in which two individuals who meet independently, fall in love, and get married regardless of parental approval. This created generational tensions between parents and children, a conflict that persists in many families today.

In 2015, siblings Geeta and Ravi Patel created a documentary titled “Meet the Patels,” addressing this exact scenario - a set of concerned parents trying to convince their single children
to give arranged marriage a try. The film highlights the importance parents place on getting married and settling down with someone of a similar background while the youth place importance of finding the “right” person. This generational gap, the importance placed on marriage, pressure from parents, and the contrasting influence of Western dating practices makes finding a life partner for much of today’s Indian American youth a herculean task. I have personally heard stories like Anjali’s and “Meet the Patels” from more than half of my friends, both female and male. What piqued my interest the most was the initial inertia against arranged marriage in favor of finding someone independently. While there are many factors that may contribute to such thought processes, as a budding communication and cultural studies scholar, I am particularly interested in if, and to what extent, Bollywood might contribute to this phenomenon.

Bollywood films have a strong presence in the lives of Indian American’s. They are often attributed to shaping cultural identity (Tirumala, 2009, 64) and serve as a means for many diasporic Indians to imagine and connect with the motherland (Bandyopadhyay, 2008, Abstract). I can personally say that despite having grown up in the United States, I watch Bollywood films more than any other form of Western media. These films are in fact the center of conversation in many settings in my life, from family dinners to Indian community gatherings. The presence of Bollywood in the lives of Indian Americans lends itself to important questions about the impact that these films might have on this population. In an effort on the part of Bollywood filmmakers to connect with their diasporic audiences, these films often feature NRI (non-residential Indian) characters and offer narratives on balancing modernity and tradition. Perhaps the most salient metaphorical depiction of this balancing act is that of marriage. A common narrative of these
films involves the protagonist having to choose between marrying someone who they truly love (modernity) and someone arranged by their parents (tradition). Because this is a conflict that transcends into the lives of today’s youth, I was curious to see if, and to what extent, these on screen portrayals of arranged marriage shape the way Indian Americans view arranged marriage. I hypothesize that Bollywood’s apparent negative bias towards arranged marriage dissuades Indian Americans from pursuing it as an option in their own lives. Focusing on films that today’s youth grew up on, I ask, “how do Indian Americans (born between 1985-1995) talk about arranged marriage through the lens of the popular Hindi films released between 1994-2004?”

This demographic and era of Hindi cinema has been specified for a reason. Films released during the advent of the 1990’s economic liberalization of India have often followed the “happy, feel-good” formula of a love story in which two people fall in love and overcome whatever obstacles come their way to a happy resolution. For the most part, the obstacle is a parent who wants their son or daughter to marry someone of their choosing. After creating a conversation about the glory of true love, these films typically end with an acceptance of the protagonist’s partner by the protagonist’s parent.

It is also during this time period that India opened itself to the foreign market (Kohli, 1251, 2006). As a result, a large number of Indians migrated westward, settling down and growing families in countries such as the UK, Canada, and the United States. With the ascending global presence of Bollywood (Cain, 2017), these diasporic Indians had access to Hindi films like never before. As author Lakshmi N. Tirumala points out, not only were the films being screened in theaters, they made their way into homes, making Bollywood movie viewing a col-
lective family and community experience (Tirumala, 2009, 34). People of today’s dating age
range (which I am defining at those born between 1985-1995) are amongst the first Indian Amer-
icans to grow up with this level of access to Hindi cinema. This thesis explores how exposure to
narratives pitting love in direct opposition to arranged marriage during childhood and adoles-
cence could be an important factor in shaping how Indian Americans view it as an option today.
LITERATURE REVIEW

An Overview of Bollywood’s History

The Hindi film industry, popularly known as Bollywood, is the world’s largest film industry. It produces approximately 1,000 films per year, roughly double of Hollywood’s yearly film production output (McCarthy, 2014). Though these films always had an international presence, the ubiquity of Bollywood in the United States is a more recent phenomenon and can be associated with the liberalization of the Indian economy in the 1990’s. In 1991, Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao and his finance minister Manmohan Singh opened India to the global market, reducing obstructions to foreign investment and trade and cutting tariffs on foreign goods (Kohli, 1251, 2006). This lead to increased consumption of Western products, film being one of them. Alessandrini narrates how the new pace of the economy opened the borders to foreign film content in the last decade of the 20th century:

For more than twenty years, India had protected its national film industry by disallowing the dubbing of Western movies into Hindi or any other Indian language and by drastically restricting the importation of foreign films. However, after India took out a high-conditionality loan from the International Monetary Fund in 1991, increasing pressure from Washington and the Motion Picture Export Association of America led then Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao to rescind the ban on dubbing and allow the direct importation of foreign films. (Alessandrini, 2001, 321)

Initially, as Alessandrini discusses, the influx of foreign film seemed to be a threat to the Hindi film industry. The newfound wealth that came as a byproduct of the new economic climate
allowed people to spend more on luxury items, a major one being entertainment (Tirumala, 2009, 6). With India’s consumption of Western brands on the rise, it was almost a given that foreign films, mainly Hollywood cinema, would supersede Bollywood. However, Hollywood’s success in India was short lived and “fizzled” at the close of 1995 (Alessandrini, 2001, 322). In fact, Alessandrini points out that “Indian cinema audiences actually increased by 30% in 1994-1995” (Alessandrini, 2001, 322), the same years that two landmark blockbusters released. 

*Hum Aapke Hain Koun…! (1994)* and *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (1995)* broke all records and pioneered a new style and formula for Bollywood cinema, one that emphasized family, romance, and often, the NRI (non-residential Indian) protagonist.

To understand the novelty of 90’s cinema, it is important to take a look at the evolution of presiding themes in Bollywood. Noted scholar Sumitra S. Chakravarthy’s book “National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema 1947–1987” discusses the changing patterns in mainstream Hindi film since India’s independence in 1947. Before delving into these patterns, it is worth mentioning that films were being made in India even during the colonial era. India’s first feature film, *Raja Harischandra*, was made in 1913 by Dhundiraj Govind Phalke and subsequently, *Alam Ara*, the first talkie, was made in 1933. Chakravarthy talks at great length about the “stunt films” of the 1930s featuring “Fearless Nadia,” a stuntwoman who represented “courage, strength, and idealism” to the school kids who grew up watching her and provided an empowering fantasy to an India that was still under colonial rule (Chakravarthy, 1993, 59-60). This genre quickly retreated by the 1950’s which Chakravarthy cites to be reflective of a burgeoning emphasis on
“authenticity” (Chakravarthy, 1993, 61). Thus was born the golden age of Hindi cinema focusing on realism that extended all the way into the 1960’s.

Films made during the post independent era served as “idealist” commentary as the new nation built itself. Plots centered themselves around nationalism, morality, an “ambivalence to industrialization,” (Chakravarthy, 1993, 94), good vs. evil, and rich vs. poor. Chakravarthy cites that these films showed not “what Indian society was but what it should be” (Chakravarthy, 1993, 81). This can be seen predominantly in the works of filmmakers such as Raj Kapoor, Bimal Roy, and K.A. Abbas. For example, in the film *Shree 420 (1955)*, “the hero’s arrival in and departure from the big city mark the beginning and end of the narrative. Urban space engulfs him, symbolizing the closed world of the city dweller who is forced to confront pain and temptation. Vidya (meaning “knowledge”), the heroine of the film and its moral center, is a poor schoolteacher” (Chakravarthy, 1993, 103-105). A prominent feature of films made during this time period is that the rich “embody the stock opposition between the ‘traditional’ moral values of honest, hard work, and fellowship” and suggest that urban culture breeds “hatred, suspicion, greed, and loneliness” (Chakravarthy, 1993, 105). This presents a stark contrast to the characterization of the rich that we will see and discuss in 1990’s cinema later on.

By 1971, India became the world leader in film production (Chakravarty, 1993, 9). The mark of the new decade also brought with it changes in the style and themes of Bollywood films. For one, cinema became “increasingly male-oriented” starting at the end of the 1960’s and continuing through the 1980’s (Chakravarthy, 1993, 206). Perhaps the most well known aspect of the 1970’s was the “angry young man” portrayed by Amitabh Bachchan. In countless films,
Bachchan played “the lower-middle or working-class hero out to fight a corrupt and unjust system” (Chakravarthy, 1993, 231) to reflect the political unrest at the time (Doughty & Etherington-Wright, 2018, 225). Again, the rich continued to be villainized and the morality of the under-privileged prevailed. Simultaneously, a wave of “parallel” or “art cinema” swept through the same time period. Chakravarthy mentions that “during that period, a government-sponsored cinema had tried to establish a “new tradition” of filmmaking in India, one in which “authenticity” and “realism” were key terms” (Chakravarthy, 1993, 236). While mainstream cinema exuded masculine energy to address socio-political tensions, art films fought more socially related injustices through female protagonists. Both genres of cinema however addressed injustices in the Indian social, political, and economic milieu, something that was to change in the final decade of the 20th century.

**Bollywood in the Age of Economic Liberalization**

Up until the 1990’s, Bollywood films told the story of good versus evil, often through the metaphor of rich versus poor. However at the turn of the new decade, the liberalization of the Indian economy shifted the focus from drawing parallels between class and morality. With the new open market, the previously marginalized middle class found their wallets growing and no longer resented the rich the way characters in previous films did. Narratives started taking place in big villas where everybody lived in abundance and unquestioningly accepted their place in the established socio-economic hierarchy. Additionally, Bollywood audiences, which were mostly male for most of the 1980s, expanded into full families as themes became more universal and
family friendly (Schneider & Davies, 2009, 57). With the decreasing focus of socio-political economic issues came room to explore emotional themes, primarily love and marriage.

Another impact of the economic liberalization in India was an expanded job market that opened a world of opportunities, especially for women. Up until the 1990’s, “Familial ideologies of the middle class [were a] constricting force, mediating [a woman’s] entry into the labour market and economic sphere” (Sircar, 2011, 151). Though women in the workforce was not new, the woman of pre-liberalized India appeared to put her domestic life first. However with the “New Indian Woman,” author Ajanta Sircar states that “it is clear that simultaneous with the euphoria over the ‘opening’ of India’s markets was the recognition that some of the nation’s most solidly grounded social institutions were coming under intense pressure” (Sircar, 2011, 152). This “intense pressure” in turn raised questions about balancing the “modernity,” embodied in Western cultural ideals such as individualism, with “tradition,” embodied in Indian cultural ideals such as family collectivism. Tapping into the pervasiveness of this question in the 90’s and early 2000’s, Bollywood filmmakers created a slew of films metaphorically representing this dilemma through the bifurcation of “love marriages” and “arranged marriages.”

What is Arranged Marriage?

To preface the discussion on representations of marriage in Bollywood films, it is worth spending some time unpacking arranged marriage. Arranged marriage, as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary is “a marriage in which the husband and wife are chosen for each other by their parents.” This tradition has existed in almost every region of the world, one will find
traces of arranged marriage in Western culture if they open a Jane Austen book. However popular media and culture most commonly associates arranged marriage with India and South Asia at large (Aguiar, 2013, 182). Approaches to arrange marriage differ greatly across regions of India, religion, caste, and families, however the role of kin remains a cornerstone of the institution (Aguiar, 2013, 183-4). Traditionally, when children came of age, parents would seek a suitable partner for their son or daughter based on the other party’s community, religion, caste, education, occupation, astrological sign etc. Often times, this was an extended family affair - aunts, uncles, grandparents, and even family friends would involve themselves in the matchmaking process. In the past, children often would not have a say in the person that they were to marry and accepted that parents knew what was best. In many cases, the bride and groom only met on the day of their wedding. For the most part, love was not considered a strong foundation for a marriage due to its potential to eclipse objective qualities of compatibility such as family background (Gupta, 1976, 77). Therefore, it was generally expected that love would come after marriage and grow over the years (Nesteruk & Gramescu, 2012, 42).

With the passage of time, the system of arranged marriage evolved. In many households, the son or daughter would be presented with a series of potential suitors and had the opportunity to interact and check for compatibility before saying yes or no. Certainly by the advent of globalization and internet dating, the practice of arranged marriage adapted itself to the emerging online platforms. Marian Aguiar points out that “Many of today’s arranged marriage practices are modified to various degrees to lessen or eradicate these features [of old tradition] and to introduce elements associated with Western love narratives like companionate marriage, freedom of
choice, sexual desire, and a discourse of intimacy expressed in terms like ‘talking things over.’

New technologies, like Internet profiles, have changed the practice and increasingly merged more fundamental traditions with ideas and activities associated with ‘love-matches’ such as dating” (Aguiar, 2013, 183). Despite the “liberalization” of arranged marriage, family involvement approval remains a centripetal force in the practice. When contrasted with the modernity of individual romantic choice in love packaged as “Western,” the practice continues to appear traditional.

What also appears to remain central to the institution is the stereotype that arranged marriages are forced and loveless (Susarla, 2015). In her lecture on arranged marriages titled “The Concept of Arranged Marriage,” clinical psychologist Dr. Viji Susarla unpacked these stereotypes, drawing similarities between arranged and “love marriages” (as non-arranged marriages are popularly termed in Indian communities). An interesting point to note is that because “love marriage” implies that arranged marriages are loveless, a stereotype her lecture debunks, she opted to term non-arranged marriages as “free choice marriages.” Regardless of what non-arranged marriages are called, Dr. Susarla asserted that a couple brought together by their parents has no less of a chance of falling in love than two people who meet serendipitously.

It is these stereotypes around arranged marriage combined with the importance placed on the tradition of family approval that serves as the basis for conflicts presented in Bollywood films of the 1990’s and early 2000’s. As the youth embraced the idea of “western gloss - desi soul (Sharpe, 2005, 62) the ability to express individuality in making independent choices be it
clothes, jobs, or who to marry became a generational point of contention. Choice therefore appears to be the point on which modernity and tradition teeter.

Representations of Arranged Marriage in Bollywood

**Performance of Duty.** Based on existing literature, one can deduce two thematic representations in Bollywood’s portrayal of arranged marriage. The first is arranged marriage as a performance of duty (Aguiar, 2013, 185). Aguiar cites Sanjay Leela Bhansali’s *Devdas* (2002), a film in which the female protagonist Paro (Aishwarya Rai) marries a wealthy widower for the sake of her parent’s honor after being defamed by her lover Devdas’s family. This theme is seen in several other films of the 90’s and early 2000’s, another example being the massively famous *Hum Aapke Hain Koun...!* (1994). In *Hum Aapke Hain Koun...!* (1994), Nisha and Prem (played by superstars Madhuri Dixit and Salman Khan), fall in love amidst the festivities of their sibling’s wedding. After a brief euphonious marriage, Nisha’s sister Pooja (Renuka Shahane) falls down the stairs and dies, leaving Rajesh (Monish Bahl) with their infant son. To ensure that the child does not grow up motherless, the two families (who are clueless about Nisha and Prem’s budding romance) decide that it would be best for Nisha to marry Rajesh. Heartbroken, Nisha and Prem decide to sacrifice their love in the interest of their family. Luckily in the end, Rajesh discovers a love letter from Nisha to Prem and brings the two together in matrimony. Though one film has a happy ending and the other does not, they both code arranged marriage as sacrifice for the sake of family. This sacrifice, whether made temporarily or eternally, prevent the protagonists from reaping the ultimate fruit of choice - love.
**Cultural Bridge.** The second representation of arranged marriage is as a cultural bridge between NRIs (non-residential Indians) and the homeland. Before going further, it is useful to provide some context for why a representation of arranged marriage catered to the NRI population emerged in the 90’s. The opening of the Indian market lent itself to an increase in Westward migration. Though already on a steady incline, the Indian immigrant population began to double every decade between 1980 and 2010 (Zong & Batalova, 2017). Simultaneously, Bollywood films became more and more available to non-residential populations as the 90’s progressed. Filmmakers, who saw a profitable market here, started catering Bollywood films towards Indian immigrants. Watching Bollywood movies together became a common family and community affair for many immigrant families, allowing parents to connect culturally with their children and other members of the Indian community (Malhotra & Alagh, 2004, 25). A study by Marie Gillespie conducted in 1989 shows that “extensive use of VCR at home to watch Indian films represented a significant means for parents to maintain links with their country and culture of origin, whereas second-generation children resisted the Indian traditions and customs shown in the films” (Tirumala, 2009, 34; Gillespie, 1989). Consumption of Bollywood films thus became a medium reflecting the anxieties of first generation Indians who were “desperately trying to sustain a value system and inculcate the same in their children that sets them apart from mainstream society” in their country of immigration (Punathambekar, 2005, 158). As Vijay Mishra points out, cornerstones of these “value systems” were “generally about tradition, continuity, family, and often, the importance given to arranged marriages” (Mishra, 2002, 236-7; Punathambekar, 2005, 158). Thus, anxieties were articulated through narratives of arranged marriage as a means
of identity preservation. These narratives were sprinkled with elements of nostalgia for the first
generation Indians (Bandyopadhyay, 2008, 84) while their second generation offspring navigated
their two identities.

One of the pioneering films to do this is *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995). The film
opens with an introduction of the traditional Punjabi family of Baldev Singh (Amrish Puri).
Baldev, his wife Lajjo (Farida Jalal), and their daughters Simran (Kajol) and Chutki, live in Lon-
don. For as long as they have lived abroad, Baldev has taken utmost care to make sure that his
girls grew up with strong Indian values and national fervor. One day, Baldev receives a letter
from his friend in Punjab suggesting that it is time for his son Kuljit to marry Simran as had been
arranged in their childhood. Simran, who unenthusiastically resigns herself to this fate, asks her
father if she can go on one last trip of freedom before her wedding. After reluctantly agreeing,
Baldev allows her to go and Simran and her friends embark on a Eurorail tour. It is here that she
meets and falls in love with the happy-go-lucky Raj (Shahrukh Khan). After discovering that his
daughter has fallen in love, an enraged Baldev whisks his family away to India for good. Raj
then follows the family to India, determined to win over Simran’s family and take home his
bride. Despite having to face many obstacles such as the arrogant Kuljit and the patriarchal
Baldev, Raj and Simran decide that it is important to have parental blessings and thus do not
elope. Finally in the end, Baldev finds out that Raj is the one that Simran met on the Eurorail.
Though angry at first, he realizes the strength of their love and lets her marry him.

Patricia Uberoi points out that “the projection of the anxieties of modernization and iden-
tity loss, typically focussed on women’s’ sexuality” (Uberoi, 1998, 308). As she states, “crisis of
identity in DDLJ…condenses around the marriage choices of the children of first generation immigrants” (Uboeri, 1998, 308). This same “crisis of identity” is explored in another popular film of the 90’s, Pardes (1997). When NRI Kishorilal (Amrish Puri) visits his friend Suraj Dev (Alok Nath) in India, he sees a potential daughter-in-law in Suraj Dev’s daughter, Ganga (Mam-ha Chaudhary). Deciding that Ganga is exactly what his brattish, American-born son Rajiv needs, he gets the two engaged and Ganga joins her soon-to-be family in Los Angeles. Rajiv expresses a great deal of nonchalance about his engagement and continuously brushes Ganga off. Meanwhile, as Ganga slowly discovers Rajiv’s various “Western” vices (drinking, drugs, promiscuous relationships) she also finds herself relying emotionally on Rajiv’s foster brother Arjun (Shahrukh Khan). The two fall in love but do not acknowledge it because Ganga is bound in an arranged marriage with Rajiv. Ultimately, when Ganga is nearly raped by Rajiv, Arjun takes her back to India. After an intense fight, Kishorilal realizes that Arjun is a better match for Ganga and the two unite.

Given the popular sentiment that a marriage is not just between two people, it is between two families, immigrant parents want their children to marry into a family that is compatible to theirs (Nesteruk & Gramescu, 2012, 43). The concern that this might not happen is illustrated through these narratives where arranged marriage serves as somewhat of a leash. However, this contrasts the individualistic ethos both of the economically liberated India as well as that of the Western countries that house these immigrants, thereby coding arranged marriage as negative.

In light of these two films, Priya Shah further dissect this representation of arranged marriage. She defines two categories of films when discussing what “idea[s] of arranged mar-
riage in the diaspora that the Hindi film industry perpetuates” (Shah, 2004, 4). The first is the “redemption of the ‘corrupt’ diasporic subject,” in direct reference to Pardes (1997). Ganga is arranged in marriage to Rajiv with the hope that such a pure Indian soul as she can mend Rajiv’s corrupt “American” ways. This plan clearly backfires as Rajiv’s negative characterization escalates throughout the film. Additionally the contract of an arranged marriage, even if still in the engagement stage, is shown as the reason why Ganga and Arjun cannot confess their love to each other until the film’s climax.

Shah’s second category, the “Return of the True Desi” pertains to Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (1995). Shah articulates this category through a gender studies approach (Shah, 2004, 5) and also cites Purnima Mankekar’s take that Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (1995) serves as a reminder to NRIs that “India is the place to which [they] must return to consummate their desires within the confines of marriage” (Mankekar, 1999, 737; Shah, 2004, 5). Throughout the first half of the film, Baldev prides himself on raising daughters with “good Indian values,” despite living abroad. When Simran exercises the slightest bit of sexual independence with another NRI, the threatened Baldev decides the problem can be solved with an arranged marriage in India. The institution is once again shown as a means to curb the freedom of choice that everyone craves.

Arranged Marriage: A Nemesis for Independent Love

It is ironic that the films of this time period take such a traditionalist approach to their portrayal of arranged marriage. In using arranged marriage as a nemesis for independent love, these narratives undermined the liberalized changes that the practice was actually going through.
It is quite possible that the choice to portray arranged marriage in this way is a result of the idealistic nature of Bollywood, a medium that sells dreams. Scholar Rachel Dwyer argues that Bollywood “represents romance and marriage not necessarily as they are in real life but how they could be or should be - or how they should not be” (Dwyer, 2004, 60). In order to then propel the dream of love, one could argue that arranged marriage served as a catalyst. If indeed Bollywood capitalizes off of the creation of fantasies, as so many scholars have said, then the logical opposite to finding true love autonomously is an arranged marriage. (Dwyer, 2004, 61). Bollywood’s commodification of love at the expense of arranged marriage and its effects on Indian American audience is what this study seeks to further understand through the lenses Encoding and Decoding and the Circuit of Culture. Therefore, the overarching research question is “how do Indian Americans talk about arranged marriage through the lens of Bollywood?”

**Previous Studies**

Though we cannot directly measure the influence film plays on romantic ideals and identity, several studies conducted in the past have attempted to understand it. A 2013 study titled “From Love at First Sight to Soul Mate: The Influence of Romantic Ideals in Popular Films on Young People's Beliefs about Relationships” looked at the correlation between the content of romantic comedy films and youth beliefs around romance. The researchers, Hefner and Wilson, first did a content analysis of 52 top grossing romantic comedies to show the prevalence of romantic ideals in these films. The researchers then conducted a large scale survey of undergraduate students who were “asked to report on their romantic comedy movie viewing and beliefs
about romance” (Hefner & Wilson, 2013, Abstract). Results showed that the youth who watched romantic comedies “to learn reported stronger endorsement of romantic ideal beliefs than those who did not watch to learn.” (Hefner & Wilson, 2013, Abstract). The study indicates that getting to the root of why people consume a particular type of media gives insight into how this media might shape views on certain topics. This question of “why” is rooted in cultural studies and will be applied to the Circuit of Culture framework when discussing consumption of Bollywood amongst Indian Americans.

As Punathambekar cites, there has been constant expanding of scholarship since the turn of the millennium “on of how migrants recraft a sense of community and cultural identity in new socio-geographic contexts” (Punthambekar, 2005, 152). His study discusses Bollywood’s impact on first generation Indian immigrants, however there are other studies that focus on second-generation Indian Americans. One such example is Lakshmi N. Tirumala’s work that seeks to understand Bollywood as a cultural artifact that contributes to the formation of the Indian American identity. His study uses the Circuit of Culture framework, particularly the moments of consumption, representation, and identity, to analyze his interviews with Indian American young adults. The results of his qualitative study indicated that Bollywood had the biggest role amongst all other forms of media in the construction of identity for Indian Americans (Tirumala, 2009, 70). To add to Tirumala’s work, this study looks at Bollywood as a cultural artifact that contributes to the construction of perceptions around love and marriage amongst Indian Americans.
Two Qualitative Studies

Two qualitative research methods are employed to explore the hypothesis that Bollywood has a role in shaping the way Indian Americans view arranged marriage as an option. The first, a qualitative content analysis, will be referred to as Study 1. The second, a series of ten 60 minute in-depth interviews, will be referred to as Study 2. In Study 1, the qualitative content analysis of top grossing Bollywood films of the 90s and 2000s that frame love and arranged marriage as oppositional binaries serves to show Bollywood’s bias against arranged marriage. After establishing the presence of this bias, Study 2 involves 10 in-depth interviews with Indian Americans born between 1985-1995. This age group has been selected for two reasons. One, it roughly spans the current dating age group which I define as those in their 20s and 30s based on Pew Research Center data around marriage age (Cohn, Passel, Wang, & Livingston, 2011). Two, these films were released during the childhood, i.e. formative years of the demographic. This approach allows room for analysis on the shifting perceptions of arranged marriage as a result of these films over the years. In other words, do participants decode messages about love and marriage differently in their childhood versus in their adulthood?

Theoretical Frameworks

This thesis is grounded in the cultural studies frameworks of esteemed cultural theorist Stuart Hall. Cultural studies were partially formed on the recognition that like high art, mass culture too was worthy of serious analysis in “tracing the interweaving threads of culture, power and politics” (Morley & Schwarz, 2014). As a pioneer of cultural studies, Hall formulated a series of
theories through which to understand “the conditions of existence” first culturally, then politically and economically (Loudis, 2017). After establishing a bias towards finding love independently in the qualitative content analysis, the in-depth interviews will be analyzed through the the frameworks of 1) Encoding and Decoding and 2) Circuit of Culture.

**Encoding and Decoding.** The first of Stuart Hall’s theoretical frameworks employed in this study is his “Encoding, Decoding” framework. Encoding refers to the production of a message and decoding refers to how the audience interprets the message (Hall, 1993, 92). Hall identifies “three hypothetical positions from which decodings of a televisual discourse may be constructed” (Hall, 1993, 100). Though Hall illustrates his framework through the example of a newscast, it is very much applicable to understanding Bollywood’s role in shaping opinions on marriage and love. The three hypothetical positions that Hall identifies include the dominant/hegemonic position, the negotiated position, and the oppositional position. When a viewer operates within the dominant/hegemonic code, he or she is decoding a message exactly as it is encoded. This leaves very little room for misunderstandings as both the encoder and decoder come from the same cultural perspective. The second hypothetical position is the negotiated position. Here, the viewer acknowledges the dominant message but does not necessarily accept all parts of it. In disagreeing, the viewer may modify the meanings to mirror their own experiences. Finally, Hall proposes the oppositional position. This is a position that a viewer takes when they understand the message but reject it entirely based on various life experiences.

Hall’s three hypothetical positions are well suited to study how Indian Americans talk about arranged marriage through Bollywood because of the complexities involved. He asserts
that televisual signs are complex because they combine both “visual and aural” (Hall, 1993, 95) elements in addition to the fact that “messages have a ‘complex structure of dominance’” (Hall, 1993, 90) due to the circumstances of power relations under which the message is constructed. Using this framework will help in addressing both the message as it is produced and consumed. It will also provide further insights when exploring Bollywood’s role in shaping perceptions around arranged marriage through Hall’s other cultural studies framework, the Circuit of Culture.

**Circuit of Culture.** The second of Stuart Hall’s frameworks utilized in this thesis is the Circuit of Culture. Again, rooted in cultural studies, the Circuit of Culture theorizes that in order to study a cultural artifact, one must do so by examining it through the lens of five elements: representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation. Each of these elements impact that way media messages are encoded and decoded, providing a basis for rich analyses on how meaning is derived (Tirumala, 2009, 27). Also important to note is that the five elements are interconnected, one can start examining a cultural artifact from anywhere in the cyclical circuit (du Gay, 1997, 4). In the famous study, “The Story of the Sony Walkman” du Gay et. al study start their cultural analysis of the walkman analyzing how the walkman is represented, or signified “in language, both oral and visual” (du Gay et al, 1997, 4). They then move through the cycle looking at identity formation, encoding meaning through production, decoding meaning in consumption, and finally how using the “effects that Walkman use has had upon the Regulation of cultural life in modern societies” (du Gay et al, 1997, 4-5). This reputed study serves as a strong model for looking at portrayals of arranged marriage in Bollywood through the Circuit of Culture framework.
STUDY 1: QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS


In order to fully understand how Indian Americans talk about arranged marriage through Bollywood, it was necessary to formally establish how Bollywood treats arranged marriage. This study is a qualitative content analysis looking at attitudes towards independent love and arranged marriage in Bollywood films of the 90’s and early 2000’s. The methods and units of analysis used to understand these attitudes are greatly inspired by and adapted from Hefner and Wilson’s study “From Love at First Sight to Soul Mate: The Influence of Romantic Ideals in Popular Films on Young People's Beliefs about Relationships.” In this qualitative content analysis, nine top grossing films that frame independent love and arranged marriage as a dilemma are assessed. The film’s treatment of this dilemma is further categorized in terms of the three major components of Bollywood film: dialogue, music, and plot.

Marriage Terminology

Specific terminology and definitions are used when addressing and categorizing the different forms of marriage - arranged marriage, independent love, and arranged-love marriage.

Arranged Marriage. As the literature indicates, there is no fixed definition for arranged marriage, the practice is constantly changing (Aguiar, 2013, 183). However for the purposes of this qualitative content analysis, the Merriam-Webster definition is employed, “a marriage in which the husband and wife are chosen for each other by their parents.”
**Independent Love.** As mentioned earlier, the term “love marriage” has been used by South Asian communities to define a marriage where two people come together regardless of parental consent. However, the term “love marriage” appears to imply that arranged marriages are loveless. To clarify the distinction that arranged marriage is not defined by the presence or absence of love, a new term is coined for this thesis. *Independent love* refers to situations where two people find each other and fall in love *independent* of their parents or any elder family member.

**Arranged-Love Marriage.** A third term, *arranged-love*, is also included as a category for coding. The *arranged-love marriage* is a product of the new neoliberal India to reflect the balancing act of modernity and tradition at the time. Author Jyostna Kapur uses this term to describe a marriage where families of equal status orchestrate the union of the couple however the couple is shown as falling in love with each other. She cites this term in regards to *Hum Aapke Hain Koun...! (1994)*, stating that it alludes to the idea of modern romance while still rooted in patriarchal norms (Kapur, 2009, 229).

**Sample**

The sample collection process was twofold. After first creating a list of the five highest grossing films of each year from 1994-2004, the final list was created by selecting only those films that featured independent love versus arranged marriage situation as central to the plot. The films that made the final list were each viewed three times and were analyzed on the basis of dialogue, music, and plot.
**Film List**

Hum Aapke Hain Koun…! (1994)  
Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (1995)  
Dil To Pagal Hai (1997)  
Pardes (1997)  
Kuch Kuch Hota Hai (1998)  
Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam (1999)  
Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham (2001)  
Devdas (2002)  

**Methodology: Units of Analysis**

*Dialogue.* In the three viewings of each film, I noted down every time a character spoke either about independent love, arranged marriage, or an arranged-love marriage. Each verbal expressions of or concerning independent love, arranged marriage, or arranged-love marriage was assigned a valence level to understand how the film treats each theme.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film Name</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independent Love</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arranged Marriage</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arranged-Love Marriage</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Dialogue Sorting Chart

To guide the sorting process of dialogue valence, the following second level units were developed so that each dialogue could be sorted as accurately as possible:
Consequence level. Based on the Hefner & Wilson study, positive consequence was defined as “any type of reward or endorsement that occurred in response to the expression (Hefner & Wilson, 2017, 155).” In other words, when the dialogue moved the plot forward towards the ultimate goal of the film, it was coded as positive. In *Hum Aapke Hain Koun...!* (1994), Prem (Salman Khan) builds up the excitement of romance with Nisha (Madhuri Dixit) telling her flirtatiously “Today a girl is sitting in the front seat of my car for the first time. They say all experience such a day in their life. Today it has happened.” This expression leads to the ultimate goal of the film, the union of Prem and Nisha. Similarly, in *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995), Raj (Shahrukh Khan) recognizes that he and Simran (Kajol) are faced with the obstacle of arranged marriage but says “What I am against is an uphill battle. But I have faith in our love” (*Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, 1995). Again, this dialogue keeps the plot moving forward towards the ultimate goal of their union.

Negative consequences included “any type of punishment that was delivered in response to the expression” such as “rejection,” “disagreement,” “physically leaving,” “anger,” “sadness,” or “physical aggression towards the source” (Hefner & Wilson, 2017, 155). In *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* (2001), the patriarch Yashvardhan Raichand expresses anger at his son Rahul (Shahrukh Khan) for going against his wishes of marrying a family friend’s daughter and instead falling in love with someone of a lower economic status. “I will never tolerate an ordinary girl coming into our family. Did you ever think about the background of that girl, her breeding (use “family history” or “lineage” instead of breeding), status? Will she understand our culture, tradi-
tions, ethics, standards? How could you think that she could be part of my family?” (Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham, 2001).

**Character level.** The characterization of the speaker was an important factor in determining the valence of the dialogue. In six out of the nine films, the patriarch is clearly coded as the villainous antagonist. They are essentially the road blocks that stall the resolution of the film, the union of the protagonists. Therefore, dialogues spoken in favor of arranged marriage by these patriarchs are categorized as negative because they stall the progress of the narrative. For example, the patriarch Yashvardhan Raichand (Amitabh Bachchan) in Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham (2001) emphatically states that “Naina is the perfect girl for this house” without a care that his son may be in love with someone of his own choosing. Out of context, “Naina is the perfect girl for this house” could be a positive statement, however given Yashvardhan Raichand’s antagonistic characterization, it is coded in the arranged marriage category as negative.

Another situation under character level is when a character speaks from a point of helplessness. In these films, helplessness is often embodied in a mother who is stuck between the patriarchal father and the lovestruck daughter. If a “helpless” character speaks negatively about love, that is coded as negative for arranged marriage. For example, in Veer Zaara (2004), Zaara’s mother tells her that love happens only in books and poems, not in real life. Again, knowing the context, that Zaara’s mother can only speak negatively about her daughter’s love because Zaara’s marriage is in her father’s hands, allows for the dialogue to be more accurately sorted.

**Agency level.** The ability to have agency, particularly when it comes to marriage, appears to be important. Keeping this in mind, dialogues that allow characters to have agency are coded
as positive while dialogues taking away agency are coded as negative. For example, in *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* (1999), the female protagonist Nandini’s (Aishwarya Rai) father states, “A daughter must marry per a father’s wishes. After marriage, a husband means everything to a woman. That is the norm of this household” (*Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam*, 1999). This quote is coded as negative for arranged marriage because it clearly removes any trace of agency for “daughters.” Earlier in the film however, Nandini states that she will “marry who [she] want[s],” a statement that displays a great deal of agency, i.e. a positive code for love. Though at the end of this film Nandini ends up marrying the man with whom she is arranged, she autonomously makes the decision not to leave him for her first love Sameer because she subsequently falls in love him. This situation exemplifies how the idea of an arranged-love marriage could blur the lines of agency. For the purposes of this study however, if the dialogue contributes to the resolution of the film, it is labeled as positive and if it detracts from the resolution, it is coded as negative.

**Music.** Given its important role in Bollywood films, it was impossible not to take each film’s music into consideration when analyzing the depiction of independent love and arranged marriage in cinema. Every Bollywood film has a unique soundtrack with songs that fit contextually into the diegesis of the film. The songs of each film were sorted on the basis of lyrics as they pertained to independent love, arranged marriage, arranged-love marriage, or “other” in the following chart. Because all of the songs spoke positively about their theme, a valence level was not assigned.
Film Plot. Like in the Hefner and Wilson study, the overall message of the plot was taken into consideration and served as a third unit of analysis (Hefner & Wilson, 2013, 157). Each film was summarized in paragraph form highlighting key plot points. To adapt this unit of analysis to better suit this study, the summaries were then sorted based on their support of independent love, arranged marriage, and arranged-love marriage.

Results

This qualitative content analysis revealed a strong bias towards independent love over arranged marriage in the nine films, validating the literature that describe balancing independent love and arranged marriage as an allegory for modernity versus tradition. Under the dialogue unit of analysis, a total of 228 dialogues were noted and sorted (Appendix A). Of the 228 total dialogues, the distribution across the three categories is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film Name</th>
<th>Independent Love</th>
<th>Arranged Marriage</th>
<th>Arranged-Love Marriage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Song Title</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Song Title</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Song Title</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Independent Love:** Of the 117 dialogues collected pertaining to independent love, 89% were positive. The most number of dialogues were collected for this category.

**Arranged Marriage:** Of the 93 dialogues collected pertaining to arranged marriage, 88% of the dialogues were negative.

**Arranged-Love Marriage:** Of the 18 dialogues collected pertaining to the arranged-love marriage 83% of the dialogues were positive. Given the significantly low number of dialogues in this category, it is acknowledged but not given much consideration in this study. However it does create a space for future discussions on the portrayal of the hybrid arranged-love marriage in Bollywood.

Next, the inclusion of the independent love theme in each film’s musical score further supports the results from the dialogue readings. Of the 80 songs collected, 79% refer to independent love. Songs collected within this category presented different themes such as longing for love or expressing love to another. However they all glorified independent love and therefore a second level of song theme analysis was not necessary for this study.

Though not collected for analysis, the background music was interesting to consider. Often in these films, any time a character speaks about love, a specific tune is played in the background. Likewise, unhappy moments are frequently supplemented with heavy, somber, or suspenseful music. Although this study primarily focuses on verbal cues, this non-verbal contextual clue is an important element of Bollywood films and provides scope for future research.

Finally the plot summaries of each film provided a third validation for the bias of independent love over arranged marriage. While the resolution of each film was the romantic union
of the two protagonists, seven films presented this resolution through a glorification of independent love and two presented this resolution as an arranged-love marriage (Appendix B). In the two films where an “arranged-love marriage” prevailed, the plots tended to focus more on the growing romance between the protagonists rather than the fact that the two were brought together by parental figures. The fact that this growing romance is depicted in a similar fashion to independent love however can be interpreted as a promotion of independent love, thus supporting the results of this study.

**Limitations**

*No Inter-coder Reliability.* This study would have greatly benefited from inter-coder reliability, as is seen in the “From Love at first Sight to Soul Mate” study (Hefner & Wilson, 2013). Inter-coder reliability refers to “a data analysis process in which researchers working collectively on a project ensure they are all coding data in a similar manner” (Tracy, 2013, 249). Though the positive or negative sentiments of each dialogue seemed apparent, having a second and/or third coder would have helped with classifying the occasional opaque quote. Inter-coder reliability would have been particularly useful in the case of sorting the film plots. There were a few films that tread the line between independent love and arranged-love marriage that would have benefited from a second opinion. For example, the union of Raj and Simran in *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (1995)* is occasionally described as an arranged-love marriage. The final scene of the film features Simran’s father literally handing her over to Raj, thereby “valoriz[ing] the parental-ly-sanctioned love marriage as the vehicle for transferring women/culture” (Shah, 2004, 5).
However the case for classifying the film in the category of independent love can be argued on the premise that Raj and Simran *met* independently. For cases like this, inter-coder reliability would have been a useful solution to the ambiguity.
STUDY 2: IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

RQ2: How do Indian Americans talk about arranged marriage through Bollywood?

Methodology

Study 1 established a clear favoring of independent love over arranged marriage. The next course of action was to understand if, and to what extent, this portrayal shapes the way Indian Americans talk about arranged marriage as an option. To address this question, a total of 10 interviews were conducted. Participants were asked to talk about their understanding of themes in these nine films, their views on arranged marriage, and the role that Bollywood plays in their life. The interviews often veered off into tangential topics such as dating in general and the importance of family, both of which provided useful insights for this study.

The selection criteria for participants goes as follows:

a) Participants must have been born between 1985-1995
b) Participants must be of Indian origin
c) Participants must have either been born in the US or moved before the age of 10
d) Participants must have some knowledge of 90’s and 2000’s Bollywood films

In Tirumala’s study analyzing Bollywood's role in the construction of cultural identity, he discusses the benefits of in-depth interviews as they allow the researcher to obtain details in a secure environment (Tirumala, 2009, 39). He does point out disadvantages such as that interviews may be “prone to bias,” are “time consuming,” and “because of the small sample size, generalizations cannot be made” (Tirumala, 2009, 39), however for the purposes of this study, it seemed to be the best way to learn about how Indian Americans talk about arranged marriage.
Participants who fit the selection criteria were collected by convenience and snowball sampling. They were asked to sign a consent form assuring that their names and no identifying information would be published anywhere. After ensuring that their participation was completely voluntary, a 60 minute interview ensued. Participants were first asked to talk about films from the 90’s and early 2000’s that they had seen (including the films from Study 1). This was followed by a discussion on the role of Bollywood in their life. The final set of questions pertained to their perceptions of arranged marriage. These interviews were audio recorded and analyzed using MAXQDA.

**Interview Guide**

The following questions served as a guide for the interviews but allowed the opportunity for tangential questions to emerge. True to the nature of in-depth interviews, several other tangential questions emerged and guided the discussions into different directions.

**Questions About Films:**

1) Can you provide a brief summary of (chose films they have seen)
2) Can you describe your experiences viewing these films?
   a) When did you first see each film?
   b) What thoughts went through your head while watching these films?
   c) Who were you with when you saw these films?
3) What do you think are important themes in these films?
   a) How do they relate to each other?
4) What do you think this film says about love and marriage?

**Questions About Bollywood in Indian American Life:**

1) What role does Bollywood play in your life?
   a) Does it help you connect with other Indian Americans?
b) Does it connect you to your Indian roots?
c) Is there any aspect of your life that you feel Bollywood influences?

2) What are some disservices that Bollywood does to its audience
3) Are you a heavy, medium or light viewer of Bollywood?
   a) Growing up, were you a heavy, medium, or light viewer of Bollywood?
4) Why do you watch Bollywood?

Questions About Arranged Marriage:

1) What are your thoughts on arranged marriage?
   a) Have you seen any arranged marriages in your life?
2) How do non-Indians (even non-South Asians) perceive arranged marriage?
3) How does arranged marriage work in today’s world?
4) Would you be open to an arranged marriage? Why or why not?
5) Circling back to the films, how do these films portray arranged marriage?
   a) What messages about arranged marriage do these films want to give?

Participant Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant #</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Bollywood Viewing Level as Child (as defined by participant)</th>
<th>Bollywood Viewing Level as Adult (as defined by participant)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant 1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Heavy</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Light</td>
<td>Light</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 3</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Light</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 4</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Heavy</td>
<td>Heavy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 5</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 6</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Heavy</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 7</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Heavy</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 8</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Light</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 9</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Light</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 10</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Heavy</td>
<td>Heavy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3: Participant Profiles
Analysis of Interviews through Cultural Studies Frameworks

The interviews were analyzed through two Stuart Hall cultural studies frameworks, first through Encoding/Decoding and second through Circuit of Culture.

Encoding/Decoding. Encoding refers to how a message is produced and decoding refers to how a message is received (Hall, 1993, 92). Quotes from each interview were then sorted based on the following four questions:

1) How does film encode love?
2) How does film encode arranged marriage?
3) How does film decode love?
4) How does film decode arranged marriage?

The participants’ answers were sorted into four main thematic categories per question. Quotes where participants spoke about how and why Bollywood creates certain messages were categorized as either encoding love or arranged marriage. Quotes where participants spoke about their interpretation of messages from Bollywood films were categorized as either decoding love or arranged marriage.

Circuit of Culture. The Circuit of Culture asserts that a cultural artifact must be studied through the moments of production, consumption, representation, identity, and regulation. Hence, interview quotes were collected and sorted based on these five moments.

Results through Encoding and Decoding

When analyzing the interview data through Stuart Hall’s framework of Encoding and Decoding, a few major patterns emerge.
After exploring the results, these findings are later articulated through Hall’s three positions of decoding in the discussion.

**Encoding Love.** When talking about how films encode love, participants consistently spoke to the serendipity and magic with which love happens in Bollywood films. “Bollywood makes it appear that the instant you see someone, you are in love. Or there is some sort of metaphysical connection” noted Participant 4 in regards to the heavy use of the “love at first sight” trope. Participant 5 offers support stating, “they make it seem like falling in love is easy.” Others pointed out that films encode love in direct opposition to arranged marriage stating, “they all have the same theme. The central idea that arranged marriage being forced down the throat is not the way to go. But when you find someone you love you should pursue that no matter who your
family tries to set you up with.” (Participant 4). Participant 2 adds to this saying, “they make love seem much more exciting and thrilling compared to the traditional ways in India like arranged marriage.”

Participant 3 discusses Bollywood films as advertisements for romance. “It’s like looking at a car commercial, they make it look pretty, drive it through the countryside. So in the same way, every Bollywood movie is a commercial for relationship.” In light of Bollywood’s idealist nature, Participant 2 addresses that it is in the interest of business that Bollywood shows love in this way. “If you think about movie business, you need to spice it up. You can do a lot more with a love story, there is more drama, there isn’t much drama with arranged. It’s show business, that is important to remember, they need to make money so they are going to need an interesting story to capture the audience.” Participant 9 expressed an understanding for why Bollywood would want to create idealist portrayals of love in a society where arranged marriage is prevalent.

People go to the movies and they don’t want reality. They want something that is an imagination, something they may inherently want but isn’t always going to happen. That’s why we go to the movies, to escape our realities. That is why these films did so well, they knew the audiences want something they cant have. That fairy-tale love story is a very great way of doing that, it’s just smart business.” Like any business, Bollywood is profit driven and glorifying love is what “breaks the box office records (Participant 9).

**Encoding Arranged Marriage.** When it comes to how films encode arranged marriage, participants unanimously cite the portrayal as negative. Participant 8 explicitly states that films want to say “that arranged marriages are wrong, very family driven, old school in their emphasis
on class and status that new generations don’t believe in. And that it takes the choice completely
away from a person.” Participant 7 adds that arranged marriage is embodied in these films
through the idea that “tradition is most important thing even if nobody is happy.” Even when not
treating arranged marriage so harshly, Bollywood still codes the practice as “a sad alternative to
what the characters want” (Participant 10). Specifically in regards to Kuch Kuch Hota Hai
(1998), Participant 9 describes Anjali’s unrequited love and resignation to marry Aman as “I
couldn’t get the gold so I’ll just go for the silver. He is still a good guy” The positive characteri-
zation of Aman makes him an anomalous arranged match. For the most part, participants agreed
that the arranged suitors were villainized. Participants talked about the characterization of char-
acters such as the “arrogant” Kujit (Participant 5) from Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (1995) and
Rajiv, the “American brat” (Participant 4) from Pardes (1997). “In Pardes, it’s obvious that Rajiv
is supposed to be the villain. They highlight his negative points like he was a drinker, violent,
they showed his values were not the same as Ganga’s. It’s showing a mismatch in values, even
though the parents are arranging the marriage. So the parents judgement can be off,” perhaps be-
cause they are blinded by patriarchal power. (Participant 2). After reflecting further, Participant 4
takes a more sympathetic approach in opining that “it’s not even the portrayal of arranged mar-
riage, its more the rigid family structures and the fact that the patriarch has all the power. If I
have any negative feelings, it’s more towards the patriarch” rather than the arranged suitor (Par-
ticipant 4). Participant 6 seconds this suggesting that films don’t “antagonize arranged marriage,
but celebrates choice of who to marry. In Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham, the main antagonist is
Amitabh Bachchan being so stringent on his rules such that he is willing to ostracize Shah Rukh
Khan from the family. I think it’s that rigidness that is the problem. Arranged marriage isn’t bad, but to be so rule driven, that’s what bad.” He continues this thought through his articulation of Bollywood’s depiction of arranged marriage as a generational conflict.

I think it’s a main conflict where younger generations are more open to the idea of a marriage that is unwarranted because arranged marriage traditionally is so rigid. Even how arranged marriage is carried out now is a lot looser than decades prior. But I think it is a main theme in cinema because it appeals to a wide audience. And integral to Indian culture is family and navigating this.

Participants consistently cited that family is a key theme encoded in every film and is the axis on which this generational conflict rotates. They note that in their own lives, regardless of what approach they take to marriage, family approval is important.

**Decoding Love and Arranged Marriage.** Participants heavily discussed depictions of both independent love and arranged marriage in film to be “highly exaggerated” (Participant 2) and to “give unrealistic portrayals of love, idealizing romance and how it happens.” (Participant 1). As children, a majority of the participants decoded these portrayals at face value and saw it as something to aspire to. Love “just happens” (Participant 10), “you see these films as a small child and think finding love is that easy’” (Participant 5). Participant 1 stated that “Everyone who grows up on Bollywood has this idea of love and romance and you always hope that you will get what you see in the movies.” However with age, participants realize that Bollywood provided them with “false expectations” (Participant 1). Participant 2 cites that despite the objectivity that comes with age, Bollywood, as well as other forms of Western media, inculcate a “subconscious
desire” for independent love in everyone. What makes Bollywood appear to have a more significant impact is the fact that participants feel heightened relatability with characters who come from similar backgrounds (Participant 3). Despite the recognition that Bollywood’s depictions of love are not based in reality, Participant 10 says

I just keep waiting for it to happen to me. I think that is very, one sad, but two it is kind of Bollywood. Love just happens to them in the movies, they are sitting on a train. It’s so funny that I keep waiting for something to happen to me, like I’m sitting on the metro and think ‘maybe he is the one.’

Participant 10, like the majority of participants, is open to the idea of arranged marriage. While films have greatly shaped her expectations around love, watching her parent’s successful marriage has made her amiable to the idea of trying it herself. “Since I haven’t been able to find someone, I am jealous of what they have. They deeply care for each other, they have this thing that works.” Her parents have started the matchmaking process which is admittedly nerve-wracking for her. “I am open to it but I feel like I am giving something up to be open to it. Which is wild because we don’t meet as many people as we get older, it seems like a great way to meet people” she rationalizes. Though all participants state that they would like to find love on their own, other’s agree with Participant 10 that it is an alternative way to meet people. Participant 3 says, “I would absolutely see it as an opportunity to meet someone I would not normally meet. As long as I have the decision to say yes or no, I am ok with my parents bringing me someone. I see it no different than a dating app.” This outlook gives participants a way to navigate family
expectations with their own desires, something they have grown up seeing Bollywood film characters do.

**Results through Circuit of Culture**

The ten interviews were further explored through the second Stuart Hall framework, Circuit of Culture. Like with the Encoding/Decoding framework, distinct patterns pertaining to each of the five “moments” surfaced in the discussion with participants on love and arranged marriage.

**Production and Consumption.** Participants acknowledge that Bollywood films are produced to create fantasies. One participant stated, “In Indian culture, a large majority of people get arranged marriages. They want to see love because it’s something they can’t have. Bollywood recognizes this lust for love and caters their stories that way” (Participant 1). Similarly, another participant recognizes that love and marriage is a universally Indian point of contention between parents and children, “With the 90’s wide diaspora throughout the globe, Bollywood is pressured to make films addressing a wide audience of Indians. To equally weight them with problems pertinent in India. Love has always been a classic argument that parents have with kids in Indian culture” (Participant 6). In producing narratives where the protagonist’s love is ultimately accepted by their parents, Bollywood posits a dream situation for its Indian consumers regardless of where they are on the globe. Though participants did cite an awareness that filmmakers catered their narratives to the NRI population, they admitted that it helped draw them in (Participant 1). Acknowledging this business tactic in tangent with their understanding of the fantastical
nature of Bollywood as adults, participants do not base their opinions of arranged marriage on Bollywood portrayals but rather on their families.

Instead, participants attribute their consumption of Bollywood to other facets of life. A majority talk about Bollywood as a means to connect with other Indian Americans, and bond over their unique “dual identities” (Participants 7, 3, 6, 9). Many recount the consumption of Bollywood music in their undergraduate days - from dancing to it at various college Indian Association events to dorm room bonding sessions (Participants 2, 7, 4). The valence assigned to depictions of cultural aspects were not so much important as their presence in the film themselves.

Other participants cite their consumption of Bollywood as a means of comfort. Participant 4 mentioned that on a bad day, all she feels like doing is watching a Bollywood film. “Listening to things in Hindi has a different weight than listening in English” she says. “Like emotions, so much more is carried through Hindi versus English. I think just listening to the stories of people navigating their lives in the Hindi language makes me comfy.” Bollywood films reflect aspects of identity that they usually do not see in Western media.

Identity. With matters around love and dating, Bollywood narratives appeared to present scenarios that related more with the Indian American identity. “In American culture, it is totally acceptable to bring a boyfriend or girlfriend to meet your parents after a month of dating. You see people do it in Hollywood movies all the time. But I see it as unrealistic because that doesn’t happen as often in Indian culture” said Participant 3 in contrast to the more conservative portrayals of love in Bollywood films. Many participants cited a level of discomfort and awk-
wardness that Indian Americans feel in regards to talking about love, marriage, and relationships with their parents. When consuming Western forms of media participants cited that sex scenes or even kissing scenes were immediately fast forwarded or shut off (Participant 10). However popular cinema of the 90’s and early 2000’s famously replaced such scenes with songs. This relatable sense of sexual conservatism portrayed in films is one of the many ways that Bollywood contributes to shaping the Indian diasporic identity.

Participants often look for someone who shares their Indian diasporic cultural identity when pursuing a romantic partner. “It’s just easier because they already understand everything” stated Participant 1. “Like, you don’t have to explain why we do this, that, or the other” Participant 2 said. Having certain shared experiences that are inherent to the Indian cultural identity is a highly prized quality in a partner.

**Representation.** Every participant cited family as the strongest connection to their roots, however many participants also did see Bollywood as an example of how to experience and navigate various facets of Indian culture. For the three participants who had never been to India, or at least have not gone in the past decade, Bollywood has been the medium through which they envisioned their motherland. “I never visited India. I grew up watching movies, loving the actors and actresses, this is what I imagined India to be” (Participant 1). Participant 9, who has not been back to India in 12 years, saw *Dangal (2016)* last year. She connected deeply to the characters occasionally speaking in Harayanvi, telling herself, “this is where I came from” (Participant 9).

Those who have been to India frequently have a slightly different take on the representation of India and Indian culture in Bollywood,
I have had the fortune of going to India a few times and I maintain a close relationship with my family there, so Bollywood was never representative of India to me because my experiences there were nothing like what I saw on screen. However it was certainly a way of kind of fetishizing my own Indianness, a way to indulge the part of me that was Indian when outside my home I had to perform as if I wasn’t Indian at all. (Participant 6)

Indeed for many, Bollywood provides Indian Americans with a means to experience rituals and culture at any time during their otherwise, Westernized lives. Other participants who have more frequent contact with India negate Bollywood portrayals of rituals. “You might see traditions in Bollywood movies but they don’t exactly portray the cultural significance” notes Participant 5 in his assertion that Bollywood strays from culture. “It is not a good representation of what culture is, what happens, what is the meaning behind it all.”

While there may be differences in opinion based on exposure to India and Indian culture, the representation of partner selection and marriage appears to have had some impact on all participants regardless. “There is a theme between parent and child, there is a theme of duty for a person in terms of the relationships they pursue” states Participant 6 in regards to the consideration the family must be given when choosing a partner. Nobody wanted a partner that their family did not approve of and spoke to the fact that Bollywood films always “end with the family coming together” (Participant 8). In the event that their partner choice is not approved, they stated that they would do everything in their power to convince their parents of their choice. Participant 5 cited Raj’s dialogue in *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) as inspiration for this sentiment. “If you look at Raj, he wanted to do it the right way. Instead of saying ‘let’s just elope to
Switzerland,’ he makes sure that Simran’s parents are on board.” The power of love in the case of these films is not just romantic love, it is familial love. Participants note that films reach a resolution when both of these forms of love are achieved.

Though Bollywood may negate arranged marriage, a practice rooted in family tradition, it still gives family a strong role in the pursuit of independent love. While scholars have referred to situations in which the parents facilitate the meeting but the individuals ind fall in love as “arranged-love marriages,” participants have consistently used the word “introduced” marriage in describing the situation. Participant 7 notes that “today, arranged marriages have evolved into introduced marriages. Kids have the option to say yes or no whereas in the past they just went along with it and were sometimes forced. But the reason why we still call it arranged marriage today is because of the parent’s involvement.” In describing her parent’s marriage, Participant 4 states, “in my family, arranged marriage is more of an introduction. My parents were introduced but they dated for a while and then got married” similar to the way the main protagonists of *Hum Aapke Hain Koun…! (1994)* fall in love. Family approval certainly plays as much a role in partner selection for Indian Americans as it is represented in Bollywood films.

**Regulation.** All participants stated that they would not want to marry someone that their family does not approve of. Such a partner is often embodied in a non-ethnically Indian person. Participant 5 mentioned that his parents would not take too well to him marrying a non-Indian woman. He shares that what he looks for in a future wife is very much in line with his parent’s expectations, “she should know her mother tongue, and hopefully follows some [Hindu] festivals” (Participant 5). This is not to say that none of the participants have had or are in relation-
ships with non-Indians. However for participants who are in relationships with partners outside their ethnicity, they express that it is important that their partner embraces their Indian culture (Participant 8). A handful of participants have noted a difference in the way they look at their relationships with non-Indians versus Indians. Of the ten participants, three revealed a sense of heightened seriousness when dating Indian Americans versus people of other ethnicities. Participant 6 notes that his parents “lean in” more when he dates an Indian American woman. He attributes the fact that he takes these relationships more seriously than others to Bollywood’s portrayal of women. “I definitely equate Indian girls with purity in the way Indian women in Bollywood are fetishized. I think Indian culture presumes to be more pure than other cultures” (Participant 6).

**Arranged Marriage: Not a Bad Option**

Analyzing the interviews through the frameworks of Encoding/Decoding and Circuit of Culture does not nearly exhaust all of the content that the participants had to offer. It is worth expanding on the participants views of arranged marriage overall. When asked for a definition of arranged marriage, all participants cited parental involvement as a key component. They also talked about how the agency of the individual has increased over time. Should their parents bring them a proposal, they all knew that they would have the final say. The amount of agency that differentiates an arranged marriage in real life versus reel life is what allows them to see it as an option for meeting someone. Participant 3 cited that arranged marriage today is no different than dating apps such as Tinder, Coffee Meets Bagel, or Bumble. It is simply a matter of parents do-
ing the matchmaking versus an algorithm. Participant 4 said that she would take her “parents over an app any day.” This further supports the results of the two studies that indicate an openness to arranged marriage despite what Bollywood films have to say.

Limitations

_A More Diverse Participant Pool._ The ten participants for Study 2 were acquired through primarily convenience and some snowball sampling. It would have been greatly beneficial to snowball into more diverse sample pools and recruit more participants for the study. While the pool of Indian Americans for this study came from varied backgrounds, the majority of participants were friends or acquaintances. It will be interesting to see in future research if participants who are not already friends or acquaintances will answer questions differently. Crosschecking the results of this data in a second round of interviewees from wider sample pools will surely provide further insights.

_Including LGBTQ Voices._ On the whole, this study primarily focuses on heterosexual relationships. Mainstream Bollywood films, especially of the 90’s and early 2000’s, rarely (if at all) depict homosexual relationships. They appear to promote heteronormativity as the correct, and only form of existence. This is likely due to the fact that same sex marriages are, and always have been illegal in India (Seetharaman, 2017). Given this, the majority of the literature on arranged marriage in India also does not address homosexual arranged marriage, or even the possibility of it. Of the ten participants interviewed in Study 2, one participant did not express an openness to arranged marriage because he felt that as a gay man, it did not apply to him (Partici-
Taking his response into consideration, it would be interesting to conduct the same study on how members of the LGBTQ community perceive arranged marriage through the lens of Bollywood.

A Comparative Analysis of Independent Love Portrayals in Western Media. Given the fact that all ten participants are Indian American, i.e. they grew up in America, it would be negligent not to acknowledge the presence of Western media content in their lives. Every single participant did mention some level American film and television consumption. Participants 3 and 9 pointed out that for the most part, Hollywood films do not include arranged marriage narratives because it is not a practice central to the American cultural milieu. “What Indians call ‘love marriage’ is just ‘marriage’” in America,” noted Participant 3. Though the results of Study 2 indicated that Indian Americans do base their opinions of arranged marriage on family rather than film, some did cite an aspiration to find love in the fantastical way that Bollywood represents. Therefore, comparing portrayals of romance in Hollywood and Bollywood to understand how these depictions inform Indian American’s views and expectations on independent love would make for an interesting analysis.
DISCUSSION

Encoding/Decoding

Hall proposes three hypothetical positions that a viewer of a televisual media takes when decoding a message they see on screen. As mentioned in the literature review, the three positions include the dominant/hegemonic position, the negotiable position, and the oppositional position (Hall, 1993, 100). Although this study looks specifically at cinema and not specifically televisual media, the two mediums involve encoded messages both visually and aurally making this framework applicable to the study.

The results of the qualitative content analysis reveal that the message encoded in all nine films is that independent love marriages are superior to arranged marriages. Participants take a negotiated position when decoding this message. While they consistently agree that an “independent love marriage” is preferable, they negate the position that arranged marriage is forced or oppressive as shown in the films. This negotiated position is primarily informed by their experiences with their parents and other family members who have had successful arranged or “introduced” marriages as many participants like to call it. This insight is very much in line with the findings of Tirumala’s study where he cites family as a main factor in building cultural identity and shaping understandings of various facets of culture (Tirumala, 2009, 72).

Participants also agree that the portrayal of love is highly unrealistic and is a result of the fact that Bollywood films are simply produced as “commercials for romantic relationships.” This contrasts with the dominant/hegemonic position they took as children in their acceptance of the portrayal of love in films, they acknowledge that it was mainly due to the fact that they had not
experienced the emotion yet. Film was a main source for learning about love as many partici-
pants. Those with parents who had arranged marriages especially mentioned that they did not see
extensive displays of affection between their parents at home. While Disney and Hollywood con-
tent did play a role in constructing views on how to pursue love, Bollywood films provided a cast
of characters that were more representative of their identity. Furthermore, the portrayal of family
as central to narratives around love and marriage contributed to the overall relatability of the
film. Several participants note that if and when they fall in love with someone, it is of utmost im-
portance to them that their families agree to their choice because, as many state, “a marriage is
not just between two people, it is between two families.”

**Circuit of Culture**

Bollywood has a pervasive presence in the lives of Indian Americans. Whether or not a
person intentionally consumes Bollywood, it’s ubiquity lends itself to passive consumption at the
very least. Interactions between diasporic Indians often appear to be centered around Bollywood,
be it families who bond over a movie every Friday night to university culture shows featuring
Bollywood dance numbers. One subject states that “We may speak different regional languages,
eat different foods, but Bollywood is the common ground of being Indian in America.”

To accompany this omnipresence of Bollywood, Stuart Hall’s all-encompassing Circuit
of Culture seems a fitting framework to discuss Bollywood’s commodification and treatment of
“independent love” that results in a negation of arranged marriage. As Annabelle M. Leve astute-
ly points out, if the five “moments” of the Circuit of Culture and the “interconnections between
them, are considered then all of the major viewpoints into the construction of a cultural phe-
nomenon appear to be potentially addressed” (Leve, 2012, 5). A comprehensive analysis of the
literature review, content analysis, and interviews is thus discussed through the framework of
Stuart Hall’s Circuit of Culture to understand Bollywood as a cultural artifact that is concerned
with matters of love and marriage.

Identity Formation through Consumption of Bollywood

The discussion of identity and belonging supports Tirumala’s findings in his thesis that
analyzes consumption of Bollywood as a means of identity formation amongst Indian Ameri-
cans. Based on interviews he conducted with a similar demographic profile, he was able to ascer-
tain that Bollywood is an influential force in the lives of Indian Americans due to “no language
barrier” (courtesy of subtitles), “showcasing of family values and religion,” “portrayal of Indian
society and traditions,” and “transmission of Indian culture in an engaging fashion.” (Tirumala,
2009, 72).

If indeed participants attribute their consumption of Bollywood to their ability to con-
nect with Indian Americans culturally, then it can be said that the very act of consuming Bolly-
wood films is a form of identity formation itself. Filmmakers appeared to have recognized this,
as reflected in the increasing film consumption through the 90’s. Participants cite that these
filmmakers seemed to have made concerted efforts to include NRI communities in the narratives
of their films. Many of the protagonists, particularly the male protagonists, lived abroad in West-
ern countries such as the United States, England, and Italy. One participant cited that they felt
more connected with these films because “they show places I am more familiar with.” These films showed individualism in love, a more Western construct, however at the end, the family, fragmented by the tensions of romantic love, was always brought back together. This family equilibrium is something that subjects cite to be very important, that despite the rhetoric of romantic love and individuality, a marriage is still a union of two families.

**Is Bollywood a Regulative Tool in its Representation of Partner Selection?**

As discussed in the literature review, arranged marriage was represented as either a “performance of duty” or “a cultural bridge between Indians and NRIs.” A distinct pattern that emerged in Study 1 was that films set in India represented arranged marriage as a performance of duty while films set abroad embodied the cultural bridge representation. Interviews revealed that regardless of which category representations of arranged marriage fall under, it is more apparent that the practice signifies a lack of agency which in turn strengthens the argument for independent love. This then creates room for a discussion on independent love portrayals in Bollywood films.

In analyzing how messages in Bollywood around independent love and marriage are decoded by Indian Americans, the representation and regulation moments of the circuit offer a most interesting analysis. Though one cannot prove causality, there are some interesting similarities to consider in how representations of partner selection in film might regulate partner selection in real life.
Diasporic Indians such as Simran in *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (1995)* are shown to pursue romantic relationships with only those who are of the same ethnic background. Despite living in London her whole life, it is clear that the thought of a romantic association with a member of any other ethnic group is out of the question. While one might reasonably argue that this stems from her conservative upbringing, it is interesting to note that even the sexually liberated Pooja (Kareena Kapoor) in *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham (2001)* also pursues relationships with only those who are ethnically Indian. In the film, she has two beaus, first Robby, the British-Indian campus heartthrob, then Rohan (Hrithik Roshan), the protagonist’s brother. Bollywood is highly encouraging of such homogeneity and is clearly disapproving of characters who venture outside their ethnicity. In *Pardes (1997)*, Rajiv’s character is antagonized partly on the premise that he engages in relationships with non-Indian women. He is labeled with the dishonor of being a “bad Indian” on several occasions throughout the film.

This representation of who the “right” partner should be bares some resemblance to the partner selection patterns of not all, but many participants in Study 2. As mentioned in the Results section, a handful of participants noted an heightened sense of seriousness when dating those who are ethnically Indian versus those who are not. Participant 6 mentioned this in light of the way Bollywood portrays Indian women, presuming them to be more “pure” than Western women. It is also supported by data from a study titled “Dating and Mate Selection Among Young Adults from Immigrant Families” seeking to understand exactly what the title indicates, how second-generation members of diasporic groups select partners. In this study, the researchers interviewed 35 culturally diverse second generation youth between the ages of 18-30.
The findings from these interviews showed that parents prefer their children to choose partners of the same cultural background and ethnicity and for the most part, youth seek “bicultural partners like themselves” (Nesteruk & Gramescu, 2012, Abstract). Participants in Study 2 mainly speak to this from a point of comfort. To paraphrase Participant 1, it is simply easier when your partner shares the same background and cultural identity.

Though there are no metrics to measure this, a level of Foucauldian biopolitics seem to be in play here. Biopolitics or biopower is a term coined by Michael Foucault who theorized that “it was essential that the state know what was happening with its citizen’s sex, and the use they made of it, but also that each individual be capable controlling the use he made of it. Between the state and the individual, sex became an issue, and a public issue no less” (Foucault, 1980, 26). One could argue through this lens that Bollywood became a regulative tool in representing partner selection patterns of a “good Indian.” These films provide an overt recommendation, especially to NRIs, to marry someone a) of the same ethnic background, i.e. an Indian and b) someone that the family would approve of. To this point, it appears that Bollywood is promoting independent love, but more so through the agenda of the “arranged-love” marriage.

Limitations/Future Research around the Moment of Production

As research primarily interested in audience point of view, perceived intentions of message encoding in the production of the studied films are articulated by participants. This raises a limitation in this thesis as the moment of production is not addressed from the perspective of the producer or filmmaker (the actual message encoder). In future research, one could analyze
how producers encode meaning through interviews with filmmakers and conduct research on the
studios that produce these films. From there, a comparative analysis with the data gleaned from
this thesis could reveal an interesting relationship between how a message is encoded and decoded.

One could also look at the Encoding and Decoding relationship through the production
of their own film. Though the means of production and the target audience of one’s own film
may vary greatly from the reach of Bollywood films, the creation of a film and the feedback that
comes from screening it can directly speak to the way messages are encoded and decoded. As the
filmmaker, you would know what message you are trying to convey, and can directly see how
audiences decode your message.

**Documentary Filmmaking Based Research**

Another research method that would be interesting to use for future research is document-
tary filmmaking. The use of documentary film as a research method not only makes for more dy-
namic content, it also provides greater accessibility. Much of the research published in academic
journals is only circulated in academic circles. Researchers Friend and Caruthers view film as a
more inclusive presentation of research, asserting that “video also provides the opportunity for
viewers to engage in their own meaning-making” (Friend & Caruthers, 34, 2016). Documentary
filmmaking becomes particularly useful when presenting research on cultural experiences such
as arranged marriage that are not shared. Watching a documentary about arranged marriage as
opposed to reading a paper allows audiences to engage more personally with the content.
In the fall of 2017, I created a short documentary titled “A Happy Arrangement.” This documentary was a portrait of an Indian American couple, Vinu and Senthil, who were arranged in marriage. The film takes viewers on a five year walk down memory lane from their initial introductory email exchange all the way to the birth of their first child. The couple talk about their awkward first meeting amidst twenty family members, navigating a long distance courtship, learning to adjust after moving in together, and finally raising their one year old daughter.

The four month process of making this documentary film taught me a great deal about modern arranged marriages and supplemented much of the interview data in Study 2. In defining what arranged marriage looks like today, several participants defined it as a process in which the parents facilitate a meeting between two individuals, however it is finally up to them to decide whether or not to pursue a marriage. A few of the participants even likened it to a dating app, except in this case, the parents do the job of the app. Vinu and Senthil’s story provided a real life illustration of this data. In the film, Vinu talks about the agreement she always had with her parents that she would have an arranged marriage. She acknowledges that “growing up in America, [she saw her] friends starting to date.” However she trusted her parents and knew that they would never force her to marry someone she did not like - contradicting what she, as well as the study’s participants, point out to be a misconception of arranged marriage.

While Vinu and Senthil recognize that there are many differences between arranged and non-arranged marriages, the couple still draws parallels between the two throughout the film. They first reminisce about the courting process, stating that “you put everything out on the table” to check for compatibility like you would when you are dating someone, but at an accelerated
rate in this case. As the film progresses, they provide a highly relatable account of moving in to-
gether for the first time. They spoke about it as a transition that they would have to get through,
much like any other couple in their nascent stages of sharing a home. Senthil humorously admits
that they are still getting through it and “she still doesn’t put her clothes away” as the camera
pans through their respective closets. At the end of the day, the means to getting into a marriage
may be different, but once you say “I do” the experiences of navigating a marriage are universal.

Ultimately the goal of this film was to challenge existing perceptions of what arranged
marriages look like. In addition to the interviews, a significant portion of the film features pho-
tographs of Vinu and Senthil through the years, wedding video clips, and footage of the couple in
their every day lives. As indicated in the Literature Review and Study 1, films - Bollywood or
otherwise - have created a negative aura around the institution. Participants too stated in Study 2
that love is what sells, therefore that is what mainstream cinema shows. While the results of
Study 2 show that Indian Americans base their opinions of arranged marriage on examples in
their family and community, not everyone has real life examples to shape their opinions of the
practice. Documentary film is the perfect platform to provide a visual depiction that is closer to
reality. This is not to say that there are no biases in documentary filmmaking. After all, the film-
maker chooses what makes it into the final cut and what gets hidden (Stille, 2011, 105). However
when using documentary film as a research method, the concerns of profit that exist in commer-
cial production houses do not shape the portrayal of a subject matter.

Documentary filmmaking is very similar to ethnographic research in that you involve
yourself heavily in the world of your subjects. In making this documentary, I immersed myself in
Vinu and Senthil’s family. I not only spent time observing their daily lives, I also spoke to various family members. Though he ultimately did not make it into the film, I interviewed Vinu’s newly wed brother Karthik to learn his take on arranged marriage. It was interesting to see that while Vinu wholeheartedly accepted the idea of arranged marriage, her brother had some doubts as a child. He attributes these doubts not to Bollywood, but to Disney films, another bastion of romantic love. Karthik even recounts a conversation he had with his mother as a child, asking her what would happen if he fell in love with somebody on his own. While both brother and sister are happily arranged in marriage today, hearing Karthik’s contrasting take on arranged marriage as a child provided insights on Vinu’s personality that might not have been apparent in traditionally academic forms of inquiry.

In addition to interviews and spending time with my subjects, I also immersed myself in archival videos and photos of the family. Though I did so specifically with the purpose of finding artifacts to include in the documentary, I learned so much about Vinu and Senthil, their parents, extended family, and friends. The photos and videos were very reflective of the positivity and happiness that both Vinu and Senthil radiate. Their childhood photos particularly showed a closeness with their family that is evocative of the ways Study 2 participants spoke about their families. This importance of family is later reflected in a statement Vinu makes in the film that “a marriage is not between two people, it is between two families” and extends into their description of family involvement in raising their daughter.

The use of archival material is certainly not foreign to traditional qualitative forms of research. Had I taken an ethnographic approach to my research in Study 2, I certainly would have
done a similar deep dive into the lives of my participants. However in my experience, a different layer of attention is added when searching for content to tell a visual story. In documentary filmmaking, your research is not simply to learn about your subject, it is to carry a narrative forward.

Friend and Caruthers encapsulate the interdisciplinary nature of documentary film referring to it as a medium that “incorporates or reconstructs borders of disciplines, research paradigms, geographical locations and cultures” (Friend & Caruthers, 2016, 33-34; Gribich, 2013). Given that the world of academia has the propensity to be insular, research and insight often seem to circulate only in these communities. However, knowledge is meant to be spread. The reach of documentary film is much wider than journal articles (Friend & Caruthers, 2016, 34) and can engage more voices that may in turn contribute to the dialogue.
CONCLUSION

This research found that as adults, Indian Americans are mostly open to an arranged marriage in the modern sense. They filter Bollywood’s messages around independent love and arranged marriage through their own family and life experiences, thereby negating the hypothesis that Bollywood’s portrayal of arranged marriage dissuades Indian Americans from viewing it as an option. Though many admit that they hope to find love in the fantastical way they see it happen on screen, they trust their parents and know that they will never be forced to marry someone that they do not like. They also agree that Bollywood films show exaggerated and extreme portrayals of arranged and therefore dismiss the negative depiction of the practice as Bollywood’s business tactic. This research also highlights similarities in the way partner selection is shown on screen and how Indian Americans look for partners in real life. Given the importance of family shown both in Bollywood films and in Indian culture, Indian Americans are sure that whether they end up in an independent love marriage or an arranged marriage, the approval of their parents is key. The table below summarizes the findings of the qualitative content analysis and the in-depth interviews through the Encoding/Decoding and Circuit of Culture frameworks:
Finding a partner has become increasingly difficult in today’s world. As Aziz Ansari describes in his book *Modern Romance*, people are always looking for something better. The resulting complexities that stem from this outlook can make pursuing love independently nightmare for many. It certainly does not help that film and media make finding love seem an easy, effortless feat. To navigate the complexities a recent CNN article asks millennials in India how they feel about an arranged marriage. Though there are differences in the way millennials in India and Indian American millennials grow up and exercise agency, some of their thoughts appear to be universal. One interviewee named Bhargavee, 26, cites that "It is convenient. It's too much trouble to find the right person." Interviewees liken the process of arranged marriage to “hiring someone for a top government job and knowing exactly what you’re getting. The vetting is done before anyone signs on a dotted line” (Basu, 2018). Many of these young women have been con-

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<tbody>
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<td>Qualitative Content Analysis</td>
<td>Bollywood favors independent love over arranged marriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-depth Interviews</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encoding/Decoding</td>
<td>Participants take a dominant position as children and a negotiated position as adults. The negotiated position as adults allows for them to be open to arranged marriage as an option.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circuit of Culture</td>
<td>Bollywood can be interpreted as a regulative tool in its representation of partner selection.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5: Findings

Finding a partner has become increasingly difficult in today’s world. As Aziz Ansari describes in his book *Modern Romance*, people are always looking for something better. The resulting complexities that stem from this outlook can make pursuing love independently nightmare for many. It certainly does not help that film and media make finding love seem an easy, effortless feat. To navigate the complexities a recent CNN article asks millennials in India how they feel about an arranged marriage. Though there are differences in the way millennials in India and Indian American millennials grow up and exercise agency, some of their thoughts appear to be universal. One interviewee named Bhargavee, 26, cites that "It is convenient. It's too much trouble to find the right person." Interviewees liken the process of arranged marriage to “hiring someone for a top government job and knowing exactly what you’re getting. The vetting is done before anyone signs on a dotted line” (Basu, 2018). Many of these young women have been con-
ditioned to believe that they will have an arranged marriage and state that Bollywood shows the exact opposite of what happens in life. However 20 year old Naina shares her outlook that “I would hope that I am destined to fall in love and life has love in store for me in some form or another” (Basu, 2018). In other words, she is open to the idea that love can be found in an arranged marriage. As many participants of Study 2 express a frustration with today’s dating scene, they note that an arranged marriage may just make things easier. While they frame the desire to choose one’s partner independently as “human nature” (Participant 2), they also cite that it is important not to be blinded by the unrealistic portrayals and glorification of love that Bollywood offers.

The dialogue around arranged marriage has changed significantly within diasporic circles as well, especially with the rise of Indian Americans in mainstream American media. Personalities such as Aziz Ansari and Hasan Minaj frequently speak about their parent’s successful arranged marriages. Geeta and Ravi Patel’s film “Meet the Patels” also does a thorough job of exploring what it means to have an arranged marriage in the new millennium. The work done by such media personalities spreads awareness around arranged marriage and works to debunk misconceptions around the practice that are harbored in Western society and spread by Bollywood.

Though Bollywood continues to sustain a bias towards independent love, emergent trends diverge from the overtness of 90’s and early 2000’s cinema. As the new millennium has progressed, a number of films have begun to show arranged marriage in a positive light. Films such as Just Married (2007), Rab Ne Bana Di Jodi (2008), and Dum Laga Ke Haisha (2015) depict the process of falling in love after an arranged marriage. For example, Dum Laga Ke Haisha
(2015) provides a particularly interesting take on the practice in that it shows a situation in which the female protagonist is interested in the alliance however the male protagonist is averse, mainly because she is overweight. The two struggle through an initially rough period and reach the brink of divorce. However over time, they learn to love each other, thereby presenting arranged marriage in a way that it had never been seen in the early 1990s and 2000s. Bollywood’s evolution in representing arranged marriage is reflective of widely held attitudes of Indian Americans towards the practice. The potential for rich storytelling inherent in more nuanced views on love and marriage is finally materializing on screen, slowly challenging the independent love and arranged marriage binary of the 1990s and early 2000s. It will be interesting to see how this trend plays out in future research on film and society.
APPENDIX A: DIALOGUE CHART

The chart indicates how many quotes fall under the three categories of independent love, arranged marriage, and arranged love marriage. Within the three categories, each quote is assigned a valence level which is reflected in the chart.

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</table>

Figure 6: Dialogue Sorting Results
APPENDIX B: FILM PLOT SUMMARIES

Films in Support of Independent Love

*Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (1995)*

After falling in love on a Eurorail trip, Raj (Shah Rukh Khan) and Simran (Kajol) have the arduous task of breaking off her arranged marriage to Kuljit, a man of her father’s choosing. When Simran’s father Baldev (Amrish Puri) discovers that his daughter has fallen in love with an NRI, he whisks his family away to India from their home in London as he is convinced that he knows what is best for his daughter. Raj follows the family to India, befriends Kuljit, and involves himself in the wedding preparations to win over the family. After a dramatic climax, Baldev finally realizes that nobody could love Simran as much as Raj and lets her go.

*Dil To Pagal Hai (1997)*

Pooja (Madhuri Dixit) is hired to dance in Rahul’s (Shahrukh Khan) dance production when his main dancer Nisha (Karishma Kapoor) injures her leg. As Pooja and Rahul spend more time together, they begin to fall in love. However, Pooja is promised to Ajay (Akshay Kumar), the son of her foster parents. She feels that she must marry him out of thanks for all that his parents have done for her. In the end, Ajay realizes through a tape recording that Pooja meant to send to Rahul that she is in love with him and the lovers are united.

*Pardes (1997)*

When NRI Kishorilal (Amrish Puri) visits his friend Suraj Dev (Alok Nath) in India, he sees a potential daughter-in-law in Suraj Dev’s daughter, Ganga (Mahima Chaudhary). Deciding that Ganga is exactly what his brattish, American-born son Rajiv needs, he gets the two engaged and Ganga joins her soon-to-be family in Los Angeles. As Ganga slowly discovers Rajiv’s various vices (drinking, drugs, promiscuous relationships) she also finds herself relying emotionally on Rajiv’s foster brother Arjun (Shahrukh Khan). The two fall in love but do not acknowledge it because Ganga is bound in an arranged marriage with Rajiv. Ultimately, when Ganga is nearly raped by Rajiv, Arjun takes her back to India. After an intense fight, Kishorilal realizes that Arjun is a better match for Ganga and the two unite.
**Kuch Kuch Hota Hai (1998)**

Before Tina (Rani Mukherji) dies of childbirth complications, she leaves a series of letters to her daughter Anjali asking her to unite her father Rahul (Shahrukh Khan) and his college best friend Anjali (Kajol). Though Rahul and Anjali were best friends, Anjali secretly had feelings for Rahul but could never reveal them because he was already in love with Tina. The young Anjali embarks on this journey only to find that Anjali has been arranged in marriage to Aman Mehra (Salman Khan). Determined to fulfill her late mother’s wish, Anjali does not give up and succeeds to break off the arranged marriage proving that true love conquers all.

**Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham (2001)**

Rahul (Shahrukh Khan) is the adopted son of millionaire Yash Raichand (Amitabh Bachchan). When he falls in love with a lower class woman, Anjali (Kajol) despite already being arranged in marriage to a family friend’s daughter, Naina (Rani Mukherji), the status conscious Yash is furious. Rahul however goes through with marrying Anjali and Yash disowns him saying “you have proven that you are not my blood.” The couple moves to London and cuts all ties with the family. A decade later, Rahul’s younger brother Rohan (Hrithik Roshan) takes it upon himself to reunite the family and does so successfully as Yash finally accepts Anjali as his daughter-in-law.

**Devdas (2002)**

When Devdas (Shahrukh Khan) comes back home after a decade of schooling in London, he is most excited to see his childhood sweetheart Paro (Aishwarya Rai). The two plan to get married however their plan is shattered by Devdas’s parents who are appalled at the idea of their son marrying someone of a lower caste. Paro is subsequently arranged in marriage to an older widower with children sending Devdas cascading into the abyss of alcoholism, ultimately leading to his death.

**Veer Zara (2004)**

After Indian Air Force pilot Veer Pratap Singh (Shah Rukh Khan) rescues Pakistani Zaara (Preity Zinta) from a bus accident, the two fall deeply in love. Unfortunately, Zaara is arranged
in marriage to the son of her father’s business partner. The news that Zaara is in love with an Indian man shatters her family. Not wanting to cause further problems, Veer visits Zaara in Pakistan and says that it is best that they part ways. On his way back he is captured and arrested by Zaara’s arranged fiance. After 22 years, a young lawyer fights for Veer in court and is able to free him. He finds out that Zaara never married her arranged suitor and the star crossed lovers unite to spend the rest of their advanced years together.

Films in Support of Arranged-Love

_Hum Aapke Hain Koun…! (1994)_

Amidst the preparations of the arranged marriage of their siblings Pooja and Rajesh, Nisha (Madhuri Dixit) and Prem (Salman Khan) fall in love. After a short year of marital bliss, Pooja falls down the stairs and dies, widowing Rajesh and leaving their newborn infant motherless. Before Nisha and Prem can reveal their love to the world, the families suggest that Nisha marry her brother-in-law so that the baby can have a mother. Nisha agrees out of a sense of duty, but is heartbroken. Finally in the end, Rajesh discovers a love letter from Nisha to Prem and brings the two together in matrimony.

_Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam (1999)_

When Nandini (Aishwarya Rai) falls in love with the handsome Italian-Indian visitor, Sameer (Salman Khan), her father is enraged. In their traditional family, only the fathers choose who their daughters marry, girls have no say. Sameer is sent back to Italy and Nandini is arranged in marriage to Vanraj (Ajay Devgan), a successful lawyer. When Vanraj discovers that Nandini is still pining for Sameer, he takes it upon himself to help her find Sameer and reunite the two. In the process, Nandini falls in love with Vanraj, touched by his commitment to her happiness. The film ends with Nandini finally finding Sameer, but telling him that she has changed and is in love with Vanraj.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


