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# *Masala and Misogyny*: A Qualitative Study of South Asian American Women's Ethnic-Racial Identity

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**Abstract:** The present study explores the lived experiences of South Asian American women and what elements shape their ethnic-racial identity (ERI). Particularly, it discovers what push and pull factors encourage South Asian American women to lean towards or away from their ERI. This qualitative study used an open-ended survey to gather responses from 38 South Asian American women. Our qualitative study findings suggest that there are diverse elements of South Asian culture that encourage South Asian American women to embrace and/or reject parts of their ERI. Data analysis revealed that cultural aspects are impactful elements (e.g., food, music, community) that sustain South Asian American women's connection with their ERI. Alternatively, the presence of patriarchy, misogyny, and feeling "othered" are factors that disengage South Asian American women from their ERI. Findings from this study contribute to the ongoing and vital expansion of the discussion of ERI and tap into the nuances of South Asian American women's ERI.

***Keywords*:** South Asian American, women, ethnic-racial identity

"Who are you? How do you identify?" were questions Sonia struggled to answer for her final project in graduate school. Since childhood, Sonia struggled to explain her identity as a South Asian woman raised in America. Sonia often wondered whether she was "more" South Asian because she loved wearing a *saree* rather than a dress or "more" American because of her progressive views on gender norms. Sonia loved the smell of *masala* that brought her comfort yet felt foreign to others. She envisioned both South Asian and American cultures in a Venn diagram where she cherry-picked elements from each culture that resonated with her identity without the guilt of not feeling "enough" of either. Sonia yearned for her family, friends, and society to understand that the journey to embody her dual cultural identity as a South Asian American woman was accompanied by a lifelong battle of cultural pride, confusion, exclusion, and acceptance. Sonia made a cup of *chai* with her bagel and sat at her desk. She pondered her final project and began to type, "Hello, *Namaste, Salaam*, I am Soh-nee-yah".

Understanding one's identity is a complex journey influenced by diverse factors across life trajectories. Similar to Sonia, many South Asian American women from a young age begin to unfold parts of their identity to comprehend who and what they are. While previous literature has

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taken some interest in Asian American's identity development, there remains minimal research on the identity of a unique population: *South Asian American women*.

Buidman and Ruiz (2021) found that Asian Americans (inclusive of South Asians) are the fastest-growing racial or ethnic group in the United States. Given this finding, research must mirror our current society's diverse population and be inclusive of South Asian American women's identity and experiences. Therefore, this qualitative study aims to discover the push and pull factors that encourage South Asian American women to either lean towards or away from their ethnic-racial identity (ERI), or the attitudes and beliefs of their ethnic-racial group and the development of it over time. South Asian American in this study refers to individuals who are from Bangladeshi, Indian, Nepali, Pakistani, and Sri Lankan descent and raised in the United States.

We begin by explaining the theoretical frameworks of ERI and South Asian American women's ERI. Secondly, we present the methods of data collection and findings from qualitative data analysis. Lastly, the implications of our findings speak to the significance of South Asian American women's ERI and calls for more inclusivity of South Asian American women's voices and identity experiences in research.

## Ethnic-Racial Identity

Scholars have proposed distinct definitions for racial and ethnic identity. Ethnic identity is "a dynamic, multidimensional construct that refers to one's identity, or sense of self, in ethnic terms, that is, in terms of a subgroup within a larger context that claims a common ancestry and shares one or more of the following elements: culture, race, religion, language, kinship, or place of origin" (Burlew, 2000, p. 254). On the other hand, racial identity is defined as "a sense of collective or group identity tied to one's perception that she is a member of a group that shares a cultural heritage" (Helms, 1990, p. 3). In examining these definitions, it is apparent that these identities may overlap; however, their differences are nuanced. The key difference between these concepts is the lens through which the group is studied. Thus, South Asian Americans' ethnic identity is "Indian, Pakistani,"' whereas their racial identity would be classified as "Asian" or "South Asian."

The Pew Research Center conducted a qualitative study that investigated what it means to be Asian American in the United States (Ruiz et al.,2022). The researchers found that participants who were born in the United States identified sometimes as Asian, or their ethnicity and American (Ruiz et al., 2022). Additionally, the research found that some smaller Asian sub-groups identify with being Asian American because the majority group does not recognize their ethnic origin. The researchers concluded that the majority, especially in the media, associate Asians with being from East Asia (Ruiz et al., 2022), thus creating a disconnect for all other Asian groups who do not look East Asian. As such, simply studying one aspect of South Asian American women's identity would not encompass the nuances of their holistic identity.

Given the complex interplay between ethnic and racial characteristics for South Asian Americans, we focus our investigation on ethnic-racial identity (ERI). The primary scholars of ERI define it "as a multidimensional, psychological construct that reflects the beliefs and attitudes that individuals have about their ethnic-racial group memberships, as well as the processes by which these beliefs and attitudes develop over time" (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014, p. 23). The conceptualization of ERI involves both content and process, where content refers to the beliefs and attitudes and process refers to the mechanism by which the attitudes and beliefs are developed and maintained (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2020).

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## Ethnic-Racial Identity Development

ERI development spans across an individual's life and is influenced by different factors. (Williams et al., 2020). Umaña-Taylor et al. (2014) outline the developmental trajectory of ERI and suggest that ERI construction depends on both developmental milestones and social context. ERI exploration begins in childhood and each stage of life aligns to different strategies individuals may use to construct their ERI. Adolescents engage in ERI exploration, meaning they look for information about their ethnic-racial group, have conversations with others about their ERI, and participate in ethnically and racially relevant activities (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). In adulthood, individuals begin to consider the intersectionality between their other identities and ERI, which creates a more holistic understanding of their identity that they incorporate into various facets of their lives (i.e. career choices).

Extending this work, Williams et al. (2020) developed a model of ERI development that explicates "potential influencers of change in ERI throughout the lifespan, with careful attention to proximal and distal contexts that inform development and the interaction of these contexts with the growing conceptual and social cognitive abilities" (p. 101). Their model suggests that ERI is shaped by five key ethnic-racial dimensions (awareness, affiliation, attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge) which are present across the lifespan. Additionally, how each dimension manifests at each stage depends on various influences (identity-relevant experiences, developmental considerations, meaning-making, and context). Finally, this model explains how processes at an earlier stage may connect to processes at a later stage (i.e., sorting in early childhood relates to public regard in adulthood). Ultimately, both these models assert that ERI development is the outcome of various processes and factors across an individual's life.

### *Ethnic-Racial Socialization*

Ethnic-racial socialization (ERS) refers to the mechanisms through which individuals learn about their ethnic and racial groups (Hughes et al., 2006). Like ERI development, ERS starts during youth from parental figures and family transmitting messages about their ethnic-racial group and expanding to others (Hughes et al., 2006; Wang & Lin, 2023). The ERS strategies that parents utilize also change based on their child's demographic characteristics and experiences of discrimination (Hughes & Chen, 1997). There are four components of ERS: cultural socialization, preparation for bias, promotion of mistrust, and egalitarianism and silence about race. Cultural socialization refers to the insights parents share about their cultural heritage, traditions, and values to "promote cultural, racial, and ethnic pride" (Hughes et al., 2006, p. 749). The second component of ERS is preparation for bias in which parents describe how their ethnic-racial group may be discriminated against and how to cope with it. Third is the promotion of mistrust, which "refers to practices that emphasize the need for wariness and distrust in interracial interactions (Hughes et al., 2006, p. 757). The last component of ERS is egalitarianism and silence about race. Within this facet of ERS, parents focus on encouraging their child to be more aligned with the mainstream ethnic and racial group in their environment, rather than their own. The literature cites that utilizing these four strategies of ERS may result in a positive self-image, better understanding of ethnic identity, enhanced self-esteem, improved coping strategies for discrimination, lower levels of deviance, and positive academic and psychosocial outcomes (Grindal, 2017; Grindal & Neiri, 2016; Hughes et al., 2006). Thus, this conceptualization of ERS offers a salient and pragmatic approach to understanding ERI development.

## Key Factors in ERI Development

### *Social Environment and Relationships*

Given that social environment is a critical factor in ERI construction, Syed et al. (2018) propose dimensions of ethnic/racial settings, "or the objective and subjective nature of group representation within an individual's context" (p. 8). The four dimensions are as follows: perspective, differentiation, heterogeneity, and proximity. Syed et al. (2018) explain that when assessing ethnic/racial settings it is important to acknowledge that individuals will have contrasting perspectives of the ethnic and racial composition of the setting, define the in-group and out-group differently depending on the setting, experience differing levels of heterogeneity of groups in a setting, and be physically located at varying distances from the setting. While there is limited research examining the association between ethnic and racial settings and ERI development, this framework provides key insights into the numerous and relevant facets of a social context.

As explained above, parental figures and family members play a vital role in ERS. Umaña-Taylor et al. (2014) explain that non-familial connections and contexts also guide ERI formation and socialization in adulthood. Increased autonomy provides adolescents with the ability to rely on other networks when forming their ERI (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). Thus, peers and friends are also a key factor in ERI development during adolescence.

## Ethnic-Racial Identity Frameworks

### *South Asian American Dual Cultural Identity*

Daulat and Wadhwa's (2022) research explained that Indian American women have a dual cultural identity. Dual cultural identity entails individuals managing identity negotiation and participating in acculturation strategies (Berry, 1988, 2007). Since the 1990s, there has been an increased interest in how South Asians in the United States (U.S.), Canada, and Britain have formed, negotiated, and presented their ethnic identities (Ghosh, 2012; Ghuman, 1998). While the experiences may differ in each country, previous research (Dey et al., 2017; Dhiman, 1997; Finn, 2008; Malhi et al., 2009) reveals a common thread recognizing South Asians' challenge to navigate their dual identities.

As a result, this paved discussion and awareness of South Asian Americans' dual cultural identity. Inman et al. (1999) pointed out that there is minimal attention given to Asian Indian women's unique identity and psychological experiences in America. They emphasize the importance of recognizing the psychological processes of Asian Indian women who are balancing the demands of their cultural origin and the messages received by White American culture (Inman et al., 1999). Understanding the messages from both South Asian and American cultures expanded the dialogue and understanding of what it means to be a *South Asian American*.

Related to these ideas, Kaduvettoor-Davidson and Weatherford (2018) dissect the term "South Asian American" and what this means for South Asians across all subgroups. They evolve this conversation, suggesting that South Asian Americans navigate their dual cultural identity along with experiences of discrimination, minority myth, and gender expectations (Kaduvettoor-Davidson & Weatherford, 2018).

The increase of South Asians in the United States has encouraged more conversation around their dual cultural identity and its relatability to others. Alexander et al. (2021) conducted a mixed-method study that aimed to understand Indian Americans' identities and how they define

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themselves in relation to others. Researchers found that respondents had different definitions for Indian and American and experienced challenges and conflicts when having to sort through both Indian and American influences. The respondents shared that there is complexity "in identifying as both Indian and American identities" (Alexander et al., 2021, p. 7), and disagreement with family about traditional gender-based roles, marriage expectations, and (for women) modesty expectations around clothing. The considerable research on South Asians' dual cultural identity is imperative to better understand South Asian Americans' ERI.

**South Asian Americans' ERI Development**

Past researchers have used diverse conceptual frameworks such as racial identity development and acculturation processes to better understand the complex ERI of South Asians (Joseph et al., 2020; Kim, 2012). An essential framework of South Asians' ERI was introduced by Ibrahim et al. (1997). They proposed an identity development framework for South Asians who were born or migrated to the United States. Specifically, their discussion on ethnic identity development centers on Indian and Pakistani Americans. Ibrahim et al. (1997) present a South Asian Identity Development Model that consists of five stages (Acceptance of cultural differences, Dissonance, Resistance, Introspection, Synergistic Articulation, and Awareness). These stages are key transitions that occur in minority identity development. Further, they point out that these stages and the experiences within them may differ across generational status in Asian Americans. In summary, Ibrahim et al. (1997) suggest an identity development model for South Asians that highlights how their experiences may differ from what other minority racial models have previously suggested.

Extending propositions from Ibrahim et al.'s (1997) work, Iwamoto et al. (2013) conducted a phenomenological qualitative study to explore ERI development among second-generation Asian Indian Americans (those born in the United States). Iwamoto et al. (2013) examined how Asian Indian Americans internalize discrimination and the impact of it on their self-concept. Study findings reveal that racial and ethnic development is ongoing, and that Asian Indian Americans' identity may continuously evolve (Iwamoto et al., 2013). Further, from childhood to adulthood there are diverse factors such as racism and discrimination that impact the development of Asian Indian Americans' racial and ethnic identities (Iwamoto et al., 2013).

Ibrahim et al. (1993) and Iwamoto et al. (2013) present important aspects of the South Asian Identity Development Model. Considering the limited research on South Asians, their research lays a foundation for understanding South Asian identity development better. Findings from both Ibrahim et al. (1993) and Iwamoto et al. (2013) reveal that numerous elements shape ERI. To tap into the nuances of these elements, additional research is needed on South Asians. As a result, these groundbreaking pieces contribute to the formation of our study on South Asian American women's ERI.

South Asian Americans embody an ERI layered in depth and complexity. With the 'push and pull' of clashing sociocultural messages, self-identity acceptance may be challenging for South Asian Americans (Daulat & Wadhwa, 2022). Additionally, previous literature supports that being "American" is often related to Whiteness or "Eurocentric" (Devos & Mohamed, 2014). This may cause societal norms and beliefs to deny the "American" identity directly/indirectly to ethnic minorities and struggle to accept and give a psychological "welcome" to their American identity (Devos & Mohamed, 2014). Further, societal, economic, and cultural factors contribute to the notion that the majority group is the "main" identity in a society leaving other ethnic minority groups feeling subordinate and yearning to belong (Devos & Mohamed, 2014). South Asian

Americans experience a similar multilayered journey as they peel apart "who" they are and how they are perceived by both South Asian and American cultures. However, there is an added layer of complexity when it comes to South Asian American women's ERI.

## South Asian American Women

Consistent with prior research about ERS, from a young age South Asian American women are taught norms and values that influence their attitudes and beliefs about their ERI, and are carried into adulthood (Dasgupta, 1998). However, there is a gendered difference in these teachings, particularly since South Asian culture is highly patriarchal (Chaudhuri et al., 2014). South Asian American women are expected to uphold and preserve the cultural norms and traditions above and beyond their male counterparts (Mehrotra, 2016). Additionally, South Asian American women must be successful in education and marry and bear children by an appropriate age (Mehrotra, 2016). When such expectations are not met, women are ostracized by their family and community members and may even be domestically abused by their partners (Chaudhuri et al., 2014). This may lead to the women subconsciously accepting certain values and beliefs and decreased emotional and mental health (Daulat & Wadhwa, 2022; Subramanian, 2013). That said, it is important to highlight that many of the South Asian norms that South Asian American women are expected to uphold are contrasting to American norms. This may result in cultural value conflict.

Cultural value conflict is when individuals may experience negative feelings when dealing with values and expectations from their culture of origin and their "new" culture (Inman, 2006). Inman (2006) studied the impact of ethnic identity and racial identity on cultural value conflict for first and second-generation South Asian women in intimate relations. In this study, the first generation was defined as those who migrated to the United States after the age of 20 and the second generation were women who were either born or migrated to the United States before the age of 12 (Inman, 2006). Interestingly, for the first generation, ethnic identity revealed a greater variance in intimate relations conflict, and for the second generation, *racial identity* showed greater variance in sex-role expectations (in South Asian culture) conflict (Inman, 2006). Additionally, South Asian American women experience a similar identity struggle in other arenas in life such as work and career (Daulat & Wadhwa, 2024). All in all, findings suggest that there may be an interplay between the roles of ethnic identity and racial identity among South Asian American women. Thus, their American identity will shape facets of South Asian American women's ERI.

## Purpose, Questions, and Significance of the Study

Although there is past research on South Asian Americans, there remains a gap in identifying the factors that influence South Asian American women's ERI. Specifically, South Asian American women who are: first-generation South Asian American women who were born in and whose parents migrated to the United States, or South Asian American women who migrated to the United States at an early age. Additionally, the "push and pull" factors in both South and American cultures consist of complexities that literature has yet to unravel. Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the following questions:

1. What factors contribute to South Asian American women leaning towards their ethnic-racial identity?
2. What factors contribute to South Asian American women leaning away from their ethnic-racial identity?

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This study contributes to the current literature on South Asian women's identities and expands knowledge about the ERI development of South Asian American women.

## Methodology

### Study Design

We used a survey research design that consisted of open-ended questions that were analyzed qualitatively. The survey was administered via Qualtrics, an online survey platform.

### Participants

To collect the data for this study, we used crowdsourcing and convenience sampling via social media to solicit participants. Primarily, we posted the solicitation message with a link to the online survey in a closed Facebook group called *Little Brown Diary (LBD).* LBD is a networking platform for South Asian women living in the United States and Canada and has over 42K members. Little Brown Diary is a group where women from all South Asian subgroups join to find a relatable and safe space. The group consists of 100+ subgroups from mental health support, fashion, motherhood, career, and relationships. While some members of LBD may have an idea of their ERI, many still struggle to understand their dual identity and how to coexist in both South Asian and American cultures.

The solicitation message included the inclusion criteria. The criteria were South Asian (Bangladeshi, Indian, Nepali, Pakistani, Sri Lankan) working women (employed full time; still eligible if on leave of any kind), at least 18 years old, who have been raised in the United States since the age of 12 years old. There were no other inclusion criteria.

Participants who believed they fit the inclusion criteria (mentioned above) were asked to click on the survey link provided in the solicitation message. When they clicked the link, the first page they saw was the informed consent. The informed consent described the study including voluntary participation, benefits, risks, and follow-up. All procedures performed in this study were in accordance with the ethical standards of the Institutional Review Board.

Those participants who clicked "I Agree" were directed through the survey, beginning first with the screening questions for the inclusion criteria. If participants did not meet the criteria (explained above), they were taken to the end of the survey. To ensure confidentiality, no identifying data was collected from participants. If participants did meet all the criteria, the participants were taken through the rest of the survey, which included open-ended questions and demographic questions. At the end of the survey, participants saw debriefing information with the end of the survey message.

We achieved a convenience sample of 38 ($N$= 38) participants that met the inclusion criteria, meaning they identified as a South Asian woman with full-time employment and have lived in the United States since they were 12 years old. The ethnic breakdown was 89.5% Indian, 2.6% Pakistani, 5.3% Bangladeshi and 2.6% other. The respondent's generational status in the United States was 20% immigrated after birth, 77.1% first generation (born in the US, parents were not), and 2.9% third generation (respondent, parents, and grandparents were born in the US). The sexual orientation of respondents was 88.6% Heterosexual or straight, 5.7% Bi-sexual, and 6.8% other or prefer not to say. The marital status was 42.9% Single, 25.7% Serious Relationship, 2.9% Engaged, 25.7% Married, and 2.9% Divorced. The highest education level for respondents was 40% had a bachelor's degree, 34.3% a master's degree, and 25.7% a doctorate degree. The age

spanned a range of 19 years (min. = 22, max. = 41), with an average (*M*) age of 31.11 years (*SD* = 5.42). The employment tenure of respondents spanned 36 years (min. = 0.08, max. = 28), with an average (*M*) tenure of 3.99 years (*SD* = 5.45). 17.1% of respondents were entry-level, 25.7% intermediate seniority, 34.3% mid-level, 14.3% senior, and 8.6% executive. The top two professions were Mental Health Professional (17.6%) and Marketing/Advertising/Creative Services Professionals (11.8%). See Table 1 for full participant demographics.

**Table 1**

*Demographics*

| Demographic Questions | Frequency | % |
|---|---|---|
| What is your ethnicity/background? (*N* = 38) | | |
| Indian | 34 | 89.5 |
| Pakistani | 1 | 2.6 |
| Bangladeshi | 2 | 5.3 |
| Other | 1 | 2.6 |
| What is the highest level of education you have completed? (*N* = 35) | | |
| Bachelor's degree | 12 | 36.8 |
| Master's degree | 12 | 31.6 |
| Doctorate | 9 | 23.7 |
| What is the seniority level of your current position? (*N* = 35) | | |
| Entry-level | 6 | 15.8 |
| Intermediate | 9 | 23.7 |
| Mid-level | 12 | 31.6 |
| Senior | 5 | 13.2 |
| Executive-level | 3 | 7.9 |
| What is your generational status in the United States? (*N* = 35) | | |
| Immigrated after birth | 7 | 18.4 |
| First generation (you were born in the US, parents were not) | 27 | 71.1 |
| Third generation (you, your parents, and your grandparents were born in the US) | 1 | 2.6 |
| What is your sexual orientation? (*N* = 35) | | |
| Heterosexual or straight | 31 | 81.6 |
| Bi-sexual | 2 | 5.3 |
| Other | 1 | 2.6 |
| Prefer not to say | 1 | 2.6 |
| What is your marital status? (*N* = 35) | | |
| Single | 15 | 39.5 |
| Serious Relationship | 9 | 23.7 |
| Engaged | 1 | 2.6 |
| Married | 9 | 23.7 |
| Divorced | 1 | 2.6 |
| For the majority of your childhood and adolescence, did you grow up near or in a place where there was a large South Asian population? (*N* = 35) | | |

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| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Yes | 15 | 39.5 |
| No | 20 | 52.6 |
| How old are you? Type your age in years. ($N$ = 38) | $M$ = 31.1 | $SD$ = 5.4 |
| How long (in years) have you been working in your current organization? ($N$ = 34) | $M$ = 3.9 | $SD$ = 5.4 |

## Data Collection Procedures

We developed a survey of five open-ended questions that asked participants questions about the following experiences, beliefs, and perspectives: earliest memory of when they realized they were South Asian, factors that did or did not contribute to their acceptance of their ERI in childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood, and ways they currently feel connected or disconnected from their ERI (See Appendix A).

Upon developing the questions, we used the decolonizing methodology by incorporating a critical reflectivity strategy. We asked participants open-ended questions so they could authentically, and without barriers, tell their stories (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). Essentially, our participants led us to our themes.

## Data Analysis

Participant responses to the open-ended survey items were downloaded from Qualtrics and put into an Excel spreadsheet. We analyzed the data using the content analysis method. Using this method, we read participants' answers line-by-line inductively to discover initial trends and variants across the participants (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Additionally, we coded the data individually on a common platform for coding (Creswell, 2013). As this process continued, codes for the question categories emerged that we documented in a codebook. As prescribed by Hsieh and Shannon (2005), we avoided using preconceived themes, instead allowing the themes to flow from the data. After we finished coding individually, we came together as a group to review, synthesize, and consolidate the codes into major and minor themes. A key focus of extracting these themes was participants' responses that pointed to "push and pull factors" from both South Asian and American cultures.

## Results

The following section presents the detailed explanations of the themes that emerged from the participant's responses. Major themes were those that were mentioned by 50% or more of the participants, while minor themes were those that were mentioned by 30-40% of the participants.

## Major Themes

### *Cultural Aspects*

South Asian culture is rich with ancestral traditions built from deep meaning and shared from generation to generation. For participants in this study, cultural aspects were and are an important aspect of their ERI. We consider cultural aspects to be any element of South Asian

culture that includes food, movies, music, dance, traditions, religion, and fashion. Respondents referred to these cultural aspects when describing their earliest memories of their South Asian identity and contributing factors to the acceptance of their ERI. One participant shared, "I knew I was South Asian when we celebrated Diwali. I loved it and we would go to all of our family." Additionally, many participants explained how being involved in cultural activities allowed them to feel closer to their ERI. One participant shared, "As a child, I was enrolled in Bollywood dancing, watched Bollywood movies, attended a Hindu Sunday school." Bollywood music and dance are cultural elements that encourage participants to stay and feel connected to their South Asian roots. Another aspect of the connection was cultural food and cuisine. One participant explained,

> Food is how I find it easiest to connect to my own ethnic identity. I spend a lot of time helping out my parents in the kitchen and I learn a lot about my South Asian heritage besides the recipes they show me just by having conversations while cooking.

It is through these cultural elements that participants found an avenue to learn and embrace their ERI across various life stages.

### *Patriarchy, Misogyny, and Restrictions*

Overwhelmingly, women indicated that across their lifespan, patriarchy and misogyny in South Asian culture did not contribute to the acceptance of their ERI. As one participant stated, "I have a big problem with the casual misogyny and sexist norms in our culture. I don't feel connected to [those] parts of my identity." Most participants shared similar sentiments about the disconnect to their identities.

By and large, the South Asian women in our sample indicated that they had restrictions placed on them by their parents during their assimilation. One woman shared,

> Limitations that were placed upon me due to my family not being comfortable with my assimilation into American culture made me feel less close to my culture (such as not being able to go to parties, having to go to religious events instead of choosing to etc.).

These restrictions propelled women to feel resentful of their ERI. Another participant explained, "Having to explain or convince parents to let me go to school dances or wear clothes that might not have been acceptable for them made it difficult not to blame at least some part of our racial or ethnic identities." Participants shared the difficulty they experienced in tapping into their ERI while balancing South Asian cultural norms and expectations.

As these women transitioned into adulthood, the restrictions made them feel even more disconnected from their ERI because the patriarchal and misogynistic beliefs were more pronounced. One participant shared, "I feel disconnected to my racial identity when I see traditions, rules, or obligations being placed on South Asian women that I don't agree with and feel are unfair." These traditions and rules also made women feel disrespected and undervalued. One woman indicated: "I feel like our race/culture/community doesn't really respect women, and that makes me feel largely disconnected." Additionally, some women are not encouraged to speak up or advocate for themselves when they feel disrespected. One participant explained, "being quiet and not speaking up when you are disrespected by aunties and uncles or your own family members" makes her feel disconnected from her culture and identity.

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### *Community*

Community is an important factor when discussing South Asian American women's ERI development. The questions tapped into how respondents began to understand and accept their ERI. Community was explained as having spaces where South Asians could gather to celebrate, learn of one's heritage, and feel connected to those of similar lived experiences. One participant shared, "having youth groups and communities like Sunday schools just for kids with similar backgrounds/cultures was helpful in understanding traditions and cultures as well as building appreciation for it." Participants shared the importance of having access to a South Asian community for ERI development.

Being different was normalized and considered an educational and fun exchange for some during adolescence. It was not uncommon to be invited to cultural events and celebrations outside of one's ethnicity or culture. It provided a sense of inclusion and belonging without forcing sameness. A respondent explained,

> Growing up in Queens with so many different ethnicities at my school really helped me understand and accept my ethnic identity. We had variety shows at school for the winter holidays and South Asian students spoke in Hindi, Punjabi, or Urdu with each other at school. Being different was normal.

This was in sharp contrast to people who mentioned, "Going to a public school where my Indian culture wasn't properly displayed." did not contribute to their understanding and acceptance of their ERI. Community went beyond just having spaces in childhood; one of the most common stages of life that people reflected on was college. During college, many participants mentioned they finally had South Asian friends that they could relate to and be their complete selves. They felt less pressure to try to conform or fit into American culture. A participant explained,

> ...college helped [me connect to my ERI] immensely, because I gravitated towards other South Asian females, and their families knew my cultural background." Similarly, another woman shared "It wasn't until adulthood that I felt more able to accept my identity as an Indian person. I attended a very diverse college, in which so many people had grown up with an Indian pride that I did not have. It felt easier to be open about who I was too.

The ability to find comfort in one's environment, friends, and commonalities was truly important in the acknowledgment and acceptance of South Asian American women's ERI. It is important to note that not all participants found having a South Asian community to be a benefit. One participant mentioned how the restrictions made them detest the community. The respondent emphasized, "Toxicity, gossip, and control from the community made me wish I wasn't South Asian. I hated living like there was a microscope or hidden camera on me at times." Although some respondents felt a sense of comfort and belonging, others who were exposed to a South Asian community felt it to be confining and a reason they distanced themselves from their ERI.

### *Being Othered*

There was a strong sense of being othered (or different from the norm) in participants' experience of understanding and accepting that they were South Asian. Many participants recognized they were different for the first time during elementary school. Participants noted they realized their physical attributes were different (e.g., skin color, hair). Being othered included recognition of unaccepting friends, experiences of bullying, and racism. One participant explained,

> The first time I remember feeling different (not white) was when I was like 7 or 8 and I desperately wanted to change my ethnic name to Amy and dye my hair red and have green eyes. I desperately wanted to be someone I wasn't. This had to be because I realized I was different from the norm (read:white) and internalized the negative connotations of that.

This quote emphasizes what many other participants echoed, that white was the norm and there were numerous assimilation challenges. Additionally, participants were reminded of their differences through bullying. Bullying took the form of being excluded, teasing about the smell of ethnic foods, and being mocked for their pronunciation. One participant recalled, "I mispronounced aluminum in elementary school and was made fun of. Realized my mom was saying it 'wrong.'" Teasing and mockery created a persistent sense of being viewed as "different". Many participants mentioned growing up in predominantly white communities and not feeling their race or ethnicity was accepted or understood. One participant noted, "Having friends outside of my race that were not welcoming or understanding of my culture" was a factor that did contribute to their racial and ethnic acceptance and understanding.

In addition, blatant racism was a key contributor to how respondents comprehended their ERI. One participant shared, "As soon as I came to America I was bullied by a white girl and a black boy in the second grade. A year later 9/11 occurred, and it became a us versus them situation." Further, 9/11 fostered a climate where it became a necessity and matter of safety to be aware of ERI. Interestingly, another participant expanded on her racist encounters as a way she came to accept and understand her ERI:

> Honestly experiencing racism made me really aware of my racial and ethnic identity. I was marked differently from the white people and also other minorities. I realized I was experiencing this discrimination because of my race, and there is nothing I can do about it. It made me see this aspect of myself. One aspect of being Asian is that we are constantly erased. People don't see us as people or even recognize when discrimination happens to us. This dehumanization made me want to connect back to my identity (which was the cause) and celebrate it. The world wants to take away my voice so I need to lean into it otherwise I disappear.

Being othered has a profound impact on how South Asian women interact with their ERI.

## Minor Themes

### *Representation and Relatability*

Reflecting on their childhood, adolescence, and current experiences, several of the participants explained that representation and relatability contributed to their understanding of their ERI and currently connects them to their ERI. Seeing the representation of South Asians in mainstream culture played a role in helping our participants feel more connected to their ERI. One woman shared, "I take pride in all the media comments about beautiful Indian women (despite not considering myself as one), as if their hair is mine!" On the contrary, the lack of representation and relatability did not contribute to their understanding of and connection with their ERI in childhood. One participant explained,

> As a child I would have liked to see Indian Americans more prominent in the media. Having that type of "Indian" role model would have made me

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> more comfortable and accepting in my own skin. I remember watching Slumdog Millionaire, so happy that this representation/film quality is being appreciated in mass media. I truly think that helped integrate more cultural media to the masses.

In essence, our participants felt more connected to their ERI when they saw individuals in mainstream media who looked more like them.

### *Language*

The ability to speak one's native language plays a part in how respondents understood, accepted, and connected with their ERI. This often led to increased exposure and enjoyment of some cultural aspects, and the opportunity to create deep connections with family members and children. One respondent shared the importance of speaking one's native language:

> I feel connected whenever I speak with my Grandma (we speak almost every day) over FaceTime… She mostly speaks Bangla, so I try to speak Bangla with her whenever we talk. I also feel connected when I try to speak Bangla with my son..he knows some Bangla words which makes me feel happy that he's learning some of his inherited Indian culture.

In contrast, participants who did not speak their native language felt disconnected or like they were missing opportunities that others had. A respondent shared, "I think there is a disconnect regarding language and that is a general communication barrier at times when trying to have relationships with extended family that does not know English." Using the avenue of language offered some participants the opportunity to connect and celebrate their culture via music, movies, and speak to family members abroad.

### *Exposure to the Motherland*

Women who had the opportunity to take trips to India and connect with extended family mentioned it helped them develop and understand their identity and culture. One respondent shared that, "Spending extended time in India with family...[and] making friends with people my age who grew up in India..." helped her connect with her ERI. Other women noted that the lack of travel to India was a disconnect or a way they felt distant from other South Asians. One respondent explained, "[I] haven't really traveled to India a lot so I don't really have that [connection] for me. The lifestyle and experiences there." Another woman recognized the gap in her experiences from other Indian Americans,

> ... [I] don't visit India often (and never did as a kid). These are experiences other Indian people have that I don't so I feel a bit left out when it comes up. And it feels like I don't really fit in with them.

Exposure to South Asian culture through visiting the motherland was important to ERI development and connection. The lack of exposure respondents indicated impacted their ability to connect to the culture.

## Discussion

South Asian American women consciously and subconsciously undergo a negotiation process between their South Asian and American cultural identities. Our study findings present a key narrative of South Asian American women that is important for literature and necessary to

understand their ERI. These study findings may also be relatable to other South Asian women in Britain, Canada, Australia, and other countries across the world. It is through this study and its contribution to literature that we present the stories and voices of South Asian American women that have been undermined, unheard, and overlooked.

This study presents a necessary discussion on the push and pull factors that contribute to South Asian American women embracing and/or rejecting parts of their ERI. Past studies present evidence that South Asian American women struggle with reconciling South Asian and American norms as part of their ERI (Chaudhuri et al., 2014; Mehrotra, 2016). Our study presents diverse factors that may shape South Asian American women's ERI. The findings reveal that cultural aspects, patriarchy/misogyny/restrictions, community, "being othered," representation/relatability, language, and exposure to the motherland play a role in South Asian American women embracing or rejecting their ERI.

South Asian American women shared how South Asian cultural aspects such as food, movies, music, dance, and religion were impactful memories from their childhood and helped them learn more about South Asian culture. Experiencing these cultural aspects was a key element of ERS for our participants. While Hughes et al.'s (2006) definition of ERS does not include these components, Umaña-Taylor et al. (2014) and Williams et al. (2020) suggest that participating in racially relevant activities is an important aspect of ERI development. Daulat and Wadhwa (2024) explain that these cultural aspects are also important for South Asian American women to share at work. The meaning tied to cultural elements is like a thread that continues to weave through their ERI development from childhood to adulthood.

The essence of community was another strong factor where respondents shared a feeling of unity. Most participants shared that having a South Asian community provided them with a sense of belonging. The presence of the community taught them about their culture, traditions, and provided positive portrayals of the culture. Further, the ability to feel connected to cultural factors and community uplifted South Asian American women to embrace parts of themselves. These findings are consistent with Wang and Lin's (2023) and Umaña-Taylor et al.'s (2014) discussion surrounding the importance of peers and community members ERS.

Our findings suggest that public (i.e., school, college, community) and private (i.e. home) spheres impact identity negotiation. When South Asian American women left their private spheres, their public spheres were not always inclusive of South Asian cultural elements. Respondents who went to predominantly White schools were pushed to seek community in other spaces. This forced these women to maintain dual identities, *South Asian and American.* As a result, they were forced to assimilate into American culture. They were only *fully* able to embrace their South Asian culture within their homes and ethnic community spaces. Alternatively, some respondents noted the advantage of growing up in a very diverse metropolitan area where all ERIs were accepted. They enjoyed sharing their culture and traditions with others and learning about their peers' ERIs. Their exposure to different environments was a factor in how South Asian American women understood and accepted their ERI, like the assertions presented by Umaña-Taylor et al. (2014). However, this dynamic of dual identities in public and private spheres has not been addressed in other literature and is, therefore, a novel contribution to this study.

Respondents shared deep feelings on why they rejected parts of their ERI. Interestingly, most respondents shared that across their lifespan, patriarchy and misogyny in South Asian culture contributed to rejecting parts of their ERI. The South Asian culture's favor towards those who identify as men has normalized prejudice against women. These restrictions are most likely born out of traditional and conservative South Asian ideologies. Therefore, individual experience of patriarchy and misogyny is a result of conditioning and cultural norms. This finding affirms the

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conclusions of Chaudhari et al. (2014) and Mehrotra (2016). Additionally, respondents' multifaceted experiences of being "othered" from childhood to adulthood fostered a domino effect of detachment from their ERI. Being othered encompasses many challenges that constantly make South Asian women lack a sense of belonging at school and the workplace (Daulat & Wadhwa, 2024). The impact of being "othered" from early childhood and onward supports the importance of community that many women share. It led women to seek out South Asian and "Brown" friends across various phases in their lives, such as college.

Our study also uncovered a few notable factors that contributed to South Asian American women embracing their ERI. Some respondents shared how the representation of South Asians in mainstream media created a sense of pride. Respondents shared that representation of South Asians in mainstream media created an opportunity for relatability. It is something that made them feel proud of their ERI. Further, speaking the native language bonded respondents to their family members, cultural aspects, and formed a deeper connection to both their ancestors and posterity. This finding suggests that native language may be a means by which ERS occurs, which was not emphasized in the work by Hughes et al. (2006). While some respondents shared how visits to their motherland bridged a deep connection, we take into consideration that financial stability and access do not look the same for everyone. Therefore, some South Asian American women may not ever have the opportunity to visit their motherland, emphasizing the significance of South Asian American women having various opportunities and spaces in the United States to explore their ERI. To conclude, our findings align with previous research (Alexander et al., 2021; Kaduvettoor-Davidson & Weatherford, 2018; Inman et al., 1999) as it expands an imperative narrative on South Asian American women's ERI.

## Conclusion, Implications, Limitations, and Directions for Future Research

Our study findings contribute to expanding psychological understanding and knowledge of the push and pull factors that shape South Asian American women's ERI. These findings may also be relatable to and help better understand the ERI of South Asians in Britain, Canada, and many other countries across the world.

Given our findings, community organizations and groups can be a great resource for South Asians and their ERI development. Specifically, the power of social media has revealed a space for solidarity and identity discovery. For example, Little *Brown Diary*, founded in 2019, is a Facebook group that creates a space for South Asian women from North America (United States and Canada) who hold a dual cultural identity. With approximately 40,000 members, this group and its 100 subgroups offer a safe and unified outlet for women to connect and relate to other South Asian American women discovering their ERI. Similarly, *Soul Sisters London,* founded in 2016 with approximately 17,000 members, is a Facebook group for South Asian women who live and are planning to move to the UK. This group was created to offer a space for British South Asian women to connect and support each other.

The past few years have showcased some South Asian authors who speak about South Asian women's identity navigation. In *They called us Exceptional and Other Lies that Raised Us,* Gupta (2023) shares, "...But I still struggle with what to call myself, rotation between Indian American, South Asian, desi, or, simply, brown. None seem quite right" (p. 10). Gupta (2023) presents the pivotal and cyclical process that South Asian American women participate in to comprehend their ERI. Likewise, in *But What Will People Say?* Kohli (2024), the founder of Brown Girl Therapy, shares her story of her battles with knowing when to embrace her South Asian culture versus when to prioritize her mental health and own values. In her experiences she felt an "ongoing

process of adaptation resulting from living within two different cultural influences" (Kohli, 2024, p. 15). The writings of these mainstream authors and our research present that South Asian American women's ERI formation and acceptance is a forefront issue that should be highlighted and discussed in various outlets and disciplines, including (but not limited to) media, research, education, and mental health therapeutic services.

Our findings present a few approaches that are beneficial on both macro and micro levels domestically and internationally. First, at the individual level, the themes uncovered in this study can help people understand how ERI is constructed and informed. This paper explains how specific areas may have impacted people's ERI development journey. Further, individuals with a dual cultural identity may be able to relate to the push and pull dynamic discussed in this paper. This can offer some insight on what has and continues to shape their ERI. The words of our participants can create a space for relatability and potentially foster some acceptance of their dual cultural identity. As a result, this connection and reflection may improve mental, emotional, and physical well-being (Daulat & Wadhwa, 2022). Second, Mental Health Specialists (counselors, psychologists, therapists, etc.) can largely benefit from this study and its findings. Due to the shortage of and limited access to South Asian mental health practitioners, our findings can help them understand the push and pull factors that affect South Asians with dual cultural identities. The insights from this study will allow them to better connect with South Asian Americans and support their ERI journey. Third, as suggested by Daulat and Wadhwa (2024), workplaces can benefit from these findings by creating DEIA (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility) councils/groups that can create webinars that introduce the concept of ERI and how minorities may experience this process. Fourth, educational institutions can create training materials for educators and hold cultural identity workshops. These resources would allow educators the opportunity to understand the ethnic-racial experiences of their students and enhance inclusivity in and outside of the classroom.

The findings of our study, the identification of the push and pull factors that shape South Asian American women's ERI, contribute to the ongoing awareness of South Asian American women's experiences. This can also pave a pathway to understanding other minority counterparts and their ERI. While this study presents rich findings that many other minority counterparts may relate to, it does come with a few limitations. First, the sample of this study primarily focuses on South Asian women who were either born or migrated by the age of 12 to the United States. It does not tap into the experiences of South Asian women who migrated in adolescence and/or young adulthood and how they perceive their ERI. Secondly, most of the respondents were women who identified as Indian American. We acknowledge that one South Asian subgroup cannot represent the others as their ERI experiences may differ. However, our decision to use the label "South Asian" as the participants' ethnic and racial group was because our study findings do align with previous research conducted on Pakistani and Bangladeshi American women. Ali (2006) and Bashir and Tang (2018) analyzed the cultural, racial, and ethnic identities of Pakistani Americans and how contributing factors shape their well-being and the meaning of their identity experiences. Additionally, Shams (2015) and Rahman (2010) discovered how Bangladeshi Americans negotiate, reject labeling, and establish their identities. Thus, our findings may also speak to the experiences of Pakistani and Bangladeshi American women. Third, we also take into consideration that our results, in some ways, may limit generalizability due to limiting recruitment to just one sampling frame (*Little Brown Diary*). Fourth, this study primarily focuses on South Asian American women and does not tap into South Asian American men's ERI. Finally, while respondents were asked their sexuality, we did not include any specific questions on how or whether their sexuality impacted the way they connected with their ERI.

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Our study findings reveal the multi-faceted push and pull factors that shape how South Asian American women embrace and/or reject their ERI. Considering that most of our sample were South Asian women, future research should study South Asian American men's ERI. Across all themes, there were direct and indirect factors that shaped why South Asian American women chose to embrace and/or reject their ERI. Future researchers should conduct a deeper analysis of South Asian American women's ERI and its impact on well-being, relationships, and career pathways. For example, relationship dynamics in South Asian culture are shaped by factors such as gender norms, traditions, helicopter parenting, patriarchy, and cultural values. Discovering how South Asian American women's ERI may potentially impact their familial, platonic, and romantic relationships would offer great insight into the influence of ERI and relationship formation. Lastly, there is a profound importance of education and career in South Asian culture. Thus, the field of organizational psychology would benefit from understanding how South Asian conditioning of education and career achievement can potentially mold South Asian American women's ERI and career decisions.

This paper contributes to the ongoing discussion on ERI and presents the voices and life experiences of South Asian American women. We aspire that our study will encourage more research on South Asian American women's ERI and that all "South Asian", "South Asian American", "brown," and/or "other" women continue to feel seen and heard.

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## Appendix A

Survey Instrument Questions

1. What is your earliest memory of when you realized you were South Asian? Please describe the memory with as much detail as you remember.
2. Reflecting back to your childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood - what factors or experiences contributed to your understanding and acceptance of your racial/ethnic identity?
3. Reflecting back to your childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood - what factors or experiences did not contribute to your understanding and acceptance of your racial/ethnic identity?
4. In what ways do you currently feel connected to your racial/ethnic identity?
5. In what ways do you currently feel disconnected from your racial/ethnic identity?