“Vanakkam, Darlings!”
Indian South African Facebook Content and Cultural Belonging

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Abstract

Over the past decade, a section of Indian South African content creators has taken to portraying stereotypical Indian South African cultural traits in their posts on social media. Much of this content incorporates South African Indian English (SAIE), an idiosyncratic 'Durban Indian' accent, niche humour pertaining to *Charou* culture, and markers such as cuisine and attire. In doing so, these content creators primarily speak to a diaspora audience whose culture is influenced by both Indian heritage and South African nationality.

For diasporic minorities, expressions of digital sociality can foster a sense of social cohesion within a population – thereby encouraging their sense of belonging to a hybridised cultural identity. This phenomenon may be especially useful for Indian South Africans, considering that experiences of displacement and non-belonging feature strongly in their history. Initial migrants from India were distanced from their homeland as transnational bodies; their descendants were subjected to strong anti-Indian sentiments during the colonial and apartheid eras; and certain political factions still contest Indian South African belonging in the democratic era. It is therefore interesting to explore Indian South Africans' sense of belonging to their hybridised culture through the lens of contemporary digital expression.

Using a qualitative research approach, this formative research presents the results of individual interviews with respondents who are familiar with this genre of content on Facebook. It asks how consumers of such content perceive the relevant content creators' portrayals of stereotypical Indian South African cultural traits, how such representations resonate with their cultural identity, and their potential to encourage feelings of sociocultural belonging. By situating the answers to these questions within the theoretical frameworks of diaspora and digital sociality, this study examines the ways in which members of the Indian South African community experience a sense of belonging (or not) to their hybridised cultural identities through the consumption of niche, culture-specific Indian South African digital content. The study argues that this community is likely to feel a sense of belonging from their consumption of expressions of niche cultural behaviours and markers, but not from the type of content they perceive as immature and offensive.

Key Words: diaspora; digital sociality; Indian South Africans; Facebook; media studies

For Anisa

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1. Foregrounding the Study

The relationship between digitality and sociality is instrumental in shaping how diaspora communities negotiate ethnocultural belonging and identity construction (Andersson 2019; Singh 2023). This thesis investigates these dynamics within the Indian South African diaspora by exploring how they receive performances of *Charou*[1] culture on Facebook, and how they reconcile these performances with their hybridised cultural identity(ies). Despite the vast scholarship on digital diasporas, at present there are no studies that investigate how the minority Indian diaspora community in South Africa engage with social media as a tool for sociality and cultural negotiation. This thesis seeks to address this gap by examining the contemporary cultural identity(ies) of Indian South Africans, analysing the online portrayal of performances meant to represent this culture, and investigating the ways in which consumers of this content experience feelings of belonging (or not) to their hybridised cultural identity through the consumption of this niche content.

1.2. A Personal Note

Durban, 2017: One humid summer's evening, I was scrolling aimlessly through Facebook when I came across a post on a Page called 'Bash with Tash'. An Indian South African woman, who presented an alter-ego called 'Tash', was narrating a comedic story about her husband. The first thing that grabbed my attention was her use of the stereotypical Durban Indian South African accent. This included Tash referring to her husband as 'Huncle' (actually 'uncle'[2], used out of respect and convention). I then went down a rabbit hole of similar content, finding creators like the 'Aunty Sheila' persona – whose templated greeting "Vanakkam[3], darlings!" became a familiar phrase as I engaged with such Pages over the years.

The nuances of this niche content and its representation of the Indian South African community fascinated me; until then, I had not encountered performances of this hybridised culture in mainstream media. There was, of course, output from India in the form of movies

[1]A colloquial, inoffensive term for an Indian South African person, often used by the community themselves.
[2]There is a tendency for some Indian South Africans to either place or remove an 'h' sound at the beginning of certain words, though it is not a feature of the South African Indian English dialect (Mesthrie 1988).
[3]A Tamil greeting that translates loosely to 'Hello' (literally: 'bowing to the soul').

and soap operas, which instilled a connection to and understanding of my heritage. Lilly Singh, a Canadian-born Indian YouTuber, evoked relatability through performances of her hybridised cultural experiences. However, these media were not representative enough of my Indian South African experiences.

At that point, the closest representation of Indian South African culture I encountered in mainstream media was doctor/comedian Riaad Moosa's movie *Material* (2012) – since the first *Keeping Up with the Kandasamys* movie was only set to release later in 2017. It was no surprise, then, that I began engaging with more niche Indian South African content and personas on Facebook. Although I could not relate to a lot of the content – since I do not have a pronounced Durban Indian South African accent, or the same Tamil background as many of these content creators – I felt a strong sense of pride in seeing those aspects of my culture 'out there' on social media. I felt represented.

So, without any connection to the particular aspects of Indian South African culture being performed, why did I feel represented? What about these posts could make me feel a sense of belonging to the broader community? Unbeknownst to me at the time, these questions would play around in my mind and provide the basis of my research interests. If I felt so strongly, could other members of my community do so, too? I thus began this study to explore these feelings of belonging and legitimacy I experienced when consuming Indian South African social media content.

The cultural expression and representation of the Indian South African population – like all minority and marginalised groups across the globe – warrant the exposure and validation offered by scholarly research. That being said, I have no personal investment in the outcome of this study, even as a member of this community. Rather, I find it interesting to traverse the unexplored terrain within this field of inquiry owing to my previous experiences. My intervention in this field aims to offer a snapshot of the Indian South African community at this moment in time – to understand our contemporary society and provide data for historical comparisons in the future.

1.3. Research Question and Hypothesis

The aim of this study is, broadly, to analyse the role of digital social media content in creating spaces for cultural expression and potentially encouraging a sense of cultural belonging for

its audiences. More specifically, I investigate the potential for members of the Indian diaspora in South Africa to experience a sense of belonging to their hybridised culture through the consumption of niche Indian South African content on Facebook. In doing so, I explore how members of this community interpret online expressions of cultural identity and the effect these performances may have on their personal and collective diasporic identities.

The central research question I seek to investigate is: In what ways do members of the Indian South African diaspora experience feelings of belonging or non-belonging towards their hybridised culture in response to their consumption of niche cultural content on Facebook? This inquiry is supported by questions that examine what culture and cultural belonging mean for Indian South African individuals, how culture-specific performances on social media reflect or challenge typical social practices and cultural norms, and whether such content encourages a feeling of cultural belonging for Indian South Africans. These questions guide me towards the crux of the conversation, which is understanding how digital spaces facilitate or hinder a connection to diasporic identities for their online audiences.

From a broad observation of Indian South African content on Facebook, I have observed audience members, or 'followers', indicating that they relate to the cultural performances enacted on the Pages in question by engaging through 'comments' and positive 'reactions' on posts. This indicates a possibility for the respondents in this study to experience an increased sense of belonging to their hybridised culture by seeing aspects of it represented online. My initial supposition held that members of the Indian South African community would feel a strong sense of belonging to their hybridised cultural identity in response to this content.

However, this estimation was proven incorrect in an Honours-level research project I undertook to explore this phenomenon. Respondents found the content creators to be entertaining and somewhat relatable, but disagreed with the caricatured representations of Indians in South Africa and argued that they do not account for contemporary and cosmopolitan cultural shifts. For them, the distorted mimicry of Indian South African cultural traits encouraged mockery against their culture, from both within the group and other populations in South Africa. I thus aim to investigate and analyse more thoroughly the ways in which a random sample of the Indian South African diaspora experience a sense of belonging (or not) in response to culture-specific Facebook content, and why they feel this way. My current hypothesis posits that a similar response will be obtained – that is,

participants will be able to relate to the content but feel distanced from more exaggerated portrayals of the community.

1.4. Brief Contextual Background

The Indian South African community comprises a culturally diverse diasporic group shaped by a unique social, political, and cultural history. Although Indians were first brought to South Africa as part of the European slave trade in the 17th century, the majority of Indian South Africans are descendants of indentured labourers who arrived in Natal between 1860 and 1911, and a smaller group of merchant-class migrants (Desai and Vahed 2010). Indian South Africans asserted a presence within and felt a sense of belonging to their 'host' country soon after their arrival; however, they were also an unwanted group in the socio-political landscape – resented by White settler groups and the local Black population alike. I therefore find it poignant to determine the nature of belonging experienced by members of the present-day Indian South African community.

This community's identity within their 'host' country is shaped by elements of Indian heritage and South African lived experiences, as well as cultural influences from both nations. However, the rapid adoption of digital technologies has added a new dimension to how Indian South Africans negotiate their identity(ies), and how they participate in the cultural and political life of both South Africa and the global Indian diaspora. The understanding of this hybridised community's engagement with digital platforms provides valuable insights into broader discussions about digitality, sociality, and diasporic identity – which are the frameworks that support the investigation of this study's research question.

The past decade has seen a proliferation of culture-centric Indian South African content generated on social media. Although such performances are found on many popular social networking sites, such as Instagram and TikTok, I have elected to isolate Facebook content in this study; Facebook was the first platform on which this content gained traction, it remains the site of engagement for many users, and the performances in question constitute a large portion of Indian South African Facebook content. Other forms of culture-specific content include Pages that raise awareness of Indian South African history – such as the '1860 Heritage Centre' – or community-based Groups that are formed in relation to a specific area – for example, 'Indians In Cape Town' and 'Thamizha SA'. I have elected to focus on content creators within the Indian South African community, because I am interested in gauging the

ability (or not) of these representations to offer cultural value and encourage feelings of cultural belonging for its audiences.

Some Indian South African content creators, like Natashia Portrag of ‘Bash with Tash’, feature themselves in videos. They address the audience directly or enact skits that relate to a variety of topics of interest to the Indian South African community. Portrag began her content career with portrayals of a typical Indian South African wife, discussing food and prayer rituals. Other content creators adopt online personas, such as Theshen Naicker’s ‘Aunty Sheila’. These content creators dress up as their alter-egos and enact stereotypical performances of Indian South African culture, often by acting as a trope of a community member. ‘Aunty Sheila’, for example, is meant to embody a typical middle-aged Indian South African lady in terms of mannerisms and an exaggerated accent, with a more modern outlook on traditional aspects such as gender roles. A third type of content creator is the anonymous administrators of Pages like ‘Internet Amma’, who post memes, jokes, and observations related to the diasporic Indian South African community. Whether through text or audio-visual media, these Page administrators enact performances of cultural idiosyncrasies such as niche humour and a South African Indian English (SAIE) dialect. The themes featured in the above content creators’ posts thus portray a distinct ‘Indian South African’ identity.

The Facebook content in question introduced a platform upon which cultural performance can be enacted publicly, and consumed and interacted with by audiences. For Radhakrishnan (2005: 270), “the public performance of Indian culture is a key venue through which South African Indians re-create meanings of Indianness to be relevant to a multicultural post-apartheid world”. It then follows that online performances of stereotypical cultural traits of this group – although aimed at entertaining a niche audience – would have the potential to cultivate a virtual community that enables its audiences to engage with their hybridised cultural identities. While I engage with the concept of ‘networked publics’ (boyd 2010), I also hone in on the meanings that individual members of the Indian South African community make from this niche content in terms of its potential to encourage a sense of belonging. By investigating the reception and interpretation of Indian South African digital cultural performances by its audiences, we can understand more clearly how members of this community negotiate their contemporary socio-cultural presence and sense of belonging to their hybridised cultural identities.

1.5. Structure of the Thesis

The structure of this thesis is organised into six chapters that, together, respond to the overarching research question. I employ a systematic approach to organising the contextual, theoretical, and investigative foci that pertain to the topic by categorising and sub-categorising each aspect.

Chapter One introduces the study by establishing the objective and significance of the research and outlining the reading of this thesis as a whole. I then provide a contextual background to the research topic in Chapter Two with a review of existing literature that pertains to the Indian South African community's socio-cultural presence thus far. Chapter Three engages with the theoretical concepts that frame this study, namely, diaspora and digital sociality – while also discussing the intersection of these epistemes. In Chapter Four, I discuss the qualitative research design approach that I employed in the investigation of my research aim, including the sampling strategy, data collection methods, and ethical considerations that guided the study. Chapter Five then presents the research findings and an analysis of interview material from the respondents who participated in this study. Lastly, Chapter Six concludes this thesis with a synthesises of key insights, an outline of implications of the study in an academic context, and recommendations for future research.

1.6. Some Important Considerations

The history of the Indian South African community is rich and complex, for both positive and painful reasons. It is impossible to completely describe the complexities of their trajectory, much less delve into the nuances and individual stories that have been recovered from the past. As such, I begin by highlighting a list of clarifications to inform the further reading of this thesis.

1. The labels 'Indian South African' and 'South African Indian' are used interchangeably, although the latter is more commonly employed. I elected to use the former configuration following the suggestion of sociolinguistics professor Rajend Mesthrie, who asserts that "this is meant to signify someone of South African nationality and identity/belonging, and of Indian heritage… 'a willow tree' is basically a 'tree', the descriptor before it qualifies it as one type of tree" (Desai and Vahed 2019: 20).

2. I use the terms 'Indian[4]', 'Indian South African', and indeed, 'group' to refer broadly to the population under discussion. These labels constitute a 'supra-identity', which refers to "the collective identity developed by South African Indians despite their heterogeneity" (Lemon 2008). As with any national identity, "there [are] considerable differences of class, gender, caste, religion, language and experiences of migration" (Vahed 2002: 78). While acknowledging the importance of these differences, a repeated discussion thereof would complicate and extend this discussion beyond its capacity. As this study casts a broad net over the community and prioritises an 'Indian South African-ness' over any one type of Indian heritage, I only highlight internal differences where necessary.

3. The highly racialised nature of politics in South Africa has given rise to a number of race-centric classifications for each ethnic population. Racial labels were continuously changing and adapting to the particular context in which they existed – many were negatively imposed ('Asiatics'), some were proudly embraced ('Coloured'), while others just 'were' ('European'). For some time during apartheid, any person who was not 'White' was considered 'Black'. To avoid confusion, I have opted to use present-day racial classifications when referring to race groups: Black, Coloured, Indian, and White[5].

4. The term non-White is occasionally used in my discussion. This is done solely for practical reasons, that is, to distinguish Whites from all people of colour and not Indians alone. It must be noted that this nomenclature was understandably rejected by the Black Consciousness Movement during the 1970s, in favour of being proudly called 'Black'.

1.7. Conclusion

This thesis contributes to a deeper understanding of how diasporic communities engage with social media to form communities wherein they can negotiate their hybridised identities. By providing an empirical case study of how digitality and sociality intersect within the Indian South African diaspora, it provides a nuanced understanding of the Indian South African community and how cultural performances on social media influence feelings of belonging or non-belonging to their hybridised culture. In doing so, I aim to contribute to the broader discussions of the role of social media in shaping the meanings that diasporic individuals glean from their cultural identities.

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[4]When referring to current Indian inhabitants of India, I indicate this.
[5]Note that the labels 'Black' and 'Coloured' are legitimate racial identifications in South Africa, and are not considered offensive in the South African context.

Chapter Two: Indians in South Africa

2.1 Introduction

The aim of this study, as outlined in the previous chapter, is to investigate the extent to which members of the Indian South African community experience a sense of belonging to their cultural identity(ies) through the consumption of culture-specific content on Facebook. To achieve this aim, I first establish a contextual understanding of this minority diaspora's socio-political trajectory with a focus on the systemic exclusion and oppression they endured – from the British colonial period, to the apartheid era, and beyond. Situating the development of their presence in this way enables me to foreground how their culture has been shaped within a multicultural host country, and why the investigation of contemporary feelings of belonging is pertinent. Furthermore, the history of this community provides a backdrop against which we can read and understand contemporary Indian South African expressions of culture and their online experiences of cultural belonging.

This chapter therefore presents a history of the development of the South African Indian diaspora, drawing on existing literature from sociological, political, and historical disciplines. This detail is necessary to contextualise my research question, provide a background against which to understand the findings from this study, and justify the significance of contemporary Indian South African belonging and performances of cultural expression. I offer a chronological narrative of the history of this community to understand Indian South African feelings of belonging in a place that was not a 'homeland' but nonetheless became a 'home'. I only delineate the historical and contemporary events relevant to this research topic, as a comprehensive account of this community's history would extend beyond the scope of study.

2.2. Indentured Labour in Natal

The Indian presence in modern-day South Africa[6] was established "neither by accident nor design" (Du Bois 2012: 66), but forged within the crucible of colonialism. Indians first arrived in the Cape region[7] as slaves for the Dutch East India Company in the 17th century[8].

[6]The region comprising South Africa consisted of four independent colonies until the Union of the state in 1910. As such, I do not make reference to 'South Africa' until the discussion of this time period.
[7]Now the Western Cape, a provincial region on the west coast of South Africa.
[8]Engaging with the history from this period would add considerable depth to this study, but divert from the scope of my research. For further reading, see Reddy 1991; Vink 2003; Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2009; and Oliver and Oliver 2017.

General sentiment and academic output on Indian South Africans do not often take into account this initial migration, perhaps due to the relatively smaller number of immigrants. Documents from this time indicate the presence of 10,676 slaves from India (Worden 2016), whereas a total of 152,184 indentured labourers made the journey to South Africa between 1860 and 1911 (Desai and Vahed 2010). The figures on indenture also do not account for independent merchant travellers, indicating that the bulk of Indian migration took place during the 19th century. Although some indentured Indians migrated to the Cape after their arrival, records show that over 80% of the Indian population was concentrated in Natal[9] even 100 years after their arrival (MacMillan 1961). As such, I focus on the arrival of Indians to Natal in 1860 as the targets of indentured immigration and the forebears of the majority of the Indian South African community.

2.2.1. Foreshadowing the Indian Presence

During the mid-19th century, rapid developments in agriculture and industry within British colonies, like those in southern Africa, prompted demands for immediate, low-cost labour. Britain's annexation of Natal in 1843 promoted the development of White settlement and stimulated agricultural activity in the area, most notably on sugar plantations. However, no provisions were made for a commensurate supply of inexpensive labour (Desai and Vahed 2010). Farm owners were growing increasingly frustrated by their failures to procure a cheap workforce, since slavery had been abolished in British territories in 1833 (Bhana 1987; Vahed 1995). Additionally, the local African population resisted colonial subservience to maintain an independent pastoral lifestyle (Vahed 1995; Desai and Vahed 2010).

Plantation owners considered Indian indentured labour a viable solution for cheap and immediate labour, emboldened by their reputation for industry in colonies like Mauritius, British Guiana, and Trinidad and Tobago (Bhana 1987; Desai and Vahed 2010). The existing circulation of indentured labour amongst British colonies also had the merit of convenience; it circumvented accusations of slavery and nullified the need for colonial authorities in Natal to rely on the employment of local Black workers (Bhana 1987; Kumar 2005). Pressure from these settler agriculturalists hastened the process of securing Indian indentured labour, which was officially sanctioned in 1860 by a tripartite collaboration between the British Colonial Office, the Natal government, and the British Indian government (Desai and Vahed 2010).

[9]A former southern African British colony. Now KwaZulu-Natal, a province on South Africa's eastern seaboard.

It would have been a momentous decision made by prospective emigrants to leave their villages, which constituted "the sum total of the world for many migrants" (Desai and Vahed 2010: 34). However, poor socio-economic conditions generated by the Dutch and British colonial governments prompted many disadvantaged Indians to consider foreign employment (Bhana 1987). Furthermore, internal encumbrances like civil wars and natural disasters compounded the difficulties faced by Indian communities (Vahed 1995). Recruitment strategies preyed on the financial vulnerability of Indians, with British and Indian agents coercing or pressuring these individuals into leaving home (Meer 1985; Bhana 1987; Desai and Vahed 2010). To a lesser degree, there are also reports of entrapment and abduction at the hands of unlicensed *arkatias*/sub-agents (Bhana 1987; Desai and Vahed 2010).

Along with the consensus that recruits were given misrepresented notions of their prospective lives in South Africa, it is also clear that some groups willingly or informedly decided to emigrate (Bhana 1987; Anderson 2009). Pioneering migrants who had completed their indenture in other colonies encouraged interest in their familial and social networks (Bhana 1987; Desai and Vahed 2010). Others were able to escape the restrictions of Indian society and exercise a level of ambition, even while understanding that indentured labour was an unfree enterprise (Lal in Vahed 2017). Thus, dubious recruitment tactics notwithstanding, Indian indentured emigration does not constitute forced displacement since the point, according to Bhana (1987: 15), is that "they acted at all to migrate rather than stay at home".

2.2.2. The Impact of Indenture

The introduction of a migrant community in 1860 affected Natal's already complex socio-racial dynamic. Indian labourers were positioned at a relative social advantage over the local Black population, which immediately established uneasy Indo-Zulu[10] relations in Natal. Furthermore, their presence as cheap labour undermined the bargaining power of Black pastoralist cultivators against "the drive to turn them into workhorses for the colonists" (Desai and Vahed 2010: 62). As with many immigrant communities, customary differences between Indians and locals contributed to mutual suspicion, prejudice, and alienation from both parties (Kumar 2005). Colonial authorities and plantation owners were known to manipulate these differences for their benefit, including the appointment of Black workers to supervise Indian labourers, police their whereabouts, and terrorise any transgressors (Meer

[10] The amaZulu are an African ethnic group, or tribe, located predominantly in present-day KwaZulu-Natal.

1985; Desai and Vahed 2010). It was thus in the interest of the White hegemonic minority to provoke any hostility between Indians and Africans and avoid united uprisings (Meer 1985).

Indentured workers endured reprehensible living and working conditions that were exacerbated by their slave-like status within the prevailing colonial social structure (Kumar 2005). Meer (1985: 47) draws a fascinating parallel between indenture and slavery:

> European companies engaged the services of the local agents: in Africa the chief, in India the… arkatia. The slaves walked in chained coffles… the indentured were marched in gangs… Both labour commodities were kept locked and guarded at the ports while awaiting shipment – the slaves in barracoons, the indentured in emigration depots… While slaves were branded before departing, the indentured had a tin ticket hung around their necks.

Furthermore, it was only through the obligation of indenture contracts that farm owners were known to pay their workers, whose wages were "not half that of slaves" (Tinker 1974 in Meer 1985). As the brutalities of indenture became realised, mistreated workers protested their circumstances by engaging in various acts of resistance against employers and the colonial government. Labourers fought constantly against the injustices they were subject to,

> from rare direct assaults on their bosses, to malingering, absenteeism, desertion, using obscenities against employers, damaging tools, arson, insolence, self-injury, even suicide, the indentured did not simply bow to the dictates of employers (Desai and Vahed 2010: 168).

In a review of *Inside Indian Indenture* (2010), Du Bois (2010: 161) asserts that Desai and Vahed "seem intent on dignifying malingering, the feigning of illness and damage to property as 'weapons of the weak' and ascribing some sort of virtue to such conduct". I contend that this criticism of the more heterodox outlets of indentured resistance is misguided, especially considering their isolation from the opportunities and resources needed to enact effective change. A more critical stance would also recognise and take into account the plight of those who had no other means to frustrate the system. A shocking number of Indian workers opted to take their lives in the face of their indentured realities[11]; it was found that the high rate of suicide was "attributable to conditions under which indentured Indians lived and laboured" (Bhana and Bhana 1991 in Du Bois 2015: 100).

[11]In 1907, the rate of suicide amongst Indian indentured workers in Natal was 14 times greater than in India (Indian Opinion 1908 in Du Bois 2015).

The sense of inferiority imposed on Indians was reinforced by the effects of derogatory labels like 'Coolie' or 'Asiatic'. Contention was taken with the use of 'Coolie' because it demonstrated a blithe disregard for the label's implications on the Indian psyche. *Kuli* in Tamil referred to payment for menial work from lower-class labourers, and the Gujarati community perceived people from the *Kuli* tribe as villainous and inferior (Mehta 2006 in Desai and Vahed 2010). In the mutation from *kuli* to 'Coolie', "the distinct humanity of the individual was, in a single move, appropriated and eliminated: the person collapsed into the payment" (Breman and Daniel 1992 in Desai and Vahed 2010: 78). These classifications thrust a homogeneous identity on a diverse group, primarily by disregarding Indian religious and regional differences[12]. Lemon (1990: 133) acknowledges how "whites seldom recognise that Indians are themselves culturally diverse, especially in terms of religion… but [Hindu, Muslim, and Tamil] are umbrella terms which conceal great complexity". Indians were thus introduced to their new environment in ways that served to reject their personal and cultural identities – both of which are instrumental to a migrant group's sense of place within, and orientation towards, the host country (Shuval 2000).

Following a temporary suspension of indenture in 1866 due to an economic depression in the colony, the Indian government refused to sanction further emigration until the complaints from returning labourers were investigated (Kumar 2005; Desai and Vahed 2010; Du Bois 2012). This led to the establishment of the Coolie Commission in 1872 to investigate and suggest changes for the conditions of indentured labourers. Employers reluctantly accepted the recommended improvements as a condition for retaining Indian labour, especially since Black populations continued to defend their independence (Desai and Vahed 2010). Once immigration resumed in 1874, new groups of indentured labourers journeyed to South Africa (Du Bois 2012).

2.2.3. Non-Indentured Indians

Around the mid-1860s, the five-year indenture period came to an end for many Indians, while a small group were able to pay out their contracts (Meer 1985; Du Bois 2012). Those no longer under indentured servitude became known as 'free' Indians and faced the choice of re-indenturing, repatriating, or forging a new life for themselves and their families in southern Africa. The choice to re-indenture was, for apparent reasons, an unfavourable

[12]For example, a Gujarati person (from the Gujarat province) would have some cultural differences to a Punjabi person (from the Punjab province). People in each of these groups may also follow Hinduism, Islam, or Christianity.

decision for Indians with enough economic independence. Returning to India also seemed an unrealistic option for many, since

> the years of indenture fundamentally altered the lives of migrants. The plantation became the 'village', and in this village traditions… while relying on myth and memory from 'back home', were just as often transformed as replicated. Concerns about being 'outcast(e)' may also have weighed heavily on Indian minds (Desai and Vahed 2010: 341).

Free Indians had finite options by way of employment. They were restricted by limited capital, barely any education or skills beyond agriculture, and few meaningful kinship ties (Desai and Vahed 2010). With only a small number of Indians finding employment in teaching, clerical positions or the service industry, many turned to small-scale fishing, 'market-gardening', and hawking for practical sources of income (Kumar 2005; Desai and Vahed 2010; Du Bois 2012). Despite this group's undoubtedly vital contributions towards Natal's economy, the 'Indian question' of a working-class community – also known as the 'coolie curse' – became a growing threat to White settler interests (Du Bois 2012). This became especially prevalent when, by 1870, most Indians were working independently across the colony (Du Bois 2012).

The enterprise of free Indians came into conflict with Indian-owned businesses, which were mostly controlled by a group of merchants known as 'Passenger' Indians. These merchants travelled independently to Natal, having identified an opportunity for trade following the waves of labourer migration (Desai and Vahed 2010). They arrived under more favourable circumstances than their indentured counterparts, as they were governed under the customary laws of the colony (Desai and Vahed 2010). Since their arrival in the early 1870s, Passenger Indians quickly grew to "become 'formidable rivals' of white traders who sold cheap goods to the colony's African population" (Desai and Vahed 2010: 350).

For a short period, there seemed to be a precarious hope for the resident Indian community in southern Africa. An 1875 dictum cited by the Protector of Indian Immigrants claimed that free and Passenger Indians in South Africa were granted the same rights as "any other class of Her Majesty's subjects resident in the colonies" (Du Bois 2012: 41). Passenger Indians enjoyed relative economic success around this period, with their descendants growing to dominate specific trades. The agricultural enterprises of 'free' Indians were also considered integral to Natal's commercial interests (Du Bois 2012). This upward economic trajectory of

successful Indian families enabled the funding of educational establishments like the ML Sultan Technical College[13] and Sastri College; these were, respectively, the first tertiary educational institute and the first high school for Indian students in Durban (Desai and Vahed 2010).

The relative prosperity achieved by Indians became a point of consternation for White traders, who held that the commercial sector should remain an exclusively White dominion (Du Bois 2012). They became increasingly antagonistic toward the presence of Indian farmers and traders who posed an economic challenge to their pursuits – "fuelled by envy, fear of competition or just naked racism, [they] wanted Indians as labourers only" (Desai and Vahed 2010: 349). However, a report by the Wragg Commission[14] in 1886 revealed that Indians proved 'unwilling' to indenture, preferring instead the freedom and dignity of shopkeeping and peddling (Meer 1980 in Vahed 1999). This unexpected presence of non-indentured Indians began to agitate the general White population, except those who benefited from the farming and hawking activities of Indian peasants and market gardeners (Vahed 1999; Desai and Vahed 2010). As Du Bois (2012: 33) notes, the development of an anti-Indian sentiment "was neither sudden nor uniform but gathered momentum with the increase in and dispersal of the Indian population throughout Natal".

The continued presence of non-indentured Indians confounded Natal's authorities, who neither envisaged nor welcomed a settled Indian population (Desai and Vahed 2010). Where the presence of Indians was once regarded with relative ambivalence, several factors during the late 19th century exacerbated anti-Indian sentiment. First, patterns of urbanisation constituted a problem as the number of Indians in Durban rose from 665 in 1870 to 3,309 by the end of the 1880s (Du Bois 2012). Next, free Indians complicated matters for affluent White employers; in 1883, none of the 4,548 labourers who had completed their five-year contracts chose to re-indenture for a second term (Du Bois 2012). An influx of non-indentured Indians – 3,369 in 1889 and 4,408 in 1890 – further counteracted efforts to discourage Indian settlement (Du Bois 2012).

The racial intolerance that was steadily developing against Natal Indians prompted the enactment of several laws to encourage their repatriation. For example, non-indentured Indians in Durban and Pietermaritzburg underwent race-based population registration in

[13]The instituion, named after an illustrious indentured-labourer-turned-businessman who funded the project, merged with Technikon Natal in 2004 to become the Durban University of Technology.
[14]Similar to the Coolie Commission, this body was meant to investigate the condition of indentured labourers.

1888. Interestingly, this legislated imposition was enacted two years after the Wragg Commission's findings on the unwillingness of Indians to continue indenture. Population registration enabled authorities to deny Indians the same rights as British settlers, and determined conditions that would apply to Indians who decided to settle in Natal (Du Bois 2012). Legal processes aimed at expelling non-indentured Indians were then accelerated after Natal received self-government from Britain in 1893.

We thus see the impossibility for Indian migrants to have asserted a belonging to southern Africa in the colonial period. Despite their presence being contested and only reluctantly accepted into the broader Natal society, they displayed an obvious willingness to remain. One labourer refused the opportunity to return home on the basis that he "liked South Africa better than India" (Desai and Vahed 2010: 42). Of the 152,184 indentured labourers that migrated throughout the indenture period, less than a quarter returned to India (Bhana 1987; Du Bois 2010). With their untethered identities suspended between homeland and host country, the Indian population in southern Africa was yet devoid of a belonging.

2.2.4. Religious and Cultural Heritage

Culture and religion are crucial considerations in the discussion of Indian South African history – especially, as Desai and Vahed (2012) note, in the face of the mostly descriptive accounts of the indentured experience. Despite the obstacles posed to Indians who wished to establish a belonging to southern Africa, religious and cultural expression had inadvertently laid the foundation for their belonging as early as 1867 (Kumar 2005; Radhakrishnan 2005; Desai and Vahed 2010). Religion and culture were particularly important to the sense of belonging experienced by indentured labourers and their descendants. With their heterogeneous identities reduced to the catch-all 'Coolie', "cultural robustness, reflected in festivals and other religious practices, was an important mechanism for dealing with indenture" (Desai and Vahed 2010: 239).

Once indentured immigration resumed in 1874, temples began appearing across Natal (Desai and Vahed 2010). Places of worship enabled shared experiences of spirituality, offering refuge to labourers who sought comfort from their continued struggles. Over time, the erected structures were replaced with more elaborate temples as indentured labourers finished their contracts (Desai and Vahed 2010). Temples and mosques built by indentured immigrants and Passenger Indians notably survived the annihilation of urban redevelopment, and many

constitute landmarks of contemporary South African culture[15]. Early groups of Indian immigrants had thus inadvertently preserved Indian culture in southern Africa and established a basis for belonging by entrenching distinct markers of Indian identity onto its landscape (Vahed 1995; Kumar 2005).

Around the turn of the twentieth century, religious worship was fluid enough for Hindus and Muslims to celebrate each other's festivals (Desai and Vahed 2010). The Muharram festival[16], for example, was the first communal indentured event to be observed in Natal (Desai and Vahed 2010). It allowed for a stronger sense of belonging across the entire community, as "the joint participation of Hindus and Muslims… made it a pan-Indian festival, and an important aspect of Indian community formation" (Vahed 2002: 77). It also carried a political undertone as labourers inverted their daily experiences by singing, dancing, and parading outside the purview of their employers (Desai and Vahed 2010). Some Indian religious leaders criticised the celebration for falling outside Hindu practices and certain Muslim doctrines (Desai and Vahed 2010). Nonetheless, it afforded many Indians a previously unknown sense of pride in their transformed culture. For at least 25 years, the Indian community used the Muharram festival to publicly express their hybridised culture, until it was cancelled by the government for annoying White settlers (Desai and Vahed 2010).

2.2.5. Mass Media Publications

Alongside cultural expression and political activism, the media played a crucial role in the assertion of Indian belonging to South Africa. Although the extent of the media's presence and impact on a coherent diasporic cultural identity during the 19th and 20th centuries is not fully known, there is evidence of mass communication that addressed an Indian audience towards the end of the indenture period.

The Indian Opinion, the first Indian broadsheet newspaper, was printed at the first Indian-owned press (Vahed 1995; Naidoo 1997). Gandhi started the newspaper in 1903 and oversaw the paper's direction until his departure in 1914, when his son Manilal took over as editor from 1918 to 1956. It became a ubiquitous feature of the political life of the Indian South Africans in the 20th century, reporting on matters of interest such as local news, topics of general concern, and discriminatory case laws against the community. It also stood as a

[15]Famous examples in Durban include the Grey Street Jumuah Masjid, which was built in 1881, and the Umgeni Road Temple, which dates back to 1885 (Desai and Vahed 2010).
[16]This celebration of the new year is based in Shi'a Muslim practices, which are distinct from the practices of other Islamic sects, such as Sunni Muslims. However, it was initially embraced by most Indians.

form of cultural expression through the apartheid era. In one article from the early 1900s, it was stressed that "[Indian children] should be taught not to be ashamed of their nationality because they are looked down upon as Indians in this country, not to deceive their conscience… but to be proud of their nationality" (Indian Opinion in Vahed 1995).

The *African Chronicle* was founded in 1908 by P.S. Aiyar, Gandhi's political rival in Natal. This paper maintained a connection to the homeland, as it "was filled with news from India as well as parochial events concerning the Indian community in Durban" (Vahed 1999: 20). The *African Chronicle* was written in Tamil and English, which, unlike Gujarati and Hindi, was the language spoken by the majority of working-class Indians and would therefore more likely have appealed to a broader audience. This paper's concern with working-class aims could be supported by Aiyar's establishment of the Natal Indian Patriotic Union in 1908, which highlighted the poll tax[17] as a terrible burden on the working class (Vahed 1999). This tax instituted an unforeseen fee on labourers who decided against renewing their labour contracts (Du Bois 2012).

Vahed's (1999) work on Indian identity in Durban also makes mention of other mass media publications that focused on the Indian population in South Africa post-indenture, although they were differentiated by internal language and economic interests. *The Indian Views*, a Gujarati/English paper founded in 1914, reflected a Muslim middle-class perspective by engaging primarily with Muslim affairs in South Africa and India. Another notable mention is *The Leader*, which was founded in 1941 and targeted at working-class Tamil people. This paper was the first to include "cartoon, film reviews, a gossip column, and social and personal news" (Vahed 1999: 20).

Other, more fleeting publications included *The Dharma Vir*, *Passive Resistor*, and *Searchlight*. The latter two newspapers were established during the passive resistance campaign in 1946 by the Transvaal and Natal Passive Resistance Councils, respectively (Vahed 1999), receiving contributions from both radical Indians and liberal Whites in Durban. The *Call*, a publication launched in the early 1940s by the Liberal Study Group, comprised young radicals across all racial groups (Vahed 1999) – a feature not boasted by the other publications mentioned.

[17]To illustrate the obstacle that this £3 tax posed to labourers, Watson (1960 in Desai and Vahed 2010) calculates that a family of four would have owed the government £12 in taxes on an annual income of around £15. Comparatively, a 1904 census indicated that 'free' Indians earned £18 per annum, whilst traders averaged a handsome annual sum of £300 (Swan 1985 in Desai and Vahed 2010).

2.2.6. Gandhi's Influence, and the Union

As anti-Indian legislation plagued resident Indian communities, politically astute merchants turned to the legally trained Mohandas 'Mahatma' Gandhi for guidance (Vahed 2019). The implementation of discriminatory legislation in 1894 coincided with Gandhi's visit to Natal, which prompted him to form the Natal Indian Congress (NIC). This political party was established to protect the community's commercial, franchise, and residential rights (Swan 1985 in Desai and Vahed 2010). Political reform was undertaken through passive resistance campaigns, petitions to the government, and newspaper editorials – all of which aligned with the Gandhian principle of *satyagraha*/non-violent disobedience[18]. Although such efforts were often unsuccessful, they signalled the Indian population's desire to peacefully assert their right to belong to southern Africa.

Despite Gandhi's self-proclaimed altruistic nature, scholars have underlined glaring discrepancies between his autobiography and historical accounts (Markovitz 2004 and Sanghavi 2006 in Vahed 2019). A pressing concern lay specifically with his prejudice against the indentured class (Desai and Vahed 2010; Swan 1985 in Vahed 2019). In a letter to the *Transvaal Advertiser,* dated two months after his arrival, Gandhi wrote that the 'Coolie' moniker applied to indentured Indians but not free or Passenger Indians (Vahed 2019). This ideology played into prevalent intra-racial biases, with the community already being "severely split by caste, class, language and religion" (Vahed 1995: 285).

Gandhi's determination to build an overarching Indian identity in South Africa also impacted interracial tensions. It would have been advantageous for politically inclined Indians to align with Black communities, who were also beginning to mobilise against colonial-imposed socio-economic injustices at the time (Kumar 2005). However, Gandhi's bid for a self-sufficient 'Indianness' hampered their opportunity to form a cohesive unit of resistance with other marginalised groups (Desai and Vahed 2010). Per Gandhi's classist perception of non-indentured Indians, "passengers saw themselves as British imperial citizens and distinguished themselves from both indentured labourers as well as the indigenous African population, and sought equal rights with white settlers" (Vahed 2019: 662).

The unwelcome status of Indian communities was further consolidated by the establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910, which merged the independent Cape, Natal, Transvaal,

[18] Lliterally: 'power of truth'.

and Orange Free State colonies in southern Africa into a self-governing dominion under the British Empire. The Union positioned White authorities for better control over the entire region, and they intensified their aim to find 'solutions' to end the 'coolie curse'. General Jan Smuts, Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa, began calling for an end to indenture as the first step towards achieving this goal. In 1911, the British Secretary of State for the Colonies officially terminated indentured immigration, citing that the

> divergence between the standpoint of the colonists and that of the Indians has created an unsatisfactory position and that Indians have no guarantee after expiration of their indenture they will be accepted by the Union as permanent citizens (in Desai and Vahed 2010: 365).

Not all White settlers favoured this decision, as employers like Sir Liege Hulett[19] displayed concern at the large numbers of workers that would have to be replaced if Indians were repatriated (Desai and Vahed 2010). Even 'Vegetable Sammys'[20] and 'Coolie Marys'[21] – derogatory terms for Indian vegetable vendors – garnered the support of White customers who felt that "the Indian hawker is a great convenience especially to the poor white" (*African Chronicle* 1908 in Desai and Vahed 2010: 342). Nonetheless, the decision to end Indian immigration was generally welcomed by the average White settler and business owners, who considered Indians an unwelcome threat to their livelihood. Authorities then became increasingly persistent in their efforts to repatriate the now-redundant Indian population, forgetting that, by this time, the majority of this community was native to South Africa.

Gandhi, who had petitioned to end indentured immigration since the late 1890s, believed that conditions would improve for 'free' Indians if their numbers stabilised (Vahed 2019). Soon after the decision was taken, he expressed his approval in the *Indian Opinion*:

> The continued immigration of the indentured leads to increased resentment against us. If indenture is prohibited, Indians can hope for an immediate improvement in their status. It will be possible to get the laws about passes, etc., repealed, and… the community will be in a position to do a great many things (in Vahed 2019: 671).

Gandhi's views echo those expressed in the *Cape Times*, ostensibly for a White audience, who hailed the end of indentured immigration as "the first solution of the Asiatic problem" (Desai and Vahed 2010: 366). Vahed (2019) notes that, following the termination of

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[19]The founder of Hulett's Sugar, which merged with the Tongaat Sugar Company to form Tongaat Hulett. The brand, which operates as Huletts Sugar, is still popular in the South African market.
[20]Possibly taken from the fact that many Tamil surnames end with the suffix '-samy'/'-sami'/'-sawmy'. From the Tamil language 'Swami' meaning 'God' (Desai and Vahed 2010).
[21]Likely adapted from the fact that 'Mariamma' was a common name for Tamil Indian girls (Vahed 1995).

indentured immigrants, Gandhi's optimism about the improved status of Indians was misplaced, since anti-Indian legislation intensified under the rule of Union authorities.

Despite Gandhi's prolonged isolation from issues affecting indentured labourers, the continuation of the £3 residential tax prompted many coal miners and agricultural workers in Natal to respond to his call for mass strike action in 1913 (Desai 2013). Aside from this tax, Gandhi had skilfully linked the protest to “the non-recognition of Hindu and Muslim marriages, the prohibition of inter-provincial migration, the harsh application of trading licence laws [and] immigration restrictions” (Vahed 2019: 672). Coinciding with these issues was the passing of the Immigrants’ Regulations Act of 1913, which was implemented to prohibit Indians from settling outside Natal. This now iconic movement gained unprecedented support and traction as it unfolded in the months following September 1913. By October 1913, around 4,000 mine workers were on strike (Desai and Vahed 2010).

2.2.7. The End of Indenture

Following the end of indenture, Indians were gradually replaced by Amazulu in most economic sectors. Indian labour in general farming decreased by 21% between 1911 and 1936; on sugar plantations, labour fell 81% between 1910 and 1945 (Smith 1945 in Desai and Vahed 2010). Those who did not succeed in independent agriculture began shifting to urban employment, which resulted in an emerging professional Indian middle class that consisted of doctors, lawyers, and teachers. This group, who was often politically inclined, “yearned for greater opportunities and strained at the racial ceilings to their ambitions” (Desai 2013: 56), which further aggravated White settlers during the 1920s and -30s.

The subsequent decades introduced important political changes for the Indian South African community. The South African and Indian governments met in 1925 to discuss a scheme that included the repatriation of Indians, and the fair treatment of those who remained in South Africa. However, fewer Indians than expected were repatriated and not much change was enacted in terms of the tensions that existed between them and the local White population (Mesthrie 1985). Moderate politics dominated the socio-political milieu, with the South African Indian Congress formed in 1920 to represent the community’s interests. However, they were criticised for representing merchant interests and marginalising issues that affected the poorer working-class Indians (Desai 1996 in Naidoo 1997).

These working-class individuals from a range of employment sectors, including railways, mines, and sugar, then began organising during the 1930s; by 1943, 16,617 Indians were registered with unions (Vahed 1995). Indian and Black workers began engaging in strike action together, but "the practice by white employers of replacing Indian workers with Africans served to alienate Indians from union activity" (Naidoo 1997: 46). After the failure of multi-racial unionism, radical Indian leaders turned to nationalist politics and promoted a ethno-racial resistance identity (Padayachee et al. 1985 in Vahed 1995). A statement from the political news sheet *Flash* in 1946 called on this 'Indianness' by claiming that "as a true Indian, you must become a passive resistance volunteer in order to protect the honour and dignity of our people" (in Naidoo 1997: 47). Though this inwardness encouraged an assertion of belonging, it counterintuitively isolated Indians from the socio-political landscape.

By the 1940s, Durban's White electorate had become more vociferous in their demands to end the perceived infiltration of Indians into predominantly European-populated residential areas and sought to deal more harshly with the 'Indian question' (Bagwandeen 1984). Then-Prime Minister Jan Smuts introduced the Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Bill[22] to prohibit 'Asiatics' from trading in property with non-Asiatic persons and, in paltry lieu of this right, afford Indians conditional communal franchise in Parliament on a similar basis to African representation (Desai 2013). Some White factions considered this to be a liberal treatment, considering that it recognised Indians as South African citizens. However, the Indian community regarded it as an affront to their *izzat*/honour and voiced their opposition to the Bill (Bagwandeen 1984).

In 1947, an attempt at interracial collaboration was made by the African National Congress[23], Natal Indian Congress, and Transvaal Indian Congress. The president of each party – Dr Xuma, Dr Naicker, and Dr Dadoo, respectively – signed a pact that committed to Indo-African cooperation in the struggle for basic human rights and full citizenship for non-White South Africans. Doctors Naicker and Dadoo's departure from the more internalised stance of Indian resistance paved the way for cohesive collaboration between Black and Indian people in the struggle for freedom. However, Naidoo (1997) contends that this goal remained unfulfilled, especially after the 1949 Durban riots[24] intensified the hostility, mutual suspicion, and separation between Black and Indian people.

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[22]This law was also known as the 'Ghetto Act', since it restricted Indian South Africans from owning land in affluent neighbourhoods.
[23]South Africa's current ruling party that originated as a liberation movement in the struggle against apartheid.
[24]For further reading on the cause, incidents, and effects of the 1949 riots, please see Kirk 1983 and Vahed 1995.

Although India's independence from British rule in 1947 allowed for increased political support to their counterparts in South Africa, then-Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru urged them to assert a belonging to South Africa and autonomously fight for their freedom therein (Markovitz 2007 in Desai and Vahed 2019; Yengde 2021). Even before India's independence, the government played a crucial role in uniting Indian political organisation, which enabled 'colonial-born' indentured-, 'free'- and merchant Indians to assert their belonging to South Africa (Naidoo 1997). Having failed to achieve an independent identity from the colonial state and sufficient support from the homeland, Indians were yet suspended between worlds and positioned unfavourably for the commencement of apartheid.

2.3. The Apartheid Regime

The existing racist policies of British rule morphed effortlessly into apartheid state legislation, as both were based on principles of White supremacy. Following the victory of the Afrikaner[25]-led Nationalist Party (NP) at the 1948 elections, this system of racial 'apartness' was implemented to consecrate their self-appointed status as *Die Volk*[26]/God's chosen people. Apartheid leaders, like then-Prime Minister DF Malan, were "particularly obsessed with the policy of racial segregation" (Maharaj 2020: 42), which was enacted across South Africa's social, economic, political, and physical landscapes. At this point, some 500,000 Indians who considered South Africa their home were still perceived as a transient community – alien to White settlers and other people of colour (Naicker 1956 in Naidoo 1997; Reader's Digest 1988 in Naidoo and Rajab 2005).

2.3.1. Experiences of 'Apartness'

Following the disparate execution of discriminatory legislation since the 1700s, apartheid consolidated racist policies and prejudicial social mores into a cohesive legal system. The 1950 Population Registration Act, which documented each citizen according to racial categories: White, Native, and Other[27], was implemented to easily institute race-based policies. The following five decades would see more than 350 laws enacted to subjugate non-White South Africans, including the Indian South African community (Naidoo and Rajab 2005), which deeply affected their physical and psychological agencies.

[25]Descendants of predominantly Dutch settlers who arrived in the 17th and 18th centuries.
[26]Literally 'The People'.
[27]Provisions for classifications under 'Other' were made at the discretion of the minister, and it was under this label that Indians were initially classified.

The Group Areas Act, which constituted one of the more destructive iterations of population registration, enabled state control of land ownership and occupation to promote the apartheid government's overarching goal of 'separate development'[28]. Under this policy, urban areas across South Africa were divided into racially segregated residential zones for each race group. Socio-spatial restructuring under the Group Areas Act resulted in the forced and often violent displacement of thousands of non-White families from their homes and businesses to under-developed townships (Maharaj 1997). By its very design, the Group Areas Act "sought to solve the 'Asiatic question' by making life so miserable that they would repatriate to India" (Southworth 1991 in Maharaj 1997: 136).

An important purpose of the Act was to reverse the upward trajectory of Indian South Africans, half of whom lived in Durban (Southworth 1988 in Maharaj 1997). The displacement of over 140,000 Indians occurred between 1950 and 1978, specifically "to serve as a geographic and symbolic buffer between 'White' and 'African' areas" (Maharaj 1995 in Radhakrishnan 2005: 267). Segregation was an efficient means of isolating Indians from other South African communities as it ensured limited interaction and fostered mutual distrust (Naidoo 1997). Although this space for the relatively unobstructed promulgation of Indian cultures and identities had positive implications, it also "encouraged a xenophobic minority syndrome based on some aspects of Indian reality" (Naidoo 1997: 30).

Without disregarding the significant numbers of Black and Coloured people who were forcibly and violently removed from their homes, Indians had borne the proportionately greater impact of this policy "with one in four of them having been resettled" (Western 1981 in Maharaj 1997: 137). Indians who owned land in Sydenham, Springfield, and Cato Manor – areas they had pioneered almost a century earlier – had their homes expropriated by the government for use by the White hegemony (Maharaj 1997). These residents were moved to townships like Chatsworth and Phoenix on the edges of central areas in Durban, which the state had earmarked for the Indian community. These areas remain populated by an Indian majority today, standing as stark reminders of the Group Areas Act and its effects on urban racial distribution. Unlike Tongaat, a town developed from the clustering of indentured Indian labourers, these areas were specifically demarcated for dislocated Indians.

Segregation and unequal resources were also present in the vocational and educational sectors; the Mines and Work Act of 1956 gave rise to racial discrimination in employment,

[28]This policy was used to justify physical segregation of, and disparate systems and infrastructure for, each race.

especially by giving White workers a monopoly on skilled operations and higher-paying or more desirable jobs. The government only began to consider free education for Indian South Africans in 1945, after which it was made available until matriculation (MacMillan 1961). In 1959, up to 4,000 Indian children over six years old could not be admitted to schools in Natal due to a lack of accommodation (MacMillan 1961). Education-related discrimination continued well into the tertiary level; the Extension of University Education Act of 1959 stopped non-White students from attending White universities and gave rise to separate institutions for Coloureds, Blacks, and Indians. However, it must be noted that opportunities for Indian education were relatively higher than those afforded to Black people. Indians were quickly incorporated into a socio-political hierarchy that positioned them as superior to Black people in the same way they were considered inferior to White citizens (Naidoo 1997; Radhakrishnan 2005).

The separate development of each non-White race group was also repressed by laws that impeded their sense of self-worth and affected their day-to-day existence. The Reservation of Separate Amenities Act of 1953 called for the segregation of all public amenities, including parks, beaches, transportation, shelters, and bathrooms. As explained by an Indian woman who recently underwent an operation for a mild stroke,

> I found a public toilet… and was rudely pushed out by a White woman… She shoved me out of the door. I was unable to control my bladder. The humiliation and sense of despair will always be with me (in Naidoo and Rajab 2005: 150).

This Act was so malevolent that it even made provisions for the unavoidable mixing of White and non-White bodies in public buildings; enabling separate counters at post offices, waiting rooms in offices, and elevators in buildings. Facilities were not equally built or maintained, with the majority of funds and attention being directed towards amenities for Whites (Naidoo and Rajab 2005).

From these fundamental explanations and examples of the apartheid regime and its implementation, it is clear that Indians suffered exponentially from the discriminatory policies that were meant to curtail their social, political, and economic development. In a study on the traumatic experiences of apartheid endured by Indians, single words that were used by their respondents to summarise their attitudes included "pain, tragedy, slavery, best forgotten, hell!" (Naidoo and Rajab 2005: 148). Though they were considered to be superior than other non-White races, they were still affected by their second–class status as an immigrant diaspora. There has been a continued contestation over the comparative trauma

experienced by Indians, and Black and Coloured people respectively. Despite the disdain that Whites held for the 'Asiatic Menace', there were remnants of the idea that they were a less dangerous race group. However, this discussion warrants greater attention than the scope of this study allows me to undertake.

2.3.2. Indian Resistance to Apartheid

Cohesive forms of resistance were necessitated by the social and legislative onslaught against Indians. During the 1950s, political parties like the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) and the South African Indian Congress (SAIC) resumed their efforts to end Indian repatriation and foster a secure sense of belonging in their new country. NIC members challenged racial segregation through alliances with the African National Congress (ANC) on joint campaigns. However, both parties' desire for collaborative resistance was prevented by the 'ideological isolationism' of factions who sought individual identities (Kirk 1983); several NIC members continued to see Indians as a separate group, whilst some Black leaders aligned with an Africanist distinction (Vahed 1995). Furthermore, political unity was difficult for the Black and Indian masses, primarily due to social separation and competition for limited resources (Vahed 1995).

Intense political activism was enacted in response to the Group Areas Act, which was perceived as an insidious design against the community's social and financial prosperity. However, the period following this was typified by a general slump in political activity due to "ageing leadership, lack of direction, and poor organization in Indian political structures" (Maharaj 1997: 146). Furthermore, the NIC was still dominated by an elite group while its leaders were preoccupied with cases laid against them for high treason against the apartheid government (Johnson 1973). The resultant lack of organised protest action, coupled with repressive state apparatuses structured to prevent rebellion, contributed to the failure of resistance against the Group Areas Act and, more broadly, the apartheid state (Maharaj 1994).

The ANC, SAIC, South African Coloured People's Organisation, and a small group of radical Whites from the Congress of Democrats – which together formed the Congress Alliance – adopted the Freedom Charter in 1955 and embraced a non-racial identity (Vahed 1995). Other resistance movements, like the Azanian People's Organisation, believed that Indians should be classified as 'Black' to negate differentiated oppression (Naidoo 1997). The continually evolving social and political situation resulted in shifting Indian identities, especially in

relation to Black and White people (Vahed 1995). Buffeted once more between uncertain identities, the Indian South African population's status as citizens was defined according to others around them. However, evidence suggests that a non-Indian identity has been favoured by people of Indian origin who find themselves distanced from 'their' community in some way or another (Radhakrishnan 2005).

Issues of Indian belonging persisted until the advent of South Africa's status as a republic in 1961, when they were finally granted citizenship a century after their arrival (Vahed 1995). The long-awaited acceptance of Indian South Africans as legitimate inhabitants allowed for increased advantages in other spheres; state investment in their housing and education led to considerable upward mobility after the 1960s (Vahed 1995). Relative socioeconomic success for Indians was a fortunate consequence of citizenship; the state's aims were primarily to ensure that Indian demands were channelled through the government for use in the implementation of separate development policies (Desai 1996 in Naidoo 1997).

Social and economic security prompted a more moderate political outlook amongst the wider Indian population, who sought to protect their newfound interests as South African citizens (Vahed 1995; Naidoo 1997). Moreover, the arrest and exile of prominent Indian activists between 1962 and 1972 caused many to fear being involved in the resistance movement (Naidoo 1997). Although some Indian students and professionals continued their political activism post-1970, the broader South African Indian population attempted to distance themselves from the increased political repression (Naidoo 1997).

As anti-apartheid movements gained traction in the 1980s, many Indians eschewed political notoriety in favour of focusing on upward economic mobility, commonly through the development of semi-skilled and skilled labour. Once limited to operating as court interpreters or *sirdars*/supervisors on plantations, Indians established themselves in positions of public service, university lecturing, financial management and within the textile industry (Vahed 1995; Naidoo 1997). Some sectors in Durban, however, were typically averse to employing Indians, which led to the poorer classes competing with Black people over scarce employment opportunities (Naidoo 1997). Indians thus became known as 'The Best Hated Racial Group' by 1979; their poverty provoked hatred, and success prompted envy (Naidoo 1997).

Even with the concentrated efforts to separate South Africans on the basis of their racial classification, there existed remnants of multicultural communities that blighted the illusion of complete urban segregation. The previously integrated Warwick Avenue Triangle in Durban, which fell under predominantly White occupation following the rise of racial politics in the 1930s, once again housed a diverse community by the end of the 1980s (Maharaj 1999). Political reforms that occurred in the 1980s prevented the ruthless relocation that occurred in Sophiatown, District Six, and Cato Manor during the 1960s and 1970s. Those non-White families who were not removed from the area fostered relationships with each other and their White neighbours, as "traditional values based on ties of trust, friendship, sociability, obligation and mutual support served to create a set of place-based communal bonds" (Scott 1994 in Maharaj 1999: 265). The area was naturally not free from opposition; neither the central nor local state favoured its non-racial character and attempted to destroy it through the Group Areas Act and slum clearance laws (Maharaj 1999).

2.3.3. Media and Censorship

South Africa's media landscape during apartheid was shaped by state censorship, racial segregation, and the struggle for political representation. It was difficult for non-Whites – and, indeed, sympathetic White people – to effectively take a stand against segregation, as the apartheid government maintained strict control over the press. As Ginwala (1972: 27) expressed in a paper for the United Nations, "a free press cannot exist outside a free society, and South Africa is not free". The apartheid government's control over the press lead to any forms of media-based resistance being swiftly and decisively banned. Laws such as the Publications Act of 1974 enabled state members to regulate any form of public communications, while the Internal Security Act of 1982 was used to intimidate potentially threatening newspapers by imposing an absurdly high registration fee[29] (Claassen, 2000).

Mainstream media outlets dominated by the state were used to reinforce racial hierarchies (Hepple 1970 in Ginwala 1972). Government mandates forced the South African Broadcasting Corporation[30] (SABC) and commercial print media to censor any resistance activities and publish propaganda to reinforce white supremacist assumptions (Ginwala 1972; Naidoo 1997). The Indian community, classified as a distinct racial group under apartheid laws, had limited access to mainstream media and was often marginalised within the broader

[29]Under the provisions of this act, publishers could be charged R40,000 when only a R10 deposit was normally required (Jackson 1993 in Claassen 2000).
[30]The SABC remains the national radio and television public broadcaster in democratic South Africa.

public sphere. However, Indian-owned and community-based media played a critical role in preserving cultural identity, resisting oppression, and fostering political activism (Vahed and Desai 2010; Maharaj 1999).

Publications such as *Post Natal*[31] catered to the Indian South African population by reporting on political developments, social issues, community affairs; *The Graphic* offered a more politically-conscious read (Gandhi-Luthuli Documentation Centre, no date). Many Indian-owned publications that were founded during the indenture period carried over as a form of mass media communications during apartheid. The *Indian Opinion* was taken over by Gandhi's son until 1956 (Vahed 1999). *The Leader* continued until at least 1994 under the editorial leadership of Dhanee Bramdaw, serving the Indian South African community through the apartheid era and outlasting most of its competitors (Maharaj 1994). This was a momentous achievement, since the publication – as expressed by one of its writers – "could never take for granted things our white counterparts could" (Bissetty 1990). Nonetheless, these critical media outlets were used to challenge the apartheid state and advocate for social justice while avoiding repercussions from state surveillance.

Beyond mainstream newspapers, activist groups within the Indian community used pamphlets, underground newsletters, and community radio to mobilise resistance. The Natal Indian Congress and its Transvaal counterpart wielded these platforms to engage Indian South Africans in anti-apartheid efforts. Alternative radio stations – such as Radio Freedom, which operated from exile – broadcast anti-apartheid messages that reached Indian South Africans (Fortein 2023). Indian journalists played a crucial role in the fight against apartheid, though many were harassed, detained, or forced into exile due to their critical reporting (Ginwala 1972; Akhalwaya 1988). Figures such as Frene Ginwala, Ameen Akhalwaya, and Farook Khan used their platforms to expose state violence, human rights abuses, and economic marginalisation (Suder 2019; Mayet 2020; France-Presse 2021). Their efforts not only challenged apartheid but also laid the foundation for a more inclusive media landscape in post-apartheid South Africa.

2.3.4. The Fall of Segregation

The penultimate decade of apartheid rule introduced a greater sense of belonging for Indian South Africans, whose status as citizens was slowly being acknowledged as part of the

[31]Now the *Post*, this newspaper still caters for a primarily Indian readership.

country's political landscape. A survey conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council in 1983 reveals that almost two-thirds of the Indian ethno-racial group preferred to be known as 'South African' (Naidoo 1997). This component of the South African Indian population, including Indian academics, remained politically astute and positioned themselves at the forefront of debates on the peaceful achievement of democracy (Naidoo 1997).

A significant shift in South African politics occurred with the unbanning of resistance organisations in 1990 (Naidoo 1997). The NIC was then tasked with renegotiating its presence and purpose amongst the newly freed African National Congress and other political parties. However, National Party ideologies that had successfully alienated Indians from the other oppressed groups culminated in uncertainties around what 'democracy' would mean for Indians under Black rule (Naidoo 1997). The late Nelson Mandela played an instrumental role in tempering the mutual hatred that existed between Indian and Black people, highlighting their propensity for intercultural understanding instead (Naidoo 1997).

South Africa's first democratic elections were held in April 1994, commemorating the official end to apartheid and symbolising renewed hope for an equal, multiracial society. Approximately 85% of the South African Indian population exercised their democratic franchise, although the majority voted against change (Naidoo 1997). Indian voters comprised 7% of the Nationalist Party's votes, compared to a 1.5% total in favour of the African National Congress (Naidoo 1997). NIC leader Farouk Meer attributed this lack of support to fear, racial prejudice, and poor organisation among Indians (Naidoo 1997). Other factions ensured that the Minority Front (MF), an 'Indian Party' led by Amichand Rajbansi, secured a place in the Provincial legislature – if only, notes Naidoo (1997: 147), from "those who simply wanted to vote for an Indian". The majority ANC vote heralded a new era for South African rule, encapsulated by the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa to ensure that past injustices would not be repeated.

Former President Nelson Mandela played a pivotal role in the post-1994 acceptance of South African Indians. Unlike his predecessors, Mandela sought to unify the country through their diversity with the aid of Archbishop Tutu's concept of a 'rainbow nation' (Desai and Vahed 2019). This peaceful transition is considered to be a revolutionary occurrence, especially since non-Black racial groups were fearful that the ANC would implement a reverse-apartheid state. In the face of this 'new South Africa', descendants of 19th-century Indian immigrants were finally allowed to assert their cultural presence and negotiate a new

identity for themselves. The appealing idea of this multicultural, rainbow nation encouraged hope that the categorical discrimination of past years was finally to be over (Desai and Vahed 2019).

2.4. Indian South Africans and Democracy

The Indian South African population's existence as a distinct diaspora community ultimately gave rise to a level of self-acceptance (Pillay 2019). Many subgroups of Indians derived support and solidarity from belonging to a broader group, transcending intra-racial tensions in the face of an unwelcoming host country. Thus, when the host country suddenly allowed for the assertion of belonging, what were they to do with this unified sense of community? As discussed in this chapter, Indian cultural assertion developed in response to positive shifts in political dynamics across the country. The members of the Indian South African community began the process of understanding, constructing, and (re)negotiating their identities in the context of their multicultural milieu, which itself is an ongoing process (Hall 1990).

2.4.1 What of Belonging?

Vahed and Desai (2010) highlight that there is no overarching 'South African' category in the multicultural context of South Africa's population assignations. Instead, ethnic or racial identities are negotiated as part of a broader South African national affiliation. Issues of race therefore remain a point of contention in the face of being either African/Black, Coloured, Indian/Asian[32], or White; racial identity is, after all, "a habit of thought and experience" (Posel 2001 in Desai and Vahed 2019: 16). Pillay (2019), for example, argues that a homogenous 'South African' community cannot develop because of its history. Although a detailed discussion of present-day inter-racial dynamics lies outside the scope of my research, a deeper exploration of race in the context of the broader contemporary socio-political milieu could be a matter of great interest in further Indian South African diaspora studies.

Radhakrishnan (2005: 270) notes that the articulation of culture is a key avenue through which Indian South Africans have re-created meanings of 'Indianness' to assert their minority voice in a multicultural post-apartheid world – and, I argue, express their belonging to this culture. Of great importance here is the understanding that this 'Indianness' does not refer to an explicitly Indian identity connected to the homeland's socio-cultural norms, beliefs, and

[32] Interestingly, Indian South Africans are still not recognised independently from other Asian residents.

practices. Instead, it is an adaptation based on the inevitable influence of the host country that reflects the hybridity between Indian heritage and contemporary South African identity. This cultural assertion constitutes an integral part of identity and belonging for the Indian community as they negotiate their position within the broader South African society[33]. As with any diasporic group, there were various differences that the Indian community had to negotiate as they entered South African society (Kumar 2000: 392). Nonetheless, the cultural expressions that they were once forced to stifle have now become a means of asserting their hybridised identity and experiencing a sense of belonging to it.

In the democratic era, there have been several avenues available for the Indian South African community to produce and consume performances of cultural expression. Radhakrishnan (2005) gives the example of the opening event of the Miss India-Worldwide pageant, which was held in Durban. This ceremony was used as a means of promoting Indian arts and culture as much as it was about fashion, with traditional Indian dance and song being used throughout the programme (Radhakrishnan 2005). The pageant thus signalled "an authentication of Indianness and, more generally, a new interest in performing culture" (Radhakrishnan 2005: 265). Other instances of cultural assertion include the existence of local Indian fusion dance groups and Indian South African comedy shows. The production of these performances, and their relative popularity with their audiences, highlight their potential to encourage Indian South Africans to engage more with their dual identities.

However, issues of Indian South Africans 'legitimate' belonging to the country occasionally resurface. The 'fading rainbow' is a likely contributing factor to those who question their place in the South African political milieu (Desai 2019). In 2002, the anti-Indian song *AmaNdiya*/Indians was released by playwright Mbongeni Ngema – criticising Indians for not investing in Black townships, and opposing post-apartheid migration from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh (Desai 2019: 5). The Mazibuye African Forum, an African grassroots movement, has been posing similar arguments since 2012, and claim that Indians "benefitted through colonialism and apartheid" (Daily News 2013 in Desai 2019). The rising levels of African Nationalism in South Africa are a continued source of concern for Indian South Africans, who see themselves as part of the struggle against apartheid.

The Economic Freedom Fighters political party leader, Julius Malema, has in recent years reignited this argument. In party convenings, he frequently provokes Afro-Indian tensions,

[33]Interestingly, the 'History' webpage on the official South African Goverment website makes no mention of the history and presence of Indian South Africans (Government of South Africa, 2025).

accusing Indians of exploiting Black workers and labelling them as ‘worse than Afrikaners’, the racial group to which the proponents of apartheid belonged (SAHRC 2017). Though Malema has faced backlash from the Indian South African community, the EFF refused to apologise. Malema is also known to have called for a probe into the culpability of Indian South Africans in the Durban riots of July 2021, in which racial tensions between Indians and Blacks escalated in the majority Indian-populated Phoenix area. However, he made an appearance in Phoenix prior to the national 2024 elections; in this visit, he acknowledged that Indians are generally in favour of peace and that they would overcome race-based challenges together (Matiwane 2021).

2.4.2. Post-apartheid Media Practices

Along with artistic expression, mediated expressions of culture and identity are instrumental to the importance of cultural assertion. Newspapers and radio programmes are two common forms of media through which cultural expressions were enacted before the rise of social media (Silverstone 1999). Of particular interest here is Lotus FM, a radio station that has catered to the news and entertainment needs of the South African Indian community since 1983. Not only are topics of national interest discussed through the news and various talk shows, but there is also a space to discuss matters of ‘Indianness’, such as radio dramas about family life and comedy shows based on niche humour. Freely distributed community newspapers such as *The Gazette* and *The Rising Sun* also embody these characteristics of cultural expression. Within these publications are articles from predominantly Indian residential areas such as Overport and Chatsworth that would interest their audience in these communities, as well as spaces for readers to write in with their news or stories of interest.

Television shows like Eastern Mosaic also gained popularity, enjoying a Sunday morning slot on one of the South African Broadcasting Corporation’s national channels from 2000 to 2014. The programme featured social, cultural, and religious news, including segments for cuisine, fashion, and markets. Another mediated practice of culture that has been asserted by Indian South Africans is the consumption of Bollywood movies. In a study on the use of Bollywood by Indian South African youth and the meanings they construct from it in the context of their own experiences, Boshoff (2005) found that diasporic subjects use Bollywood to participate in a common international cultural pool. Thus, despite the fact that Bollywood is a form of Indian media, Indian South African youth use it as a means of "empowering their own status and identity as modern citizens of a local and distinctive community” (Boshoff 2005: 149).

Indian South African culture now has the opportunity to express itself through digital media, which is an important site for the articulation of diasporic identities (Lee and Tse 2024). Content creators feature strongly in the composition of Indian South African diasporic media that is aimed towards this group. Various individuals create a 'brand' around themselves; they embody certain traits such as an accent or attire and employ the use of niche humour to discuss matters of relevance to the Indian South African community. Whether their audiences find this content interesting, and the type of meanings they make from it, will be examined in line with the purpose of this study. Through this, I also explore the feelings of belonging or non-belonging that they construct through their interactions with this content.

2.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I traced the historical trajectory of the Indian South African community. I began with a discussion of Indian arrival as indentured labourers and independent traders, who were largely marginalised by the White hegemony and Black majority. I then examined their struggles during the colonial and apartheid eras, which were underscored by social, political, and cultural shifts that negatively affected their diasporic identities and sense of belonging in the 'host' country. These experiences provided critical contextual information for understanding the continued sense of non-belonging and 'othering' that was thrust upon this community, explaining why contemporary feelings of belonging remain crucial.

I also discussed the advent of democracy and its implications for Indian South Africans, which are being constantly reassessed and renegotiated. Lastly, I outlined how media platforms serve as critical spaces for Indian South Africans to express their heritage, negotiate their identity, and engage in digital storytelling – practices that were previously not afforded to them to the extent that it has been during South Africa's democracy. This narrative provides a foundation from which we can understand their contemporary cultural identity and the significance of preserving and performing diasporic cultural expressions in the context of digital realities.

The gaps that my research seeks to fill relate to the diasporic identity of this community that is performed on and experienced through contemporary social networking sites. I have not encountered existing literature that grapples with the specific intersection of digital sociality and the Indian South African diaspora, and I hope that my attempt is the first of many.

Chapter Three: Diaspora and Digital Sociality

3.1. Introduction

In order to understand the extent to which Indian South African Facebook content is able (or not) to encourage in its audiences a sense of belonging to their hybridised culture, it is necessary to discuss the theories that frame this research topic. In Chapter Two, I discussed the historical context of Indian arrival and settlement in South Africa to contextualise their contemporary constructions of belonging through social media content. The majority of the present-day Indian demographic in South Africa are descendants of indentured labourers who were brought to the country by British colonial authorities, and independent traders who followed them in the hopes of advancing their economic enterprise. Since the historical forces that led to an Indian presence in South Africa thus satisfy the criteria for a diaspora, we can engage with diaspora theory as a lens with which to view their contemporary cultural belonging.

Furthermore, the investigation of culture-specific content on Facebook requires a viewpoint that engages with online media and the tendency of online users to form communities around their interests. As such, I include theory on digital sociality to further inform this subject matter. Whilst this multifaceted study can be approached from different angles, I have chosen to explore it through the intersection of diaspora and digital sociality in order to explore the nuances of this research topic. I begin each section in this chapter with an explanation of key definitions and concepts related to each theory, followed by further discussions that motivate their suitability to my research.

3.2. Diaspora Theory

Diaspora theory refers to the body of literature that examines how people and their cultural practices are shaped by displacement, migration, and ongoing connections to both the homeland and host countries. This study benefits from the use of this theory as a lens through which to perceive the analysis of Indian South African culture because, as Boshoff (2005: 7) argues,

> it is impossible to come to any meaningful conclusions about personal and communal perceptions of being Indian at this point in South Africa's history without being able

in some way to theorise about the many influences such a past might have at both the subjective, personal level, and at the level of the wider Indian community.

Since it is not possible to include a comprehensive overview of the multitude of knowledge that is generated and contested within this body of literature, I outline the definitions that underscore this concept to clear the way for a discussion of the implications of diasporic culture and identity for diasporic communities. Lastly, I examine existing literature about the intersection of diaspora and media.

3.2.1 Defining Diaspora

The term 'diaspora' derives from the Greek word *diaspeirein*, meaning to disperse or scatter, and encompasses the ideas of 'dispersion', 'distribution', and 'diffusion' – which are not necessarily negative concepts (Dufoix 2018). Before its emergence as a theoretical framework, diaspora denoted the mass movements of ancient Greeks and was later synonymous with the exodus of Jewish and Armenian populations. Once migration patterns became more evident, anthropological and cultural scholars required a comprehensive label for ethnic minorities that had settled in host countries whilst maintaining cultural, social, political, and economic connections with their homelands.

Early attempts to define 'diaspora' refer to it as "a nation or part of a nation separated from its own state or territory and dispersed among other nations but preserving its own national culture" (Dubnow 1931 in Dufoix 2018: 16). Later definitions expanded on this concept to include the notion of assimilation, as with the idea of 'overseas sojourners' who could be "[accused] of breaking the loyalty of citizens to the land of their birth… by inculcating the political and cultural values of a nation across the seas" (Freedman 1995 in Dufoix 2018: 19). Although more contemporary scholarship explores different aspects of these definitions, prominent diaspora theorists unanimously contend that the term encompasses an assortment of permanently displaced, dispersed, and dislocated peoples who maintain sentimental or material links to their homeland and are thus not wholly assimilated into their host society's culture (see Safran 1991; Shuval 2000; Sheffer 2003; and Brah 2005).

Safran (1991) delineates 'common features' of diaspora communities, which were later expanded upon by Cohen (1996). These features include, but are not limited to, an often traumatic dispersal from the home country to two or more locations; the expansion from a

homeland in pursuit of work; a strong ethnic group consciousness based on shared history; and an idealisation of the homeland (Cohen 1996). Cohen (1996) recognises that it is not possible for any diaspora to manifest all of the given characteristics. Clifford (1997) also cautions against defining 'an ideal type' of diaspora based on this list, and thus identifying any one as 'more or less diasporic'. Indeed, the term 'diaspora' has grown to include meanings of transnationalism and "includes words like immigrant, expatriate, refugee… [and] ethnic community" (Tölölyan 1991: 4).

Since the development of diaspora theory, scholarly understandings of this concept have shifted focus from the homeland to the broader implications of transnationalism for diasporic groups (Brubaker 2005; Roy 2008; Faist 2010). Shuval (2000: 43) argues that the shifting nature of the concept of 'diaspora' results from it being a social construct that is

> founded on feeling, consciousness, memory, mythology, history, meaningful narratives, group identity, longings, dreams, allegorical and virtual elements, all of which play a role in establishing a diaspora reality.

For Brubaker (2005: 13), it is not useful to speak of a diapora as an "ethnodemographic or ethnocultural fact"; they should instead be spoken about in terms of "diasporic stances, projects, claims, idioms, practices, and so on". Newer understandings of 'diaspora' have also engaged with a more complex view of the "ongoing political, economic, social and cultural ties between multiple institutions" (Kalra, Kaur, and Hutnyk 2005: 3). There is a tendency to privilege aspects like experience, body, and imagination (Roy 2008). Furthermore, the emphasis on cultural hybridity and processes of cultural innovation addresses the coexistence of migrant integration and cultural distinction (Faist 2010). The above viewpoints depart from previously static notions of the 'triadic relationship' among diaspora bodies, homelands, and host countries, instead taking into account the continuously changing contexts of diasporic experiences.

3.2.2. Diaspora and Cultural Identity

The socio-historical examination of what constitutes a diaspora comprises one approach to understanding diasporic cultural identities. Discussions of this nature emphasise the triadic relationship among the homeland, the host country, and the diasporic group that seeks to maintain a connection to both these places (Sheffer 2003). Although this position does not perceive diasporas as communities that can surpass the state of being 'torn between' two or more places, it is useful for understanding how and why the Indian South African diaspora

came into being as a group. I engaged with this 'becoming' in Chapter Two's review of existing literature, by showing the trajectory of this community from immigrants to part of the socio-political landscape. Still, a meaningful discussion of the interpretations made by Indian South Africans through their experiences with social media requires an understanding of the shared cultural identity(ies) under which they consume this media.

It is useful to explore fundamental descriptions of culture and identity as a starting point to foreground a more in-depth discussion of these concepts. Grimson (2010: 63) asserts that "culture alludes to our routine of strongly sedimented practices, beliefs and meanings; identity refers to our feelings of belonging to a collective". Although readers are cautioned against indiscriminately blending the two concepts, "in certain contexts, culture and identity can combine into a single practice, ritual or expression" (Grimson 2010: 63). I argue that in the context of this research topic, culture and identity can be combined because racial-cultural groupings are often used as social and political descriptors in South Africa's milieu. The combination of culture and identity can then be used to provide a lens through which we can view the ways in which members of the Indian South African diaspora feel a sense of belonging or non-belonging to their 'practices' of shared values and behaviours. We can thus surmise that an Indian South African cultural identity encompasses the idea of individuals who feel that they belong to this group by subscribing to the key aspects of its associated values and behaviours.

Alongside discussions of culture and identity, it is important to understand the context of 'ethnicity' within the framework of diaspora theory. In conventional social science discourses, ethnic groups are seen to share "some combination of common descent (real or supposed); cultural or physical characteristics; and sets of attitudes and behaviours" (Smooha 1989 in Gillespie 2001). However, this predicates ethnicity on the practices of race and endogamy, and ignores the "compound of objective markers, subjective definitions and explicit codes of cultural behaviour" (Gillespie 2001). Grimson (2010), too, eschews the idea that a common skin colour or place of origin should indicate a shared culture and identity. An example that comes to mind is of a Black or White person who has been adopted into and raised in an Indian South African household. As such, I favour the approach that views ethnic identity as acknowledging places of history and culture in the construction of identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is positioned and all knowledge is contextual (Hall 1988 in Gillespie 2001).

For Hall (1994: 393), one way of thinking about cultural identity entails an understanding of "the common historical experiences and shared culture codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history". Here, the concept of cultural identity is not seen as static *per se*, but rather as a constant collective bearing under which to identify and negotiate the dynamic nature of our individual identities. Cultural markers such as cuisine, attire, and speech patterns stand as examples of these frames of reference. A second, related view acknowledges cultural identity as "the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (Hall 1994: 394). These identities are seen as constantly undergoing transformation in their experiences of history, culture and power (Hall 1994). Although Hall speaks from the post-colonial perspective, these meanings are equally relevant to diaspora groups, since Indian South African cultural identities are informed by a multiplicity of positions that include experiences of colonial, apartheid, and multicultural societies.

Diasporic individuals and communities are understood to possess fluid identities that are shaped through multiple experiences and perspectives (Said 1984). These have been described as part of the global postmodern, which is an earlier way of thinking about the production of identities that rejected the idea of them being fixed and unchanging. It still may be useful in discussions of hybridised identities, since diasporas are seen to constantly negotiate their identities and cultural positions by shifting between multiple contexts from their homeland and host country (Bhabha 1994; Brah 2005). It is important to factor in the various cultural, political, and historical influences that act upon diasporic identities to create a 'double consciousness' (Gilroy 1993). The Indian South African community forms part of the historical and contemporary 'flows' of people, technologies, media, and ideas that make their identities part of what we understand to be the 'postmodern' (Appadurai 1996). From their initial introduction to the country as labourers or traders, they have been involved in the process of social integration that saw them adapt traditions from 'home' to be applied in the land of the 'host' (Desai and Vahed 2010).

The phenomenon of transnationalism brings into sharp relief the drivers of globalisation that dissolve spatiotemporal boundaries, such as media platforms and the increased accessibility of cross-border travel. These phenomena have caused ideas of 'cultures' and 'nations' to lose traditional delineations of meaning as large-scale movements of people distort the definitive boundaries of how and why a group or subgroup came to be in a particular locale. Boshoff

(2005) explains how absolute borders are being eroded as mass movements of people from postcolonial contexts voluntarily move to, or travel between, their homes and countries of increased opportunity. As such, we can depart from viewing diasporic bodies solely as victims or members of a country who remain economically subaltern. This is a useful perspective from which to approach the analysis of my research, as the Indian South African community is no longer under the thumb of colonial or apartheid influences.

How, then, are we to understand the relationship between diaspora and cultural identity if these concepts are so fluid? It may still be helpful to retain their analytical descriptiveness, as 'diaspora' "captures the dynamics of cross-cultural and cross-language settlement in particular, rather than such neutral and technical terms as immigration" (Sinclair and Cunningham 2000: 18). Still, where national cultures become susceptible to the deconstruction of boundaries, so too do individual identities experience the same decentering of static characteristics (Sinclair and Cunningham 2000); social identities are marked by "fragmentation, multiplicity, plurality and indeterminacy" (Thompson 1992 in Gillespie 2001). Cultural adaptation thus becomes an important feature of diasporic identities that must inform how we interpret their meanings. For Hall (1993: 362), diasporas are "the products of the cultures of hybridity", or a 'diasporic consciousness', who retain strong links to their homelands while creating new identities from within - and in relation to - the cultures of the host country. Hall's (1993) description serves as a strong reflection of the Indian South African community. The majority of this population is integrated with their host country in their dress, language, and general social relationships, but also retain strong links to their place of origin through religious practices, types of cuisine, and the continuation of tradition.

3.3. Digital Sociality

Digitality refers to the condition of and processes associated with digital technologies, such as the Internet and social media (Miller 2011). Sociality is the investigation of how social interactions are formed and the tendency of people to interact with others in groups (Papacharissi 2010). Together, these concepts can be integrated to use in the investigation of how social interactions are mediated through digital platforms, and how these are interpreted by the social actors who engage with them. Bratrud and Waltorp (2024: 7) refer to 'digital sociality' as "the ubiquitous nature of digital technologies and digitally mediated, digitally enabled, and digitally augmented society".

3.3.1. Understanding Digital Sociality

The field of digital sociality builds on traditional frameworks that underscore the study of human society to include the effect of social media. For Frade (2024), digitisation is "something so deeply embedded in our lives that it fundamentally organises and moulds social life and selves". Miller et al. (2016) go so far as to argue that there is no longer any distinction between the virtual world and the real one, in much the same way we do not consider a telephone conversation to take place in a separate world. Since digital platforms like social networking sites are spaces wherein people spend a significant portion of their lives, the study thereof is "as much one of sociality as of communication" (Miller et al. 2016). Still, "the blurring of the online and offline does not remove the requirement to address circulating symbolic forms, that is, representations" (Enli and Thumin 2012: 90).

Indeed, a prominent area of inquiry within digital sociality is that of digital identity and self-presentation (Frade 2024). For Couldry and Hepp (2017), the construction of the social world, which we look out on as 'selves', is enacted through various forms of agency that are being transformed by media and communications. Once such a form of agency is the practice of people representing themselves online, which departs from 'old' media practices whereby the public is represented through the lens of media professionals (Enli and Thumim 2012). Though self-representation is not the explicit purpose of a platform like Facebook, it is a necessary part of socialising online – especially since "socializing is inextricably entwined with the making of representations of the self" (Enli and Thumim 2012: 88). The pervasiveness of digitalisation in society has placed a certain pressure on the 'self' to represent itself on digital platforms in the 'culture of connectivity' (van Dijck 2013 in Couldry and Hepp 2017: 145). Digital devices that provide access to social media help the 'self' to handle the multiple expectations of contemporary life and the growing avenues for self-representation (Couldry and Hepp 2017).

An important concept to introduce here is the Habermasian idea of the 'public sphere', whereby political processes can be negotiated by a group of citizens who express, share, and contest meanings in a universally accessible space (Habermas 1992 in Burgess 2007). Though the public sphere is not part of recent scholarship, it still may be useful for examining social media platforms wherein audiences can interact with each other to discuss the meanings that they derive from media content. Furthermore, these audiences can form opinions that inform their personal understandings through observation, without necessarily

engaging in direct participation. Fraser (1990 in Bosch 2020) describes the public sphere as an "institutionalised arena of discursive interaction"; this statement – although a political reference – still holds true to the social sphere. For one film studies scholar, movies and other forms of representation

> play an important role in forming ideas about, and attitudes to, the world, in alleviating anxiety and even in diffusing conflict – in short, they do do political work (Perkins 2000 in Enli and Thumim 2012: 90).

I argue that Pages centred around Indian South African content on Facebook serve as an extension of the public sphere by providing an online arena for discourse around the community's socio-cultural and political presence, which in turn validates their sense of belonging as a diaspora community.

To connect the idea of a cultural public sphere with contemporary models of cultural citizenship in light of new media technologies, Burgess (2007) offers a few poignant clarifications – some from Habermas' own writings. First, instead of 'a' public sphere existing, there are multiple spaces for the formation of *publics* via communication (Burgess 2007: 56, original emphasis). These spaces are not the realm of expert discourse, but accessible to the layperson; they are differentiated according to the complexity of discussion, and brought together through the mass media (Habermas 1996 in Burgess 2007). McGuigan (2005 in Burgess 2007) introduces the idea of everyday life, affect, and pleasure as some of the most impactful forms of civic participation. We can thus understand that informal social gatherings – as found on social networking sites – can be sites of the practice of contemporary cultural citizenship (Burgess 2007).

Also useful to the concept of digital sociality is Ragnedda's (2018) perspective on what digital capital has to offer the other capitals, such as the social sphere, which informs a person's experience of the world. Once the 'digital divides' of access and effective use are overcome, people who transform the online experience into something 'concrete' tend to experience an increase in their general quality of life (Ragnedda 2018). For example, an individual with a high level of digital capital would experience the social advantages of implementing virtual activism effectively in the offline realm (Ragnedda 2018). This concept of transforming resources acquired online into a useful outcome in the 'real' world can greatly benefit diaspora communities, who can use a sense of pride and identity reinforcement found online to assert their right to belong in the physical space as a minority group. In terms of this study, we find that an Indian South African person is able to use the

content that they encounter online as a means of reinforcing shared offline experiences with other members of the community, and experiencing a validation of such practices for their own identities.

The above points are salient for diaspora communities, who can look to performances of their cultures by content creators as representations that they are free to engage with and share to their personal profiles to express themselves. This assists diasporic individuals with engaging in the constant renegotiation of their multiplicity of identities, especially as they may be particularly driven as minorities to form online communities and be made visible by mediatised representations therein (Enli and Thumim 2012; Lorenzana 2016). The intersection of diaspora and digital sociality, then, frames the observation of digital social interactions for communities with a minority ethnic presence. This convergence of theories enables me to investigate how Indian South African social media content is received and interpreted by the online communities that comprise their audience.

3.3.2. 'Network Sociality'

Social networking sites, like Facebook and Instagram, have been subject to mainstream and scholarly criticism for making people less sociable (Turkle 2011 in Miller and Horst 2021). The idea behind this phenomenon is that being engaged on a mobile device makes users less prone to interacting with people in the offline world. While this critique is not without merit, Miller and Horst (2021) offer a counterargument that highlights a tendency towards nostalgia and viewing new media as a harbinger of a loss of authentic sociality. They contend that it is untrue to consider prior forms of sociality to be more authentic by virtue of being less 'online', since "people are not one iota more mediated by the rise of digital technologies" (Miller and Horst 2021: 26). As an example, they query Turkle (2011) bemoaning the behaviours of people who return from work only to log on to Facebook instead of watching television, when TV was subject to similar lamentations when it was introduced (Miller and Horst 2021). From arguments such as this, we start to see how Facebook has the potential for encouraging a 'network sociality'.

The term 'network sociality' refers to a technological tendency to form social groups

> insofar as it is deeply embedded in communication technology… and technologies to manage relationships. It is a sociality that is based on the use of… phones, faxes…

> voicemail, video-conferencing, mobiles, emails… and websites (Wittel 2001 in Willson 2010: 494).

This early description, which predates Facebook and many other social media, indicates that Wittel (2001) observes a shift in society from the more structured and stable 'community-based sociality' (Willson 2010). As such, technology is considered in terms of its capacity to manage relationships in the 'offline' world, which underestimates the capacity for valuable connections to be maintained online. We recall how Miller et al. (2016) consider there to be no distinction between the real and virtual worlds, which necessitates a contemporary reflection of a network sociality. As Willson (2010) notes, online social activities that are confined to digital spaces exist alongside practices that leverage technology to build and sustain offline social relationships.

What is more helpful, then, is to consider the idea of a network sociality in terms of boyd's (2010) concept of 'networked publics', which are simultaneously "(1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology and practice". A 'public', in this sense, can be understood as a collection of localised or distant people who share "a common understanding of the world, a shared identity, [and] a claim to inclusiveness" (Livingstone 2005 in boyd 2010: 40). We thus see that networked publics, in allowing for people to coalesce online for social, cultural, and civic purposes (boyd 2010), offer users a space wherein they can form a community around matters that are of interest or relevance to them. Following this position, framing social networking sites as networked publics recognises the capacity for forming social groups within these spaces and how the practices that emerge therein are shaped by the shared dynamics.

From the above discussion, we see that network sociality not only transforms the nature of interpersonal connections but also redefines the concept of community by challenging the traditional views of relying on physical proximity and established norms. Digital spaces offer communal and interpersonal engagement across a range of forums (Willson 2010), which allow connection across spatial-temporal contexts. This convergence can foster, through digital interactions, a type of sociality that is based on a collective identity – even as this identity, as Said (1984) and Hall (1990) contend for diasporas, is fluid and continually negotiated. Networked publics, or a network sociality, can then exemplify this shift by providing spaces where people can engage in public discourse and find meaning in the shared codes that inform their lives.

These possibilities provide a valuable opportunity for the subaltern – such as marginalised, minority, or diasporic bodies – to engage in meaningful social discourse. For Miller (2021), "social media has become one of the most conspicuous examples of the internet as representing the death of distance". The internet not only provides a connection between migrants and their families, but, in linking diasporic populations settled across various offline locations, "represent a kind of home or place in its own right" (Miller 2021: 88). Some examples provided by Miller (2011 in Miller 2021) examine how migrants and transnational bodies find more meaning and connection on their phones and Facebook, than in their 'offline' worlds. He also discusses the diasporans who attempt to relate to a homeland that can no longer be revisited, those who affirm a sense of belonging to the host country, and those who reconcile their relationships with both – all online (Miller 2021). This enables an understanding of network sociality for diasporans as a phenomenon that allows them to engage with their feelings towards home and host. Furthermore, they do this while satiating the desire for social connectivity that is realised on the social web (Willson 2010).

3.3.3. Overview of Facebook

Social network sites have been defined as "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (boyd and Ellison 2008: 211). Though the nature and terminology of these profiles and connections vary across different sites, most sites facilitate the maintenance of existing social networks or enable strangers to connect based on shared interests, views, or activities (boyd and Ellison 2008). Although the terms 'social network sites' and 'social network*ing* sites' are used interchangeably, boyd and Ellison (2008) regard the latter to emphasise relationship initiation often occurring between strangers, which is not the primary activity on many of these platforms. Nonetheless, digital communication practices have developed to include a capacity for online interaction among users with no offline connection. This is the case with Indian South African content on Facebook; strangers bound by ethno-racial or cultural ties coalesce around this content and can interact with each other in the 'comments' sections on these Pages.

Miller et. al (2016) have defined virtual platforms in terms of social media, claiming that it is "the colonisation of the space between traditional broadcast and private dyadic

communication, providing people with a scale of group size and degrees of privacy". Again, we see a disruption of agreed-upon terms: 'social networking sites' is used synonymously with 'social media' – or even 'social media sites'. However, we can understand 'social media' as a communications channel for broadcasting information, while 'social networking sites' are online spaces for communication with people in a two-way nature (Froehlich 2020). With this understanding, and acknowledging that such uses can overlap, I use these terms interchangeably on a case-by-case basis. I do note Miller's (2021) more recent contention that the term 'social networking sites' is now redundant, and that 'social media' is heading the same way; however, I choose to employ both in the contexts in which they seem most appropriate.

Facebook comprises just one of the dozens of social networking sites today – yet it has maintained its popularity since its inception in 2004 and widespread use since 2006 (boyd and Ellison 2008). With over 3 billion monthly active users worldwide, Facebook surpasses other popular social network sites like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok (Dixon 2024). This could, for a large part, be attributed to it being a

> a typical easy-to-use service… which results in a low threshold for participation and socializing in the social network… The immediate user-friendliness is a key success factor explaining the fast global spread of Facebook as a social network site… Previously, blogs and homepages had been used by the technologically savvy, and required more than average digital literacy (Enli and Thumim 2012: 91).

Facebook, unlike other social media, has been available as an application on mobile devices (boyd and Ellison 2008), which likely makes more accessible the process of mediated socialising more accessible. Furthermore, the platform now allows users to customise their privacy settings – controlling what information is made known to which users on the platform.

For Enli and Thumim (2012), the self-representation and collective representation of individuals are particularly connected in the context of online socialising, such as Facebook. In South Africa, roughly 32 million people have a Facebook account, totalling just over 51% of the total population (Cowling 2025). When discussing the proliferation of social media, it is not surprising that only half the population are users – South Africa has the highest levels of income and wealth disparity in the world (Thorpe 2022). To obtain a clearer idea of the popularity of Facebook within the country, we can consider that 72% of over 45 million internet users in South Africa are on Facebook (Galal 2024); a figure that far surpasses its

competitors (StatCounter 2025). Though it is difficult to gather data for South African cases on who uses Facebook and for what, we may be able to make inferences from broader trends. South African internet users each spend just over 3.5 hours per day on social media, and use an average of 8 platforms per month. Gender trends in 2023 were split evenly, with 49.8% of users being female and 50.2% being male (McInnes 2024).

Of the types of content posted globally in 2024, photographs and videos featured at 33% and 17%, respectively; links accounted for 46% of all media on the site (Iqbal 2025). Although the social aspect of Facebook is still prominent, the nature of the platform has changed since its beginnings. It has now (d)evolved into an algorithm-based hub of news, memes, 'reels' (short-form videos), and links to purchase products from 'storefronts'[34]. While Facebook's age demographics show an older audience as the app itself ages, the majority of users (34%) in 2024 were under 35 years old (Iqbal 2025). Despite the signs that young people are increasingly making use of other social networking sites to act outside the purview of their older relatives (Enli and Thumim 2012), Facebook remains a massively popular digital platform.

This democratisation brings with it a commercialisation, and for Keen (2007 in Enli and Thumim 2012), Facebook as a business is based on a model of 'social ads'. In 2024, Facebook disclosed a net profit of just over $62 billion (Iqbal 2025) and an advertising revenue of $164,5 billion (Barnhart 2025). These figures indicate the massive reach that Facebook has globally, but also the scope that it offers for social product discovery, with brands and businesses paying to have their marketing material shown to users. Content creators are able to monetise their content in many ways, such as including advertisements in their videos and collaborating with brands if they have a "well-established presence with 10,000 Page followers" (Meta[35] Website, no date).

An important aspect to introduce here is the users and content creators around whom online communities centre themselves. Social media platforms allow users to simultaneously curate a personal brand and perform socially validated identities for their followers (Marwick and boyd 2011). The term 'content creator' has emerged as a catch-all phrase that describes "digitally enabled cultural producers who create and circulate content on social media platforms, driven by an entrepreneurial spirit and desire to generate their own 'media

[34]An e-commerce phenomenon that allows consumers to buy products through social media pages, either directly from a retailer or via a reseller, such as a content creator.
[35]Meta is the parent company under which social networking sites like Facebook and Instagram operate.

brands'" (Craig 2019 in Arriagada and Ibáñez 2020: 1). Content creators reflect the self-projection and self-promotion practices associated with individual representation on social media – but tailor their content to topics that may be less about their personal practices and more about what would appeal to their target audience(s). In terms of this study, we can understand that content creators take on the role of representing the cultural identity(ies) of the self; audience members may find themselves represented by these performances and thus benefit from the aforementioned possibilities of self-representation.

Many creators find a niche that they feel confident enough to operate within and create a self-represented online identity that is meant to "garner attention, reputation, and potentially profit" (Hearn 2010 in Arriagada and Ibáñez 2020: 3). Through advertising revenue and the possibility for brand sponsorship, the sharing of information becomes a monetised undertaking rather than simply a means for communicating topics of interest or personal knowledge (Hoose and Rosenbohm 2023). The term 'influencer' is also employed to refer to those content creators who have enough of a following and support from their audiences to persuade people to buy an item they are sponsored to promote, follow another Page or creator, or generally engage in activities that would benefit the influencer in some way. This poses a risk for uninformed audiences who may not be aware of the potential reasons behind why some types of content are created and posted, especially if the content is popular.

3.4. Diaspora and Digital Sociality

The relationship between media and diaspora has become a key area of study within cultural studies, especially as the forces of globalisation have intensified transnational flows of communication and identity (Ponzanesi 2020). Diasporic media is content that is "produced by and for certain ethnocultural communities" (Ahmed and Veronis 2020 in Lee and Tse 2024). This type of media can encourage the articulation of diasporic identities and enhance their visibility within the host society, but may also reduce ethnic identities to fixed categories and divide broader public discourse along cultural lines (Lee and Tse 2024). As individuals use their online presence to interact with diasporic media content and others who are drawn to it, there is a risk of these spaces becoming echo chambers that contribute to a sense of 'inwardness' (Sunstein 2018).

3.4.1. Diaspora and Social Media

Mass media technologies have long played a crucial role in the maintenance and continuous restructuring of diasporic identities (Gillespie 2001; Mattelart 2017; Odabasi 2019). 'New' media such as digital communications platforms are no different – they provide spaces wherein identities can be mobilised and shaped to a significant extent (Georgiou 2013). For Hall (1990: 224), the media facilitates connections for dispersed populations by creating an "imaginary coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation". I argue the point of these imaginary constructions in terms of connections between individuals from the Indian South African population to each other and their hybridised culture; that is, a collective identity can be expressed through social media and interpreted by its audiences to form personal meanings that contribute to the 'texture' of their lived diasporic experiences and identities. This viewpoint is supported by the idea of 'mediascapes', wherein the production and dissemination of information occur through technologies that create the imagined worlds that shape diasporic experiences (Appadurai 1996). Diasporas can thus use these imagined worlds to (re)articulate experiences of belonging (Appadurai 1996).

One of these 'imagined worlds' may well be a Habermasian public sphere, which, as mentioned earlier, is a helpful way of understanding Indian South African-centric social media content as a site for deliberation and cultural validation. Although Indian South African content cannot be considered part of global public spheres, it still might be useful to think of it in terms of a 'sphericule' that "provides a central site for public communication in globally dispersed communities, stage communal difference and discord productively, and work to articulate insider ethno-specific identities" (Cunningham 2001: 135). In this vein, we view the media content created by members of Indian diasporas as forming a public sphere, and the focus on the Indian South African diaspora as a sphericule; the dynamics of an ethno-specific mediatised community is a microcosm of the elements that can be found in the overarching institution (Cunningham 2001). Additionally, the point remains that these social media spaces enable people to engage in debate and discussion on matters of mutual interest (Bosch 2020).

Globalisation and digitisation have introduced spaces for marginalised and/or diasporic voices "to connect to (or disconnect from) individuals and communities in their neighbourhood or in distant places" (Georgiou 2010). The idea of 'sphericules' underscores the idea of agency that diaspora groups have in shaping their narratives and political identities (Karim 2003). In this way, access to information about the culture of their locality enables the construction of a world of cultural proximity through which diasporic identities can act and

construct meaning from a multiplicity of positions (Georgiou 2010). The concept of a public 'sphericule' implicitly accommodates a range of audiences and participants: diasporic media is not used by all members of a diasporic community. For those diaspora members who do use it, it is a complementary part of their wider media repertoire (Bozdag et al. 2012). Nonetheless, the pertinence and relevance of diasporic media to those who engage with it make it "an important part of the increasingly mediatized everyday lives of migrants" (Bozdag et al. 2012: 12). This perspective supports the assertion that the existence of Indian South African content is valuable to the ongoing identity formation of members of this diaspora.

With the idea of cultural identity being a production that is constantly mediated through representation, diasporic media offers counter-hegemonic narratives that challenge the often stereotypical narratives of mainstream media (Hall 1990; Silverstone 2007). It provides a space wherein diasporic voices can contest stereotypes and advocate for their rights in the host society (Silverstone 2007) or subvert this narrative and reclaim their power by embracing positive stereotypes. Furthermore, diasporic identities that are constantly being negotiated in the contexts of historical, social, and cultural changes can find respite in being exposed to familiar cultural repertoires that shape their self-understanding (Hall 1990). The sharing and co-creation of diasporic narratives would thus support a collective sense of identity and belonging (Georgiou 2013). This phenomenon applies to social networking sites, and specifically to the content produced by the Indian South African community. The existence of content that is created by Indian South Africans for members of their population to relate with or be entertained by constitutes a form of self-representation; it provides a space for members of this community to experience the shared meanings of their hybridised culture by seeing it represented online.

In all, the advent of new media technologies such as social media has enabled members of the Indian diaspora to negotiate their identity and cultural belonging (Boshoff 2005; Singh 2023). Not only do they serve as platforms for communicating shared experiences, but they also facilitate the formation of virtual communities based on shared identities that provide a sense of belonging for diaspora members (Georgiou 2017 in Singh 2023). Additionally, social media have enabled the expression of cultural identity through music, art, literature, and other forms of creative expression (Bhatia 2014 in Singh 2023). This has significant potential in sharing cultural traditions and practices with a wider audience. However, in my observations, the majority of responses and interactions on Indian South African content creators'

platforms come from within the community. This is unsurprising, as this group comprises 2.7% of the national population, and may be little heard of in other parts of the globe, most of whom have their own Indian diaspora.

3.4.2. Social Media and Belonging: Case Studies

For Enli and Thumim (2012: 89), the concept of mediation involves technologies and people, and "foregrounds the processes by which meanings are produced, emphasizing that meaning-making is negotiated, open-ended and ongoing". Social media such as Facebook have institutionalised and mediatised personal processes of socialising and display of identity, which traditionally have belonged to the private and non-mediated spheres (Enli and Thumim 2012). There has been an output of scholarly research on the potential of social networking sites to offer a space of belonging in recent years, especially for displaced and subaltern communities. I outline some of these studies to demonstrate how diaspora communities make use of platforms like Facebook as a means of negotiating their cultural identities.

In a study on how refugees from the displaced Rohingya community engage in ethnic identity preservation and cultural reproduction online, Ansar and Maitra (2024: 13) find that Facebook offers a node for socialisation and interaction that is non-linear, "despite its dubious role in making the Rohingya crisis and their forced exodus from Myanmar". The Pages around the Rohingya diaspora offer a platform on which diasporans can express memories of loss and homesickness, articulate their political grievances online, and engage in human-rights-based discourse as a means of seeking global attention. They can also transcend their local struggle by bridging across scattered members and "cementing the nexus between their Muslim identity and discrimination by the Buddhist-majority Myanmar government" (Ansar and Maitra 2024: 1).

For the Jain diaspora living outside India, digital media have changed "what it means to live 'in diaspora' [and makes it] easier to maintain regular contact and share experiences with family members and friends in India and elsewhere" (Vekemans 2019: 15). Those Jain diasporas who develop digital content find that digital media enables them to mitigate the challenges associated with practicing Jainism and (re)building Jain communities outside India (Vekemans 2019). As with the Rohingya community, we see the propensity for maintaining religious and cultural ties with practices in the homeland.

In a study of the Maghrebi-origin population living in France, Mattelart (2017) finds that social media platforms like Facebook are used to maintain connections with family members living in the homeland or other parts of the world. In this way, social media allows for them to remain "in contact with their cultures of origin" (Mattelart 2017: 111). Furthermore, politically conscious members of the Maghrebi diaspora use Facebook to consume content from investigative news outlets or use their accounts to send and receive alternative news (Mattelart 2017). We are thus made aware of both the sense of cultural connection and space for political activity that is constituted through the use of social media.

Bulgarians in the United Kingdom have also been observed to rely on informal social support networks online for assistance with "work, accommodation, customers, services, advice, to deal with public authorities, or to handle sudden crises" (Nancheva 2022: 3235). This type of engagement transcends digital boundaries to translate into the 'real' world (Nancheva 2016), highlighting the ability of social media in affording a sense of belonging and connectivity – if not to the homeland, then at least to the host country. Nancheva (2016: 3236) has found these interactions to be "central to the migratory experience, as it provides support which would otherwise have been unavailable… or inaccessible". This indicates a need for belonging and social interaction that remains otherwise unmet. However, we also see the concept of 'internalisation' emerge as Bulgarian diasporans in the UK often prefer exchanges with fellow Bulgarians (Nancheva 2016).

For Filipino transnationals in Indian cities, Facebook aids in communication with connections from within and outside of India (Lorenzana 2016). Their practices of 'mediated recognition' on Facebook relate to their need for visibility that is defined by their particular context of migration and shows how "media provide symbolic resources that are harnessed by Filipino transnationals in constituting their identities and social relations" (Lorenzana 2016: 2188). These practices are instrumental in the shaping of agency and self-representation in a country where they find themselves a minority ethnocultural group (Lorenzana 2016).

Scholars such as Gillespie (2001), Boshoff (2005), Hossein and Veenstra (2017), and Somani and Guo (2018) have investigated the various Indian diasporas' engagement with media (both 'old' and 'new') – and how these media are able to contribute to the (trans)formation of an Indian ethnic and cultural identity for these groups. For Gillespie (2001: 206), young British Indians subvert the concept of a 'culture clash' in their consumption of Indian and British media, even as oppositions between tradition and modernity continually "shape people's

understanding of the cultural changes in which they participate". Similarly, Boshoff (2005) holds that Indian South African youths use Bollywood both to affirm their hybrid identity by connecting imaginatively with a transnational community of Indian diasporas through Bollywood media consumption. Somani and Guo (2018) found that Indian television programming allowed older diasporans to keep abreast of Indian culture connect to their cultural roots. With Indians in the United States diaspora, Hossein and Veenstra (2017) observed how women use Facebook to maintain group ties and construct social identities. These studies speak to the potential of media in encouraging feelings of belonging for diaspora audiences.

The above studies also reflect a gap in scholarship pertaining to specific uses of digital technologies for Indian diasporas. My study seeks to fill this gap, at least partially, by investigating the ways in which members of the Indian South African diaspora experience a sense of belonging or non-belonging to their hybridised culture through the consumption of niche Indian South African content on Facebook. In doing so, I contribute to an unexplored field in the history of this community.

3.5. Conclusion

The interplay between digitality, sociality, and diaspora in the context of the Indian South African population provides a nuanced perspective on how individuals maintain connections with their heritage while engaging with global digital platforms. This chapter has provided an outline of these concepts as theoretical frameworks from which to understand the contextual background and analyse the research findings of this study. We have observed that diaspora theory broadly emphasises the effects of transnationalism and cultural hybridity on migrant communities like the Indian diaspora in South Africa.

The work in this chapter has also highlighted the processes of identity formation and cultural significance in a mediatised context. The discussion thereof illuminates how social media, as a tool of digitality, fosters new forms of community and sociality – while also enabling the renegotiation of cultural practices for diasporic communities. Digital content is thus examined as a tool that can facilitate representations of constantly evolving cultural identities from the perspective of its audiences as consumers. Using the Circuit of Culture in the next chapter, I flesh out these theories as a framework to aid my analysis of the interview data that engages with the respondents' practices of consumption and identity negotiation.

Chapter Four: Research Design

4.1. Introduction

As stipulated in previous chapters, this study aims to explore the ways in which members of the Indian South African community experience a sense of belonging or non-belonging to their hybridised culture in response to their interactions with stereotypical Indian South African content on Facebook. To achieve this, I have presented a background of the Indian community's historical sense of belonging to South Africa in Chapter Two, which contextualises present feelings of belonging that have been gleaned from interviews with a sample of respondents to be discussed in the following chapter. I have also discussed existing literature on diaspora and digital sociality in Chapter Three to underscore the key theoretical frameworks under which this study exists. The focus of this chapter, then, is to justify the methods, processes, and philosophical foundations that I employed in the undertaking of this study. In doing so, I present an insight into my choices regarding how I approached this research project.

The research design, which serves as a blueprint for the study, is essential to ensure the rigour and consistency of research objectives (Cohen et al. 2018). I begin by comparing the two common methodological frameworks utilised in the social sciences and offer a justification for the selected approach. This is followed by a discussion of the employed research methods and sample selection process, followed by an outline of the data collection and analysis methods used in the research process. I then advocate for a Circuit of Culture approach to analyse my research findings (du Gay et. al 2013). Lastly, the ethical considerations and limitations associated with this study are reviewed to underscore the planning and structure of the research design.

4.2. Methodological Framework

Investigations within the social sciences have given rise to ongoing theoretical debates regarding the relative merits of qualitative and quantitative methodologies (see Becker and Geer 1957; Morgan 1998; Cresswell 2014; and Babbie 2021). Some scholars view the difference between these two methodologies as opposing paradigms, while others see them simply as different ways of conducting social investigations that may be appropriate to various research questions (Bryman 2003; Babbie 2021). It is not uncommon to find a hybrid

approach; quantitative researchers are known to use qualitative data collection techniques as a starting point, and vice versa (Bryman and Bell 2019; Deacon et al. 2021). Nonetheless, they are considered divergent genres because of the distinct ways of gathering data and presenting ideas that have been adopted by the practitioners of each tradition (Bryman 2003).

The advantages and limitations of these approaches often depend on their technical appropriateness in relation to a particular research topic. However, philosophical issues are equally important in informing a scientist's approach to research (Bryman 2003). As such, the following discussion includes the characteristics of each research tradition and the foundational systems of knowledge within which they operate.

4.2.1 Quantitative Research

The quantitative research tradition is typically associated with converting data to a numerical form and analysing it using statistical methods (Babbie 2021). Research methods include social surveys, structured observation, and content analysis, which is preferably undertaken in a laboratory setting under controlled conditions (Bryman 2003; Deacon et al. 2021). This tradition requires that the findings of a specific study can be applied to contexts beyond the research setting, that it should be possible for the results of a study to be replicated, and – despite the irony inherent in its requirements for generalisability – that the individual be treated as the focus of inquiry (Bryman 2003).

Quantitative research is epistemologically underpinned by a positivist theory, which maintains that only phenomena that are observable to the senses can be warranted as valid knowledge (Bryman 2003; Deacon et al. 2021). From this understanding, the only valid form of scientific evidence would comprise 'facts' based on systematic empirical testing (Babbie 2021). It would account for real-world experiences instead of constructions of cultural identity resulting from online engagement. Positivism seeks to develop generalisations about the relationships between these 'facts' to identify fundamental cause-and-effect connections, thus entailing strong beliefs on what can and cannot be considered legitimate research (Deacon et al. 2021).

Based on the above discussion, a quantitative approach rooted in positivism would disadvantage my study. At a foundational level, quantifiable data and statistical analysis processes would not elicit responses that are rich in descriptions of feelings and emotions. As

Bryman and Bell (2019: 10) note, “we humans have thoughts, feelings, and values – perhaps even some capacity for volition… not often addressed in the leading positivistic theories of the day”. Furthermore, my research is not predicated on the ‘if this, then that’ statements that satisfy the cause-and-effect conditions of quantitative research. The reasons that prompted me to favour qualitative research are discussed in the following section.

4.2.2. A Qualitative Research Approach

Qualitative research entails the “nonnumerical examination and interpretation of observations, for the purpose of discovering underlying meanings and patterns of relationships” (Babbie 2021: 383). This approach, known as ‘grounded theory’, upholds that theory is derived from the collection and analysis of data and emphasises the importance of using data to develop theoretical ideas (Bryman and Bell 2019: 201). Qualitative researchers aim to generate rich, descriptive data “*from the point of view of the actors*” (Bryman and Bell 2019, original emphasis) through flexible research techniques such as participant observation, unstructured interviews, and textual analysis. These devices enable respondents to express themselves without the rigid constraints of a quantitative survey or checklist. For example, a phenomenon like ‘rambling’ can be an asset to researchers by providing a deeper understanding of the respondents’ experiences, perspectives, and social contexts as they detail areas of most interest to them (Bryman 2003).

Within this tradition, the interviewer is called upon to somewhat surrender control of the interview session (Bryman 1988). This contrasts starkly with researchers working under a quantitative approach, as surveys and similar data collection methods rely on structured responses. There can be a tendency to view an interview schedule as a means of manipulating the topics to be addressed by the respondent (Bryman 1988). However, it can also be said that the use of open-ended and carefully worded questions is likely to encourage authentic responses. This is especially true when considering the agency given to respondents – opportunities to ‘ramble’ enable them to express themselves at length about the reasons behind their claims or thoughts, and thus be less susceptible to manipulation. Furthermore, there is a tendency to eschew the term ‘subject’ for the person being interviewed in favour of ‘interviewee’ or ‘client’, thereby posing respondents as people who are not merely recipients of the researcher’s promptings (Measor 1985 in Bryman 1988).

The epistemological foundations of qualitative research are based on interpretivism, whereby the central focus is to examine how people interpret their social worlds and convey these interpretations through language, sound, imagery, personal style, and social rituals (Deacon et al. 2021). This paradigm views human behaviour as complex, context-dependent, and shaped by subjective meanings that individuals attach to their experiences – which researchers must understand and seek to interpret (Berger 2015; Bryman and Bell 2019). Social knowledge is then co-created from the researchers' interactions with their subjects (Guba and Lincoln 1994; Deacon et al. 2021). When this inductive research approach is employed, data is used to "come up with the information required to *construct* a theory or interpretation" (Bryman and Bell 2019: 7, original emphasis). Interpretivism is thus strongly linked to constructivism.

Constructivism rejects the positivist view that social reality is created 'out there', emphasising instead that it is constructed and reconstructed from within the countless activities of everyday life (Deacon et al. 2021). The concern here is focusing on understanding how social actors create, interpret, and negotiate meaning within specific contexts – all while acknowledging that these meanings are fluid (Hall 1980). In this vein, subjectivity cannot be entirely removed from the process, necessitating that researchers recognise how their positionality would influence the investigation (Babbie 2021). This prioritisation of interpreting and constructing meaning is more suited to research in media studies as it can provide nuanced insights into how media consumption and reception are embedded in everyday life (Silverstone 1999; Brennen 2017).

Interpretivism supports an ethnographic approach to research by allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the social subject's way of life (Geertz 1973; Bryman 2003; Deacon et al. 2021). Ethnography aligns with the tenets of interpretivism by prioritising context and a subjective understanding of social actors within their natural settings through an immersion in the world of the social actor (Geertz 1973; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). The term 'social actor' implies that individuals interpret their social roles in terms of the meanings that they are given, just as theatrical actors interpret the characters they must embody (Saunders et al. 2007). This approach emphasises the importance of social context, interaction, and cultural meanings, all core tenets of interpretivism. Ethnography is thus a suitable device through which media consumption and interaction can be understood, as it offers a broader understanding of how media as a practice is embedded in the everyday life of individuals and their interpretation of digital content (Silverstone 1994; Gillespie 2010).

A qualitative research approach is well-suited to my study as it facilitates an authentic exploration of the complex ways in which respondents interpret and make meaning of Indian South African media content. It also allows for the uncovering of underlying meanings and patterns, which is particularly valuable when studying the subjective experiences of media audiences – especially those that are shaped by context, individual experiences, and ongoing social interactions (Guba and Lincoln 1994; Babbie 2021). Qualitative research methods thus ensure that the research captures the nuances of engagement within media environments (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007; Gillespie 2010). This methodology allows for rich, descriptive insights into the nuanced experiences and meanings created by the Indian South African community through their interaction with social media.

4.3. Research Methods

The selection of appropriate research methods is essential to the success of academic inquiry, as they dictate how data is collected, analysed, and interpreted. In the context of exploring the relationship between digitality and sociality, I have discussed why it is necessary to adopt a qualitative tradition. It is useful when exploring how media platforms are experienced and interpreted since the researcher can construct knowledge based on the respondents' interpretations (Guba & Lincoln 1994; Creswell 2014). As a result, transparency in the research process is necessary to ensure a greater level of credibility. To achieve this, I justify my choice of sampling strategy and reflect on the biases and weaknesses that may arise from the employed data collection methods. I then discuss the Circuit of Culture (Du Gay et al. 2013) as an approach to the data analysis in order to foreground the research findings.

4.3.1. Data Collection

To elicit thick, rich descriptions from participants, I have chosen to employ a semi-structured, open-ended, individual interview style using a list of questions with specific topics and themes that pertain to my subject matter (Bryman and Bell 2019; Deacon et al. 2021). As the interviews progressed, I also posed questions that were not included in the interview schedule but related to the subject matter, which enabled me to "gain spontaneous information about attitudes and actions" (Fielding 1993 in Boshoff 2005). In doing so, I allowed for significant leeway for participants to speak freely and was able to elicit how the interviewees themselves interpret and make sense of issues and events (Bryman and Bell 2019). Indeed, the concept of

'rambling' proved immensely insightful and provided interesting sociocultural discussion that can inspire further research.

The presence of standardised questions in an interview schedule enabled a degree of comparison between respondents (Hansen et al. 1998). This also established a feeling of order so that questions would flow well whilst still allowing for an impromptu change in the line of questioning (Bryman and Bell 2019). I was careful to use comprehensible language for the participants and explain myself in simpler terms if any respondents did not understand a question, or jargon like the term 'diaspora'. Furthermore, I made sure not to ask leading questions that would imply a specific stance on my part or steer a respondent to answer in a particular direction (Bryman and Bell 2019). My goal was to prompt responses that gave detailed and authentic results to analyse respondents' feelings and the meanings that they constructed from the subject matter.

Individual interviews proved to be a valuable tool for collecting data. Respondents could express themselves freely, away from the limitations that a group interview might have imposed – such as being shy, protecting their privacy, and not wanting to share sensitive or controversial feelings (Schrøder et al. 2003). No particularly sensitive issues arose in terms of the respondents' personal experiences, but they did share explicit opinions about the relevance of Indian South African content creators that they might not have done in a broader group. With the understanding that meanings emerge through discourse and social practices (Schwandt 2000), the individual attention given to each participant enabled me to conduct a detailed analysis of co-constructed meaning.

One of the benefits of living in an 'online era' is the ability to connect over different spatio-temporal milieus. Since the respondents in my study did not all live in close geographical proximity to me or each other, I took advantage of online questioning through the Zoom remote conferencing software (Deacon et al. 2021). Some of these interviews were audio-only, which disadvantaged my results by not enabling me to observe their facial expressions and body language. However, I did not request respondents whose cameras were off to change this, thereby ensuring they were as comfortable as possible. According to recent literature on the study of online meetings, participants may have chosen to keep their cameras off for reasons that could range from privacy to technical issues like bandwidth (Nadler 2020; Bailenson 2021). Nonetheless, this type of interviewing – which occurred synchronously –

enabled participants to be ‘present’ and able to interact (Deacon et al. 2021). I was thus able to ask follow-up questions and clarify certain points during the interview.

In the interview process, I attempted to embody the traits of a successful interviewer as proposed by Kvale (1996 in Bryman and Bell 2019). These characteristics include being familiar with the interview topic, outlining the purpose of the interview to respondents, allowing for questions, and responding to what the interviewee considers important. One disadvantage of online interviewing that I noticed during the process was what Kvale (1996) refers to as being ‘gentle’, that is, letting people finish and tolerating pauses. At times, it was difficult to differentiate between a respondent's pause and the end of their thought process due to bandwidth ‘lag’, causing me to interject as they continued to speak. The inability to see people also precluded me from observing thoughtful expressions that can precede further speech. Nonetheless, I overcame this by prompting respondents to continue with their line of thought.

4.3.2. Data Analysis

In the analysis of interview transcripts, I coded certain qualitative responses to identify key themes or concepts. Coding is an important means of achieving validity and reliability, as it facilitates a comparison between responses and allows findings to be more accurately constructed (Babbie 2021). I found that delineating sets of themes and ideas was helpful in understanding and extracting meaning from the participants’ responses. Not all the categories were predetermined, as I added to them after rereading the interview transcripts and becoming more attuned to other nuances. Coding enabled me to go beyond describing observations by inductively finding patterns and relationships among variables (Glaser and Strauss 1967). In this way, my data analysis process went inductively from the individual cases of each interview transcript, to gradually developing conceptual categories and then identifying patterned relationships of media experiences (Schrøder et al. 2003).

Each interview was recorded through the Zoom platform and transcribed in its entirety. This practice ensures that the entire set of exchanges in an interview is available to the researcher (Bryman and Bell 2019). As a result, I could pay full attention to each respondent and my interview with them while still taking field notes during the discussion. Transcriptions also allowed for an easier analysis process by providing a textual reference that I could use to determine what and how information and meanings were communicated (Bryman and Bell

2019). Furthermore, having audio interviews in text form aided the coding process by enabling me to reference minutiae from the interviews with ease.

Social science researchers have long emphasised the need for objectivity. This is necessary to ensure the validity and credibility of research findings (Babbie 2021), irrespective of the interpretive approach necessitated by the discussion of concepts, feelings, thoughts, and behaviours. That being said, it is also useful to temporarily adopt the views of respondents as true in order to fully understand their thoughts and feelings – a practice that would empower the researcher with "insider knowledge, skill, or understanding" (Lofland 2006 in Babbie 2021). I have embodied this practice in my data collection and analysis processes by adopting the 'emic' perspective, to align with the interpretive view of understanding the meaning of responses from the point of view of the insider (Harris 1976). During the data analysis process, I switched back to an objective lens and ensured that their information was transcribed and written about as impartially as possible.

4.3.3. Sample Selection

Sample selection is a deliberate process that ensures the validity and reliability of qualitative social science research findings (Hansen et al. 1998). A 'sample' refers to the subset of a larger population – such as people, texts, institutions, or events – chosen to be the subject of observation (Bryman and Bell 2019; Deacon et al. 2021). Within the qualitative research paradigm, a sample's responses cannot be generalised to the broader population as they "are not necessarily meant to be representative of some larger group" (Bryman and Bell 2019: 211). Instead, researchers benefit from recruiting a wide range of individuals so that various perspectives and experiences can be analysed for meaning (Bryman and Bell 2019).

Purposive sampling is one of the most common techniques used in qualitative research, used to select participants based on specific characteristics or perspectives that align with the research objectives (Deacon et al. 2021). It allows for the inclusion of participants who can offer the deep insights that are meant to be gleaned by the qualitative approach to research (Patton 2015). Researchers might choose participants who have experienced a particular event, belong to a specific social group, or have expertise in a relevant subject area. To investigate how members of the Indian South African community experience and understand social media content, I needed to employ a purposive sampling technique and request that respondents ethnically or racially belong to this population. Furthermore, I added a condition

that prospective respondents be familiar with Indian South African Facebook content and personalities to satisfy the criteria of the study's interests.

There are several strategies within purposive sampling whereby respondents are selected based on certain factors. Maximum variation sampling advocates for selecting participants with diverse characteristics to obtain a wide range of perspectives and identify common themes across different subgroups (Patton 2015). I was able to use this strategy as there were no further conditions imposed on the sample besides being Indian South African and having a knowledge of the relevant social media content. Respondents were then recruited indiscriminately, without concern for religion, cultural-linguistic background, age, political affiliation, and other factors. This enabled my results to be analysed in terms of how the subject matter was perceived by subgroups from various contexts.

Another strategy within the purposive selection technique is snowball sampling, where initial participants refer others who meet the research criteria. Snowball sampling is advantageous when studying hidden or hard-to-reach populations (Noy 2008), such as the Indian South African demographic that comprises less than 2.7% of the national population (Statistics South Africa 2022). I found it difficult to recruit participants despite belonging to this group, which could have resulted from potential respondents feeling unqualified to respond or uninterested in doing so. I relied on interviewees recommending my study to their social circles or referring me to forums where I could recruit participants. For this reason, I included respondents living abroad on the condition that they were born and raised in South Africa and had sufficient knowledge of the culture to respond adequately.

In this sense, I also employed a convenience sampling strategy by selecting my respondents based on their willingness to participate (Deacon et al. 2021). This facilitated the involvement of as many respondents as possible, which was necessary due to the difficulty of recruitment. The element of convenience sampling in my selection highlights a weakness, as it may introduce biases through the lack of randomisation (Deacon et al. 2021). However, indiscriminate recruitment enabled me to conduct a sufficient number of interviews for the results to reach the point of saturation, whereby no new themes or insights emerged from the data (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

My sample consists of seven participants who fulfilled the criteria for this study. They comprise a group of individuals with varied personal backgrounds, ages, and experiences. Of

this selection, two respondents now reside outside the borders of South Africa; their responses have been integrated with the rest of the sample since they spent a sufficient number of years in the country to be aware of the nuances and idiosyncrasies of the Indian South African culture and experience. As per the qualitative and interpretive research paradigm, it would be better to glean concrete knowledge from this small sample than indiscriminately recruit participants to generalise this study's results.

Unlike quantitative research, which requires a large enough sample size for results to be applicable beyond the confines of a particular case, qualitative research prioritises the richness and relevance of data from the chosen sample (Bryman 2003). The number of participants required for saturation depends largely on the research focus and complexity of the study (Mouton 2011; Fusch and Ness 2015). I achieved a set of saturated results from my sample and obtained findings that provide detailed insights into the phenomenon under investigation, which is analysed in the next chapter.

4.3.4. The Circuit of Culture

In Chapter Three, I engaged with the idea of culture as a description of the way of life of different nations and peoples. There is another sense, or meaning, of the word 'culture' that is as applicable to this study. This social definition views 'culture' as a particular way of life which expresses certain meanings and values in institutions and ordinary behaviour (Du Gay et al. 2013). The analysis thereof seeks to clarify the meanings that are implicit and explicit in a particular way of life. Therefore, something can be cultural because it has acquired a social identity by connecting with a distinct set of social practices, is associated with certain kinds of people, and is represented within our media of communication (Du Gay et al. 2013). Another important element of this culture is a shared, presumed knowledge that is embedded in our social world and unconsciously acquired (Du Gay et. al 2013). In this vein, cultural belonging affords people with shared frameworks or 'maps' of meaning that we use to make sense of the world, formulate ideas, and exchange ideas and meanings about it (Du Gay et al. 2013: 9-10). As such, we can consider the social media data under scrutiny to comprise a form of cultural expression beyond just being related to the Indian culture.

In order to investigate and understand the meanings that diaspora audiences make from social media content, I require a useful approach with which to analyse culture in terms of my study.

I employ a model known as the Circuit of Culture[36], which is described by its developers as the 'articulation' of distinct processes that temporarily converge under certain conditions to lead to variable outcomes (Du Gay et al. 2013). Although the proponents of this model use a cultural artefact – the Sony Walkman – as the medium of modern culture under investigation, I use their approach to understand how culture and cultural belonging are experienced through social media content as a cultural process.

Within the Cultural Studies tradition, the Circuit has been applied to studies of the relationship between culture and media. Five major cultural processes are articulated to form a cohesive unit under this approach: representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation. Although these sections are separated in the interest of discussing the complexities of each strand, it is important to note that they are continuously linked so that each concept leads to the other – and that they necessarily overlap in the real world (Du Gay et al. 2013). Furthermore, the circuitous nature of these interrelated concepts affords researchers a freedom of 'where to begin'; in effect, it does not matter because each moment in this circuit will inevitably lead back to the other (Du Gay et al. 2013).

Since this study aims to investigate the feelings of belonging (or not) that Indian South Africans experience towards their hybridised culture in response to the cultural performances enacted on Facebook, I have chosen to use the Circuit of Culture within the confines of the scope of this topic. As such, I focus on only two aspects of the Circuit: consumption and identity. The elements of production, representation, and regulation are undoubtedly relevant and would add considerable value to the topic of diaspora and media as a whole, but they lie outside the scope of this particular piece of research. First, I do not investigate the actual processes of content creation, which entails the production of Indian South African Facebook content (Deacon et al. 2021). Furthermore, I do not provide a comprehensive analysis of this content, thereby omitting the moment of 'representation'. Lastly, this study does not explore the effects of Indian South African content on the regulation of contemporary cultural life. Rather, I use two moments that speak to each other in the investigation of how belonging or non-belonging is experienced through reception.

Where the production of media content may be focused on structures of power, *consumption* is more closely related to structures of experience (Deacon et al. 2021). It explains how and why audiences engage with cultural texts – which involves the understanding that meaning is

[36]A similar model was developed in 1986 by cultural theorist Richard Johnson (Du Gay et al. 2013).

not just ‘sent’ by producers and passively ‘received’ by audiences, but is actively created in consumption (Du Gay et al. 2013). I use this approach to understand how Indian South African social media content is understood and interpreted by the respondents as an audience. This enables me to gauge how they construct meaning from social media posts in terms of how the content may resonate with their lived realities, which inform my exploration of the ways in which they experience feelings of belonging or non-belonging towards their culture.

Silverstone (1999) argues that the media plays a critical role in the definition of *identity* and culture, which is also true of diaspora groups who are often marginalised within mainstream media culture. Social media, with its potential for accessibility and capacity to be shared indiscriminately[37], has become an indispensable tool for diasporas to enact cultural performances that assert their hybridised identities. Scholarship that explores the relationship between media and identity formation examines how individuals and groups construct their sense of self within cultural contexts in relation to the media (Andersson 2019; Widjanarko 2020; Singh 2023). Identities cannot be seen as static, but are constantly changing and being informed by a multiplicity of experiences and positions (Said 1984, Hall 1990; Bhabha 1994). As such, my analysis requires the cultural perspective of Indian South African identities as they are informed by links to the homeland, colonial and apartheid legacies, and the contemporary digital world(s) that they find themselves immersed in.

Using the Circuit of Culture, my research employs two interconnected ‘elements’ – that is, identity and consumption – to analyse how members of the Indian South African community feel about culture-specific media that is distinctly centred around their Indian South African hybridised identities. This evaluation of cultural phenomena will lend to the exploration of diasporic cultural expressions, how users receive such content, and the meanings they make from it in terms of the cultural identities discussed in Chapter Three.

4.4. Ethical Considerations

Researchers in the social sciences need to be aware of what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate practices when conducting scientific research (Babbie 2021). As a general and overarching rule, the welfare of research subjects must take precedence over all other considerations – this includes the pursuit of knowledge, “even if that knowledge would expand our understanding of humanity or lead to improvements in the human condition”

[37] Here, I hedge my statement to refer to users who make use of privacy settings on social media.

(Bryman and Bell 2019: 51). In order to achieve a desirable level of certainty that a study will be carried out within the confines of ethical and moral practices, a research ethics board is required to review and approve the project prior to investigation (Bryman and Bell 2019: 51). This study was given approval by the Rhodes University Human Research Ethics Committee, following an application that detailed the purpose and nature of my research, as well how I would go about recruiting and interviewing participants.

Each respondent was required to sign an 'informed consent declaration' that outlined their rights as participants. This ensured that participants were aware of what the project would be about, would not be obliged to share any personal or sensitive information, would be afforded anonymity, and were informed of any possible risks associated with their participation. Since this particular study seeks to elicit opinions and feelings about cultural expressions on social media, there were no pressing concerns about the discussion of highly sensitive topics *per se*. However, there was still the possibility that such information may have been divulged during our conversations. Furthermore, consent forms allow prospective respondents to think about the project and ask clarifying questions if needed (Bryman and Bell 2019).

I reiterated some points from the consent form before each interview began, including the purpose of my research and the participants' right to not share any information that they were not comfortable sharing (Mouton 2011). I requested their permission to record the online meeting for my reference, with the reassurance that this would be stored safely and only made available to examiners if necessary. Participants were also reminded that their personal information would not be revealed in the dissemination of the study (Mouton 2011). This was done to respect the respondents and to ensure I had their "free, informed, and ongoing consent to participate in the study" (Bryman and Bell 2019).

Reflexivity is of particular importance to questions of ethics in the research process, which refers to the researcher's awareness of the contexts in which they operate and how this may influence data collection and analysis. As per Turnbull (1973 in Bryman and Bell 2019: 18), "the reader is entitled to know something of the aims, expectations, hopes, and attitudes that the writer brought to the field… for these will surely influence not only how he sees things but even what he sees". It was thus imperative that I recognised my biases, assumptions, and perspectives on the subject matter and sought as far as possible not to let those factors influence the meanings I co-construct from the participants' responses. Due to my belonging to the Indian South African demographic under observation, I was privileged with a

pre-existing awareness of the historical and cultural nuances of this community and thus approached my discussions with the necessary sensitivity (Hall 1997). It is also important to note that I do not have a stake in the results of this study, and so would not consciously skew their meanings towards any particular response.

4.5. Limitations of the Study

While this study offers valuable contributions to a specific research field that has not yet been addressed – that is, Indian South African diasporic social media engagement – it is not without its limitations. The small sample size disallowed robust conclusions that can be generalisable to the broader Indian South African community. However, the disadvantages of this sample size can be overcome by considering this study to be formative research for future investigation. Furthermore, the collected data relied solely on individual perspectives that did not have the opportunity to be reinforced or challenged through focus groups, and thus were disadvantaged by omitting a more complex and nuanced set of responses.

I find that my respondent sample does not equally represent a spectrum of different age groups, genders, residential locations, and religious and linguistic backgrounds, which is the result of a convenience sampling strategy. Although it does not directly impinge upon the quality of responses obtained, a broader and more varied sample would have provided more nuanced data to facilitate a deeper set of findings. The varied experiences of each subgroup within the Indian South African community would no doubt factor into the meanings they construct from digital and social media. Nonetheless, to bring into account such differentiations would require a far more complex discussion that would be too complex to disseminate under the scope of this project.

It is with regret that I acknowledge my lack of attention to the role of women in the Indian South African community[38], since questions of gender were not relevant to the primary aims of this research and its objectives. Feminist analyses are crucial to the understanding of any population's media landscape (Steiner 2014), and it is no different in the case of this demographic. I hope that this field of research will expand to acknowledge how Indian South African women experience – and construct meanings from – digital forms of culture in the context of their specific histories.

[38]Such scholarly undertakings have been made by Chetty (1991), Dhupelia-Mesthrie (2007), Desai and Vahed (2010), and Carrim (2012).

4.6. Conclusion

Despite the above limitations, I was pleased to note that the interviews were successful. Most respondents reacted positively to this project once their interviews were concluded. I initially posed a time frame of one hour – to be adjusted according to the needs and response lengths of the participant – but found that most interviews ran longer, some for up to four hours. This provided me with a wealth of contextual information for this study and added to my understanding of and appreciation for topics that fall within the purview of Indian South African history and culture. The collection of this type of rich, descriptive data was made possible by my working under the qualitative research paradigm – and, of course, the enthusiastic participation of the respondents.

Although quantitative methods have their undeniable advantages for certain disciplines, this study's focus on media communications and the emotions of human belonging necessitated an approach that accounted for unstructured and statistically unquantifiable data sets. With qualitative research methods, I have been able to obtain and present the unfiltered responses of individuals within the sample in their own words, while leaning on my understandings of cultural studies to co-create meaning from their interpretations and experiences of the world(s) in which they act. Using individual interviews, respondents were able to speak freely and without interruption from external bodies – thereby providing me, as the researcher, with a wealth of knowledge to respond to the research question.

I have included a discussion of the Circuit of Culture (Du Gay et al. 2013) to not just indicate the approach I take to data analysis, but also foreground the collection techniques I employed to obtain the data that would be investigated under this tradition. Though I explored the two 'elements', or moments, independently in the next chapter, they are interrelated and should be considered in tandem to provide a multidimensional understanding of the conclusions drawn. Chapter Five begins with an overview of the Indian South African Facebook content in question to contextualise the findings in the Circuit.

Chapter Five: Research Findings and Analysis

5.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of this study and seeks to answer the research question: In what ways do members of the Indian South African diaspora experience feelings of belonging or non-belonging towards their hybridised culture in response to their consumption of niche cultural content on Facebook? The analysis of these findings is supported by the discussion in Chapter Two, regarding the historical struggles of the Indian South African diasporic community to assert a sense of belonging to the socio-political milieu of their 'host' country, and eventually being recognised as part of its landscape. The findings are also framed by the theories outlined in Chapter Three, namely, diaspora theory and digital sociality, which examine the concepts of cultural identity, network sociality, and the role of media for diaspora communities. These perspectives provide a base for understanding the responses to performances of culture in digital spaces and the social construction of diasporic identity within online communities.

As noted in Chapter Four, I use two 'elements' from the Circuit of Culture to collate the findings of this study – namely, consumption and identity. Within these moments, I organise my findings according to sub-themes that emerged from the interviews to identify key patterns and insights. I first provide an overview of the Facebook content in question to contextualise the social media platform under discussion in the interviews. I then delve into the 'consumption' of this content by investigating how respondents perceive these digital portrayals of stereotypical Indian South African cultural traits. Finally, I link this reception to the concept of 'identity' to explore how individuals from this community negotiate cultural belonging in terms of being affiliated with the Indian South African population.

Drawing on a qualitative research approach, data was collected through semi-structured interviews with seven participants. An outlying trend in this sample is reflected in the geographical trajectories of three respondents; two were born and raised in South Africa but settled overseas during their adulthood, and one was born outside the country but relocated to South Africa during her childhood. Since these respondents demonstrated a strong knowledge of Indian South African culture, their responses were discussed in tandem with the rest of the sample. I conducted these interviews using a list of pre-determined questions while remaining amenable to spontaneous lines of investigation. Owing to the small sample size, this study

does not claim to be representative of the entire Indian South African population. Although the consumption and interpretation of digital content is developed around a group identity, responses are explored through the individual understandings and experiences of each respondent.

Through the dissection and comparison of participants' responses, this chapter explores how digital platforms both reinforce and challenge aspects of respondents' contemporary diasporic identity(ies). The respondents' thoughts, feelings, and opinions are interpreted to respond to questions about their hybridised cultural identities through the consumption of culture-specific content on Facebook. What is the scope of the themes that are found in culture-specific Indian South African content on Facebook? Do respondents – as individuals from the Indian South African community and online audience members – find such content to be at least broadly representative of their culture? And to what extent does it encourage a feeling of belonging or non-belonging to the hybridised Indian South African culture? My initial hypothesis, which is based on previous research, holds that participants will be able to relate to the content but feel distanced from more exaggerated portrayals of the community.

I quote my study participants' words and explanations verbatim to present as accurate a description as possible of their experiences[39]. Responses have been edited slightly for clarity and continuity, with filler words and similar phrases being removed; nonetheless, I have taken great care to ensure that the meanings of responses have not been distorted. Of course, the narratives presented only include those portions that I, as the researcher, deem most relevant to this study, which is unavoidable in terms of the scope of the study.

5.2. Overview of Indian South African Facebook Content

A group of Indian South African content creators have established a significant presence on Facebook over the past decade. A significant portion of their content includes the use of humour to frame cultural narratives, which is meant to entertain and resonate with members of the Indian South African community. Though it was my intention to interview these content creators for the purpose of ascertaining the moment of 'production' in the Circuit of Culture, those content creators that I reached out to were either unresponsive or unable to follow through with the interview process. A thematic content analysis would also benefit this study, but would extend the discussion beyond its present capacity. As such, I provide an

[39]To ensure the respondents' privacy while still enabling self-representation, I requested that they suggest the names I use alongside their responses.

overview of each type of content creator found on Indian South African social media (one standard, one persona, and one anonymous) and the broader themes that emerge from their recent posts.

Types of content include Posts (featuring local events, gossip about Indian celebrities, or questions that prompt discussion), skit-style videos (where the content creator acts as all the characters in a hypothetical scenario), short-form videos known as 'Reels' (where a content creator portraying an alter-ego may provide commentary on social behaviour), memes (that employ culture-specific humour), sponsorship advertisements (from business that employ these content creators to market their brands to their audiences), and content related to the creators' occupations (such as the 'Aunty Sheila' page featuring videos of Theshen Naicker's makeup artistry). These types of content reflect the hybridised cultural experiences of Indian South Africans and explore the themes of identity, heritage and social belonging – even when the content does not explicitly make reference to these concepts. With reference to content posted by Prev Reddy[40] (as a standard content creator), Aunty Sheila (as a persona), and the administrator behind the 'South African Indians' Page, I provide an overview of the dominant themes that emerge from this type of culture-specific content.

The most prominent theme found in posts by Indian South African Facebook content creators is the performance of cultural identity. Two of the three Pages reflected a distinct Indian identity on their user 'bios', known as the 'Intro' for Pages. They read as follows:

- 'Lets talk with Aunty Sheila': "Aunty Sheila is a fictional character created and owned by Theshen Naicker. None of the content is meant to harm or offend anyone and is Indian Comedy." (Lets talk with Aunty Sheila, 2025).
- 'Prev Reddy': "Prev Reddy is a South African Actor, Stand-up comic and Content Creator. This page is home to all of his skits, parodies & latest news on shows & appearances." (Prev Reddy, 2025).
- 'South African Indians': "UNITING ALL South African Indians. Irrespective of your cultural background or religious beliefs!" (South African Indians, 2025).

Although Prev Reddy's 'Intro' does not align with an 'Indian' identity, his content does reflect 'markers' of typical Indian South African culture.

Most, if not all, existing Indian South African content creators base their Pages and output on niche, culture-specific humour. Taking the Pages under scrutiny, 'Lets talk with AUNTY

[40]Prev Reddy also creates content based on a put-upon persona, but this aspect has been omitted to focus on his standard posts.

Sheila' is classified as a 'Comedy club' and 'Prev Reddy' as a 'Comedian'. Although 'South African Indians' is classified as a 'Media/news company', much of their content comprises jokes. For example, one post from 24 February 2025 employed Indian South African phraseology in its humour, by providing a tongue-in-cheek definition of the word '*mukoo*'[41]. (South African Indians, 2025). These content creators employ humour and satire to depict everyday experiences within the community, often exaggerating cultural norms, traditions, and stereotypes for comedic effect.

Linguistic expression is another key element in Facebook performances by Indian South African content creators. The distinctiveness of South African Indian English (SAIE) and the use of lexical items from Tamil, Hindi, Gujarati, and Afrikaans often feature prominently in posts and videos. Some creators intentionally highlight SAIE accents and vocabulary to create a sense of familiarity and belonging within the community. Aunty Sheila often begins videos with "Vanakkam darlings!", employing the Tamil greeting to address the audience. Prev Reddy does not lean into this tradition heavily, although he did enact an exaggerated accent with his 'Aunty Shamilla' persona. The 'South African Indians' Page administrator often posts memes and general conversation points with language use that reflects a South African Indian dialect.

Performances frequently centre around family dynamics, with portrayals of strict parents, religious practices, and intergenerational tensions forming a recurring motif. Additionally, food is a central cultural marker, with content creators celebrating and humorously critiquing traditional Indian South African dishes such as *biryani*, *samoosas*, and the bunny chow. Aunty Sheila regularly posts videos featuring Tamil devotional hymns or recipe videos that instruct the audience on how to make a curry (Aunty Sheila, 2025). A post on the 'South African Indians' page from February 2025 featured a picture of a meat-and-potato bunny chow with the caption: "Stand back Gordon Ramsay. This is a work of art!" (South African Indians, 2025). These portrayals serve both as a means of reinforcing cultural continuity and as a space for self-reflection on the ways traditions evolve in contemporary South Africa.

Nostalgia also plays a significant role in the content shared on Facebook. Many posts reference historical events, past social practices, and formative childhood experiences that resonate with older generations of Indian South Africans. For example, the 'South African Indians' Page administrator posted a picture of a plastic shopping bag hanging on a kitchen

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[41]Refers to a man who often defers to his wife and does not assert his own opinion.

door with the caption: "Admit it, every Indian family has a plastic bag that is full of plastic bags!" (South African Indians, 2025). Creators often evoke memories of apartheid-era experiences and contrast them with present-day realities. For example, a February 2025 post on the 'South African Indians' page called on those Indian South Africans who experienced economic paucity with a picture of a newspaper sheet rolled into a cone, captioned: "Only legends will know what's inside this [tongue poking out emoji], if you don't know, sit and relax" (South African Indians, 2025). Many of the 2,400 comments on the post were users identifying the object as a holder for roasted nuts, popcorn, or other such snacks (South African Indians, 2025). This type of nostalgic engagement is not merely sentimental but serves as a form of collective memory that informs contemporary discussions on identity and social cohesion.

The past decade has witnessed an increase in culture-centric content produced by Indian South African content creators on Facebook. While similar content can be found on other social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, this study focuses on Facebook as the first platform where such content gained traction and as a primary site of engagement for many users. Whether through text-based posts or audiovisual content, these creators showcase cultural nuances such as niche humour and an often exaggerated dialect of South African Indian English (SAIE). In doing so, they ultimately construct and reinforce a distinct Indian South African identity while highlighting the dynamic and evolving nature of their digital cultural expressions. By blending cultural markers, humour, linguistic distinctiveness, and nostalgia, these creators contribute to an ongoing dialogue about identity and belonging in contemporary South Africa.

5.3. Consumption

5.3.1. Reception of Indian South African Facebook Content

Delving into how respondents received Indian South African content on Facebook brought up a wealth of information about the perception of consumers. Participants were asked about their consumption practices and which aspects of content creators' performances they either did or did not enjoy. Most respondents from this study did not actively 'follow' Indian South African content creators on Facebook, but engaged with the content when it appeared on their 'feed', or when it was sent to them by a friend or family member.

Vishen: I do engage [with Indian South African personalities on Facebook]. Pure nostalgia, that's really what it is… It's an algorithm, right? Because I've got a lot of friends in South Africa that are Indian, and a lot of them are my family as well, and so, if they like it or share it, it comes up more. It's not that I'm specifically looking for such content, or joining groups, and things like that, it just happens to come across… I think [I was interested in] Aunty Sheila in the beginning, and I don't really watch anymore, but it's just that novelty, that initial kick of, 'Ha ha that's funny'... I like the memes, I like content that does satirise culture, but does it in a way that's quite playful and respectful. And I do enjoy the comedic satire of the culture sometimes, and I also appreciate people trying to do good, and trying to reconnect, and people who are trying to share information and educate people, so I think that's nice. I mean, interesting is not a word I would describe. Enjoyable, sure, or, like, valuable in a world where people just churning out content… The purpose of connecting people or giving them that sense of belonging, I think that's quite nice.

Vishen, who was born and raised in South Africa, noted that this culture-specific content elicited in him a sense of nostalgia. As a member of the 'double diaspora', he considered Indian South African content on Facebook useful in connecting with family members and maintaining a connection to the culture he experienced in his upbringing – phenomena that were recognised in Ansar and Maitra's (2024) study on the Rohingya diaspora. Vishen asserted his enjoyment of the novelty of online cultural performances when they first debuted, such as those enacted by the Aunty Sheila persona. However, he did not actively follow Indian South African content creators' posts. We thus see that Vishen appreciated the comedic, satirical, and informational nature of the content for the purposes of creating a virtual space wherein Indian South African people could experience a sense of belonging.

Sai also stated that she was entertained by the Aunty Sheila persona, who is embodied by one of the Indian South African content creators on Facebook.

Sai: I enjoy Aunty Sheila– I think [the Page is] called 'Lets talk with AUNTY Sheila'. I find a lot of the videos funny and a lot of the content important in terms of– I mean, we grew up in this culture where we dismiss when anybody has treated us in the wrong way, and we were taught to just walk away or not deal with it, otherwise you were seen as problematic… I think the Aunty Sheila

personality, in the videos and stuff, calls out a lot of behaviour that people need to self-reflect and say, “I need to stop behaving this way”. We need to evolve in this sense. So I like, basically, the message that’s being put across, and sometimes I find the comedy side of it quite funny as well.

Sai found that the content performed by the Aunty Sheila persona criticised stereotypically problematic behaviours in the Indian South African community and would thus encourage change. Nonetheless, both Sai and Vishen indicated that the value of these Pages was surpassed by community-centric Groups on Facebook.

> *Sai*: I think the group that you posted on, ‘Thamizha SA’, was one of the first groups that I joined in terms of the culture aspect. I find that group really helpful. So, often when the baby is born, they ask names to help name the children because that’s something that I feel is going down the wrong road in terms of– like, we want to give our children the Westernised modern names and we just losing the plot in terms of that.… One of the Pages that was created during [the] COVID [pandemic] was ‘SA Musicians against Covid’. And we were getting people to sing and have *kacheris* – which is like a whole concert – so we used to host them at our homes back in the day. So, people were having this little *kacheri* concert in their lounges and recording it and then it was live-streamed via this group, and then everybody was getting to enjoy music… And that just shows the positive impact that social media can make as well, ’cause at the end of the day, social media can be a very negative space… but when we use it for positive things like uplifting our culture and connecting in terms of our culture, I say we doing a very good job and social media then shows you how beneficial it is.
>
> *Vishen*: A good example of a sense of belonging and connections is the ‘SA Musicians Against Covid’ group. It was so nice when people would say, “Oh, I haven’t heard these songs in such a long time. Thank you for posting it”, “Oh, these songs remind me of, you know, a family member. It reminds me of my childhood”, and things like that. And, you know, that was an amazing thing because, all of a sudden, it made elements of culture accessible to people. And even if somebody was with Sai Baba[42] or *Satsang*[43] or whatever, they would still

[42]An Indian spiritual guru considered to be a saint by his followers.
[43]A gathering with a priest for the purposes of spiritual or devotional activities (literally: 'the company of truth').

listen to all these other artists playing the *thevarams*[44] and stuff, because that in itself is cultural, the different hymns and poems. And yes, I think that's a good example of how you create pride for a sense of community, but also provide them support with the sense of belonging.

From these responses, we see why Sai and Vishen considered groups that are centred around Indian South African culture to be more beneficial than performances shared by content creators. They mentioned the value that 'Thamizha SA' offered its members in terms of individual Facebook users assisting others with cultural practices like naming or prayer-related rituals. Similarly, the 'SA Musicians against Covid19' group was perceived to offer a more authentic form of Indian South African content by enabling Indian South Africans to experience a virtual sense of 'togetherness' and connect over religious and cultural expression. The practice of Indian South African communities connecting through music has its roots in the South African colonial period, and was carried through apartheid and into the democratic era (Jackson 1991; Desai and Vahed 2010). This type of online cultural performance can thus encourage a sense of cultural belonging by connecting Indian South Africans through uplifting culture-specific content, which is enjoyed across many subgroups within the community.

Fawzia also expressed more interest in culture- and community-centric groups than the content posted by Indian South African personas.

> *Fawzia*: I just don't have an interest in an Indian kind of thing. I know on Facebook, there's one group called 'Indians in Gauteng', for instance, and a lot of people from Durban that I know belong to that… But this group is more about food and people. It also keeps me in touch with who died, who's born, and that kind of thing, in Durban… I don't have a problem with your Aunty Sheilas and all that… I can relate to that, because that's how we grew up, our grannies and all that used to talk like that... But I'm not going to go and seek it out.

Fawzia's response showed that her lack of interest in typical Indian South African content on Facebook resulted from personal preference related to a disinterest in culture-specific content. She understood and related to the content because of her upbringing, but favoured Groups for the value that they brought to her interests. Here, we see the usefulness of social media in

[44]Devotional hymns sung in praise of the Hindu god Shiva.

enabling members of a diaspora to connect with others in their cultural group(s), similar to Mattelart's (2017) study of the Indian diaspora in France who use social media to maintain remote connections. Mehnaz also indicated that she found more value in blog-style Facebook Pages than in the cultural performances enacted by Indian South African content creators.

> *Mehnaz*: I find the [1860] Heritage Centre absolutely fascinating… They're trying to promote the history and the learnings of where we've come from. That, I am 200% there for. Some of the more stupid jokes and stuff like that, those are just kind of entertaining – and if it comes on my feed, it comes on my feed. I don't go looking for it, so to speak… There's a group called 'CHAROUS CORNER'. I think that has just, like, jokes and stuff. I'm on that and then– sometimes they're all a blur to me, so… Prev Reddy, okay, I love his content. I will have a binge-watch of all his videos every so often. So I do enjoy his take on things, I find it absolutely entertaining. There was another lady, [from the Page] 'Bash with Tash'. I follow some of her content, but it became too much advertising… There is a community called 'South African Indians'. I'm not part of it and I know why I'm not part of it, because it's very 'Indian Indian', like Bollywood crap that I don't follow at all… just not my cup of tea… The rest of the stuff, I don't know. I think it's just whine and bitch about a lot of things… I'm not part of the communities that are – if I could call it – 'India Indian'.

Mehnaz expressed more of an interest in groups like 'CHAROUS CORNER' for niche, culture-specific humour, and Pages like the '1860 Heritage Centre' to understand her Indian roots and the history of her hybridised heritage. She did not favour certain groups and content creators because of her personal consumption preferences, and again, we see a disinterest in certain types of culture-specific content. Nonetheless, she singled out Prev Reddy as a performer who evoked memories through his relatable culture-specific content.

> *Mehnaz*: Prev Reddy, his content takes me back to how I was raised. All of the quirkiness of that family dynamic is so relatable because it is the quirkiness of most of our homes when we grew up. And especially when he does the [differences between] white parent/brown parent thing, it's so true. I still hear my mom's voice, like, "Why are you going out 'til so late?"

Along with Mehnaz and Vishen, Safiyya also expressed an enjoyment of cultural performances that were nostalgic and relatable. Regarding her consumption practices, she explained that she did not actively 'follow' Indian South African content creators, but engaged with posts that appeared on her feed or were sent to her by friends and family. Unlike those who found little interest in Indian-centric content, Safiyya's disdain stemmed from personal preference.

> *Safiyya*: I tend to follow very few because I find them very annoying… They just start to pop up on the screen, you know? Somebody would send you a funny thing or something, and then you would search for the name to find something. But why, sometimes, it appeals is if somebody does something good or there's a change or something, then you would go on to the Page to see what prompted them to do what they're doing… Ja, so that's one woman [Hahooma Kahani], if you want to share a joke with your friend, and if somebody sends it to you, then you'll send that and you'll have a laugh about it.

Safiyya asserted that many online personas are created by people who are 'fake' or conceited in real life. She responded more favourably towards content that promotes social good and positive change. In terms of content creators, she expressed an interest in 'Hahooma' from 'Hahooma Kahani'; although this persona is primarily active on Instagram, this type of content is still comparable to that on Facebook.

Azanian did not follow many content creators on Facebook, but was mostly active on X (formerly Twitter). He mentioned that he did not find personas such as 'Karou Charou' and 'Aunty Sheila' to be entertaining.

> *Azanian*: I'd watch the fishing, I'd watch the cooking, I'd maybe watch sports stuff if there was. Ja, but I mean the comedians not so much. It's a bit crass, I think.

Instead of cultural performances by Indian South African content creators, Azanian showed interest in other forms of online content that include political commentary and outdoor activities. Victory, too, felt that Indian South African content relies too heavily on crude and immature humour. She blatantly expressed her disapproval of Indian South African content on Facebook.

> *Victory*: I find them disgusting. And I mean, because you're on Facebook, you automatically come across them, right? So, I don't like the stupid accents. We don't talk like that. I like intelligent banter, so maybe– I don't enjoy those cheap digs that they make, and we don't talk like that, we don't behave like that. So to me, it's not funny, you know? You can be funny, and with intelligent conversations, you can make people laugh. You don't have to use stupid words and swear, or whatever. So I don't find them that interesting at all. No.

The words that Victory used are particularly telling – she did not just indicate her distance or dislike of an aspect of the content, but described these content creators who enact cultural performances through online personas as 'disgusting'. She explained that she feels this way due to issues of mockery as well as inauthentic portrayals of the Indian South African community. Victory then contrasted these performances with a content creator who she feels does not portray negative stereotypes.

> *Victory*: This guy – he's called the Social Entrepreneur. He's not bad. He comes up with authentic– He doesn't have a fake accent or anything. He speaks the way he's supposed to speak, and that's good, you know? He doesn't put on anything, and his humour is funny. I mean– it's not like he's the best there is, but I could tolerate him. But not those Aunty Sheilas, and Bash with Tash, and all of that nonsense. I cannot stand them because they don't bring any value. They just mock!

From the above responses, we see that most participants found cultural performances by Indian South African Facebook content creators to offer at least some form of entertainment or relatability. However, not a single respondent asserted an unqualified enjoyment of the content creators who enact performances of stereotypical Indian South African culture. They either indicated that blog-style Pages or community groups on Facebook provide more value in terms of cultural belonging or reiterated their stances on finding the comedic content to be silly or mocking and thus not representative of the community being portrayed.

5.3.2. Opinions Toward Online Portrayals of Culture

Along with understanding how respondents perceive cultural identity and belonging, it is necessary to gauge their opinions regarding the online representation of this culture. This will establish a foundation for exploring whether or not they feel a sense of belonging through

their consumption of such content. Respondents were thus asked about their feelings toward the portrayals of Indian South African culture by Facebook content creators, and what they deemed accurate or inaccurate representations.

> *Sai*: They often showing both sides of the dynamic which is being Indian as well as being a South African Indian… I do feel that they close to accurate but not always 100 per cent, because with every type of situation, there's always different perspectives… I like seeing those videos that was started as a trend: "I'm a South African Indian", because that just describes who we are, our uniqueness, our idiosyncrasies, the things that our parents would say that are usually not said in other cultures. I just feel that there's certain aspects where a lot of people have evolved in the way we speak in English and stuff like that because we've been around for a long time now.

> *Mehnaz*: I think it's an accurate portrayal of what is often present part of South African India. If one had to be very, sort of, clinical about it, most African Indians don't speak the way they do.

> *Fawzia*: To a large degree, I think what they portray is reality, but if you can laugh at yourself, right? I mean, imagine if it was a non-Indian that had to say those things, how it would be. My son was saying Trevor Noah said something about Indians… Now, some people would take umbrage at that [and] feel like he's being racist. Comedy you gotta be very careful with, because there's a point where it becomes offensive, but… if it's an Indian saying something like that, it's okay. If it's a non-Indian saying it, it could be offensive, but that's how it is. Most of it, I think, is relatable, and it's happening, and that's how people talk and things… but the *larney*[45] Indians, the educated Indians, may not talk that way.

These respondents consider such content to be a largely accurate portrayal of stereotypical Indian South African cultural traits. We thus see how communities utilise these online spaces to enjoy content that reflects their cultural identities. Fawzia's claim that comedy has the potential to offend people is a salient point, as it is easy for outsider representations of culture to be perceived as a mockery of that culture. This is especially prevalent with comedic enactments – as is the case with content creators such as Tash and Aunty Sheila – since

[45] A South African slang term for a wealthy person.

tongue-in-cheek personas often enact a trope of the mannerisms of certain people within the Indian South African community.

The use of South African Indian English (SAIE) and stereotypical Durban Indian South African accents – which were mentioned by Sai, Mehnaz, and Fawzia – are part of the comedic cultural enactments performed by Indian South African content creators. Despite these respondents' assertion that portrayals of cultural traits were mostly accurate, they qualified that the use of language and accents was not representative. Instead, they felt that it was more accurate for Indian South African speech patterns used by previous generations, or those with little education, and only used by a portion of members within this community today[46].

Azanian, too, mentioned that the content creators' use of this stereotypical accent was problematic; however, this was expressed in response to a separate line of questioning and will be discussed further in the next subsection. He felt that other aspects of cultural performances were fairly representative, noting the regulatory nature of audiences and 'cancel culture' on social media.

> *Azanian*: I'd say it's fairly accurate in general, you know? Because if it wasn't, they'd be called out and cancelled and banned, and all these things, by now.

When asked about the accuracy of the portrayals enacted by Indian South African content creators, Vishen challenged the notion of these content creators being expected to represent the community.

> *Vishen*: I think we definitely shouldn't look at anybody as a representation of a whole. And that's what a lot of people, unfortunately, do – where we expect one person to represent everything, and we criticise them for not representing everything, when all they were doing was just satirising a particular factor, and not everything else… But you just have to look at the intention, and realise that these are not supposed to be role models, they're not supposed to be ambassadors, they're not supposed to be that.

[46] For a more detailed discussion on attitudes towards SAIE, see Wiebesiek et al. (2010).

This opinion has interesting implications for studies of Indian South African content creators and their role as ‘ambassadors’ of the culture. It is true that their intention is primarily to entertain their audiences, which often occurs through the use of satire, and that online personas should not be expected to shoulder the burden of representing an entire community. However, they enact *representations* of this group – even if inadvertent – by performing distinctly niche and stereotypical traits of the Indian South African culture and the people who are affiliated with it. As such, I contend it is inevitable that such content will be examined in relation to representation, albeit with the understanding of satire and stereotypes. Still, Vishen showed a level of ambivalence about the aspects of online cultural performances that are portrayed by Indian South African content creators.

> *Vishen*: I don’t necessarily agree with some of the things they say or do, but you look past that just because– I mean, even something as simple as the accent, I don’t hear that anymore because I’m [overseas]. And so when I hear the accent, it’s sort of already just like… “Oh, my God, I want to cry”, just because it’s something so simple… They don’t need to do much. They just need to stay genuine to the character they’re trying to portray. Or they need to stick to the intent of what they were doing, and that is to have a bit of a satire on the way some Indian people act… Things will come up where you’re like, “Well, that’s a bit misogynistic, or that’s outdated”… Maybe that’s doing more harm than good, where you continue to propagate something that’s perhaps not 100% accurate now. And you would wish that these people and their platforms could propagate something that’s a little bit better and can push us in a better direction, rather than sticking to the old things. Because I think you can use the character to be a bit more progressive than what they sometimes can be. I can’t think of an exact example, but, you know, sometimes you’re just listening and you’re like, “I wish you didn’t say that”.

Vishen thus expressed a similar opinion to the previous respondents, whereby the expression of culture is considered generally accurate with the exception of certain elements such as ‘misogynistic’ or ‘outdated’ portrayals of the community. As he viewed the representations enacted by Indian South African content creators as satirical, he did not consider their performances to be offensive. Vishen also noted the use of a stereotypical Durban Indian South African accent, but did not consider this to be problematic, as it elicited feelings of nostalgia by reminding him of the way many members of this community speak. Where the

previous responses discussed in this subsection viewed the use of South African Indian English as an inaccurate portrayal, Vishen considered it to be something that allowed him to 'look past' other aspects that he felt were not accurately representative of the community.

Unlike the rest of the respondents in this study, Victory and Safiyya did not consider Indian South African content creators on Facebook to accurately represent this community.

> *Victory*: I find it inaccurate. But [Aunty Sheila] does a slot for– like, she prepares meals and stuff like that. So, that is nice because she's teaching people how to cook. She cooks a chicken curry, for example, and people learn from her. That part of it is nice because she's educating people. But even there now, with her content and the way she talks and stuff like that, that is off-putting to me. I mean, I don't know. Maybe people find that funny, but I don't.

> *Safiyya*: It's a fake world out there, so it's a fake online world also, and it's fake what appears on your screen. And you can't believe things that you see on a video, you can't – like watching a movie, it's not true.

Victory expressed a similar sentiment to Sai, Fawzia, and Mehnaz, who felt that the content creators' use of South African Indian English and a stereotypical accent are not accurate reflections of the speech patterns of the majority of the Indian South African community. She also felt that the general performances enacted by creators like Aunty Sheila were inaccurate, with only the videos detailing recipes being representative and of value. Safiyya took a broader stance on the idea of representative portrayals and asserted that content performed in the media could not be a realistic representation of the subject matter it is addressing because it is created for a specific purpose or with a specific goal in mind.

Concerning the concept of cultural portrayals, most respondents felt that the performances enacted by Indian South African content creators on Facebook were relatively accurate portrayals of cultural aspects such as content, humour, and cuisine. The content can therefore be considered broadly representative of Indian South African culture, and used to explore whether it encourages feelings of belonging for the community. The use of language that most respondents discussed is explored in the next subsection; participants spoke at length about this aspect, which offered insights into how they perceive and relate to this content.

Furthermore, the mockery of language would have implications for whether respondents could experience a sense of belonging based on their engagement with such content.

5.3.3. Mockery: a respondent-identified theme

Content creators with an alter ego often employ a South African Indian English (SAIE) dialect and stereotypical Durban Indian South African accent. These markers are most commonly used by many members of the Indian South African community who were raised in Indian-only residential spaces during apartheid (Mesthrie 1988; Mesthrie 2013). This gave rise to a unique way of speaking that deviated from standard English in terms of accent, dialect, and slang words. Since these areas were historically affected by a lack of resources and funding for their schools, the use of SAIE is still commonly associated with a lower socioeconomic standing, poor education, and is regarded as unsuitable for professional contexts (Meshtrie 1988).

> *Mehnaz*: Most African Indians don't speak the way [the content creators] do. The people that generally speak that way are, unfortunately, educated to a lower level, live in a certain socioeconomic environment. I think that if you go back to when I was a kid, probably more people spoke that way or behaved that way… So I feel like it is a representation of aspects of the South African Indian community… and probably more the stereotype versus how we actually behave… And I think that accent has pretty much disappeared in a large extent. I don't think that accent is a predominant accent anymore. I think it's there in pockets of the community, but not widespread. I think the behaviours that they joke about are so widespread.

Fawzia and Azanian discussed examples of the type of change that is made to standard English and how the accent contributes to a shift in the language. These have been included below for edification.

> *Fawzia*: There is an 'H' missing in that language. They don't have that 'huh' sound, but then they pick it up in another way. I'm not quite sure what's the explanation of that. They always say, you drop your 'H' in Hillary and pick it up in Umbilo – you drop it in 'illary and pick it up in Humbilo[47].

[47]Hillary and Umbilo are suburbs in Queensburgh and Durban, respectively, in KwaZulu-Natal.

> *Azanian*: I think they use the term 'haccent'. I don't know if you know that story about mineral[48] and fucking tumbler… Now, tumbler is actually the correct word – that is the English word – but mineral is a Durban thing.

I had previously heard the expression that Fawzia quotes about dropping the 'H' sound in 'Hillary' and inserting it at the beginning of 'Umbilo'. These areas are perhaps employed in this quip because they suit the purpose of demonstrating how the glottal 'H' sound is dropped in certain words and picked up in others (Mesthrie 1988), and are well-known by Indian South Africans in KwaZulu-Natal to be understandable even with linguistic change. Azanian also discussed this phenomenon using the term 'haccent' to refer to the accent that causes this idiosyncrasy. He also discussed alternative words that are employed in place of the ones used in standard English, such as 'mineral[49]' instead of 'soft drink'.

Most participants felt strongly about the use of these linguistic deviations from standard English as a means of mocking the Indian South African community. Fawzia brought up the issue of classism as a basis for this mockery, especially as it exists amongst Indian South Africans.

> *Fawzia*: Most of it, I think, is relatable, and it's happening, and that's how people talk and things… but the *larney* Indians, the educated Indians may not talk that way… I think it's a class thing as well, because things like '*pozi*' and '*vaaing pozi*'[50], and things like that, I know those things. I know friends who talk like that. And it's fine because the problem arises when people start looking down on it. Even amongst Indians themselves – the more educated, the more sophisticated Indians would look down on a person who talks like that. And for me, that becomes problematic… where you're laughing at people from the low-income groups, that's the part that's not nice. On the other hand, it's reflecting reality as well… That's how it is, we can't pretend… So, depending – you know, it's a difficult one… I mean, a person may be talking like that, but may be a brilliant person otherwise, but they grew up in that neighbourhood, and that's how they grew up talking.

[48] An Indian South African slang term to refer to any type of 'soft drink'.
[49] This term can be found in Mesthrie's (2013) *A Dictionary of South African Indian English*.
[50] Slang terms commonly used by Indian South Africans, especially in Durban. 'Vaaing pozi' = going home.

Here, Fawzia brought up a salient point. A portrayal of the way of speaking that is typically associated with Indian South Africans would be 'fine' if other members of the community did not denigrate this particular cultural idiosyncrasy. However, the common societal perception of South African Indian English means that its users stand to be mocked (Wiebesiek et al. 2010). This is subverted by the members of the community who choose to employ the dialect and accent, which Mehnaz mentioned in reference to her husband and his friends during social get-togethers. Fawzia also acknowledged the reality of this being an accurate representation of the way that many members of the Indian South African community speak (Mesthrie 2013: v).

> *Fawzia*: I think people who speak like that, for them it's fine because that's how they speak, and they relate to it. Maybe some sophisticates may not laugh at the content, but be laughing at the people and the way they speak. I don't know whether it can actually make you look less down upon– If you're looking down on those people, you're looking down on those people anyway, no matter how they speak… So, it again depends on individuals and how individuals perceive things and judge things. Do you judge people by the way they talk? By the way they behave?

Fawzia expressed the concern that a portion of the audience would use these satirical portrayals as a means of mocking those members of the Indian South African community who use SAIE and the stereotypical accent. She then elucidated on this opinion and concluded that the portrayals of these members of the community *ipso facto* would not cause 'sophisticates' to mock others, since such views would already be clouded by a sense of superiority. Rather, these portrayals would contribute to the overall act of condescension and classism by Indian South Africans who feel that they speak better standard English (Wiebesiek et al. 2010).

Sai indicated that the use of language and accent portrayed by Indian South African content creators on Facebook did not accurately reflect the community as a whole. She expressed a belief that the majority of this community no longer uses SAIE, and that their adoption of a standard English dialect speaks to their sociolinguistic development since the days of indenture and apartheid.

> *Sai*: Initially, when our forefathers came here, they didn't know English at all… There are certain ways in which Indians used to speak, especially if you've come from areas like Phoenix and Chatsworth[51] and things like that. A lot of comedians base their presence on social media on that. So that's the only thing that I have two minds about, because a lot of the time I find it funny and I laugh about everything, but I also feel like we speak so much better now. So instead of sticking to that box of 'Indians only speak like this', we must be able to say, "Hey, Indians speak in other ways now, we speak more eloquently, we more knowledgeable, we in higher rankings and jobs and things like that where it's required for us to speak better". And there's nothing wrong with speaking English properly because it is a universal language. It doesn't mean that you're trying to act like you're in a different race or anything like that. Anytime anybody learns a language, you obviously want to speak it better… So if I feel your content is too much of a mocking nature, then that's somebody I would never follow.

As with Fawzia, Sai acknowledged the accuracy of certain aspects of the Indian South African content creators' performances and expressed an enjoyment of the niche humour and content. It was specifically the idea of language and other elements that came across as mockery that she did not find enjoyable or representative of the Indian South African population. It is interesting, though not uncommon, that Sai considers the use of standard English to be better than other dialects. Realistically, people who use standard English are considered more professional and educated. However, scholars such as Wiebesiek et al. (2010) have been trying to advocate for a shift away from this perspective. It is also worth noting that Sai referenced how people who deviate from vernacular speech patterns are considered by vernacular speakers as trying to act like a White person, who are stereotypically considered to be fluent in standard English. Although the implications of this lie outside the scope of this thesis, it does speak to the idea that the use of language is a highly contestable area where the use of vernacular is at once considered to be a positive and a negative aspect of a person's identity.

Azanian explained why he considered portrayals of South African Indian English and the use of a stereotypical accent to be well-received by audiences of Indian South African social media content.

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[51] Phoenix and Chatsworth are areas to the north and south of central Durban, respectively, that were demarcated for Indians during apartheid. These areas still comprise a majority Indian demographic.

> *Azanian*: I think it's part of that self-hatred thing, that they don't realise that they are mocking themselves. They can't tell that difference between what's funny and what's mockery. Because now you kind of painting everybody with that, you know, 'unsophisticated, got no grasp of English, this is how you all are'. And you wouldn't have that problem if you didn't have the kind of racial divide you got here in this country, where people could look at you and relate you to something else that you had nothing to do with. They oversimplify it because it's easier to understand and process that way.

Again, we see how the online portrayals of SAIE are equated with not having a proper grasp of standard English. By discussing the 'self-hatred' that may be present in audience members, Azanian introduced the concept of internalised oppression that engages with how negative beliefs about a group are accepted and incorporated by its members (Rosenwasser 2002). His view indicated that audiences would only enjoy the portrayals of language and speech because they do not recognise that they are being mocked. This opinion would be contradicted by, for example, the one put forward by Vishen about understanding the representations as satirical enactments. However, it opened up an interesting avenue for further exploration in a related but wider field of diasporas and sociolinguistics.

Victory also spoke strongly against the way that the stereotypical Durban Indian South African accent was portrayed.

> *Victory*: People now don't talk like that. They may have spoken like that about 30 years ago, or 40 years ago, maybe, but not now. I mean, you notice that the best news readers are Indian? Even in South Africa, newsreaders used to be Indian. Why? They speak very well. So, you can't have these kinds of people and say they represent us. No, they don't. I'm very strong on that.

Here, Victory made a salient point about the trajectory of the community. As Sai mentioned, Indians were brought to South Africa with almost no command of the English language. Today, Indian South Africans have taken great strides in areas of public speaking, such as journalism and politics[52]. This shift from being 'lesser-than' the White hegemony to being educated and successful explains why so many respondents do not tolerate the satirical representations of the Durban Indian South African accent. In this context, there is a sense of

[52]Some examples of these successful individuals include Pravin Gordhan, Shahan Ramkissoon, and Frene Ginwala.

communal pride in achieving the aims of advancing within a society that largely deems standard English to be the only acceptable way of speaking. However, other cultural markers were not regarded with the same distaste. When Victory was asked about the use of distinct cultural markers such as South African Indian English, she described it as a unique factor that the Indian South African community could take pride in.

> *Victory*: It's something that we identify with, you know? We call ourselves – I say we, *Charous*[53], you know? – We find a sense of pride in that, because we kind of have unique nicknames, or whatever you could call them, but we understand it. So, even though we Indian as such, we of South African descent. And we have this pride in saying those words, so we're not offended by it. We say, like, I mean, '*pozi*', everyone understands what we're talking about. You go to India and say '*pozi*', they wouldn't know what you're talking about. So that kind of thing is good. It's something that came up, but it just stuck with us. And it's continuing, and maybe the younger folk are adding to it. I don't know, but it could be.

Here, Victory specifically stated that the use of South African Indian English is not something that she found offensive or encouraging mockery. Instead, she felt that it embodies the hybridised culture of Indian South Africans and constitutes a positive representation of this community. Victory's response thus deviated from that of the other respondents, who included the use of SAIE and slang words as something that would reflect negatively on Indian South Africans. This indicates that the majority of the sample took exception to some form of how the language and speech patterns of the Indian South African community have been portrayed by content creators.

Only two respondents did not express any negative opinions about the representation of Indian South Africans through speech and language. We recall that Vishen experienced a sense of nostalgia when hearing it, especially since he settled abroad and very rarely hears people speaking this way. Safiyya also mentioned the positive aspect of hearing one's way of speaking represented on social media, but this was expressed in relation to the Gujarati language and not the South African Indian English dialect.

> *Safiyya*: Our grannies spoke [Gujarati] to us, and our mothers used to speak– We can't speak, but we understand, you know? So if I link up with a video, like

[53] A colloquial term for an Indian South African person, often used by the community to refer to themselves.

> there's another Muslim woman, Hahooma Kahani – 'mother-in-law stories' it means… she speaks in Gujarati, so a lot of us understand. She phones her friend every day, or cousin or whoever, and she gossips about her daughter-in-law the whole day. But the words that she'll use is things that we understood because our mothers and our grannies and that spoke to us.

We see from Safiyya's response that the portrayal of a language that is tied to culture elicits a sense of nostalgia – even if it is not a person's first language. The humour employed in this content is therefore something that she can discuss or share with friends and family who also understand Gujarati. However, it must be noted that we cannot form a direct link between this response and the ones expressed by other participants; the use of 'Indian languages' as entertainment in Facebook content is often understood for its comical or relatable nature and not considered demeaning in the way that South African Indian English is perceived.

Though most respondents felt that Indian South African content creators on Facebook enacted a relatively accurate portrayal of the culture, they took exception to the use of language and accent as an inaccurate representation of the majority of Indian South Africans. While the respondents reflected a sense of classism even while engaging with the pitfalls of superiority and mockery, this was done to problematise the use of South African Indian English as an outlet for condescension. I understand their assertions as a desire to rid themselves and their community of being considered 'less than'. In this case, there needs to be a societal shift within the Indian South African demographic to recognise the vernacular dialect as legitimate and equal to standard English. This would create more scope for internal acceptance of these niche cultural expressions and, consequently, the digital performances that portray them.

5.4. Identity

5.4.1. Culture

When participants were asked about how they understand culture, responses ranged from broader explanations of what culture means to descriptions of their personal identities. Vishen and Sai expressed their views on culture in terms of practices that are ingrained in a person's everyday life.

> *Sai*: I think it would be the way you live your life. So it's about the things that you do, not just when not seen by the rest of the world and social media, but also what you do when you wake up in the morning, what you do when you are away from the eyes of social media, as well. So it's basically a way of life.

> *Vishen*: From its highest level, culture would be an expression of a particular group's interpretation of life, in a way. And I think belonging to that culture is you sharing common forms of that expression… From a broad perspective, it's all about: if you've got a culture, and that culture has a set of defined common features, if you identify with even one of those features, then that is how you connect yourself to that culture and belong to that culture. It doesn't have to be a multifactored connection. But, then again, it also depends on certain people – some people feel that they do need a multi-factor connection.

These responses offer a good foundation to foreground the rest of this discussion. Sai links the practice of culture to personal activities that are also practised outside the purview of an audience. In terms of this discussion, she asserts that cultural acts do not merely include performances of attire or cuisine for social media but should be ingrained into a person's daily behaviours. Vishen asserts that a person can be affiliated with a culture by identifying themselves in relation to any one of these expressions – although some people may need more than one expression of this commonality. These views of culture, which see it as a way of life, align with Hall's (1994) view of culture entailing common histories and cultural codes. In a separate but related line of questioning, Vishen provided an interesting analogy for what a diaspora culture can mean for a person's identity.

> *Vishen*: Let's call your identity a jar of Smarties[54], right? Let's have this example. And the one jar has a red Smartie, the other one has a blue Smartie, and then the third jar has both the blue and red Smartie, right? They're all just jars. They don't have different colours, like, it's not a different jar. It's just what's in them is different. And it's not all of a sudden a purple Smartie, it's still just a red and a blue Smartie. So a hybrid culture is not a purple Smartie... It's being both blue and red at the same time.

[54] A popular type of multicoloured candy-coated chocolate drops in South Africa.

Here we see that Vishen views a person as the jar, and culture as Smarties. Having a hybridised culture does not mean that two distinct cultures – that is, two differently-coloured sweets – have blended, *per se*, but that a person can associate with and embody both cultures concurrently. This is in line with understandings of 'culture' that have departed from previous notions of culture as a static 'thing' rather than a concept as a process. Although an argument can be made that Indian South Africans have adapted Indian cultural influences over time by virtue of being away from the 'homeland', we can still see it as a set of cultural practices that are separate from the more cosmopolitan South African influences.

Nonetheless, not all respondents reflected the idea of having 'both the blue and red Smarties' as part of their cultural identities. Although all respondents showed an awareness of their cultural hybridity in terms of having an Indian heritage and South African nationality, different opinions emerged between those who felt a sense of belonging to their hybridised identity(ies) and those who sought to distance themselves from an Indian affiliation.

> *Fawzia*: When I came to South Africa… the first year was very difficult. I could not, sort of, connect to South Africa… But over the years, things have changed totally. I see myself totally as a South African and not an Indian South African, although I like my curries, I like Indian music, Bollywood movies, I speak Gujarati and Urdu… and so I do have those cultural roots. In fact, I'm very influenced by the Black Consciousness philosophy, and I see myself as a Black South African even in current-day South Africa… because the Black Consciousness movement regarded all disadvantaged races as Black. So Indians, Coloureds, and Africans were regarded as Black… Now, other people don't see me as a South African, they see me as an Indian. South Africa is like that, which– it's painful, because I don't see myself as Indian.

> *Mehnaz*: I always say I'm South African. I don't add the Indian part to it… There's the subsets of it, you know, I am of Indian heritage, I was born and raised Muslim, I've lived in different parts of the world… but I will always say, "First, I'm South African", because I don't identify as Indian at all… I've had the luxury of making friends, when I studied abroad, that were from India. And there's so little we have in common in terms of them being Indian and me being South African. But then, there are also things that are relatable. So I'm always wary of saying I'm Indian, because I know people from India and they are so different to

> me in so many ways… And I must say, it's an interesting perspective for me, being married to somebody who actually was born and spent quite a bit of their upbringing in India, and how different we are in stories of how we grew up, and things we did, and experiences. And then I realised how my experiences are so uniquely South African. And one would say they're Indian, but they're really not. They really are not.

> *Azanian*: I say I'm South African. The only thing I don't do as an African is, like, I don't greet people. Africans love greeting. You know, you must say, "Hello! Good morning! How are you?", that sort of thing. I just don't have the patience for it… But other than that, I'm very African. This is where I'm very happy.

What is particularly interesting about these respondents is the similarity of their self-identification practices despite the difference in their geographical trajectories. Fawzia was born overseas and settled in South Africa, while Mehnaz was born in South Africa and is now settled outside the country. Azanian was born and currently resides in South Africa. Although these respondents noted their association with their Indian heritage, they expressed a sense of distance from that culture and country. Instead, they felt strongly about their South African national identity and blatantly rejected the ethnocultural 'Indian' label in their self-identification practices. This phenomenon is discussed by scholars like Vahed (1995) and Radhakrishnan (2005). For administrative purposes, such as government census statistics, the 'Indian/Asian' label would define the population group to which they belong, since there is no 'South African' category (Vahed and Desai 2010); however, these individuals still choose to self-identify under a national affiliation.

Fawzia's response shows that being identified as Indian and not Black was actually a 'painful' experience, as she continues to feel disadvantaged by the legacies of the White establishment. For Mehnaz, the similarities between Indian and Indian South Africa did not negate the vast differences in cultural experiences that she witnessed firsthand. Azanian's South African identity stemmed from his contentment in calling this country home; differences between himself and other South Africans were based on superficial personality traits rather than fundamental differences. He reflected on why members of the Indian diaspora would retain an 'Indian' classification, and tellingly referred to it as a 'problem'.

> *Azanian*: Race, I think, in the SA[55] context is important because of Group Areas[56] and the history. But it was badly done, naturally, so people still call themselves Indians, or they call themselves Coloureds or Whites. If you look at other parts of the diaspora, like the Caribbean, they're Jamaican. They don't consider themselves 'Indian Jamaican'… So, here you have that identity issue because of segregation and apartheid. That's why people regard themselves as X or Y. If you didn't have Group Areas, I don't think you'd have that problem. Everyone would consider to be South African.

Still, all three of the above respondents mentioned the influence that an Indian heritage has on their lived experiences, which included one or all of the following 'markers' of culture: cuisine, language, media, cultural or religious events, sports, and attire.

> *Azanian*: Cultural events, like we have once or twice a year Kavady[57], everybody goes for that… So these events that draw people to a temple… This Man United/Liverpool thing, it fucking drives me up the wall, 'cause I don't even watch soccer… Literally, it makes no stitch of difference to your life. So I don't know why, but a significant portion of this population's attention gets spent there… The third thing, food. You can tell the difference between India– and I mean 'India Indian' food, and SA food. Clothes, well, they all wear soccer T-shirts, anyway. That funny Adidas slops. I don't know {chuckles} These are generalisations, but, I mean, it's true, and I don't know why. Not that I'd wear a *dhoti*[58] if I had a choice, I just wouldn't. But why is [sports merchandise] your go-to thing?

The above response from Azanian revealed how some markers of typical Indian culture have been adapted, and thus reflect a hybridised Indian South African culture. Attire and the media, for example, were brought up in relation to soccer, since the English Premier League has become stereotypically popular amongst Indian South Africans. Azanian also mentioned how traditional Indian attire like the *dhoti* is not generally favoured, either by himself or the broader community; instead, the community has adapted to most commonly wear Western attire. Cuisine is an especially reliable indicator of how culture has been adapted from India and has become a unique feature of Indian South African culture. Much like Mehnaz's

[55] Verbal and written abbreviation of South African/South Africa.
[56] The Group Areas Act under apartheid law enacted the geographical and social segregation of different races.
[57] A Hindu festival celebrated by the Tamil community across the world.
[58] A long piece of fabric worn that is wrapped around the hips and legs, resembling baggy knee-length trousers.

assertion that her cultural upbringing differed from that of her Indian husband's, it becomes clear that Indian cultural markers were adapted in the South African context. Just as Azanian specified a difference between 'India Indian food' and Indian South African dishes, Victory also spoke about the uniqueness of how Indian South African cuisine has been adapted.

> *Victory*: Although we have Indian cuisine, it's uniquely South African because if you go to India, you don't get a simple curry, like a potato curry. Even our chicken curry, or a mutton curry, is totally different. But then you get Indian cuisine. So I always ask people, "Do you want to eat a South African dish, or you want to eat South African Indian dish, or you want to eat an Indian dish?" So you see, there's a difference. Obviously, the recipe came from [India] initially, but we added our own nuances to it, so it's totally different. The spices that we use, or the method, or whatever, but it's different.

In terms of what culture meant to Victory, she noted the importance of religion and the role of parents in nurturing a sense of pride and belonging to that religion.

> *Victory*: [Culture is about] a sense of togetherness, especially if you go to a prayer or to the temple, and, you know, you feel that connection with God… It's also the upbringing. I feel that's very, very important that the parents instil in you values from a very young age… then you grow up with that sense of belonging, and pride in that religion. We South African primarily, but we are of Indian background. So we cannot let that just disappear. It's a sense of pride that we have. Our forebears went through a lot. You know the atrocities that they went through. We are like third, fourth, fifth generation, and we have obviously evolved because all of us are doing better. And that's the greatness of the Indian community, where they always teach their children to better themselves. So it's continuing. They have that pride, which is good. That hasn't wavered at all, that is still there. That sense of belonging, we still have it, because even though we are a minority in South Africa, look at the GDP per capita. The Indians are quite high up there.

We thus see that, for Victory, the significance of maintaining a sense of pride in the Indian South African culture honours early groups of diaspora immigrants who were subject to systemic oppression. It is also a way of celebrating the strides that the Indian diaspora has

taken to establish themselves as contributors to the South African economy, which Victory attributed to the idea that each generation of Indian South Africans are advancing further than the previous generation.

For Safiyya, culture was described as an inward-facing experience because of the Group Areas Act.

> *Safiyya*: Living amongst different cultures– because of apartheid and that, we were separated. And so we grew up in our cocoons where we couldn't live [together], so we had to grow up in Indian areas… As I grow older, I realised what a beautiful time of our childhood and our life [it was]. Although you would never want to go back – and that was because of Group Areas that we were segregated – it was actually a very nice period in one's life because we walked to the local *madrasa*[59] together. We had a Hindu woman down the road, she used to sell *bor*[60]. We used to call her the Bor Aunty. We used to take, like, one rand and go and buy from her, you know, things like that.

We see that, despite the injustices of apartheid, growing up in a predominantly Indian environment enabled Safiyya to enjoy shared experiences with other members of the Indian South African community that fostered the creation of positive moments (and now memories). For Naidoo (1997), "the 'inward-looking' nature of Indians" resulted from the sensitive relationship between Africans and Indians at the time, and, in part, religious influences. At a time when cultural plurality was not possible in society, being part of a broader group bound by certain commonalities created a sense of cohesion – often irrespective of internal differences – whereby they would not be subject to intercultural intolerance or judgement. From Safiyya and Victory's responses, we start to see the importance of a sense of cultural belonging to members of diasporic communities.

Respondents' perceptions of culture ranged from deep-seated connections on account of growing up with its associated practices and understanding its inherent value, to an ambivalence about its role in a person's life. We see that those who considered Indian South African culture to be a prominent part of their lives benefited from a sense of social cohesion, and the value of having other individuals understand one's way of life because of shared commonalities. Others felt that culture was more of a feature that stood alongside other facets

[59]A school for Muslim children to learn about different aspects of their faith (lit. 'school').
[60]A sweet, sour, and spicy treat made by boiling jujube or figs, and then drenching them in a syrup mixture.

of their lives and personalities. Although some acknowledged the value of cultural roots and heritage, they did not consider it of particular significance. From these responses, we see that some participants may consider cultural belonging more relevant than others.

5.4.2. Cultural Belonging

When participants were asked about how important they perceived cultural belonging to be for a minority group, responses were again varied.

> *Mehnaz*: It's nice to belong, I must say, because you have people that have had a similar experience, a similar upbringing, they kind of know your backstory. They understand – and I think in some way they respect – where you are differently. So I feel like when I look at my– the South African Indian community, and I look at people that have accomplished something, be it a degree or a business, or if they have some measure of success, I know how hard it was for them to achieve that… So, yes, it's important for me – the cultural belonging – in that respect, but it's not the end-all and be-all of what defines me, you know?

Mehnaz linked cultural belonging to an appreciation of the community's generally positive economic trajectory – a far cry from the days of indentured labour and fighting for equal opportunities like education. We recall that Mehnaz did not identify with an 'Indian' label, but still mentioned that her belonging to this community was valuable in terms of commonalities that would make a person's cultural practices easily understandable to others. This sentiment was echoed by Fawzia in a different but related line of discussion.

> *Fawzia*: I have a lot of respect for what Indians have achieved in this country. But I just feel that Indians also have this tendency– and I feel that's a worldwide thing, maybe it's a survival tactic. They tend to– we have this thing about being– and it's part of keeping your culture alive in a way. That's the other thing, you know, assimilation on the one hand is bad, but as long as it doesn't lead you to see yourself as different from other people… Maintain your culture if you want to, but not where you have this superiority complex. I think we need that.

Fawzia, who also did not identify with an 'Indian' designation, shared the sentiment of the value that cultural belonging has for minority groups like the Indian diaspora in South Africa.

In this case, the 'survival tactic' she refers to is the tendency of diaspora groups to associate with others in their community for practical and emotional reasons. Much like Mehnaz and Safiyya, who ascribed a benefit to being a part of a group with the same shared experiences, Fawzia alluded to the idea of 'strength in numbers' – having a space for acceptance and understanding with others who are broadly subject to the same experiences. That being said, she was also very specific about the downfalls of cultural cohesion being used by a cultural group to isolate itself from the broader society in a country, which may lead them to adopt a sense of superiority. This sentiment reflects the contention of Lee and Tse (2024), who hold that diasporic media may divide a public along ethnocultural lines.

As with Victory, Fawzia and Mehnaz expressed a sense of pride in the Indian community's achievements vis à vis educational success and financial independence. However, they definitively mentioned that this sense of belonging was not a major part of their identity. We can also note Fawzia's use of the words 'they' being changed to 'we' when referring to the Indian South African community, suggesting an identity that both encompasses belonging to and distancing from this group. This negotiation between these two cultures stemmed from Fawzia's stronger sense of affiliation to a 'Black' identity rather than an 'Indian' one, even though she retained aspects associated with Indian culture.

> *Fawzia*: I don't want to be pigeonholed as Indian, I don't want to work only with Indians, I don't want to interact with only Indians… I mean, look, I think it's important to also not lose your cultural and religious roots, if you feel so inclined… There's a place for people to celebrate their culture, their religion, and come together and all that, as long as it doesn't alienate you from the wider society… And again, I have mixed feelings about hanging on to your culture. I myself, I haven't hung on to my culture at all. But as I said, I like Bollywood movies – music especially – I like Indian music. I love my curries, but I also like other foods, you know?

In terms of cultural belonging, Fawzia again discussed how her connection to aspects of Indian culture did not negate her stance on feeling more of a belonging to the broader South African community rather than its Indian diaspora. We also see that she does not disparage the need or desire of people to maintain a connection to their heritage or ethnic roots, as long as it does not result in isolation from the broader society. This is a particularly important attitude in the context of a multiracial South Africa, as personal desires to integrate into a

broader society can only contribute to a 'healthier' political milieu. Safiyya made reference to the tendency of certain groups within the Indian South African population to alienate themselves from other groups.

> *Safiyya*: We grew up where our community was our own, our Indian people, our Muslim community, things like that. Then, when we went into the workplace, or as we got into high school, and then when we went to college and that, then we got exposed to other people. But we tend to, like, stick to our own. I don't know, that's just how it is, because our generation, we were like that.

Here, Safiyya shared her experiences growing up under apartheid and how this translated to present-day society. The Group Areas Act made it so that racial and cultural isolation was part of many people's lives until the end of apartheid – and sometimes even beyond. Azanian expressed the idea of cultural internalisation being an issue in the context of a multicultural country where differences were once legally entrenched and used to subjugate a vast majority of people.

> *Azanian*: I think if it wasn't for forced segregation and being isolated in your own little area, it would be encouraged, I would say, to understand your culture, and really live it, and that sort of thing. But here, it becomes problematic because you become totally isolated, and you become, like, 'mine is mine, and I'm quite happy, being mine' – which for us, in this country, becomes a problem… But I do feel a sense of pride when I see– or maybe it's a bit of nostalgia slash pride, or something, that when you see something that you think is that only you understand, you know?

Here, we see how Azanian felt that for Indians as a minority to embrace their culture would mean a *de facto* isolation from the broader South African society. Nonetheless, he also mentioned feeling a sense of pride and nostalgia when seeing typical markers of Indian South African culture being represented in the media and general society.

The remaining respondents expressed a more positive set of opinions regarding cultural belonging, and specifically to an Indian South African minority. Safiyya expressed the importance of cultural belonging in terms of the valuable teachings it offers to individuals.

> *Safiyya*: It gives them a sense of direction. You know where you're heading, supposed to head. It's so important to have a sense of direction in life because that is the stepping stone to everything, all your success. You got to have a direction of where you come from and know where you're going. You've got to have your morals, your principles, your values, everything. Not everybody thinks that way.

In the context of the Indian South African community, these morals and values would typically include strong ties to family and elders, the prioritisation of education avenues that lead to stable incomes, and a devout orientation to whichever religion they follow (Khan 2012). Many Indian families believe these traits to be salient pillars of personal and professional success. In terms of the importance of minority groups experiencing this sense of belonging to the culture, Victory and Sai shared their opinions on keeping the Indian South African culture 'alive'.

> *Victory*: [It is] extremely important, because we have a low number compared to others, so we need to foster it and make sure it continues. We cannot let it just fade off.

> *Sai*: I would say it's even more important [for minority communities to practise their culture] because the responsibility lies on just very few people to uphold your culture. You obviously don't want to let it die down. Yeah, so it is high priority, it is really important.

From these responses, we gather that the importance of belonging for minority cultures – especially compared to those cultures with a substantial number of members, because fewer people are able to pass down and receive their traditions and practices. The continuation of rituals and behaviours associated with the Indian South African culture is seen as imperative because of the value that it offers to a person, and the emotional connection that a person feels towards their culture and heritage. This importance was summarised by Vishen, following a discussion about how elements of culture are shared in a global sense.

> *Vishen*: Even though you say that in a global way, nothing belongs to a particular culture, it is important to recognise that certain things do originate from a particular culture, and are associated with that cultural group, to sort of maintain

> the integrity and sort of give that culture the due of the art and the value that culture brings to the world.

Here, we see that Vishen was concerned with the ethical implications and general respect that comes with acknowledging cultures that provide value of some sort to the world. A typical example would be artwork and traditional products or inventions, but also includes general practices and behaviours. Victory provided the example of ‘superfood’ products that have been adapted and sometimes appropriated by non-Indians

> *Victory*: In the old days, they used to eat [the moringa tree] for diabetes and cholesterol and whatever. And now it’s becoming ‘it’ amongst health shops, and it’s expensive… The other thing is *haldi*[61] milk. When we were kids – and we still do that – when we have a cold, they give us this [tumeric and] ginger milk. And now you go and buy that from your coffee shop, and it’s like it came from the West now. But meanwhile, it was from the East… So all those kind of things is unique to all of us. It’s not like between only Christians or whatever, it’s an Indian thing.

Although Victory lamented the appropriation of traditional Indian remedies, there was also a sense of pride in aspects of Indian South African culture being recognised for their benefits on a global scale. Phenomena such as these can, therefore, greatly increase a person’s pride in belonging to their culture. Vishen voiced a complex take on the importance of cultural belonging and began with a dismissal of its importance, which he revised as he spoke.

> *Vishen*: If you think about it, you can live without culture… People who grow up and experience the value of culture will find it very valuable, because it’s something that makes them happy. Whereas people that grew up completely alienated from a culture have never seen that value, and to them, they can live completely fine without it… I think it’s important because I see the value in having this multifaceted perspective of life. Wait, hang on, I think I’m going to change my answer because of that part I just said. I think that it is important to look at life from multiple perspectives. Culture is a lens of life, right? And so I think it’s important that we embrace all cultures so that we can have that multifaceted perspective on life… I think it’s important for you to have that

[61] A Hindi/Urdu word for 'turmeric'.

> connection to whatever ethnic culture you belong to, because then it enables you to see the world in two different lights.

Vishen initially claimed that cultural belonging was not necessary for an individual, unless they personally found value in retaining that identity. When he verbalised his personal feelings about cultural belonging affording him a multiplicity of perspectives, he changed direction to express that this multifaceted outlook would be beneficial for anyone. Vishen's first point is worthy of merit; a person may not be inherently disadvantaged by not feeling a sense of belonging to whichever culture they belong. However, cultural belonging indeed offers an advantage to people by providing them with nuanced lenses from which to observe and engage with the world(s) in which they act.

From the above discussion, we see that respondents' opinions about culture and cultural belonging oscillated between maintaining a distinct Indian South African cultural identity and discarding the retention of distinctly ethnic or heritage-based connections. Perceptions of cultural belonging were predominantly perceived as a valuable aspect of an individual's life. Many respondents expressed that this pride in – and desire to belong to – a particular culture should not result in a person isolating themselves from the broader societal milieu. For minority diaspora groups, this is an especially necessary requirement; although associating with people from their culture could be considered a 'survival tactic', it would also alienate them from the multicultural population to which they now belong. Those respondents who did not claim an 'Indian' self-identification still acknowledged the value of being part of a culture. With a knowledge of how respondents understand an Indian South African cultural identity, we can now engage with how they perceive the representation of this culture online.

5.4.3. Does the Content Encourage Belonging?

When asked about the representations of stereotypical Indian South African cultural identity(ies) having the ability to encourage a sense of belonging or not[62], responses were again varied.

> *Fawzia*: I don't think it would really alienate you because it's more you're laughing at the content, isn't it? The problem that I would probably have with it is that, will only Indians be watching it? Would non-Indians be watching it? Does it

[62] I used the term 'alienation' as an antithesis to belonging, until I established that this was a very drastic term. I then used the phrase 'non-belonging' in the rest of my interviews.

> cross cultural borders in terms of accessibility? I don't know, because if it can cross that barrier, would African people or White people watch it? And would they find it funny? Can they relate to it? I don't know… Who watches it, really? I don't know what the demographics of their audience is, whether it's only Indians or not. My suspicion is it's only Indians. And if that's the case, then again, you're pigeonholing. And for me, pigeonholing is not a good thing because if it's a subject matter that can cross borders, then somehow you must be able to do that.

Since Fawzia identified with a 'Black' identity instead of an 'Indian South African' label, her response centred around the ability of this content to be relatable to a multicultural audience in South Africa. Even though she did not feel a sense of distance from the culture by virtue of the content presenting humour that is broadly and stereotypically applicable to the Indian South African population, her concern and line of questioning indicated that other races and cultures within the country should also be able to engage with the content. In a sense, this can be difficult to achieve for reasons beyond 'pigeonholing' – since the portrayal of a certain culture would inevitably employ nuanced and niche language and humour that could not be easily consumed and enjoyed by an 'outsider'. Furthermore, an argument can be made that it is beneficial for subgroups within a broader population to have a virtual space wherein they can celebrate and contest aspects of their culture or interests. Nonetheless, Fawzia introduced a thought-provoking perspective on the ability of such content to transcend boundaries and thus encourage a sense of belonging that could be understood across cultures.

Azanian also verbalised the idea that content on social media needs to be relevant to a wider range of people and indicated his feelings of disconnect from the Indian South African culture as it is portrayed by the content creators and their online personas.

> *Azanian*: [I feel] very distant {chuckles}, very distant. Like, it's amusing, and sometimes it'll be nostalgic, but no. I live on Twitter. There, we've got global issues to deal with. We've got South African politics to deal with. We've got race relations to deal with. We not interested in Man United and Liverpool at all. In fact, you could run over both teams, we wouldn't know.

Azanian explained that while he found niche Indian South African content on Facebook amusing and nostalgic, this had no effect on the fact that he was not interested in the cultural performances. This may well be attributed to the fact that he identifies with a 'South African'

identity that is not prefixed by any ethnic affiliation. Nonetheless, the examples of topics that Azanian preferred to engage with indicated that he would feel more of a sense of belonging to matters of global and political interest.

Like Azanian, Mehnaz mentioned that she found some of the Indian South African content on Facebook to be entertaining, but that it did not account for a person's values that would affect their sense of belonging to the community.

> *Mehnaz*: Yes, I think I do [feel a sense of non-belonging]. I would say yes… I tend not to be the kind of person that focuses on the negative, so if your whole persona is 'Woe is me, and my life is so sad, and I'm going to talk about other people', then I just step away from that space. So, it's more of a value thing than it is like– even if it's funny, and even if it might be relatable and there's truth to it, I don't need that kind of negative energy. I could do without that… But I do find that – it's not just Bash with Tash – there are people that just congregate around negativity, and they get on a bandwagon. It's funny, because this is how it is, but then they won't really– I don't know, it's not my cup of tea… And it's not just on the South African Indian Pages, just in general on social media, if people were starting to talk crap about something, I'll just kind of move away from it.

When asked specifically about belonging, Mehnaz expressed a sense of non-belonging to her culture in response to online portrayals that were grounded in negativity. First, she gave the example of content creators ranting about bad behaviours stereotypically found within the Indian South African community, which she disagreed with as unnecessary generalisations across the whole group. Mehnaz also gave the example of a post on the 'Bash with Tash' Page, which chastised people who would show up to a person's home as unannounced guests, and felt that it advocated for behaviours that went against the cultural norms for Indian South Africans and who they fundamentally are as people. Similarly, Safiyya explained that she found some of the content funny and relatable – but that the performances by Indian South African content creators did not encourage her to feel a sense of belonging to her culture.

Victory, as we recall, felt strongly about Indian South African content creators portraying an inaccurate representation of the culture. However, she expressed that there was a space

created by the online performance of Indian South African culture that could help encourage a sense of belonging for members of the community.

> *Victory*: Overall, I feel a sense of belonging… If something is posted that you know a person likes, then they'll comment, and then the other person will also add to it. So you kind of have a sense of belonging. It does help. Yes, it does… In certain aspects, it doesn't encompass the whole group. But… there's lots of Indian food bloggers and those kinds of people who post recipes and stuff like that, and they're very interesting. They bring the people together, and there's a sense of belonging there because they're posting recipes that we know, we're familiar with, you know, and also adding to it. But the sense of belonging, we do get on those kind of Pages.

From the above response, we see that Victory experienced an overall sense of belonging to her culture as portrayed by Indian South African cultural performances on Facebook, despite her contention with some of the portrayals. She went on to highlight the *prima facie* ability of culture-specific media to enable people from the same community to engage with each other and bond over their commonalities. Although she asserted that not all types of these cultural performances would encourage a sense of belonging, she mentioned aspects like cuisine that would be more useful in encouraging Indian South African individuals across the community to feel a connection to their culture.

Sai discussed how the online cultural performances posted by Indian South African content creators gave her a connection and sense of belonging to her culture.

> *Sai*: I do feel a sense of belonging, definitely. But I can't deny that there are certain aspects where you don't feel that. But in the majority of my experience, I would say I do feel a sense of belonging. It's played a significant role in my growth. Because at a certain point, I started really missing my culture, I really need to get back into it. So how do I do it? You know, because my parents are no longer around, and they were my backbone in terms of being in culture. Then, through social media, I was able to get back into it.

We see that, for the most part, Sai was able to experience a sense of belonging to her culture in response to cultural performances on Facebook. The content posted by Indian South

African content creators provided her with an opportunity to reconnect with her culture and other community members who would understand her experiences – especially since she felt distanced from her culture after losing her parents. In this way, we see the scope for positivity that online cultural performances have.

We recall that Vishen is a member of the Indian South African diaspora who then moved to another country in which the Indian population is a minority. Despite his physical presence in another country, he still found a connection to the Indian South African culture.

> *Vishen*: I definitely have [experienced a sense of belonging to my culture in response to this content]. I think the platforms give you access to wisdom from across the world and wisdom across generations, and as long as you find the correct platforms that have the right information, you can benefit very well from it. And I mean, again, I said, I do enjoy the satire and I do enjoy the music and the live streaming of all the songs and things like that. That's quite nice. So yes, in short, it's a very short yes… I wouldn't say it creates a sense of community. I would say it creates a sense of belonging. I think community is a much more long-lasting structure than the feeling of belonging… And especially when people move away, they need those groups to have that sense of belonging or ask the questions.

We thus see that Vishen does not find Indian South African cultural performances by Facebook content creators to enable spaces wherein people can experience a sense of community – in the context of this study, what we refer to as digital sociality. Vishen's discussion of the idea not burdening these content creators as representatives of the community reemerges in this context, as he argues that these media should not control a person's sense of belonging.

> *Vishen*: Just because you disagree with somebody or disagree with the view, it doesn't mean you should be feeling any less of that thing, because they are not representative of your identity. It just shows that they're not representative if you're disagreeing with them. But I feel like people would look at them as a representation and the mould, and if they don't fit that mould, then they would probably feel quite alienated from that. But, I mean, I don't see them as the mould. And so, how people interact with these figures, and the interaction with

> these figures then, would sort of lead to the answer of your question of whether they feel alienated or not. And those people who see them as moulds and things that you should be doing, they will feel alienated. But for us who think they just represent a different perspective and represent some people – not me, because I disagree with them – you don't feel the alienation, you just feel annoyed.

Vishen thus discussed the phenomenon of people potentially feeling alienated from their Indian South African culture when interacting with such content, only if they perceived the creators of that content to be an ideal representation or mould for an Indian South African person. As he explained earlier, he would not feel a sense of disconnect or non-belonging to his culture by virtue of engaging with niche Indian South African content, because he only perceived it as one of many perspectives of the culture. Therefore, it would stand to reason that he felt a sense of belonging through the aspects that he deemed representative of the culture. Those elements that he did not agree with or found 'annoying' were then simply a matter of personal consumption preferences and had no bearing on his connection to culture.

The above responses indicate the feelings of respondents towards the scope of Indian South African content to encourage a sense of belonging or non-belonging to their culture. For many, their perceptions of the inaccurate representations of their identity(ies) lead them to feel a distance from how their culture was portrayed by these Indian South African content creators. For other respondents, their disagreement with the representations that have been enacted did not negate the fact that they did feel a sense of connection to their culture that – even if inaccurately – was given a platform to be expressed on social media.

> *Sai*: You'd rather have these personalities speaking about Indians and basically making a noise about us than Indians playing small and insignificant, which I feel we did for a long time. And especially with girls, we were always told to be low-key, not to put ourselves out there. So having these personalities, we have to have these people that put themselves out there and put our culture out there… and let us be seen for a change.

5.5. Conclusion

From the findings discussed in this chapter, we see that participant responses fell across a broad spectrum of hybridised cultural identity(ies), their perceptions of the importance of

belonging, and the ways in which they felt a sense of belonging (or not) to their hybridised culture through their consumption of cultural performances on Facebook. The respondents' perceptions of the accuracy of cultural representations on Facebook were then used to explore whether their consumption of performances by Indian South African content creators enabled them to feel a sense of belonging to their culture. Many respondents indicated that they found the content entertaining and somewhat valuable, even if they did not find it to be an accurate portrayal of the Indian South African community. However, the stereotypical representation resulted in these respondents experiencing a greater sense of belonging from blog-style Pages and community groups on Facebook than from content creators who embody online alter-egos. They felt a sense of non-belonging to their culture when consuming such content.

While some respondents expressed a connection to Indian South African culture and valued their belonging to it, others viewed it as just one of many facets of their identity. Despite these differences, respondents indicated that they generally regarded cultural belonging to be valuable on condition that it did not hinder the integration of the Indian diaspora into the broader South African society. When respondents were asked about the scope of online performances of culture-specific behaviours to be representative of the Indian South African community, most respondents agreed that Indian South African content creators enacted generally accurate representations of the culture, especially with regards to cuisine and niche humour. However, the vast majority were critical of the use of South African Indian English, an often exaggerated use of the stereotypical Durban Indian South African accent, and the tendency of many content creators to use crass and immature humour. They perceived this aspect of online cultural performance to reinforce negative stereotypes about the community, and used by the creators and the broader online community to mock those Indian South Africans who speak that way.

In all, the results of this study proved my hypothesis correct; participants were able to relate to the content but felt distanced from more exaggerated portrayals of the community. While many agreed that cultural expression is an important part of keeping a person's heritage alive, they did not seem confident that the Indian South African Facebook performances have strong potential to encourage a sense of pride in belonging to the culture.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

6.1. Research Problem and Purpose

The aim of this study has been to determine the extent to which members of the Indian South African community experience a sense of belonging or non-belonging to their hybridised culture through the consumption of Facebook content that represents their cultural identity. With the current popularity of social media, content creators are able to enact performances that pertain to niche interests and subgroups within populations – including the promotion of culture-specific content. In the case of the Indian South African community, content that focuses on niche humour, comedy, and cuisine has been portrayed online. Most notably, Indian South African content creators have assumed alter-egos, or personas, that they use in the enactment of cultural performances. Although this study does not make any claims to be generalisable to the broader Indian South African community, it is nonetheless a useful pilot investigation into the feelings that a group of members experience – which can be used as a basis for further hypothesising and investigation.

I set out to investigate whether the Indian South African audiences perceived online cultural performances as mere entertainment, or if they were able to experience a sense of benefit vis à vis feeling a sense of belonging to their culture through their consumption. The purpose of this was to go beyond a descriptive exploration of what members of the Indian South African community *think* about culture-specific Facebook performances and instead inquire about the complexities of how it makes them *feel* about their cultural identity(ies). My initial hypothesis was based on the assumption that Indians in South Africa would want to retain a distinct identity following the socio-political recognition of this group in the democratic era. This research project has thus broadened my understanding of how culture, belonging, and identity are perceived by descendants of the Indian diaspora in South Africa.

6.2. Key Findings and Implications

Data was gathered through individual qualitative interviews with the sample of respondents. The research design that I employed facilitated the exploration of the nuances of individual experiences by establishing a set of key questions and enabling respondents to respond freely about the aspects that they found most poignant. I was able to gather an in-depth set of data that encapsulated participants' interpretations of the culture-specific content in question, as

well as their emotional responses to the concepts of cultural identity, belonging, and representation. The use of purposive and snowball sampling ensured that there were no significant demographic trends in the sample and provided a range of perspectives that reinforced the validity of the findings. Of particular usefulness is that responses reached a saturation point – even where differing viewpoints were expressed, there was always more than one type of response per discussion point.

Findings from this data set revealed a range of responses that varied from feelings of belonging to ambivalence and non-belonging – these highlight the vastness of human experiences as they pertain to cultural belonging, but also the complexities of identity negotiation on digital platforms for diasporic audiences. The findings therefore demonstrate that opinions formed through digital engagement are dynamic and subject to influence from an individual's background, exposure to other forms of media, and pre-existing attitudes towards cultural identity and representation. A study of this nature – that encompasses discussions of culture, diaspora, and social media – would thus benefit from an extended scope in order to fully explore the nuances of participants' responses.

A notable finding from the discussion of interview data was the diversity of perspectives among respondents. Some individuals found the content to be entertaining and relatable, expressing an appreciation for the ability of social networking sites to provide a platform for social cohesion and cultural expression. Others were more selective in their consumption practices and only found value in certain aspects of cultural performances on Facebook. Interestingly, most respondents – irrespective of their opinion on cultural identity – criticised the use of South African Indian English (SAIE) and an often exaggerated Durban Indian South African accent. They perceived these portrayals as a form of mockery rather than affirmation. Discussions of consumption practices and their scope for encouraging feelings of belonging were also varied, where some respondents experienced a connection to their culture by virtue of the type of content they interacted with, others were sceptical of its value and indicated feeling a sense of distance from the cultural representations enacted by Indian South African content creators. The vast range of responses underscores the multifaceted nature of digital sociality; it also suggests that cultural portrayals on social media do not resolve but facilitate another avenue for the constant (re)negotiation of cultural belonging for diaspora communities.

The insights offered by these findings have several implications for the practical enactment of cultural portrayals on social media. We see that content creators should be more cognisant of their intention behind creating culture-specific content and communicate this to their audiences; it would be worth conveying, for example, the satirical nature of some content to override concerns regarding inappropriate representations and mockery. If their content is not meant to satirise stereotypical behaviours of the Indian South African community, then it would be prudent to employ a greater level of sensitivity in their practices of digital storytelling. Although there is nothing wrong with using South African Indian English or having an accent, respondents took exception to the idea that the content creators behind these personas did not typically speak that way and were thus mocking it.

The indications that respondents found more value in blog-style Pages and community groups on Facebook suggest that alternative digital spaces on social media may be more impactful for online users who seek meaningful social engagements and cultural connections. The idea that members of the Indian South African community can seek help with religious rituals and baby-naming practices shows that culture-specific digital engagement may be more impactful in niche, self-regulated environments rather than through cultural performances meant for mass consumption.

6.3. Theoretical Contributions

The findings put forward in this study challenge those in traditional diaspora theory, which often suggest that cultural engagement in digital spaces is able to provide diaspora audiences with a sense of connection to their culture. Respondents did not necessarily express that they felt a sense of belonging to their hybridised culture as a result of interacting with performances by Indian South African Facebook content creators. Rather, only certain creators and types of content successfully facilitated feelings of belonging – most notably through humour and cuisine. To a large degree, online performances of this hybridised culture tended to cause a disconnect for audience members who participated in this study, especially with regard to the use of language and accent.

Hall's (1990) work on cultural representation and identity provides a useful lens through which to understand the responses in this study. The notion of identity being fluid and constructed through representation is particularly relevant to my findings (Hall 1990). Where some participants embraced the performative aspects portrayed by Indian South African

content creators, others resisted these enactments; these variations highlight the tensions that are associated with cultural self-identification and how it is represented in mediatised spaces. Additionally, Silverstone's (1999) concept of a 'mediatised world' shaping and mediating social experiences supports the idea that online spaces like social media platforms can reflect diasporic identity, or be used in constructions of identity for members of diaspora communities.

6.4. Suggestions for Further Research

While this study offers previously unexplored contributions to research on the Indian South African community – that is, diasporic social media engagement – there is much that I have neglected in this formative research study.

With regard to further research, I draw on the limitations of this study to suggest further avenues for exploration. First, future research would benefit immensely from a larger sample to determine whether the results from this study can be extrapolated. A sufficiently large sample would also enable more robust conclusions that can be applied to the broader Indian South African community. Furthermore, a larger sample would allow for different sub-demographics to be represented more equally; these include but are not limited to: location (both in South Africa and ancestral villages), language (like Gujarati, Tamil, and Urdu), age, religion, and so on. The similarities or differences found across this sample may then give researchers the data to draw more nuanced conclusions or allow for focus groups to analyse data from respondents who interact with each other.

Second, an analysis of a different social networking site or a comparison of a few different sites would allow for results to encompass responses from across a broader spectrum, and thus contribute to more generalisable theses. Another interesting avenue for future research would be a study that engages with the perspectives of Indian South African content creators in tandem[63] with their audiences. Using similar questions, researchers can determine the 'how' and 'why' of content creators' choices as well as the reception of these choices by audience members.

Although I did not expect responses to focus so heavily on the concept of language, it is no doubt of great importance to the respondents from this study. Assuming that other members

[63] I attempted to contact some of the content creators who enact an online persona for this study, to no avail.

of the Indian South African community would share this perspective, a deeper investigation into the phenomenon of language and accent being used as humour and satire (or not) would no doubt be of interest and relevance to academia centred around this community. My third recommendation is thus an independent study that revolves around the use of language in Indian South African social media content.

My final suggestion for further research would be the exploration of Indian South African belonging through social media *from a feminist lens*. Although scholars such as Chetty (1991), Dhupelia-Mesthrie (2007), Desai and Vahed (2010), and Carrim (2012) have done great work on the role of Indian South African women in the home and political milieu, there is a need for knowledge on how Indian South African women receive digital forms of culture in the context of their specific histories.

6.5. Final Thoughts

As shown in this study, social networking sites such as Facebook play a dual role in shaping cultural identity(ies) within diaspora communities; they provide avenues for representation and social connection while facilitating critical discussions around cultural identity, authenticity, and community belonging. The findings of this study underscore the importance of digitality in contemporary social life by demonstrating that online platforms constitute spaces wherein cultural meanings are reflected and contested.

As the nature of digital media continues to evolve, so too will the ways in which diasporic communities engage with their identities. Content creators and audiences alike must reflect on the power of representation to shape cultural narratives and define how belonging can be negotiated in an increasingly mediatised world. This study began with a complex question: To what extent do members of the Indian South African community experience a sense of belonging or non-belonging to their hybridised culture through their interactions with niche content on Facebook? The response to this is no less complex: it calls into question a plethora of worldviews that are each informed by their unique sets of experiences. Though I am inclined to say that culture-specific content does little to encourage a sense of belonging, this is by no means a definitive conclusion and reveals the shifting, contestable nature of diasporic belonging in a digital age.

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Interview Schedule

Greetings and thanks.

Points to run through before the interview:

- I will be recording this session for reference purposes, and will use the voice recording only. This data will be stored securely and may only be made available to examiners if they request it. I may occasionally take notes while we speak.
- This interview is meant to be more of an open-ended discussion between us, and I would appreciate it if you would elaborate on your responses to an extent that you feel comfortable with.
- The first section deals with belonging and alienation, especially for diaspora communities and their descendants. The second section will look at your opinions on Indian South African content creators on Facebook.
- Please let me know if you require a break at any point, and if you have any questions.

Questions for Respondents:

1. How would you define belonging to a cultural group?
2. Do you feel that there are any requirements for this belonging, besides ethnic affiliation?
    a. If yes, what are these? If not, why not?
3. How important do you perceive cultural belonging to be for individuals who belong to a minority culture in their country?
4. What factors may contribute to a sense of non-belonging from a person's culture?
5. While recognising that there is no 'one way' to belong, what are some of your experiences with belonging to and/or alienation from your culture?
6. Looking at a non-indigenous but settled cultural group with its own distinct identity, how do you see distinct ethnic markers (such as the use of South African Indian English) as helpful and/or unhelpful to belonging?
7. Do you observe or engage with South African Indian personalities on Facebook? Why / why not?
    a. If yes, please name some of these.
8. If yes to 7: How did you discover this genre of content on Facebook?
    a. If no to 7: Have you seen any of these personalities' posts on social media?
9. If yes to 7: Of all the content that is posted (i.e.: jokes, videos, adverts, spiritual messages, philanthropy work, memes, etc.), which strikes you as particularly interesting and why?

10. Acknowledging the diversity within the community, do you feel that personalities such as 'Aunty Sheila' and 'Internet Amma', amongst others, convey a generally accurate or inaccurate portrayal of what it is like to be South African and Indian?
    a. What gives you this perception?
11. How do these online spaces affect the cultural belonging of this group?
12. Have you noticed that members of the South African Indian community formed an online society through their interaction with these personalities and pages? If yes or no, what kind of impact would that have on a sense of belonging?
13. What do you think is the scope for social media in enabling the creation of spaces of belonging or alienation for various groups? Are South African Indians benefiting from such spaces in terms of the South African Indian community?
    a. And the broader South African population?

*** Some questions (below) were added during the data collection process***

1. In your opinion, what is the scope for cultural benefits that come from interacting with these personalities, such as learning something new about your culture?
2. Do you feel that niche content like this is important for members of diaspora cultures to form stronger bonds with their 'hybridised' identities? Why?
3. Do you feel a sense of belonging or non-belonging from the types of South African Indian culture that these personalities portray?
    a. What parts of their performance make you feel this way?
4. Do you personally find benefit in the platforms that these personalities offer?
    a. Are there digital spaces beyond these that encourage a sense of belonging or alienation by performing South African Indian culture? How do you feel about them?
5. Have you ever felt a sense of alienation or non-belonging to broader SA society by virtue of being South African Indian?
6. With the Indian race constituting a 2.6% minority in South Africa, are expressions of culture, such as the ones we see on Facebook, important in keeping aspects of either Indian or a hybrid culture alive?
7. Do you share content from social media that South African Indian creators share? Do you talk about the content that these personalities have posted? If yes or no, why?
8. How do you imagine this content is received by the majority of the South African Indian community?
    a. What about other races?

Let's talk about **South African Indian** Facebook content!

Are you interested in the online presence of South African Indian culture? How does it make you feel about your Indian identity?

If you find these questions exciting, I invite you to participate in a study about South African Indian culture on Facebook. I would love to hear your views about your sense of belonging (or exclusion), and identity.

You will be required to participate in a one-on-one discussion, based on your interactions with and opinions of SA Indian Facebook content.

The length of the interview (±1 hour) may vary depending on your responses – it's up to you to decide how much you are comfortable with sharing.

To be eligible, you must:

- Be over 18 years old.
- Have an understanding of SA Indian culture (like humour and language).

For more information on this study, contact aaliyah.aboobaker@gmail.com

N.B.: You may request to see a copy of my ethical clearance certificate.