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Ethnic Identity Development and South Asian Stereotypes in 'Never Have I Ever'

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Loyola Marymount University
University Honors
Program

Ethnic Identity Development and South Asian Stereotypes in *Never Have I Ever*

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements of the University Honors Program
of Loyola Marymount University

by

Priya Dutta

Advisor: Dr. Allison Noyes

May 3, 2024

Introduction

With the Asian American population in the U.S. doubling over the past two decades, reaching 17.8 million (Center, 2023), and heightened attention drawn to this demographic amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, there warrants an urgent imperative to examine the evolving landscape of conversation and treatment of Asian Americans. One such lens of exploration includes media portrayal and diverse perspectives. From 2007 to 2002, the USC Norman Lear Center and the non-profit organization Gold House have cited an increase of Asian characters from three percent to 16 percent as major characters in the top 100 films and series on streaming platforms (CITE). Despite this advancement, quantitative representation does not convey qualitative inclusion, with perpetuated Asian tropes, lack of nuance in characters' stories, and limited diversity in skin tone (CITE). Hollywood's persistent stereotypes shape perceptions and behaviors, transcending the screen into real-life interactions.

The power of media cannot be understated--serving as a socializing agent and context for shaping one's sense of self and relation to others (Mok, 1998). Thus, scrutinizing Asian American media representation is important as it positively and negatively impacts identity development, with misrepresentations shaping intergroup interactions and out-group members' perceptions (Besana et al., 2020). Consequently, the intersection of ethnic identity development in the U.S. through media among adolescents in immigrant families serves as a poignant group experiencing heightened impacts of representation to examine.

The following qualitative thematic content analysis focuses on the nuanced depiction of ethnic identity in Mindy Kaling's *Never Have I Ever*. Through this exploration, the researcher aims to note the show's contributions to fostering positive and diverse representations while also identifying areas for further improvement. As this study is situated in the context of recent

scholarship on the development of ethnic identity amidst Asian American stereotypes, I will briefly review the literature before analyzing the qualitative data on which my findings are based.

Literature Review

Ethnic Identity

Identity comprises one's personal perceptions and social behaviors. Stuart Hall (1996) emphasizes that rather than a fixed state, identity is an evolving process of "becoming" versus "being" as individuals are consistently shaped by cultural, economic, and political contexts. Thus, the search for one's identity institutes emotional notions of confidence, confusion, and categorization, as in-group superiority serves as an influential source of self-esteem (Yoon et al., 2017). Thus, among these dimensions, ethnic identity remains significantly more complex and ambiguous. Angela Byars-Winston (2005) maintains that ethnic identity formation inherently stems from a place of separation--people develop their ethnic identities when they see themselves as different. Moreover, cultural and political contexts, including racism, discrimination, microaggressions, and stereotypes, emphasize these differences in such a poignant process of development for ethnically diverse individuals. As a central concept of this research, I will provide an overview of the complexities of ethnic identity in the following sections.

Ethnic identity development is a process that occurs in stages. Bernal and Knight (1993) explain three phases of ethnic identity development: unexamined identity, search/moratorium, and achievement. A lack of ethnicity exploration (foreclosure), interest in reflection (diffusion), and internalized negative societal values characterize unexamined ethnic identity. For Asian Americans, Kim (1981) names this stage "white-identified" as "subjects in this stage had

internalized the white societal values and standards and saw themselves through the eyes of the white society” (p. 66). The second phase involves an identity crisis or a necessary turning point that initiates development positively or negatively. Often, ethnic identity moratorium includes dissonance: “growing awareness that not all cultural values of the dominant group are beneficial to ethnic minorities” (Bernal & Knight, 1993, p. 69). Finally, ethnic identity achievement denotes confidence, acceptance, internalization, positive relations, and both a secure identity and orientation toward mainstream culture. While these stages are insightful in understanding the perspectives of minority groups, it is poignant to examine real-world applications and experiences of this journey. Embracing one’s ethnic identity can distort and isolate individuals as they experience an ongoing transformation focused on their differentiating traits. These ever-changing external factors that shape ethnic identity make the journey to find oneself complex and challenging, especially for adolescents in the United States within immigrant families.

Identity Development in Immigrant Families

As adolescents universally experience formative changes and search for identity, those in immigrant families endure a challenging intersection, forced to balance their identity among cultural standards and mainstream norms. Yoon and colleagues (2017) explain, “From a developmental perspective, adult immigrants are more likely to have voluntarily chosen to come to the United States after their personal and cultural identities were rather established, whereas their 1.5- or second-generation children, who either immigrated at young ages or were born in the United States, may have quite different experiences as to identity development and cultural integration” (p. 65). This dichotomy between parents and children can foster positive or negative ethnic boundaries. When this natural sense of “otherness” emerges, so do defensive ethnic boundaries or cultural and systemic discrimination. However, if a child perceives their ethnic

identity as unique and welcome solidarity, belonging, and connection, they experience positive ethnic boundaries. Similarly, this contrast connects to ascribed identity, the aspects of identity given by society, such as ethnicity, nationality, gender, and social class, versus achieved identity, or the characteristics chosen by an individual like religious belief, family role, social and relationship status (Stuart Hall, 1996). As children of immigrants endure a unique choice or pressure to embrace or dismiss their cultural identity, they inherently experience a convulsion that others do not.

These themes relate to the process of acculturation, or “cultural socialization to the mainstream,” and enculturation, meaning “the retention of or cultural socialization to one’s culture of origin” (B. Kim & Abreu, 2001). Research suggests that while high acculturation relates to positive mental health outcomes, especially for Asian Americans, high enculturation predicts worse psychological impacts (Yoon et al., 2013). However, Asian American adolescents may experience acculturative stress regardless as they navigate two different cultures at home versus at school (R. Lee, Su, & Yoshida, 2005). This strain primarily stems from family contexts, as “Asian immigrant families have reported increased intergenerational conflicts due to acculturation gaps” (Birman, 2006; Kwak, 2003; R. Lee et al., 2005). Thus, identity-related pressure is an experience Asian American adolescents will inherently endure, and these factors shaped my targeted research audience. And, beyond real-world factors that foster such divides, media and how it portrays life--often with flawed representations--sweepingly shapes ethnic identity development and relationships. Next, I will explore common Asian stereotypes and their effect on experiencers’ lives

The Forever Foreigner Stereotype

This familiar experience for Asian Americans, in which people probe, “Where are you *really* from?” contributes to a long history of Asian Americans being treated as outsiders. The “forever foreigner” or “perpetual foreigner” narrative exacerbates discrimination, as shown by the COVID-19 pandemic and anti-Asian racism. Fifty-two percent of Asian Americans report that they have experienced related discrimination incidents in their daily lives, including the assumption that they do not speak English, being told to go back to their home country, and receiving criticism for speaking a language other than English in public, with 1.5- and second-generation children experiencing this more (Center, 2023). Relevant to identity, 79% of Indian adults have had their name mispronounced by strangers, a larger share than among other ethnic groups (Center, 2023). While name mispronunciation may not serve as an incident of discrimination, it often fuels identity conformity, with Asian Americans going by an easier-to-pronounce Anglicized or American name, masking their origin or culture (Center, 2023). The frequency of Asian American individuals encountering the forever foreigner stereotype reveals how identity management and development are impacted by others every day.

The Model Minority Myth

The “Model Minority” stereotype characterizes Asian Americans as high-achieving economically and educationally, generalizing the population as hardworking, obedient or passive, and apt for fields of math and science (Yoon et al., 2017). While the myth does not align with many Asian Americans’ lived realities of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, the pressures of this assumption impact mental health and academic performance and create divides among other comparative minority groups (Center, 2023). Furthermore, the stereotype is widely leveraged to minimize the severity of racial discrimination through microaggressions and “justify policies that overlook the historical circumstances and impacts of colonialism, slavery and

segregation on other non-White racial and ethnic groups” (Center, 2023). The impacts of such transgressions are further harmful concerning identity shaping, as Asian Americans report feeling like “monoliths” with “no room for failure,” higher expectations and diminished achievements due to their ethnicity, and overall, “no room for any sort of freedom in identity except for the mold that you’ve been painted as – as a model citizen” (Center, 2023).

Docility and Sexuality

While Asians and Asian Americans are universally regarded as submissive and passive, Asian American women experience further characterization of docility, impacting them professionally and personally through sexuality. In one study among Asian American women who have experienced discrimination, 14% reported perceptions of being incapable of becoming leaders, and 34% received assumptions of being compliant and unassertive (Ro, 2020.). While all women experience such sexism, the widespread generalization in the U.S. that there is a lack of leadership competencies in Asia contributes to significant discrepancies in the workforce: “One study of five Silicon Valley companies showed that while white women and Asian men were also under-represented at the highest levels, Asian women were the least likely to be executives, relative to their proportion of the workforce. “The ‘Asian effect’ is 3.7X greater than the ‘gender effect’ as a glass ceiling factor”, the report notes” (Ro, 2020).

While Asian American women are frequently treated as docile, Western culture simultaneously hypersexualizes girls and women of color, conflicting with the rigid restraints they otherwise experience. For adolescents, these mixed messages between their family, professional environments, and American media narratives prove complex for identity development: “They did classify themselves as Indian, but recognized that their Indianness differed from that of their parents... the issues of sexuality that marked the divisions between

themselves and their parents also demarcated lines of difference between themselves and their American peers” (Gigi Durham, 2004). Specifically, sexual self-identification for South Asian adolescent girls becomes a political project involving gender, race, and culture between “the culturally fetishized role in of the hypersexual woman of color” in media and “fantasies of sexual purity and fears of polluting seductiveness” from immigrant families, rejecting the lack of realism in media due to an acute awareness of their ethnic identity that distances themselves from such portrayals (Gigi Durham, 2004). Once again, this poignant recognition of never being able to fulfill any expectation from docility to hypersexuality provides a divisive foundation for identity development. These established stereotypes provide the foundation for what Asian and Asian American viewers perpetually endure, informing the present study by providing an avenue to view media's portrayal of these tropes.

Shaping Ethnic Identity Through Media

In constructing ethnic identity, it is crucial to explore experiences of stereotypes and resulting discrimination and popular media’s connection to these instances. Unni et al. discuss the discrimination Asian Indian adolescents experience while developing their racial and ethnic identities, with second-generation youth enduring more racial discrimination and their first-generation counterparts encountering increased ethnic discrimination (2022). Furthermore, among a pool of adolescents, most participants became aware of their race or ethnicity via discrimination as early as preschool and elementary school. However, Yoon et al. offer a solution: “Adolescents with higher ethnic centrality reported greater perceived discrimination compared to those with low ethnic centrality...Such findings suggest the need for a more nuanced understanding of ethnic identity, such as specific messages that Asian adolescents receive while growing up” (2017). As the social sciences define stereotypes as

constructions of reality that have clear consequences for thought and action in everyday life, it is critical to discover how media portrays such stereotypes and the messages it sends to young Asian Americans on how to interact and respond to related discrimination (Schweinitz, 2010).

Universally, media plays a significant role in reflecting and promoting cultural attitudes toward societal roles, norms, attitudes, and expectations (Simonton, 2004, p. 781). Movies and television shows emphasize the concept of “social mirroring,” meaning the behaviors displayed on the screen are often reflected in daily life (Mok, 1998). However, social cognitive theory illustrates that instead of offering realistic representations, media often encourages stereotypes, providing skewed, hyper-traditional portrayals of minority communities (Murphy, 2015). Thus, minority groups, such as Asian Americans, frequently endure a “vicious cycle” (Kunsey, 2018), with media disseminating and reaffirming stereotypes and inhibiting progress toward equity for ethnic communities. In other words, as non-Asian viewers consume media with harmful prejudices, this contributes to discriminatory treatment of Asian adolescents in life, thus impacting Asian adolescent identity development. This principle confirms the relevancy and urgency of the present research because counter-productive Asian-centered media have proven to have long-lasting cultural implications for all audiences.

Present Study

The present study will expand on previous research by examining a popular television show and its portrayal of South Asian ethnic identity development among generations of an Indian immigrant family in the U.S. I will conduct a thematic content analysis of selected episodes of Netflix’s *Never Have I Ever* to determine how the representation of Indian American women in the show RQ1) promotes or rejects South Asian stereotypes and RQ2) depicts the ethnic socialization and identity development of a second-generation Indian American teen.

From this analysis, I hope to note the conducive and lacking representations in *Never Have I Ever* to communicate some best practices for creating identity-affirming media for second-generation immigrant adolescents.

Method

Data and Procedure

The researcher conducted a thematic content analysis of Netflix’s *Never Have I Ever*, randomly choosing four episodes from the series’ four seasons—one episode from each season. The researcher developed the following coding scheme to analyze the characters of Devi Vishwakumar, Kamala Nandiwadal, and Nalini Vishwakumar, who represent second-, 1.5-, and first-generation Indian immigrants, respectively. The coding scheme expanded upon the work of Yoon and colleagues (2017) on Asian American media representation as well as emergent affective codes developed by the researcher (see Table 1).

Table 1: Coding Scheme

Domain	Category
Ethnic Identity Development	Societal Influence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Context (e.g. predominantly white school) • Assimilation pressure, school message (e.g. no message, negative message, universal message, diversity message) • Friendship with coethnics Family Influence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural practice at home (e.g. food, holidays, ancestral ceremony) • Language teaching • Instilling ethnic/cultural pride • Sharing stories from home country • Extended family influence Discomfort with Asian Background Identity change over time (e.g. increased acceptance of Asianness)
Stereotypes and Racism	Stereotypes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic achievement

-
- Docility or hypersexuality
 - Arranged marriage
 - Mental health
 - Occupation field (e.g. science, math)

Responses to Stereotypes

- Embracing
- Distancing
- Dismissive

Experience of Racism

Responses to Racism

- Passive coping (e.g. dismissive)
- Active coping (confrontation, discussion)

Researcher' Affective Variables

- Satisfaction
 - Relatability
 - Cringe
 - Dissatisfaction
-

Positioning Statement

The researcher of this research study is a second-generation South Asian woman who has navigated the cross-cultural experience of being “too Indian” and “not Indian” enough. She has witnessed a lack of representation in Hollywood of South Asian women and poor and harmful models when inclusion does exist. Due to this endurance growing up, the researcher felt compelled to explore what is widely attributed as a positive portrayal of her experiences. The researcher aimed to weave her nuanced understanding of South Asian adolescents into the research, and thus, she systematically developed affective codes relevant to her identity positioning.

The researcher first watched an episode of the show that was not selected as research material for this project to develop “positioning codes” that would allow her to systematically reflect on her own experience of watching the research content. As she watched each episode, the researcher wrote objective descriptions per scene, focusing only on those that involved the

three established women of interest. Then, she rewatched each episode to code each scene with her affective responses. As she recoded her work, the researcher developed emergent themes that connected to the original research questions.

Four distinct emotional response categories emerged within the affective spectrum, shaped by the researcher's identity positioning and responses to the show: satisfaction, relatability, cringe, and dissatisfaction. Such nuanced emotional reactions surprised the researcher, diverging from her initial expectations of *Never Have I Ever*, and frequently occurred in response to recurring themes or specific instances portrayed throughout the series. From moments of profound satisfaction sparked by scenes of identity validation and humor to times of relatability where the characters' experiences mirrored her own, each emotion reflected the researcher's evolving connection with the show. Moreover, feelings of cringe surfaced during the inherent high school awkwardness, while dissatisfaction highlighted areas where the show fell short in representation.

Findings

The first research question aimed to determine how the representation of Indian American women in *Never Have I Ever* promotes or rejects South Asian stereotypes, and the second asked how the show depicts the ethnic socialization and identity development of a second-generation Indian American teen. The analysis of *Never Have I Ever* revealed the following themes: 1) the show caters to a white audience, promoting stereotypes to adhere to mainstream expectations, and 2) the show rejects expectations through Devi's adolescent identity development and socialization, navigating through sexuality and mental health, but overlooks her ethnic identity. Overall, *Never Have I Ever* exhibits well-known South Asian norms and culture,

often dismissing the intricacies that comprise the comprehensive Indian immigrant experience. Each of these themes is discussed below.

Catering to a White Audience

The researcher experienced dissatisfaction through elements for which the *Never Have I Ever* receives the most critique: its romanticization of stereotypes and being tailored toward a white audience. Although the show portrayed relatable South Asian experiences, they remained familiar to non-diverse audiences—thus, only reinforcing what viewers were used to instead of shedding light on immigrant complexities. For instance, a recurring issue was the anglicization of Devi's name. While these exchanges reflect reality for many individuals of ethnic backgrounds, the show had the opportunity to normalize the proper pronunciation of ethnic names and create greater cultural understanding. Interestingly, even as a South Asian woman, the researcher began inadvertently anglicizing Devi's name in conversation about the show, highlighting the small yet pervasive impact on audiences' behaviors and perceptions. These conventions are further illustrated through generational relationships, academic conventions, and media experiences.

Nalini and Immigrant Parent Expectations

Devi and her mother's relationship provides some insight into immigrant family contexts but primarily showcases a classic mother and adolescent-daughter dynamic. Thus, as Nalini is an Indian immigrant, viewers will attribute her traditional values and strictness to that identity instead of the intersection of being a teenage parent as well. Her character ultimately confirms South Asian stereotypes of what can be argued as a convenience for the show's landing amongst a wider audience.

Speaking to the stereotype-affirming interactions between mother and daughter, in one instance, as Devi prepares to visit a friend's house for a group project, Nalini insists she takes a box of sweets: "No child of mine shall go to someone's house in the evening without taking a delicious box of confections for the parents." Devi resists, "No one in America does that, Mom." In the same conversation, when Devi mentions she has to continue working on a group project, Nalini asks if she's working with "stupid people," lamenting, "This is why the American school system is failing because everybody is treated like they're special when most of them should just drop out and learn a trade" (Kaling et al., 2020).

Furthermore, when Devi ends up in the hospital after a coyote attack at a party, Nalini's concern turns to questioning her daughter's behavior, reflecting her adherence to traditional values of responsibility and restraint. She exclaims, "Kanna...What on earth possessed you to misbehave this way?" While Devi tells her she was trying to be a normal teenager, her mom responds, "Normal teenagers end up in prison. Or worse, working in Jersey Mike's" (Kaling et al., 2020). These interactions illustrate how Nalini upholds traditional values regarding hospitality, respect for elders, academic success, career aspirations, and cautious behavior. While these expectations are universal for parents of adolescents, Nalini's adherence to them also substantiates norms associated with South Asian immigrant parents. Beyond Nalini, Nirmala's relationship with Devi provides a contrasting perspective, not highlighting conventions when it had a crucial opportunity to.

Nirmala and Devi's Intergenerational Relationship

Furthermore, the show's inclination towards catering to a white or non-Indian audience was evident in its portrayal of characters like Devi's grandmother, Nirmala. Nirmala's character breaks traditional norms with her American accent, references to popular Western culture like

Mean Girls: The Musical, and witty remarks - for example, urging that Devi "ride around in her shame" in her vandalized car. Although her progressive and forward-thinking character adds humor to the narrative, it also represents a missed opportunity to showcase the Indian immigrant experience and the complexities of generational conflict.

The relationship between Nirmala, an immigrant, and Devi, her second-generation immigrant granddaughter, could have explored assimilation pressure, enculturation, and acculturation. By portraying a more conventional dynamic between the two, the show could have displayed further nuances of identity formation within immigrant families and the challenges of navigating multiple cultural spheres. Outside of personal relationships, other stereotypes persist in *Never Have I Ever*, including Devi's relationship with academics.

Academic Achievement vs. The Model Minority Myth

Devi remained an academically driven student with dreams of attending Princeton, and her character is set up as such from the first season, with her academic rivalry against Ben Gross. While it is not inaccurate that Devi is scholarly, she is often overlooked and taken for granted due to her merits. She experiences extensive assumptions and prejudice about intelligence:

"What are you doing here? Did you forget your calculator or something?"

"Just let Devi write it. She's the smart one in the group."

"This is Devi, she's cool. And she's good at this stuff, so it's a guaranteed A. That's why I asked her" (Kaling et al., 2020).

Moreover, Devi's interactions with her mother, Nalini, shed light on the pressure she faces at home. Nalini's remarks about Devi's classmates and the American school system reflect a broader cultural attitude toward education and success. Nalini's expectations for Devi to excel academically, while rooted in a desire for her daughter's success, also serve as a source of tension

for Devi as she navigates her identity and desires. Despite her resistance to the model minority myth at home, Devi often finds herself conforming to it in her interactions with friends and love interests. By downplaying her identity beyond academic validation and making self-deprecating remarks about her social status, Devi inadvertently perpetuates stereotypes about South Asian students and their priorities. While Devi's relationship with academic validation is common among South Asian students, thus representing an accurate part of the Indian adolescent experience, it serves as another stereotype-confirming detail for non-diverse viewers. Beyond relationships and interactions, the characters' conversations inadvertently present non-diverse perspectives, especially in their discussion and prioritization of media.

Media Experiences

As part of the research process, examining how *Never Have I Ever* impacts identity development as a piece of media, the researcher encountered a meta experience as the show's characters are also influenced by media. For example, Kamala stirs up the courage to stand up to her parents after being inspired by Betty in *Riverdale*. When Devi is in the hospital, Fabiola and Eleanor say, "Who cares? You're with Paxton, right? You're gonna have hospital sex like on *Grey's Anatomy*." Finally, Nirmala declares that she resonates with Regina from *Mean Girls: The Musical* (Kaling et al., 2020). The characters view Western media as aspirational.

Conversely, as Kamala and Devi decide what to watch, Kamala suggests a Bollywood movie, claiming, "It's only 7 hours long." Similarly, when Devi gives her family tickets to *Shen Yun*, a Chinese dance show described as a rich celebration of color, the women resist, as it is several hours long (Kaling et al., 2020). These subtle references to media throughout the show display a compelling and notable contrast between the characters' reverence for Western media and disdain for Eastern entertainment. In this way, *Never Have I Ever* displays minor

microaggressions to Asian media and heritage, once again reflecting damaging, non-minority perspectives.

In these examples, the researcher experienced dissatisfaction with the show's tendency to push boundaries to extremes to cater familiarity to a less diverse audience instead of fully embracing cultural diversity. While the show successfully appeals to both Indian and non-Indian viewers, it was disappointing to witness a recurring pattern of prioritizing majority perspectives over minority voices for the sake of appealing to the mainstream. Overall, through immigrant family relationships, academic tropes, and the portrayal of media in *Never Have I Ever*, the show demonstrates to often uphold whitewashed conventions to appeal to a mass audience, connecting to RQ1. Regarding RQ2, the show prioritizes Devi's social identity development over her ethnic identity.

Devi's Adolescent Identity Development and Socialization

Never Have I Ever missed the opportunity to expand on Devi's ethnic identity exploration, focusing on universal themes of adolescent vulnerability and self-discovery. While it was refreshing for the show to not solely focus on Indian experiences, a balance that included showcasing authentic experiences rooted in South Asian identity could have added depth and richness to Devi's character arc, providing a nuanced portrayal that resonated with viewers from various backgrounds. In the following examples, the show displays adolescent themes of peer relationships and mental health, and Devi's Indian heritage did not play as large a role as it could have in establishing more intersectional issues.

Devi's Peer Interactions and High School Context

The researcher's experience of embarrassment while watching the show was primarily confined to moments when it fully embraced its identity as a high school drama. The use of Gen-

Z language, humor, and typical high school reactions, such as Devi's casual remark, "I did a boof. My b," and explains that her senior year has gone "tits up" thanks to Margot, "a jealous slore," induced a sense of cringe or discomfort (Kaling et al., 2020). Despite their authenticity in representing the realities of modern high school life, such moments induced discomfort or unease, potentially due to a sense of disconnect or unfamiliarity with the younger Gen-Z experience.

While the researcher enjoyed the balance between showcasing real experiences—South Asian identity-related and not—there were opportunities to highlight complex expectations, for example, in Devi's romantic relationship with Des. Devi's dilemma of navigating her feelings for Des reflected a tension between familial expectations and personal desires. Despite her surprise at succumbing to these expectations, Devi found solace in the approval it garnered from both Indian mothers, acknowledging it as a source of genuine happiness: "This is the best relationship ever, which I know is a really low bar, but I just feel really happy" (Kaling et al., 2020). However, beyond their Indian identities, Devi's relationship with Des remains a classic teenage occurrence, navigating the extremities along the spectrum of resistance and acceptance of parental standards. Furthermore, Devi experiences a further dilemma in her youthful desire for intimacy despite insecurity. Overall, the emotions surrounding Des and Devi's connection sacrifice South Asian standards for high school normality. However, *Never Have I Ever* makes strides in representing mental health and grief in a high school context.

Mental Health Representations

The show's inclusion of open discussions about mental health is admirable and essential in understanding the adolescent experience. These conversations contribute to the show's progressive narrative and offer valuable insights into the challenges and triumphs of navigating

identity and loss. While Devi displays growth throughout her therapy sessions, these conversations rarely surround the second-generation immigrant experience—a convention that demands normalizing. Nevertheless, as Devi endures grief, her character development is commendable and inspiring to other teens.

In the first season, Devi remains dismissive of her trauma, claiming, "Life is good now. I can basically forget about all that bad stuff that happened before" (Kaling et al., 2020). Despite her therapist, Dr. Ryan's encouragement to process rather than suppress her emotions, Devi brushes off the suggestion, citing an encounter with a coyote in her backyard as a form of coping mechanism. She eventually relents to Dr. Ryan's advice, acknowledging the need to confront her feelings, and quickly returns to her original conversation of asking her therapist to buy her alcohol. In the first season, Devi remains a teenage girl seeking to avoid the complexities of her emotions and grief. However, her journey throughout the series reflects a gradual shift towards a more mature and introspective approach to coping, marking significant character development.

In season two, Devi's anger issues persist, and she endures different stressors. Alongside the lingering grief from her father's passing, Devi navigates fresh challenges, including her rivalry with Aneesa over their involvement in a love triangle with Ben Gross. This brief tension is poignant, given Aneesa's shared Indian heritage, leading Devi to wrestle not only with typical teenage emotions but also with comparisons of ethnic identity. For instance, she detests Aneesa's ability to do a "Beyonce hair flip" with no dandruff—a common concern especially for Indian women (Kaling et al., 2020). Moreover, Devi faces academic stress, having to amend a failing grade in PE class. In therapy, Dr. Ryan suggests that during any surge of anger, Devi should take a deep breath and listen to soothing music or anything that would bring her peace. Although she initially resists and asks Dr. Ryan for marijuana instead, throughout the episode, she repeatedly

listens to an old voicemail from her dad saying, "There's my perfect girl" (Kaling et al., 2020). The shift in her coping mechanism reflects Devi's growth as a teenage South Asian adolescent, as she learns to channel her focus towards finding peace through the memory of her father.

Finally, in season three, Devi demonstrates exceptional improvement. During a therapy session, Devi, normally outspoken, remains quiet, explaining she had a misunderstanding with Des but can fix it. Devi acknowledges her true sadness over forgetting about her father's tennis racket. She expresses her guilt for prioritizing having fun over memories of her father but recognizes that she has been happier lately with less frequent waves of grief. Dr. Ryan offers reassurance, affirming that Devi's ability to be a kid again does not diminish her love for her father. After the scene, Devi hangs up her dad's racket in her room to honor his treasure, a poignant moment that encapsulates Devi's healing journey. This pivotal therapy scene highlights Devi's newfound ability to articulate her emotions with clarity and engage in healthier coping strategies. In these storylines, the researcher experienced empathy and satisfaction of *Never Have I Ever* displaying high-school-related issues. However, as a South Asian woman, she found the show sacrificing significant opportunities to exhibit intersectional matters, combining adolescence with immigrant and ethnic identity. The only exploration of Devi's identity development comes through her peer relationships and mental health journey, however, there are complexities regarding the representation of ethnic identity that the researcher will explore next.

Exhibiting Ethnic Identity Complexities

The researcher noted particular intricacies due to her own ethnic identity; however, most remained experiences familiar to all audiences, including sexuality, racism, and generational expectations. The researcher experienced satisfaction with the show's balance between issues concerning the South Asian identity and those that need not be explained by the characters'

Indianness. For example, there were various scenes depicting identity validation. Moreover, the researcher appreciated how the female characters exhibited strong-willed personalities, with others attributing this trait to their disposition rather than solely to their South Asian identity. For instance, Devi's friends, including Paxton, Fabiola, Eleanor, and Des, interpreted her expressions of rage as inherent willfulness instead of as a consequence of her status as a minority woman.

The Spectrum of Docility to Hypersexuality

Never Have I Ever displays a range of sexual docility to hypersexuality among the female characters, but imposed by themselves and not others. First, exhibiting shelteredness, in the first episode, Nalini scolds Devi for not wearing a shirt underneath her dress to cover up more for a video she was filming with her friends. At school, Devi, Fabiola, and Eleanor receive the nickname "the UN," meaning "Unfuckable Nerds." To defy such expectations, Devi almost hypersexualizes herself with her pursuit to have sex with Paxton Hall-Yoshida and "get horizontal" with Des. Specifically, she tries to resist conformity through clothing, with thigh-high boots, a thong, and an edible bra (Kaling et al., 2020). However, when she tries to be romantic with Des, she is displayed as unassertive, becoming self-deprecating, calling herself a loser, dork, and unpopular. The balance between the two is poignant because although Devi sexualizes herself against her mother and peers' assumptions, her imposed expectations of docility ultimately impact her private romantic life. Whether she submits to docility due to her being an adolescent or a minority girl in high school is unclear, but nevertheless, such representation reflects the poignant reality of Indian girls being unable to and feeling conflicted about fulfilling any sexual expectation from docility to hypersexuality. Next, the characters' experience and response to racism showcase the plethora of realities Asian women endure.

Responses to Racism

Embracing. While the show occasionally fell short in its representation efforts, it effectively shed light on the intricate dynamics of microaggressions and racism and how the characters navigated these challenges. Throughout the narrative, the show displayed three distinct responses to racism: embracing, distancing, and dismissing. In one instance, after being invited to a video game convention by her male lab coworkers, Kamala appears in a pink wig and short, tight dress, to Devi and Nalini's surprise. She explains, "I have to dress this way to get respected at my work...It was the least suggestive female character I could find...This is so undignified, I know" (Kaling et al., 2020). This interaction displays intersectional experiences and societal pressures, with Kamala being a woman, Indian, and professional in a male-dominated field. Despite acknowledging the indignity of the situation, Kamala embraced this outward persona to gain acceptance, highlighting a universal struggle among women in similar environments.

Distancing. Another compelling storyline revolved around Kamala's internal conflict regarding her arranged marriage and pursuing her relationship with Steve. While Steve questions the validity of such traditions, Kamala grapples with her familial expectations: "They're not forcing me. I have a choice between my family and a life of shame that will disgrace me and my descendants for generations...I can't betray my family." Steve replies, "I can't believe a woman who was brave enough to travel halfway around the world to pursue her dreams would allow anyone to dictate who she can be with" (Kaling et al., 2020), leaving Kamala shocked. Her eventual decision to pursue her relationship with Steve, inspired by watching sixteen hours of *Riverdale* and seeing the female characters' agency against their parents, comes with bargaining and hesitation. She declares, "I don't care what they think. But also, I'm not going to tell them about this, and we'll pretend I'm still getting an arranged marriage" (Kaling et al., 2020). This

response illustrates Kamala's crisis of losing her agency as a woman to her parents and surrendering to their wishes for approval while also having to teach Steve about such South Asian traditions. Her solution is distanced as she tries to please both sides, even though she knows it is not a long-term answer. Despite her ambiguity, this interaction felt the most authentic to the researcher in exemplifying the negotiation between cultural norms and personal autonomy for immigrant children.

Dismissing. Contrary to expectations, Devi, Kamala, and Nalini's fiery personalities did not always result in overtly dismissive responses to racism. Despite their outspoken nature, the women often navigated their issues with restraint, illustrating the burden of consistently retorting. One example of Devi being dismissive is when a girl at school mistakes her for Aneesa, to which she exclaims, "No, you racist, I'm not Aneesa! I don't run fast, I'm not cool, and I don't eat like one crumb of brownie because I'm straight-up anorexic! Okay?" (Kaling et al., 2020). This interaction displays the difficulty of dealing with racism, especially as an adolescent, while also underscoring the typical animosity and internal strife between South Asians trying to assimilate into mainstream culture. Overall, *Never Have I Ever* skillfully depicted the diverse nature of racial dynamics and the South Asian women's responses to navigate them, providing a nuanced portrayal of the inherent complexities in such experiences. Finally, Devi's grandmother, Nirmala defies expectations in her personality and interactions with other characters.

Nirmala Transcending Generational Norms

Nirmala emerges as a captivating character, particularly with her storyline involving her relationship with a white man named Len. When Kamala discovers their secret relationship, Nirmala reacts with defiance, declaring, "Disown me if you must...I'm a common harlot." She articulates, "They should shame me...respectable widows aren't supposed to move on...that's the

way you're supposed to do it...devoting time to grandchildren." Her crisis reflects generational expectations for widows, as Nirmala refers to her mother, who did not move on from the age of 22 to 104 (Kaling et al., 2020)..

Kamala, however, reassures Nirmala that the family's priority is her happiness and well-being, not conformity to outdated norms. Nirmala herself acknowledges the conflict between societal expectations and her desires, declaring, "I'm a mere woman, a woman with needs," as she unveils her relationship with Len to Nalini and Devi. Despite initial reservations, the family ultimately supports Nirmala's relationship, with Kamala questioning the necessity of mentioning Len's race and both Devi and Nalini offering congratulations, as she is "a woman who deserves company" (Kaling et al., 2020). This portrayal challenges societal norms surrounding interracial relationships and South Asian widowhood, presenting a refreshing and humorous departure from tradition. In normalizing these conventions, Nirmala's storyline serves as a disruptive yet heartwarming addition to the show and reality, offering a glimpse into the complexities of love, acceptance, and familial dynamics in a South Asian family. Although it can be considered a convention-confirming detail for non-Indian audiences, as these are issues rarely explored, the researcher acknowledges its progressiveness.

Discussion and Conclusion

Never Have I Ever did not fully seize the opportunity to demonstrate the intersectional experience of a second-generation Indian American woman in high school. The show, unfortunately, picks and chooses which South Asian conventions to uphold and deny, consequently affirming mainstream audiences' perception of Indian American culture. While it exhibits various progressions of identity development, it misses many possibilities of applying an ethnic lens. For example, Devi demonstrates the three stages of identity exploration -

unexamined, moratorium, and achievement, but only concerning her therapy sessions and coping with the loss of her father. Her mental health journey could have acknowledged acculturative stress or ethnic centrality. Furthermore, by illustrating common experiences and stereotypes, including name mispronunciation and the Model Minority Myth, *Never Have I Ever* reinforced understood conventions for the sake of universal appeal.

Despite these critiques, it is unfair for the show to be treated as the epitome of South Asian representation, and the researcher acknowledges that many flaws may stem from her nuanced understanding of identity-related experiences. The researcher's experience of watching *Never Have I Ever* was overwhelmingly positive due to the show's humor and lightheartedness, even though it had a limited impact on her own identity development, aside from its relatability. Devi, Kamala, Nalini, and Nirmala illuminated cross-generational intricacies involving racism, mental health, romantic relationships, and conforming to societal norms. However, they all share the ongoing struggle for recognition, acceptance, and agency in a world shaped by non-diverse perspectives and experiences. The researcher recognizes that there has not been a more comprehensive show and that the first step of media representation may be to involve and normalize Indian experiences in mainstream storylines. The detachment from complexity might have been intentional to open the door for future inclusion of diverse perspectives. However, the present study confirms and expands on existing research regarding the portrayal and experience of media representation.

For example, regarding the presentation of sexuality, Devi's ambiguity between docility and hypersexuality reflects a common occurrence among Asian adolescents. As Gigi Durham (2004) established, "girls create the potential for new sexual identities that have emancipatory possibilities for them as girls in-between...forging new ethnicities in the interstitial cultural

spaces that allow for new imaginings of gender and sexuality." Conversely, *Never Have I Ever* had instances of more positive associations with ethnic identity, providing the opportunity to establish norms. As Angela Byars-Winston (2005) asserted, ethnic identity formation stems from a place of differences, and Devi remains surrounded by an embracing and validating group of peers that disregard her "otherness." These small but influential examples display how the present study built on previous research by finding connections within a piece of popular media.

This study involves potential limitations, given the lack of scope in watching the show, with the researcher only viewing four episodes, although this method was intentional to gain an unbiased and random outlook on the show's representation. Nevertheless, this research offers suggestions for creating identity-affirming media for immigrant adolescents. As demonstrated with *Never Have I Ever*, it is difficult to please both ethnic and non-diverse audiences, and it is better to prioritize perspectives instead of trying to strike an ineffective and unimpactful balance. Diverse shows should take a stance - although they should not serve as the epitome of representation, they will naturally fall in that category within Western media. Therefore, they must normalize the ultimate embrace of one's culture and dismantle harmful stereotypes. While *Never Have I Ever* had potential in its vibrancy and approachability, future media should not compromise a marketable aesthetic for powerful storylines. Ultimately, as those within the represented community are most likely to be harmed, their satisfaction must be prioritized.

Furthermore, this study offers suggestions for future related research. New studies can incorporate a more comprehensive sample size of episodes, present the show to other people of similar backgrounds to gather varied perspectives, and expand the scope to all characters. The research conversation must be continued to change the landscape of media, representation, inclusion, and diversity and those who experience its impacts.

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