Mohan J. Dutta-Bergman and Mahuya Pal

The Negotiation of U.S. Advertising Among Bengali Immigrants: A Journey in Hybridity

The process of globalization has unsettled the idea of territories and space, disrupting certainties of culture and altering the way identities are constructed. Understanding diasporic complexities can inform media studies about the intersection of globality and locality and the issue of identity. However, this has remained a marginal area of inquiry in communication studies, particularly in advertising research. With an ever-increasing number of people now defining themselves in terms of multiple attachments, it has become imperative for advertising research to address hybridity, an inherent characterization of globalization. This project examines the discursive construction of advertisements by Bengali immigrants from East India and demonstrates the hybrid existences of diasporic groups, positioning themselves at the crossroads of global and local.

Keywords: culture; diaspora; immigration; identity; postcolonialism; globalization

Globalized changes are integral to the co-construction and reconstruction of identities within and across specific national boundaries (Drzewiecka & Halualani, 2002). Such sweeping flows of globalization are disrupting the certainties of culture and altering the notions of identity construction (Appadurai, 1990; Giddens, 1990; Said, 1993). The processes of globalization are continuously challenging the concept of nation-state and the role played by nationality in the realm of identity. In essence, the social, economic, and cultural landscapes operate at the intersection of the global, local, and transnational processes that are threatening the traditional conceptualization of nationality (Wiley, 2004). A few scholars have explored the notion of hybridity to examine the cultural dimension of diaspora (Appadurai, 1990; Bhabha, 1994; Clifford, 1994; Gilroy, 1989). Although interrogations of transnational, postcolonial, and hybrid formations have remained a marginal area of inquiry in communication studies (Drzewiecka & Halualani, 2002), recent years have witnessed
an increasing interest among communication scholars in the topic of hybridity in communication practices (Durham, 2004; Grossberg, 1993; Hegde, 1998; Kraidy, 1999; Rajgopal, 2003; Shome, 1996).

Understanding diasporic complexities in the context of globalization can inform media studies about the intersection of globality and locality, the redefining of the nation-state, and the issue of identity. Although a few scholars have initiated these discussions in communication studies, such an inquiry is almost missing in the advertising literature. An integral part of the modern sociocultural space, advertising has been conceptualized by scholars as a cultural artifact (McCracken, 1990; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988, 1991). Advertising and culture exist in a dynamic relationship that continually shifts around the cultural space. As an economic enterprise, advertising plays a critical role in diffusing multinational brands in the global landscape; simultaneously, it enters into the cultural space as a mediated text. This article examines the discursive interpretation of advertising among Indian immigrants who belong to the state of West Bengal in East India. Looking at identity construction at the crossroads of globalization, tradition, modernity, and nationality, the study seeks to bring to the fore the “multilayered communication discourses of diasporic groups” and the “fluid unpredictability of identity formation” (Drzewiecka & Halualani, 2002, p. 341). Through the explorations of advertisements, the article examines the narratives of hybridity in an immigrant community, “addressing a gap in the emerging field of international media studies, which has remained largely oblivious to the phenomenon of hybridity” (Kraidy, 1999, p. 457).

Advertising and Culture

A large body of literature discusses the changing face of the world with borders getting blurred, creating boundless diversity and fostering spaces for the enactment of complex identities. Advertising traverses the cultural and economic worlds, as both a cultural product and an economic product. It plays a critical role in the global landscape as a messenger of the global brands, reaching out to audiences in different parts of the globe. Advertising exists in a pivotal relationship with globalization processes, having to respond to the varying needs of diverse audiences both within and outside the national space. To understand the role of culture in advertising, literature in the realms of the global-local relationship and hybridity will be reviewed in the next section.

The Global and the Local

At a time when the connections between space, place, and culture are in a state of flux, new forms of hybrid practices are being defined globally (Gupta
As ever increasing numbers of people now define themselves in terms of multiple attachments encompassing multiple identities, it has become imperative for advertising research to address hybridity, an inherent characterization of globalization. In a sense, globalization alters the relationship between one’s place in the world and cultural practices, experiences, and identities (Tomlinson, 1999). Globalization scholarship has explored the complexities in terms of deterritorialization (Appadurai, 1990; Featherstone 1995; Latouche, 1996; Lull 1995; Mlinar, 1992) and displacement (Durham, 2001, 2004; Giddens, 1991). Giddens (1991) introduces the concept of “time-space distanciation” (p. 19) and argues that social life stretches across time and space. As Giddens states, the stretching process is at the core of globalization, which networks different social contexts. Giddens posits that although global citizens retain their day-to-day experience of local contexts, local existences derive from particularities that may not be unique to the locale but may be positioned into the locale by distanciated forces.

Robertson (1997) introduces the term “glocalization” (p. 29) to deliberate on the global-local problematic, which hinges on the view that “contemporary conceptions of locality are largely produced in something like global terms” (p. 31). The theorization in terms of glocalization underscores the perspective that there are no longer any stable accounts of dominant change in the world and that grand theories have come to an end (Robertson, 1997). At the fore is the significance of space rather than time. The bounded notion of time and space has been displaced by the notion of “the ‘representational’ space within which all kinds of narratives may be inserted” (Robertson, 1997, p. 32). Tomlinson (1999) describes the daily experience in modern societies as a “complex and ambivalent cultural condition” (p. 108). Individuals are trying to find the comfort zones in the world of global modernity, to live with its transformations, and to generate new identities (Berman, 1983). Hence, deterritorialization does not mean the end of locality but defines locality in terms of a complex cultural space (Tomlinson, 1999). As the ideas of locality and national borders get blurred, people’s feelings of national identity become more complex, no longer bound within a set of symbols and beliefs (Giddens, 1991). In Anderson’s (1991) words, national identity comprises an imagined community, something that exists within the imagination of people. For Anderson, “national imagining is a phenomenon of modernity, a form of experiencing which is only possible within the context of the technological and economic changes that produced modern capitalist societies” (Tomlinson, 1991, p. 81). Extending Anderson’s theory, Tomlinson (1991) argues that the idea of imaginary national identity replacing earlier forms of cultural belonging threatens the “existential certainties” (p. 84) that characterize modern social life. Tomlinson posits a lived reality of national identity that is lived in
representations, not in deep attachments to a homeland. Therefore, it is theoretically interesting to examine the interplay between divergence and convergence in the articulations of immigrant cultural identity in the global economy. What are the ways in which members of diasporic groups negotiate their identities in a global mediated space?

**Globalization and Hybridity**

The overarching themes of the global and the local, the complexities involved in identity construction, and the erosion of borders have been captured, to a large extent, by the notion of hybridity. Apart from globalization scholarship, a variety of traditions associated with anthropology, cultural studies, and postcolonial theory have argued that global cultural discourses are “mitigated by symbolic local practices” (Kraidy, 1999, p. 16). Their conceptualizations have centered on cultural hybridity (Durham, 2001, 2004; Kraidy, 1999). Hybridity originated from postcolonial discussions (Bhabha, 1994; Tiffin, 1995). However, Kraidy (1999) argues that hybridity is not a phenomenon that is unique to postcolonial cultures; it is an inevitability for all cultural conditions—a view that has been supported by a few scholars. For instance, Pieterse (1994) recognizes hybridization as being closely linked to the phenomenon of globalization.

A growing body of scholarship has examined hybridity as a phenomenon that is born out of the consumption of the national and transnational media and popular culture (Kraidy, 1999). Some scholars suggest that local cultures redefine themselves in the light of modern processes and are, hence, products of constant adaptation to global influences. It is important to recognize that all cultures are hybrid to some extent, as Kraidy (1999) emphasizes, “to understand the micropolitics of local/global interactions” (p. 460). Bhabha (1994) calls culture a “strategy of survival” (p. 172). “The transnational dimension of cultural transformation—migration, diaspora, displacement, relocation—makes the process of cultural translation a complex form of signification” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 172). In a sense, this validates the position about construction of culture and invention of tradition. Hence, as Bhabha emphasizes, culture is an uneven, incomplete production of meaning and value, produced in the act of social survival.

Given this overview, this article argues that diasporic subjectivities move between home and host cultures, encompassing a “double consciousness” (Drzewiecka & Halualani, 2002, p. 344). It is a consciousness that resists nationalist sentiments and embraces new contexts with cultural traditions. A few scholars have suggested that diasporic groups always resist dominant structures in both home and host cultures. “Diaspora discourses are grounded
in politics of history, territory, and location, and diasporic individuals strategically employ and mobilize cultural and ethnic labels” (Drzewiecka & Halualani, 2002, p. 344). In other words, diasporic identities are imbued with multiple dialectical tensions that simultaneously coexist. Located in the realms of historical and spatial contexts, diasporic identities deploy and mobilize the cultural and ethnic labels in negotiating the diasporic experience.

Hall (1996) puts forth a similar strategic and positional view of identity, suggesting that identity is strategically employed as a resource that responds to the position within which it is situated. Articulating the discontinuous nature of identity, he states that “identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured, never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices, and positions” (p. 4). Contrary to the fixed and stable construction of identity, Hall articulates the multiple contradictions that compose identity. It is within these contradictions and tensions that identity operates as fragmented and fractured rather than as a fixed and stable entity. In his discussion of diasporic identities, Hall (1994) argues that identity is tied in with discourses of both similarity and differences, and these dialectical tensions set the parameters of the discursive space in immigrant experience. For him, difference exists “in and alongside continuity” (p. 396). The displaced or decentered position of diasporic identity is a construction—a process that is always in motion and is never really complete (Hall, 1996).

This study explores the intersection of the global and the local cultural spheres in terms of the hybrid cultural identities enacted by immigrants in their consumption of U.S. advertisements—an examination that has remained beyond the scope of advertising research so far. The new global cultural economy has to be understood as a “complex, overlapping, disjunctive order, which cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models” (Appadurai, 1990, p. 296). Central to the enactment of identity in a globalized world is the dialectical tension between the global and the local. In this project, we seek to understand this interplay of the global and the local in articulations of identity.

As suggested by the notion of hybridity, we live in a time of “constant re/placement and reterritorialization as global capital connects, disconnects, and reconnects spaces in new ways” (Shome & Hegde, 2002, p. 258). However, cross-cultural advertising research seems to have overlooked this complex hybrid existence in the context of globalization. It has focused on the broader execution strategies, differences in persuasive appeals, and immigrant consumer behavior and has thus remained inadequate in addressing the dynamism of cultural implications in the global cultural economy. The most common process used to investigate cross-cultural differences in advertising has been
content analysis. A vast majority of the studies have assumed implicitly that cultures differ on certain dimensions and have then investigated the match between those differences and the content of advertising messages (Cho, Kwon, Gentry, Jun, & Kropp, 1999). In other words, inherent in such studies is the notion that certain universal values exemplify cultural constructs of national boundaries that can be regarded as the guiding principles for cross-cultural advertising. Culture for ethnic populations within national borders has been defined in terms of certain religious values, rituals, and a set of symbols. Missing in this literature is the understanding of culture in its dynamic capacity. It is only recently that hybridity has gained visibility in communication scholarship, but sustained interest is rare in theorizing cultural hybridity as a communicative practice and thus in bringing hybridity to the center of communication theory as a field (Kraidy, 2002). This project is particularly interested in examining the identity construction of diasporic groups, who are positioning and repositioning themselves at the hybrid crossroads of global, local, and imagined communities. Through analyzing the discursive construction of U.S. advertisements by Bengali immigrants, this study answers the following question: How do immigrants from Bengal draw meaning from U.S. advertising? This examination of meaning making among an immigrant community draws on the concept of hybridity to elucidate the seamless web of meanings that flow in coexisting spaces of home and host cultures.

Method

Data

In this project, we conducted focus groups to examine the interpretation of television commercials in the U.S. by Bengali immigrants. The focus groups were conceptualized in the form of addas and were conducted during the period of a year. Integral to Bengali culture, addas are informal sessions where people get together in groups to discuss political, social, economic, and cultural issues; addas typically happen over tea and snacks in public spaces in Bengal and are typically spontaneous in the flow of topics (Chakrabarty, 2000). For Chakrabarty (2000), adda is “the practice of friends getting together for long, informal and unrigorous conversations” (p. 181). Our approach included discussions with men and women between 25 and 35 years old. Our goal was to understand their experiences and narratives that are drawn together in the consumption of ads. The participants comprised a mix of students, professionals, and homemakers, and their stay in the United States ranged from 5 years to 5 months. We recruited participants via postings on the listserv of the Bengali association of a small midwestern college town. Those
members of the listserv who responded to our e-mail were contacted about setting up a time to participate in our focus groups. Each focus group involved between 5 and 8 participants.

The participants came from a regional subsection of India (West Bengal) and shared the same mother tongue, Bengali. West Bengal is a state in the eastern part of India that is known for its literary and cultural contributions; a Nobel-winning poet, Rabindranath Tagore; and an active political climate (Scrase, 2002). Bengalis are known for their fascination with the fine arts and take great pride in their literary and cultural heritage; Bengali identity is deeply rooted in the literary, cultural, and political spaces of the culture. West Bengal has been ruled by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) for the past 3 decades and is an active political state that is often a site of political protests, rallies, and debates (Scrase, 2002). Bengalis, therefore, offer a theoretical entry point for interrogating issues of identity in the context of modernization and globalization, given their strong cultural and political awareness and their sense of identity that is intertwined with this awareness. The Bengali sense of culture has played a key role in the debates and dialogues in the Bengali public sphere about the influences of globalization and the erosion of culture.

Being immigrants from Bengal ourselves, we were easily accepted by the participants. Arranging the focus groups in the form of informal addas allowed for the free flow of narratives and influenced the discourses that were articulated. Chakrabarty (2000) describes addas as “a particular way of dwelling in modernity, almost a zone of comfort in capitalism” (p. 213). Addas, therefore, offer an unresolved space for articulation of the question of home in the Bengali present within a globalized capitalism. This contested nature of the adda as a dialectical discursive space lends itself particularly well to examinations of immigrant identity in a global economy. Our familiarity with most of the participants through the informal Bengali networks further facilitated the flow of meanings, creating a shared context for the co-construction of meanings.

In each session, we showed six U.S. television commercials randomly selected from the Advertising Age database (http://www.adage.com) and let the respondents discuss the ads. Different sets of six ads were shown in the different sessions, resulting in a total of 18 ads shown. The major product categories used in the study were beer, nonalcoholic beverages, fast-food chains, recruitment agencies, automobiles, shoes, and apparel. The results are discussed in the next section. The Advertising Age database features the top weekly broadcast advertisements in the national U.S. market. The focus groups were audiotaped and began with predetermined questions, which provided the starting points for further discussion. The interview protocol asked the participants to reflect on their thoughts and feelings toward the ads while they watched them, accompanied by probes that delved into the explanations for these thoughts and feelings.
As pointed out earlier, 18 participants were involved in focus groups, and
the participants were recruited via e-mail contacts to the Bengali association
listserv in a midwestern community. The participant pool was built of 7 men
and 11 women who responded to our initial e-mail to the listserv. The focus
groups ranged from 1 hr to 1.5 hr.

Data Analysis

The coconstructive grounded theory approach was used for analyzing the
data. The data analysis started with open coding to identify discrete concepts
that could be easily labeled and sorted; subsequently, the discrete concepts that
were related to the same phenomenon were grouped under conceptual catego-
ries. Open coding was followed by axial coding that involved the formulation
of relationships within and among the categories; finally, theoretical integra-
tion was achieved by selective coding. At this stage, the relationships between
the distinct categories were established at a more abstract level and were vali-
dated by returning to the data and finding evidence to support or refute the rela-
tionships. The responses primarily revealed the ambiguity the participants
experience in their interpretation of advertising and juxtaposed this ambiguity
with the backdrop of references to home. The participants emphasized the role
of context in advertising and repeatedly shifted their cultural frames of refer-
ce during the process. In addition, the addas demonstrated the ways in which
the Bengali community used this form of cross-referencing to create a shared-
meaning space and cultural memory, tapping back to the “Bengaliness” in
identity.

From the conversations, two key themes emerge that are reflective of the
dynamic cultural space and the experience of Bengali immigrants as they
negotiate meanings of the mediated texts in their movement between cultures.
These themes are ambiguity and memories of home, which in turn are located
in a dialectical relationship. The theme of ambiguity emphasizes the novelty of
the cultural symbols and artifacts in the new culture and the active process of
meaning making that the participants engage in; the theme of memories of
home reflects their active navigation between home and host cultures in their
interpretation of American advertising. The participants’ memories of home
are intrinsically intertwined with the ambiguity that they experience in their
dislocated being; home offers a point of reference for their already fragmented
identities that are constituted in their experiences of ambiguity.

Ambiguity

An essential element of the hybrid experience is a sense of ambiguity in
negotiating the cultural artifacts of the host culture. The participants
articulated their experience of ambiguity as they navigated the symbols and codes of a new culture. The experience of being in a new culture that is different from one’s home culture creates a scenario where symbols in the cultural space have to be understood and accorded meaning. It is within the ambiguity of these cultural texts that the discourses of identity are played out. The ambiguity that the participants experience in relation to the cultural symbols in the mediated space (advertising) is marked by their sense of discontinuity and by their inability to locate the symbols within the broader historical context of the host country because of their lack of familiarity with this context. For instance, responding to a Guinness beer ad depicting the theme of innovation and a discussion between two innovators, this is what Arijit has to say:

Maybe the historical part will be difficult to understand because, I mean, it’s directed to more, I mean . . . I don’t know . . . I mean, for common people, whether they are going to understand that logic behind it, because the history of going from telegraph to telephone like that, um, will be difficult to understand for an Indian.

What Arijit is pointing out here is that the logic link that connects the different symbols used in the ad is not directly evident for him. He further points out that a viewer has to have a sense of cultural history and be familiar with it to be able to make sense of the message. Essential to the sense of ambiguity is a (dis)connectedness with the cultural history of the host culture. In this context, the experience of moving to a different culture creates a disconnection where the past and present do not fit together along a smooth continuum. Instead, there are spaces of disjuncture between the past and present. These spaces of disjuncture are marked by ambiguity—a lack of connectivity between what was and what is—reflecting a sense of fragmentation in the participants’ identities. This disjuncture is discussed by Reba:

Well, who are these two persons, why they are talking, why they are doing . . . so all these thought processes are not related to at all in Indian, I mean, I would not say that it will connote Indian tradition, maybe, American tradition, maybe, because of telephone and telegraph kind of stuff, the historical truth in USA, I mean, they are proud of this one. But the thing is that this ad will not create any particular sensation in the mind of people like us because, first of all, we used to have the beer ads linked with joy, and then the second one is that we don’t know the history behind this, sometimes most of the people might know.

Evident here is an active attempt at meaning making in an ambiguous environment. Reba tries to figure out the message; note the questions that are put forth by her. She articulates that the message builds on American tradition and a historical truth in the United States. She further points out her inability to relate to the message because she lacks knowledge regarding U.S. history, and
this creates a sense of disjuncture. Similarly, Mondira says this about a Miller Lite ad: “Again, when you see the ad you have no clue as to what it is about.” Sabina states, “I was thinking, what are they talking about? . . . What is the product? . . . I was totally confused about what they wanted to show. We came to know of the product at the end, and we didn’t know before that what it was all about.” The consumption of advertising as a mediated text embodies the uncertainty that surrounds immigrant experience. Other participants demonstrate similar modes of meaning making in an ambiguous discursive environment as they try to make sense of these symbols and codes. Note the following conversation that ensues among the participants in response to a Gap ad:

Mohit: I was trying to make a sense out of it. I couldn’t get it. Slowly, if you show me something like it again and again, I would try to find the meaning out of it.
That’s like a challenge. I liked it because of the music and the camera.
Anita: I enjoyed it. But I didn’t understand the meaning.

Once again, the conversation among the participants builds on a sense of ambiguity in the mediated environment. Mohit points out his attempt at making sense of the message. He suggests that repeated viewing of the message would be helpful in unraveling the meaning of the message and that this is a challenge to him. In other words, the ambiguity created by the cultural symbols in a different culture offers an opportunity for learning, which is like unraveling a puzzle. This sense of unraveling a puzzle or learning is central to the participants’ negotiation of cultural symbols in the host culture as they seek to assimilate, to gain acceptance by the mainstream society of the host country, and to appear less culturally alien. This observation has also been made by other scholars examining the negotiation of cultural meanings in an immigrant population (Hall, 1996).

Similar articulations are put forth by other participants in their discussion of navigating the mediated cultural space. Note the following conversation that circulates around the issue of understanding an ad, triggered by a commercial about CareerMosaic.com, an Internet recruiting company, which depicted a young White woman breaking free from her office and running into the street:

Amit: Not only that. Understanding something gives you a high. Wow, I have understood it. That feeling—it is like understanding a clever joke.
Anita: That way I am dumb. I cannot understand beforehand . . . I was looking more at the picture. I enjoyed the whole thing though I could not understand what it was trying to say. I liked it because I enjoyed the visual stuff.

For Amit, the sense of understanding a message in the host culture gives him a high. He discusses the feeling of victory and the feeling of having figured something out in the new culture. Note that the ability to figure out the symbols
of the host culture is central to diasporic identities as diaspora members constantly negotiate the pressure for cultural assimilation. Amit compares understanding a mediated message in the new culture to understanding a clever joke. Also note the reference Anita makes to her lack of understanding the message. The discourse that gets shaped here is one of figuring out a puzzle or playing a challenging cognitive game. A similar sense of satisfaction derived from understanding a message also surfaced in the following conversation:

Rakesh: I liked it [a Miller Lite commercial]. First, because of the language. The message was conveyed in English, which I understand. It was simplified, taken from very common, palpable kind of source in life. These are the things that appeal to me.
Ritu: Like Amit, every time you get a smart joke, smart ad, you feel good about yourself. So to that extent, I felt the same—that I got the joke.

Note once again that the discussion moves around the sense of understanding the cultural artifacts in the host culture. Rakesh explains his liking for the ad because he could understand the message that was conveyed in English. The ability to understand something in English (the language spoken in the host culture) is discussed as a positive end state and a marker of assimilation; participants often point out the joy they feel after figuring out a message in the new culture. This excitement at figuring out the communicative symbols of the host culture is reflective of the hybrid nature of diasporic identity; the lack of historical context exists simultaneously with the desire to unravel the symbols and make sense of them. The excitement is perhaps also reflective of the eagerness among members of this diasporic population to assimilate, to gain acceptance by mainstream society, or to be perceived as less culturally alien. Ritu once again draws a comparison between understanding a smart joke and figuring out an ad. The experience of figuring out the ad is much like the experience of “getting a joke.” Angshu, another participant, refers to his experience of viewing the ad as “unraveling a mystery.” What these narratives highlight is the cognitive experience of meaning making in an ambiguous environment and the fluidity of diasporic identity associated with this ambiguity. The ambiguity generated by the newness and unfamiliarity of the cultural symbols and artifacts in the host culture creates a cognitively challenging scenario. Much of the immigrant experience in a host culture is predicated on the ability to survive and overcome this challenge. This ability gives a sense of victory, perhaps reflecting the diaspora members’ desire to assimilate and be accepted by the mainstream society.

As articulated earlier, the participants’ sense of ambiguity in relation to the commercials brought forth the fluidity of their diasporic existence, and it is within this context of fluidity that the participants referred to their home culture, perhaps to gain a sense of being anchored. In addition to discussing the
ambiguity in advertising and the challenge of figuring out the “new,” the participants also discussed their memories of “back home.” The ads offered a discursive space to reflect on their experiences of back home. The sense of ambiguity creates a context where references to symbols and artifacts from home provide a stable anchor to the fluidity that is inherent in diasporic identity. The references to experiences from home generate a sense of belonging and familiarity in an otherwise fluid discursive space. Hall (1995) also discusses the relationship between diasporic translation and tradition, arguing that diaspora members’ sense of fluidity and ambiguity nurtures their memories of the home and motivates their construction of “home cultures.”

Memories of Home

As the participants navigated the mediated environment, they often drew comparisons to messages back home. The references to home provided a location for an otherwise fluid identity juxtaposed with the backdrops of uncertainty and ambiguity. The cultural relics and artifacts of home served as referential points for meaning making among the cultural participants, giving them a sense of stability; the participants drew from their memories of the past and reflected on their constructions of meanings back home to negotiate the complicated, hybrid discursive space of the present. Their reference to their experiences of home is evident in the following discussion among the participants about an Amstel Light ad:

Ritu: But it doesn’t remind me of beer ads back home. Beer ads [in the United States] are sort of . . . they are talking about stronger and stronger . . . they are talking about product values. Like, it [the U.S. ad] is talking about “light.” To that extent there is some similarity. Alcohol advertising back home is very much image-driven advertising. They talk about different places. Kingfisher is very Caribbean mood.
Anita: Much more romantic.

Ritu draws a comparison to beer ads back home and suggests that the beer commercial she just saw is very different from beer commercials back home. The commercial reminded her of Kingfisher (a brand of beer in India) ads. Anita builds on Ritu’s reference to the Kingfisher ads and points out that these ads back home were much more romantic. In this domain, advertising (specifically the beer ad) creates the context for referring to ads from home. Similar references were made by Reena to a specific genre of ads shown in India in her response to an American ad depicting price comparisons of two brands: “I used to find those ads horrible. Horribly boring. Back home. Immediately I remembered those ads and lost interest in this [American] ad.” In this case, viewing an ad in the host culture brought back memories of the “boring” deter-
gent ads in India. This link is made more explicit in the following statement: “I found it [this American ad] even more boring because I immediately associated it with the detergent ads in India.” The memories of her response to detergent ads in the home culture served as a fulcrum for the negotiation of ads in the host culture. Swarup further states, “You know, when we are reminded of the ads back home, we are not excited with those ads.” In this instance, although references to ads back home provide a point of entry for navigating ads in the host culture, memories of home ads take away the excitement of exploring new commercials in the host culture.

It is also important to note the articulation of similarities and differences within the discursive space. Home and host cultures coexist in a comparative space, where the participants continuously navigate between these spaces and often construct their identities through them as they draw meanings from both of these spaces in making sense of their mediated consumption of advertising. The discussion of differences interpenetrates the discussion of similarities; similarities and differences coexist in a space of simultaneity. In other words, participants navigate between the two cultures through their articulations of similarities and differences between the cultures, thus locating their interpretation of advertising in the host culture in the realm of experiences of home. The participants’ flow of consciousness between home and host cultures helps them locate and identify the meanings and artifacts of the host culture in a seamless space marked by the interlocking meanings and symbols from both home and host cultures. Ajanta compares her experience of the present (in the host culture) with the ads back home:

I think what Amit is saying about Mile Sur Hamara Tumhara [a public service announcement about national unity] is very relevant about ads back home. They are very emotional. And emotional ads attract us because we are, by nature, high-strung, emotional people. Again this is stereotyping. But I feel we are more emotionally charged, and you can fool around with our emotions much more than with people in this part of the world. And that’s the reflection of the ads. The ads like Mile Sur . . . I don’t see these kinds of ads . . . little things about a small boy . . . like “Ami to emni emni khai” (I eat like this), some thing that tugs at your little heart string affects us a lot. I don’t know whether it is stereotyping. But I see less of that in ads over here. I see more of that in ads in India.

Ajanta draws a comparison between the home and host cultures. She reflects on her experience with advertising back home to point out that the ads there are a lot more “emotional,” and she suggests that this perhaps has something to do with the fact that Bengalis are emotional people. Note that advertising in the host culture creates a contextual reference point for her to construct the identity of Bengalis as emotional people whose emotions can be “fool[ed] around with,” compared to people in the host culture, whom she refers to as
“people in this part of the world.” She goes on to suggest that there is a lesser number of these emotionally charged ads in the U.S. Similar articulation of differences between the emotional nature of Indian ads and the cognitive nature of U.S. ads is made by Pratik:

Mainly I can say, um, there [in India] the subject matter is a kind of a celebration kind of thing . . . so when you take beer, that means it’s celebration time . . . there is nothing to think about or ponder about. Just forget everything . . . drink beer and make merry kind of a thing. But here [in the United States] whenever you see an ad it is some kind of a food for thought.

He draws out the difference in context within which a particular product is consumed between the home and the host cultures, which perhaps plays a role in the ways in which the message is created. He suggests that the messages back home emphasize the emotions and feelings that come along within the larger context of consuming a product. For instance, the consumption of beer is located within the frame of celebration. However, advertising in the United States, according to him, is a lot more cognitive and is often positioned as “food for thought.” The constant process of shifting between cultures is also evident in the following conversation among the participants as they reflect on their feelings and emotions in response to an ad for Guinness beer:

Aparna: It talks about much more lifestyle. More lifestyle ads than product-driven kind of stuff . . . But I don’t think that’s what’s happening in India or was happening in India 5 years ago. Right now I have no clue. I haven’t seen beer ads for quite some time. Are beer ads still not allowed on television?
Rupa: In India? You cannot show?
Monojit: You can show water.
Aparna: For Kingfisher you see Kingfisher tonic water.
Monojit: In India, I can only think of the Kingfisher beer ads. The Caribbean theme.
Rupa: That was a nice ad. Every time you came under that thing, you became a different person.

Note that the participants are attempting to locate their experience of watching the U.S. ads in the backdrop of the experience with advertising back home. This leads to the discussion of television advertising for beer in India. The beer ad the participants observed provide the context for discussing the ads for a particular brand of Indian beer, Kingfisher. Rupa remembers the ad and comments about the feelings generated by the ad. The reflections on advertising back home provide the referential point for meaning making in the immigrant community. In addition, it is within the context of disjuncture—which brings forth the dislocated nature of immigrant identity in the ambiguous communicative environment of the host culture—that participants seem to romanticize their experiences with advertising back home. In other words, memories of
home not only serve as stable sources of meaning, but as markers of a sense of belonging.

Also worth noting is Aparna’s articulation of the dynamic space of culture back home. Although she can comment on what was happening in India 5 years ago, she does not have a clue about the cultural scenario right now. Inherent in this articulation is the dynamic nature of the cultural space—the understanding that the culture back home would have changed in the past 5 years. An important component of the immigrant experience is the continual change in the home culture since one’s departure, and this change often contributes to the dislocated nature of immigrant experience. There remains a point of disjuncture between the memories of home back then (before one left the country) and the experience of home right now. India and its media culture is not the same as it used to be when one left home for the United States. This sense of change in the cultural environment of the home space is evident in the following conversation where the participants discuss a McDonald’s ad depicting a boy in a dream sequence with scantily clad women. The conversation starts with the following comment made by one of the participants:

I was actually comparing it with India. I was thinking whether the dream sequence would have been the same had it been in India. Boy of that age, girl skimpily clad . . . yeah, we see these kinds of ads in India now.

In response, the following exchange ensued:

Prakriti: I can’t remember the product. But already these kinds of ads [referring to the U.S. ad] are . . .
Abhay: Yeah.
Bijoy: The songs they show on MTV . . .
Everybody: Oh yeah . . .
Bijoy: They are worse than this.
Abhay: The bhangra [a music and dance form from the state of Punjab in India] popularity and this kind of thing . . . You call that reggae or something . . .
Bijoy: Rap.
Prakriti: Rap.
Abhay: Yeah, rap . . . So this is quite common . . . It will sell in India I should say.

The discussion points out that although this type of ad (reflecting an MTV lifestyle) would not have been a part of the mediated cultural space in India in the past, it is prevalent in the Indian mediated space today. Note the comparative frame that locates “now” in the backdrop of “then.” Once again, inherent in the discussion is the notion of change. As Prakriti points out, these types of ads have inundated the Indian media space. They refer to “the songs on MTV” and point out that the depictions in the music videos are worse than the commercial they just saw. The participants further refer to the widespread diffusion
of rap on Indian television. In summary, this section highlights the anchoring of immigrant discourse in memories of home, especially in sociocultural contexts where the displacement of immigrant identity is particularly brought to surface in the experiences of ambiguity in the host culture (Hall, 1994, 1996). In addition, it articulates the ways in which immigrants romanticize memories of home to feel a sense of belonging in the context of the displacement that is central to immigrant experience.

Discussion

Drawing on the notion of hybridity, this project examines the construction of meanings of U.S. advertising among an immigrant Bengali community. The focus groups demonstrate the continuous flow of meanings in a hybrid space, where they live between home and host cultures. The discursive spaces of the ads offer points of identification and negotiation for the participants, which reiterates the articulations of identity as being constituted within representation (Hall, 1994). As suggested by Hall (1994), identities are constructed within discourses, produced in “specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies” (p. 4). In the context of the Bengali narratives, the discursive spaces of the ads provide the context for the construction and articulation of identity. In other words, the participants locate their identities within the discursive spaces of the ads they saw, drawing references from the ads to locate themselves. In narrating their experiences of negotiating ads in the host culture, the participants discuss their sense of ambiguity in interpreting the symbols and messages of the new cultural space. This ambiguity is an important component of the immigrant experience (Hall, 1994, 1995, 1996). Reiterating the ambiguous nature of immigrant identity, Hall (1996) articulates that identification is ambivalent from the very start. The cultural symbols and scripts that are reflected in the mediated space of the host culture are new to the immigrants. They draw on their schema of cultural symbols and codes to make sense of the ads.

Highlighting their sense of ambiguity in negotiating the meanings of the ads, the participants compared their experiences to the process of solving a puzzle or a mystery. They reflected on this process as a way of learning a new culture. Therefore, the experience of uncovering a set of meanings and deciphering an ad brought joy and excitement to the participants. They articulated that this was part of the learning process in the host culture. This sense of excitement was perhaps reflective of their desire to assimilate with the host culture and to gain acceptance by mainstream society. It is important to note that the process of coming to terms with the communicative symbols in the
host culture is central to the assimilation and cultural negotiation of
immigrants as individuals and communities.

The focus groups also brought out the multiplicity of meanings and the par-
ticipants’ experiences of living in an interstitial space between the host and the
home cultures. The participants shifted back and forth between the two cul-
tures to make sense of the ads, demonstrating the fluidity of the interstitial cul-
The consumption of U.S. ads evoked their comparisons of these ads with ads
back home. The participants drew on their memories of the home culture to
discuss the similarities and differences in advertising between the two cul-
tures. For instance, they discussed that the Indian ads were more likely to be
emotional, appealing to the different aspects of human emotion, whereas the
U.S. ads were cognitive, calling for a thoughtful processing of the information
in the message. Similarly, in other instances, the participants compared the
execution of ads in different product categories. Not only did the participants’
comparisons focus on differences, but also they were about the similarities
between ads in India and ads in the United States. In this case, the memories of
home serve as an anchor for the participants’ negotiation in relation to the fluid
diasporic discursive space. Gupta and Ferguson (1992) argue that immigrants
often use their memories of place to imaginatively construct their new lived
world. Memories of home serve as the “symbolic anchors of community”
(p. 11) for displaced people.

As demonstrated above, the discussions of the ads were often located in the
realm of difference. As Hall (1996) contends, identities are constructed
through and within discursive spaces and are positioned in the realm of differ-
ence. For the Bengali participants, their identity as Bengali is constructed in
the realm of what is not. The ads provide a discursive frame for locating iden-
tity in terms of what it lacks. In negotiating the ads, the participants continu-
ously refer to the ambiguity of the ads, articulating, as outsiders, their unfamil-
ularity with the messages. The viewing of ads in this context discursively
constructs the Bengalis as “the other,” locating their sense of identity outside
mainstream culture. This dislocation motivates their search for stability,
anchored in their memories of home and in their references to advertising back
home. The disjuncture that the participants feel in interpreting the meanings of
the unfamiliar communicative artifacts nurtures their search for a stable source
of meaning that is located in their memories of home.

The findings also point out the transitive nature of culture. The participants
refer to the dynamic nature of culture, recognizing that the cultural relics and
meanings that circulated in the home culture before the participants’ departure
have shifted. This ties in with the fast pace of cultural change in global spaces.
The experience of leaving one’s home is ultimately tied in with a sense of dis-
location because things are not the same on visits back to the homeland. This
sense of dislocation is articulated in the notion of change that might have taken place back home during one’s absence from this space. The recognition of change also creates a sense of discontinuity in the participants’ articulation of their identities as they move from the home culture to the host culture. They ruminate about the MTV and the McDonald’s cultures in India, contending that things are different from what they used to be.

In referring to the process of meaning making, the study highlights a seamless web of meanings in hybrid diasporic spaces. The symbols and artifacts of the home and the host cultures are intertwined and often coexist within interpenetrating spaces. The participants often refer to both spaces in their efforts to make sense of the ads in the host culture. The relics of the home and host culture form an intricate web of meanings that shifts back and forth between these cultures, raising questions of identity that might be related to this continual process of shifting.

Note

1. The names of the participants have been changed to protect their identity.

References


*Mohan J. Dutta-Bergman is an associate professor in the Department of Communication at Purdue University, where he teaches undergraduate and graduate courses on culture and communication, health communication campaigns, cross-cultural issues in communication, and new media applications. He conducts research in the areas of culture and communication, postcolonial studies, and subaltern studies.*

*Mahuya Pal is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Communication at Purdue University. She is interested in studying the role of media in a global context.*