



Asian Indians in the U.S.

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Executive Summary

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An Attractive Market Segment



First-generation Indian Americans exhibit a number of demographic and behavioral traits that may be appealing to marketers:

Demographically:

- ❖ Young (median age of 32)
- ❖ Likely to be married, with young kids
- ❖ High purchasing power and potential for more:
 - Median annual household income of \$85 K
 - Highly educated
 - Three-quarters employed in professional or technical occupations
 - Almost half own homes (a high number for a first-generation immigrant group)

Marketers who target first-generation Indian Americans should keep in mind that they tend to be careful consumers who:

- ❖ Shop around to find the right product and price
- ❖ Research products (particularly online) before buying
 - Though they generally like to shop around to *research* products, most don't enjoy browsing or shopping just for the fun of it.

Behaviorally:

- ❖ Tend to be willing to pay more for a brand they trust (indicating that they're potentially loyal consumers)
- ❖ Frequently ...
 - Engage in social activities, such as eating at restaurants, entertaining friends at home, going to the movies, and watching English-language movies on DVD
 - Communicate via email, IM, and international phone calls (in part, to stay connected with India)
- ❖ Compared to overall U.S., very high ownership of electronic communication and entertainment devices, including:
 - PCs/laptops/notebooks
 - Cell phones
 - Digital cameras
 - iPods/MP3 players
 - High-definition TV



The Immigrant Experience

Most came by themselves or with parents for increased professional, educational or economic opportunities.

- ❖ Those who immigrate as children experience different social processes from those who decide to come to the U.S. on their own. Most who received elementary education in the U.S. acculturate through the educational setting and personal friendships. Some mention attending very multi-cultural schools, others comment on difficulty stemming from their unique background. Many experienced the shift from being the *geeky Indian* to being part of a cool subculture with the rising pop culture attraction to all things Indian.
- ❖ Many women found the experience liberating, because America is a land of equal opportunity offering more choices for women.

Challenges:

- ❖ Some experience the push/pull of acculturation against conservative parents who wanted them to be more Indian and were upset at them being too American.
- ❖ For many, becoming a resident and then a citizen was perceived as a battle or logistical nightmare.
- ❖ Some have experienced difficulty finding jobs due to the sliding economy.
- ❖ Navigating in America's *individualist* culture – some feel the de-emphasis on friends and family makes the transition tough.
- ❖ Many respondents mention that they miss the community bonding and family values in India. Here people only talk to people they know, but in India you talk to everyone.
- ❖ Some of what respondents miss about India has changed, so what they really miss does not exist any more.

Do not identify with Asian classification

Asian Indian immigrants don't identify with being called Asian and resort to that only on government forms.

- ❖ Some felt that the Asian classification was negative, an attempt to lump Asian Indians in with the rest of Asia when they have a distinct, rich culture that should stand by itself.
- ❖ First-generation Asian Indians identify themselves as Indians.
- ❖ Generation 1.5 have dual identities and balance them according to situation and context.
- ❖ For some, their identity changes according to whom they date.
- ❖ Many mention that although they may emphasize the American part of their identities, they engage in a balancing act of identity to please their conservative parents. Others confessed having major clashes with the conservative older generation.
- ❖ Almost all return to their Indian roots more in adulthood, when they realize the uniqueness of their Indian heritage.
- ❖ When asked as to which country they consider home, some said India, but most said the U.S., even though they miss their home country.

Stereotypes are not all bad

- ❖ Many communicated that they suffered from the common western stereotype that most Indians are engineers who as a community cannot speak English well.
- ❖ Others felt portrayed as having a different lifestyle and being unclean.
- ❖ Overall, Asian Indians felt some discrimination as a repercussion of 9/11 safety measures and profiling. One respondent mentioned that he got checked at the airport all of the time due to his skin color. In general, respondents understood the reasoning behind this and did not seem upset by the generalizing.
- ❖ Most who mentioned having difficulty with the stereotypes growing up acknowledge that being Indian is cool now.
- ❖ Respondents like that Indians are perceived as smart and hardworking and mentioned advantageous to having a positive stereotype.



Rapid Acculturation



Though relatively new to the U.S., first-generation Indian Americans show many signs of advanced acculturation:

- ❖ They are generally proud of their heritage, but consider themselves to be both Indian and American (despite having lived in the U.S. for an average of only about one-third of their life).
- ❖ Most express interest in enjoying Indian food, music, and entertainment and in preserving their native language (the latter, a means of staying connected with family and friends back in India). However, they tend to ascribe less importance to retaining other aspects of their culture, such as traditional clothing, vegetarianism, arranged marriages, and religious holidays and rituals.

Despite their fairly recent arrival, first-generation Indian Americans appear to be quite comfortable with life in the U.S.:

- The majority indicate that they're comfortable with non-Indians and feel completely at home.
- Most believe they're valued in the workplace, treated well in American culture, and portrayed positively by U.S. media.
- A high number feel welcome in stores and are willing to shop retailers that aren't close to home or that don't speak their native language.
- They tend to make purchase decisions independently (without relying on recommendations from family or friends) and are receptive to American brands, including those that aren't well known.
- They're likely to use media in English, and with American content (not surprising given their proficiency in English and the greater availability of those media, relative to Indian-language vehicles).

Taken as a whole, the above findings are indicative of the high extent to which first-generation Indian Americans have been able to adjust to life in the U.S. and become comfortable there. Their ability to adjust may have been facilitated by their:

- Use of English and exposure to other aspects of Western society while in India, a country with strong historical ties to Britain. (Language proficiency and cultural exposure have been major obstacles for many first-generation immigrants of other ethnicities.)
- Valued workplace skills (which may lead to a feeling of self-esteem and contribute to their overall comfort with both non-Indians and life in the U.S.)
- High education and income (which generally make life easier)



American Identity



- ❖ Many feel American, yet this identity is not without conflict, since the world does not see them as American, and they too retain strong ties with India, and appreciate their Indian roots (especially now that being Indian is *cool*).
- ❖ Some who identified themselves as being American mentioned having more non-Indian friends.
- ❖ Others felt they were very much Indian at heart and will always be.
- ❖ Generally younger participants and those who immigrated as children felt more American. Although a few mentioned the significance of the country that provides one's livelihood and expressed loyalty to the U.S. on that basis.
- ❖ Some women point out the chauvinism in India that makes them more apt to identify themselves as American.

- ❖ **Respondents value the spirit of American individualism** as unlike India, it does not hold one back, and is generally a global trend. That value, according to many, brings about progress.
- ❖ In the U.S., **Asian Indians appear to embrace open mindedness** and are more accepting of liberal lifestyles.
- ❖ Many mention gaining their American side through school and friends and later clashing with the conservative, older generation.
- ❖ A few felt that what it is to be American cannot be easily defined, because it is so diverse. It's the values that stand out as American, particularly the focus on self determination.
- ❖ Perhaps because of the diversity, perhaps because we spoke with respondents in multicultural Los Angeles, respondents generally felt that it was easy to fit in and didn't feel uncomfortable in the U.S.
- ❖ Another reason for the smooth transition for most respondents is their English dominance. All respondents use English as their primary language and identify that they feel most themselves when speaking English.
- ❖ Many respondents speak multiple languages and feel that it makes them retain their connection to Indian culture. Although they're most comfortable with English, they'd like to pass these other languages to the next generation – it is part of the culture that they wish to preserve.

MEDIA CHOICES SHOW ASIAN INDIANS FAVOR DIVERSITY

- Indian and western music, including jazz and blues
- Bollywood and Hollywood movies
- Indian commercials. Enjoy humor in commercials
- Watch news at CNN, ZEN TV
- Read LA Times, India Abroad and other Indian print
- Listen to NPR
- Increase Indian media consumption during family visits
- Drawn to Indian faces in mainstream media (such as Verizon commercial)
- Like multi-racial casts
- Would prefer marketers to not single out Indians.
- Younger participants go online for news and keep track of Asian Indian Media



- ❖ Although deeply rooted in family and community, Asian Indians in the U.S. are diverting from traditional family units living together and broaden their definition of community to include non-Asian Indian friends.
- ❖ Community is described as food, family and friends, including relatives from India as well as friends in the U.S. One example of new, but deep community bond is through a college fraternity.
- ❖ When asked if they were living with family or separately, respondents had mixed reactions. Most wanted their parents to live close, but not with them. Yet, the value of taking care of the elders in the family was prevalent among all participants – some communicated that they will feel guilty if they did not take care of their parents.
- ❖ Some described that they did feel the pressure of family expectations, such as to get married at a certain marriageable age, and such expectations of the Indian community create friction and tension in the household.
- ❖ They seem ok with the concept of arranged marriages, because most of the marriages in the family have been such and nobody has been divorced, even though half are happy and half are not. Decision making in the family is mostly made jointly by both partners, and the traditional pattern of male dominance was not visible.
- ❖ Respondents with family primarily still in India feel a strong divide between the two realities. Although they maintain strong familial loyalty, lifestyle differences can create wedges in these relationships.

Religion is more spiritual than traditional

- ❖ Respondents generally viewed themselves as being more spiritual than traditionally religious. Their religious beliefs seemed to be based on a sense of global religion, solid faith in divinity and good conduct.
- ❖ Many believe in keeping a positive attitude and in karma or causation, yet at the same time feel in control of their life/actions and destiny. Others simply believe in fate.
- ❖ A few participants emphasized faith in an overall universal belief system, rather than strict adherence to religious guidelines. They consider themselves spiritual rather than religious – and the part of the religion that they indulge most in is the cultural aspect, not religion itself. The participants displayed a mixed level of interest in politics.
- ❖ Few practice according to a religious book or attend religious services regularly.
- ❖ They all believe in core religious/spiritual values, such as truth, doing good actions, belief in God, and helping people in need, which they consider to be global values.
- ❖ Though they believe in karma and reincarnation – they seem to have fun with other traditional Indian superstitions rather than believing in them seriously.
- ❖ Many simply expressed that everything happens for a reason.



- ❖ Growing up, some were completely comfortable inviting their friends over, others felt constrained by their conservative parents.
- ❖ Many enjoy traditional Indian weddings and cultural festivities, mentioning that they miss the level of celebration more common in India.
- ❖ Community festivals are very important for some respondents. Others participated with less involvement, but still acknowledged that these activities mean something to them.
- ❖ Older participants seemed to prefer traditional wedding ceremonies and enjoyed a blending with western styles. Younger ones found it cool to go back India to have the traditional wedding for 4 days, but are fine with 100% American weddings too.
- ❖ Nearly all participants appeared to value travel, interested in culture, history and exploration.
- ❖ For vacation ideas, the older generation who came here as adults still prefer to go with family to places of historical interest, while younger respondents were more sporty and adventurous.
- ❖ Participants mentioned adventurous destinations and activities to immerse in different cultures and try new things while travelling.
- ❖ When it came to relationships, generation 1.5 seems to be completely Americanized in their outlook, some stated having never dated Indian women and others stated that religion or race never made a difference.
- ❖ Younger respondents seem completely acculturated to the Western lifestyle.
- ❖ Almost all respondents expressed complete openness to inter-racial marriages, including the first generation participants who feel that India in some ways is exceedingly modern anyway. Even for a single woman participant, who lives amidst a diverse Indian family, dating across ethnicity is not an issue.
- ❖ Older generation respondents did mention that inter-racial marriages create more challenges, because it can be difficult to adjust to other cultures or the blending of cultures. Some thought it would take time and patience to learn the nuances of another culture.
- ❖ The topic of same sex marriages evoked mixed opinions – most seem to be accepting of the trend and generally liberal, some having gay friends in their circle, yet some participants did not feel extremely comfortable with the discussion. Generally respondents agree that people should be able to do what they choose.

Family is a top priority of first-generation Indian Americans, and appears to be a factor that motivates them to set and fulfill financial goals:

- The importance they ascribe to family is reflected in:
 - A very strong desire to provide a college education for their kids (in our experience, a desire that may also be tied to the notion that education brings honor, which runs deep in Indian culture)
 - A belief that it's their responsibility to care for their elderly parents
 - Their efforts to keep in touch with family in India (and maintain their native language in order to do so)
- They are indeed motivated by financial aspirations:
 - Most came to the U.S. to pursue employment or educational opportunities.
 - They place high importance on job stability, financial independence, and saving for their future.



Food: Culture, Tradition, Taste and Health



- ❖ All Asian Indian participants relish Indian cuisine and have it often. They go home for home-cooked food and like the attention on organic produce.
- ❖ Most consume both Indian and American food, though when living with family, the consumption of traditional Indian food increases.
- ❖ Most prefer fresh foods, and home cooking, as one has more control over knowing how and who made it.
- ❖ Many praise the availability of Indian ingredients and prepared or frozen foods at American supermarkets, including Trader Joe's.
- ❖ Many link food to wellness, which includes having clean food and water, avoiding junk food and choosing organic food.
- ❖ In general, they blamed the media for promoting junk foods.
- ❖ Most have Indian food every day and go often to Artesia (Little India) for grocery shopping.

Health

- ❖ Respondents' concepts of health and wellness include notions of balance, moderation, use of herbs and natural medicine. While some may prefer Western medicine, most agree that a balanced approach naturally creates a more healthful environment.
- ❖ Activities believed to promote wellness included taking nature walks and relaxing...most trust and use Western medicine.
- ❖ Some health care approaches include many non-physical components, including music and attitude.≈



Pragmatic Shoppers Looking for Representation



- ❖ Respondent shopping preferences include grocery shopping (Trader Joe's), getting something to eat, buying music/entertainment, Indian outfits, gas, taking people to drink and clothes/shoe shopping.
- ❖ Special interest items also top the shopping lists, e.g., Gibson guitar.
- ❖ Brand loyalty does not appear high with this group, unless a very personal connection is made with the brand. Some brand preferences include Levis, Target, Abercrombie, Nissan and Toyota.
- ❖ Shopping is driven more by pragmatic concerns than by aspiration.
- ❖ The group values investing money in books, travel, cars, real estate, E-trade and Waterhouse.
- ❖ Some prefer to save half and spend the other half in clothing, accessories, and travel.
- ❖ Quality is always more important than brand name.

Messaging

- ❖ Respondents felt that corporate America should know the intricacies of Indian culture to avoid resorting to over generalization or stereotypes.
- ❖ Some suggested that marketers should learn more about the Indian audience, what the audience likes to do before marketing to them. One respondent felt that Indian people are the most loyal people, and loyal to the country where they live. We'd like to give back if we are treated well.
- ❖ Include anti-stereotype, smart, more Americanized Indians rather than hardcore traditional Indians.
- ❖ Overall, Asian Indians want to see more Indian faces in mainstream media.



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