

# Cultural Communication Exchanges: A Survey of the Portrayal of Cultural Roles & Differences Using Film and Television

## Introduction

The creative space humans occupy gives rise to an abundance of content in a variety of mediums. Among the most prevalent and impactful mediums are both film and television. Their impact stems largely from their ability to convey an abundance of information on both the subconscious and conscious levels to a potentially unlimited audience size. The results of the impact have been mixed in efficacy, concerning the notion of promoting accurate and meaningful cultural representation and communication over the last century.

Beginning in film, and continuing to include television, the genres of creative material have snowballed to such an abundance of content that almost every culture and type of person grouping has been portrayed through the product of content creators. Sometimes this is to the detriment of a particular culture; and so to the intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding between cultures. Other times the opposite can occur. And of course, examples are rife in the 'gray' area as well, where perhaps both or none of the previously mentioned effects are present.

However, one thing is certain. Students of culture can find within the boundaries of many content artifacts ways to illuminate the reality status of intercultural communication by an examination of constructed stereotypes in individual television shows and films. These stereotypes can be broken down into sub-genres of stereotypes relating to age, religion, race, etc. In an honest reflection of what is contained and portrayed within the body of American creative culture, one can view its intercultural relationship among groups, and also other cultures.

## Purpose

The original impetus for this survey arose out of a controversy surrounding the character of 'Apu' from the long-time television series *The Simpsons*. The specific aspects and details of that situation will be dealt with later in this survey, however, it is important to mention now, the events concerning the raising of the issue in American culture are key and serve as a sort of parallax to get a slight peripheral; of a culture changing vis-à-vis impacting and merging with another unique culture. This merging will be explored using a cultural model reflective of Geert

Hofstede's dimensional model of human culture, following a brief review of those concepts for the reader.

The literature survey will then begin from a high-level perspective with aim to solidify the existing literature's support of using film and television to identify stereotypes in the content and also to then assess impacts on strands of intercultural relationships via the static created perceptions they contain, which for better or worse are then distributed to their respective audience members.

The survey will then concern itself with more nuanced specificities and analysis concerning stereotypes created and portrayed in *The Simpsons*. The specific details of the issues surrounding the character 'Apu' from *The Simpsons* will be examined and analyzed in this portion of the survey.

Finally, the uniquely American idea of Free Speech rights in terms of content creation will be compared next to the mined consequences of the examination previously done, and conclusions as to the path of treading culture in light of these truths will be cautiously put forth.

## Geert Hofstede's Definition of Culture

Geert Hofstede's work is of enormous importance to how culture and its structures are viewed in the present time. His definition surrounds the concept enough that those who study it using his framework can get a good grip on the relationship between the object of study and an appropriate cultural model. Please see the definition and figure below for a brief review of Hofstede's thoughts on the role of culture in human society.

*"Culture is learned, not innate. It derives from one's social environment rather than from one's genes. Culture should be distinguished from human nature on one side and from an individual's personality on the other (See Figure 1.1), although exactly where the borders lie between culture and personality, is a matter of discussion among social scientists."* (Hofstede, 2010)

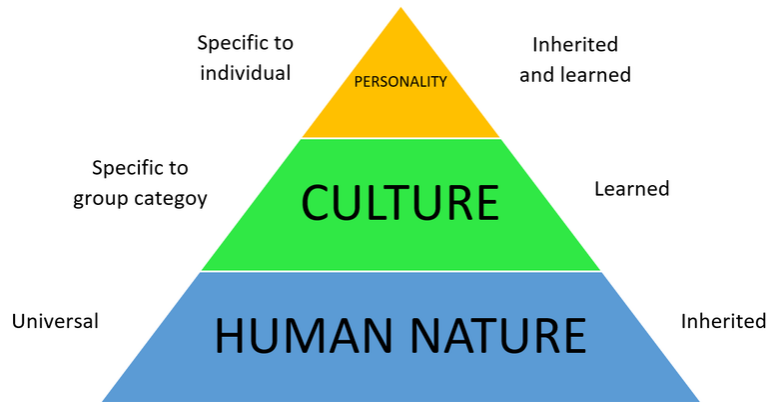


Figure 1.1

*\*Image from Wikimedia*

One key piece of information contained in the definition of culture put forth by Hofstede is the fact that the domain of social scientists lies in the space where both personality and human nature itself grind against the fabric of each culture, though opposite and independent of each other. This aspect of the definition has informed the portion of this survey which relies on the observation of such social scientists and other students of culture which have published material in favor of this survey's thesis: that film and television are great tools for uncovering stereotypes in a given culture, and that the content of these mediums can provide students of intercultural communication with valuable insights.

## Geert Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

Hofstede's framework of viewing culture through six dimensions is essential to this survey, as from this baseline, a cultural model was adapted for the analysis at hand. Please see the below definitions for a review of each dimension.

**Individualism vs. Collectivism** in a culture refers to the expectations of an individual attitude toward their ultimate responsibility toward the group as a whole.

**Indulgence** is a measure of individuals' ability to restrain themselves from their desires. In the content marketplace, this cultural trend will feed into how often people consume, in what quantity, and of course their expectations.

**Masculinity vs. Femininity** represents a culture's attitude toward values typically associated with gender binaries.

**Power Distance** represents the dimension in which a culture considers and responds typically to the power inequalities that inevitably rise in human organization.

**Time Orientation** is culture's perception of an individual's relationship to the progression of history through time.

**Uncertainty Avoidance** is concerned with a culture's attitude toward and "response to unknown situations." (Hoft, 1995)

*\*Definitions derived from the Website of Geert Hofstede and slightly modified as put forth in the Marketing Assignment.*

## Refining the Hofstede Cultural Model

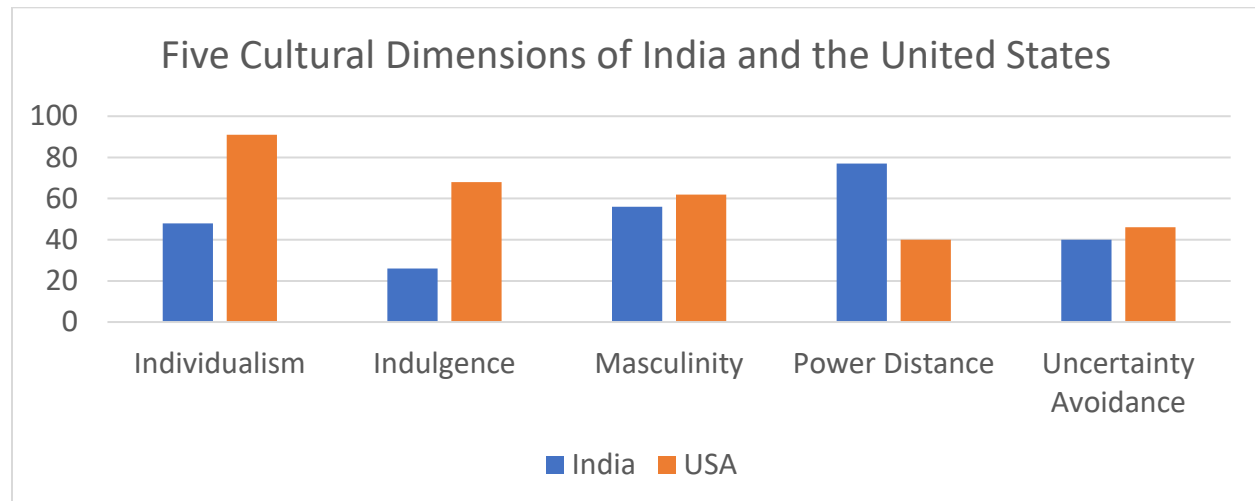
Due to this survey primarily focusing on cultural artifacts born of film and television, this cultural model, though comprised of Hofstede's dimensions, ultimately relies more on international variables which are subjective, specifically; value systems, behavior systems, and intellectual systems in the form of stereotypes distilled from film and television content, as well as the response to these stereotypes in social scientific literature. This also includes consideration of cultural attitude toward authority, which although has unique characteristics, often coincides with dimensions of Hofstede's cultural model. (Hoft, 1995)

For the analysis Hofstede's five dimensions were used since they've been demonstrated to be the components of the most widely used cultural model in published literature concerning studies of cultures. It has also been proven successful in evaluating cultural values in both television and print media advertising. (Moura, F., et al., 2015)

Granted the analysis is made based on the observation of film and television content, the model is still solid ground in that films and television programs are sponsored. The values contained can thus be considered normative to a cultural value system based on the support from advertisers and production companies.

The time orientation value is excluded from this analysis because it primarily focused on content stemming from an action-drama series and an animated show in which the dimension of time is essentially absent. In the realm of *The Simpsons*, time passage does not affect the characters in a true linear fashion. Events occur and the universe they occupy essentially resets for each episode.

## Comparison of Cultural Dimensions of India and the United States



*\*The Website of Hofstede Insights. Country Comparison Tool.*

## How the Formation of a Personality from Two Cultures Can Create Capacity for Cultural Change: Enter Hari Kondabolu

Hari Kondabolu's documentary demonstrates an under-the-hood type view of cultural change. It is important to note here that while Kondabolu has certainly continued and been successful bringing forth the conversation concerning Apu into popular American culture, he by no means is the first to notice stereotypes concerning Apu or other characters.

But the parallax hinting at cultural meld mentioned earlier lies within his personality, in which one finds a microcosm of both American and Indian culture, and perhaps the very reason for his success in helping this cultural dialogue breach the resistance and marginalization it has encountered in the past. Not that it does not still encounter resistance, which will be addressed later, but the stage has never been occupied so front and center as it has by this topic following Kondabolu's documentary.

This can be accounted for using the above mentioned refined cultural model based on Hofstede's work. Each applicable dimension will be examined and analyzed for its influence on this cultural merge acting as catalyst for a change in American cultural attitudes perceptible in this case.

Hari Kondabolu is both American and descendent of Indian parents. So culturally speaking, he is Indian in that he was raised by Indian immigrants, learning Indian culture, and yet he is starkly

American by birth and in that his environment provided more cultural programming for his absorption beyond his parents' influence.

It seems the blending of these cultures worked to the advantage of his documentary. The success of its message cannot be simply chalked up to his minor fame as a peripheral comedian, but rather resides in his American cultural perspectives leading the way to help bring equality and respect to his Indian roots. Please see the table below.

Cultural Dimension	American Influence	Indian Influence
<i>Individualism</i>	This is a dimension much higher (more individualistic) in the U.S. than in India, which seems to lend itself to the willingness to really drive this issue of Indian stereotypes to the forefront of current American cultural dialogues.	
<i>Indulgence</i>	Intertwined with <i>Individualism</i> this dimension seems to also spur on the desire for those with Indian cultural roots to be more unrelenting in helping to open a dialogue and stamp out oppressive and racist tropes within the mediums of American film and television.	
<i>Masculinity</i>	Here there seems to be an equal influence due to similarities across cultures. Both American culture and Indian culture fall on about the same values. Based on the literature, Kondabolu's message is perhaps more successful in that the call to change tends toward the masculine attitude of force. His message contains no element of compromise, but	Here there seems to be an equal influence due to similarities across cultures. Both American culture and Indian culture fall on about the same values. Based on the literature, Kondabolu's message is perhaps more successful in that the call to change tends toward the masculine attitude of force. His message contains no element of compromise, but

	rather an issuing of a callout of American cultural artifacts.	rather an issuing of a callout of American cultural artifacts.
<i>Power Distance</i>	Here, Americans are much less accepting as a culture of the distance between perceived or instated authority when compared to Indian culture. This seems to help fuel Kondabolu's willingness to buck the system, even at potential risk to his career.	
<i>Uncertainty Avoidance</i>	With this dimension American and Indian cultures find themselves in very close quarters, which may help explain why these stereotypes exist in the first place in cherished American characters, while simultaneously being tolerated.	With this dimension American and Indian cultures find themselves in very close quarters, which may help explain why these stereotypes exist in the first place in cherished American characters, while simultaneously being tolerated.

## Learning about Cross Cultural Stereotypes in Film and TV

In order to understand what gives rise to the tendency to stereotype in human beings one must first consider the human being in its necessary capacity of information intake. From a survival perspective, the more information an individual can take in, the better off one presumably is in the realm of survival of the fittest. From this standpoint "most intercultural experts cautiously consider stereotypes essential since they are ""cognitive process[ es] necessitated by our limited capacity to handle complex data."" (Dimnik & Felton, 2006)" (Cordon, P.W., 2010)

However, there comes a point at which this truth can arc away from the best interest of truth, and veer us into creating boilerplate stereotypes for groups based on contact with individuals from that group. For example, a person having contact only with racial stereotypes relayed from one's parents might lead to the conclusion of an individual projecting those stereotypes on individuals they interact with in reality. The stereotype has the capacity to change based on experiential interaction if the individual is open to modification, especially in the event some type of malicious prejudice or innate fear exists of a particular group. This tendency is referred to in literature as the *Outgroup Homogeneity Effect*. (Cardon, P.W., 2010)

The tendency for stereotypes to easily become “inaccurate, ethnocentric, and dysfunctional”, as well as their proven power to influence a culture, is precisely the reason intercultural experts advocate the use of film and television as tools to help students identify and avoid harmful stereotypes. (Cardon, P.W., 2010)

Cardon points out the following three reasons film and television achieve such success in purveying stereotypes:

*“Films and television shows are particularly influential in creating and reinforcing stereotypes for several reasons.”* (Cardon, P.W., 2010)

- *“First, they engage the audience more intensely and leave deeper impressions than other media.”* (Cardon, P.W., 2010)
- *“Second, they rely on using a few distinct traits to help the audience immediately recognize social group types.”* (Cardon, P.W., 2010)
- *“Third, they build on successful stereotypes that have been portrayed previously in film. Thus, the stereotypes become even more entrenched. This is the case for cultural groups as well as many other types of groups such as occupational groups (e.g., accountants) or religious groups (e.g., Amish) (Dimnik & Felton, 2006).”* (Cardon, P.W., 2010)

## Race and Ethnic Portrayal in Film and Television

American culture is rife with film and television artifacts which engage in cultural appropriation. The show *Walker Texas Ranger* starring Chuck Norris wandered into the territory of dangerous cultural stereotypes and appropriation by having written into episodes elements of culture which are completely made up for the sake of the show. One could be excused for a certain type of nuanced ignorance of a specific culture, but the indifference to which American culture has held to American Indian peoples is made obvious and evident in both the stereotypes and the complete lack of effort to present the cultural rituals accurately within this show. (Fitzgerald, M.R., 2013)

The creative attitude gleaned from film and television with respect to racial presentation runs one way. It involves portrayal of Anglo-American perceptions of the culture, and also appropriates what it finds useful, and on a selective basis.

*“As Edward Said points out, the colonialist trope of a white man “passing” as native was a prominent theme in Lawrence’s Seven Pillars of Wisdom (1922) as well as in Kipling’s Kim (1901).[25] In colonial encounters it is easy for talented white men to pass as—even be accepted by—natives, yet it is difficult if not impossible for a native to be accepted as white. Indeed, as Cedric Clark argued in 1969, this theme of the assimilated native having to constantly prove his loyalty by becoming an enforcer of the dominant group’s norms is nearly universal in the*



*literature and media of colonialist countries, including the United States.” (Fitzgerald, M.R., 2013).*

This sort of portrayal of stereotypes unfortunately creeps beyond visual representations, and given the nature of the media in question, by necessity includes voice acting. This is one of the primary issues Kondabolu and others have with the character ‘Apu’ from *The Simpsons*. The idea is that the “white guy (Hank Azaria) doing an impression of a white guy doing an impression of my father” (Kondabolu, 2017) contributes to pigeon-holing South Asian immigrants into permanently occupying a sub-prime or sub-equal cultural status in American culture and society. At the very least, even if equal, the portrayal is governed by American cultural interpretation via stereotype and not left at all to the influence of the culture being portrayed.

*“Ultimately, the practice of brown voice is a form of cultural inflection: a variation on cultural citizenship that reinforces a static, racialized position for South Asian Americans regardless of their status or occupation in the United States. South Asian American groups are represented as one undifferentiated group who are saddled with one accent and one voice.” (DAVÉ, S., 2013)*

## Much Apu About Nothing

The quintessential episode from *The Simpsons* concerning an articulate comic expression of the complexity of Indian immigrants in American society is called *Much Apu About Nothing*. The reason it is the perfect episode for analysis of this problem of brown voice and Indian stereotypes in America is due to the fact that it explores the issue on the surface of the episode’s content, while still most assuredly containing elements which contribute to the problem in question. The below synoptic analysis of the episode captures the essence of the above observation.

*“Apu’s transformative moment hinges on changing his vocal accent to one of an undisputed movie icon of American culture. When he says to Homer Simpson, “You are noticing the way I am talking to you now,” he emphasizes both the absence of his Indian accent and his “new” manner of speech. It is Apu’s use of an iconic American accent rather than his visual facade that causes Homer to do a physical double take because hearing a different accent come from Apu defies conventional expectations about how Apu and South Asians in the United States are supposed to talk. When he changes his accent, he changes his racialized position as a foreigner and noncitizen to a (differently racialized) citizen: “It turns out that I am an American citizen after all. Apparently, I just plumb forgot about it.” His Indian accent may allow him to live in the United States, but it does not award him the privileges of American identity that include belonging to or being associated with the American culture.” (DAVÉ, S., 2013)*

Here consumers of the content find themselves in a sticky predicament mirroring reality. On the one hand there is a kudos which deserves to be aimed at the show's writers, for taking on this uncomfortable material. The episode does diligence in highlighting the plight of Indian Americans in their attempts to participate on a level playing field in their adopted culture. Yet, quizzically, the brown voice used to purvey the issue contained in the episode is itself problematic.

## The Chaotic Zone Buffer of Comedy

In American comedy, the preservation of free speech at all costs is an ever-present aspect. Not everyone finds issue with Hank Azaria voicing Apu, so long as they feel his treatment of the character is done with respect. There is no real question as to Hank Azaria's or the creators' respect for Indian Americans, but the continuation of outdated stereotypes is problematic for both future consumers and creative participants of the show.

There is no easy way to address these issues, especially when the material is rooted in sub-par stereotypes to begin with. On the one hand, some creators, like Matt Groening, have been relatively dismissive of the criticism, blaming the outcry on ideas of the modern era, too overflowed with PC emotional catering. Though in a light of truth approaching the objective space, it seems these responses, though perhaps inappropriate, are from a place of personal defensiveness. No one wants to appear ignorant or even bigoted. And after all, Apu does have endearing qualities. He exposed Lisa to vegetarianism on his rooftop utopia with Paul and Linda McCartney in one episode. There's also the running satire of his back story. He holds a Ph.D. in Computer Science, but instead owns the Kwik-E-Mart, an overt stereotype, but also with rays of truth concerning the limited options in the past for Indian American immigrants in the American economy. But in the case of Kondabolu's objections, the show's creators seem to disagree based on their responsorial episode to the controversy entitled *No Good Read Goes Unpunished*. Please see the excerpt below.

*"On Sunday, The Simpsons baked a response to the Apu controversy into the latest episode, titled "No Good Read Goes Unpunished." In one scene, Marge Simpson is seen reading a book called The Princess in the Garden to her daughter Lisa. Though the book used to be considered problematic, it has been re-written to meet modern standards. Despite the effort, Lisa isn't impressed by the new version. "Well, what am I supposed to do?" Marge says, frustrated.*

*Lisa responds by breaking the fourth wall. "It's hard to say. Something that started decades ago, and was applauded and inoffensive, is now politically incorrect. What can you do?" she says. She then looks at her nightstand, upon which rests a framed photo of Apu, emblazoned with the caption, "Don't have a cow!" (Desta, Y., 2018)*

There are the more militant critics as well, claiming Kondabolu's concerns are outdated at best. Please see the below criticism of Kondabolu's work on Apu.

*“Kondabolu is fanning needless paranoia, perhaps from an aching grudge rooted in a time when kids actually aped voices from The Simpsons. The fact that he’s America’s tardiest social-justice warrior means his argument shouldn’t be taken seriously. But because he’s a micro-famous Indian-American comedian, he’s been empowered by the mob to try Apu before a leftist Nuremberg court that wants to execute the rebellious, politically incorrect spirit that birthed The Simpsons as a punk-rock answer to the yuppie ’80s sitcom. And a new book takes all this seriously, as something every Simpsons fan should know. Nonsense.” (Tavana, A., 2018)*

## Conclusion

Ultimately, whatever one decides to conclude about the character Apu and its repercussions, one can be assured that there are indeed stereotypes pervading everything consumed in the realm of American film and television. These can appreciate and promote a culture. They can equally be hurtful, inaccurate, even destructive to one culture’s view of another culture, or sadly, can even warp a culture’s view of itself with untrue negative connotations.

There is also an ever-present possibility for change. The cultural tendency to merge and form new and combined ways of personality programming is an agent in the process of progression. Whether the future of a certain cultural relationship dwells in understanding, good faith, and fairness is up to everyone. Students must never cease in their pursuit of understanding stereotypes and their implications, even in cherished media. Most importantly, those who might be quieted or oppressed must be heard, and where truth and right actions are needed, hopefully heeded.

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