

INDIAN AUDIENCE INTERPRETATIONS OF HEALTH-RELATED CONTENT IN *THE BOLD AND THE BEAUTIFUL*¹

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Abstract / This article explores the meanings given by Indian viewers to a series of health-related episodes dealing with 'Tony's HIV' in the Hollywood television soap opera, *The Bold and the Beautiful*. Forty-two respondents in six focus group interviews and in 17 in-depth personal interviews were asked for their interpretations of this television health content. Indian respondents interpreted the sexual explicitness and the assertiveness of female characters as characteristic of the US, but not as a part of Indian reality. The sexual openness in *The Bold and the Beautiful* 'shocked' Indian viewers, and led some to watch the episodes only in private. Indian respondents generally had positive reactions to the 'Tony's HIV' episodes, although they felt that self-disclosure of HIV/AIDS status could not happen in India, where HIV/AIDS is highly stigmatized. In general, Indian respondents felt that 'Tony's HIV' showed an ideal situation regarding HIV/AIDS, but one that was far removed from Indian reality.

Keywords / audience / health messages / India / television / *The Bold and the Beautiful*

Imported Hollywood television programs, while widely popular, are controversial in many developing countries of Latin America, Africa and Asia. Critics claim that the programs expose local populations to alien cultural influences, thereby having a negative influence on local cultures. For instance, angry crowds in India burned television sets to protest against satellite broadcasting of Hollywood television shows (*Times of India*, 2003). Anger against these television broadcasts some years previously (1999) had forced India's Minister of Information and Broadcasting, Sushma Swaraj, to halt the broadcasting of two Hollywood television shows *Bay Watch* and *Fashion Television*. However, both programs were soon back on the air.

The present research was part of a larger study intended to better understand how Indian viewers of *The Bold and the Beautiful* and *Friends* interpreted health messages that were embedded in these American television programs.¹ The present study focuses on how television audiences in India processed and gave meanings to health-related messages in the US-produced soap opera *The Bold and the Beautiful*. A series of episodes on 'Tony's HIV' were selected for study in focus group interviews and in-depth personal interviews. Specifically, we ask: (1) What meanings do Indian respondents give to messages about sexual openness, female assertiveness, concepts of female and

male beauty, social acceptance of HIV patients, and HIV treatment (anti-retroviral drugs)? and (2) What influences do these meanings have on the attitudes and behavior of our Indian respondents?

Planet Hollywood and Local Audiences

Satellite broadcasting now makes it possible for any television program to be broadcast anywhere in the world. Hollywood television programs like *The Bold and the Beautiful*, *Friends*, *Baywatch*, *NYPD Blues*, *The Practice*, *X-Files*, *Dynasty*, *Ally McBeal* and many others are now broadcast from Iceland to Fiji. Hollywood television soap operas are especially popular with worldwide audiences. For example *The Bold and the Beautiful* is broadcast in 110 nations. *The Bold and the Beautiful* has consciously incorporated health-related content in its storyline dealing with abortion, safer sex, HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention, alcoholism, date rape, teenage pregnancy and sexual abuse (Beck, 2004). When such television programs are broadcast to millions of viewers in developing nations, the health messages that they contain elicit meanings from their overseas audiences, meanings that may or may not be intended by the American producers of the television program, who mainly have a domestic audience in mind.

Hollywood television programs and films are extremely popular throughout the world: Hollywood media revenues from exports have been growing at 25 percent per year for the past 20 years, double the growth of the US economy as a whole (Olson, 1999). Each national market has its own peculiar values, beliefs and tastes, which would lead one to expect varied reactions to American media products. Past research suggests that local audiences give their own unique interpretations to Hollywood television programs. 'Whether or not these [American media] texts are transforming indigenous cultures into something American, those audiences are transforming the texts into something indigenous' (Olson, 1999: 50).

Efforts to understand the process and effects of cross-border television have engaged many communication scholars over recent decades with the increased export of Hollywood-produced television programs to developing countries. These studies analyzed the impacts of imported television on the attitudes, beliefs, values and culture of local populations. A meta-analysis of 36 research studies of cross-border effects of US television broadcasting from 1960 to 1995 by Elasmir and Hunter (2003) showed considerable effects on attitudes, values and beliefs. However, none of the 36 studies analyzed the impacts of *health-related* Hollywood television programs.

Television audiences have exploded in recent decades in Africa, Asia and Latin America. For example, the number of television viewers in India increased from 10 percent in 1984, to 25 percent in 1991, to more than 50 percent in 2000 (Singhal and Rogers, 2001; Thomas, 2003). These 600 million viewers, along with an even larger television audience in China, dwarf the size of the television audience in the US. The potential worldwide audience for American television soap operas like *The Bold and the Beautiful* today may include almost half of the world's population of 6 billion people. As the television

audience in countries like India exploded during the past decade, the audience make-up changed from mainly urban elites to include lower-income, rural people (who often have the gravest health needs).

The present investigation has a special focus on the degree to which American television programs may be destroying indigenous, traditional cultures, as many critical communication scholars (for example, Schiller, 1976, 1989) claimed. Tomlinson (1991) argued that a process of media imperialism is taking place in which media (especially television) from one nation (mainly the US) change the culture of the receiving nation. Tomlinson pointed that there is an 'American message' in the form and content of television programs and this message is perceived similarly by viewers in different countries.

Specifically, we here explore how US television programs influence indigenous values and beliefs about sexuality and gender relations in India. We seek to gain insight into the process through which audience individuals interpret the health events in Hollywood television programs, and apply them to their own life-situations. We also analyze the process through which these health issues were originally included in *The Bold and the Beautiful* by Hollywood creative personnel (including the role played by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Populations Communications International and their Soap Summits).

Interpreting Textual Transparency

Interpretive research argues that audiences often make active, empowering 'readings' of media content (Lindlof, 1987). Thus the dominant code (such as that intended by the American producers of television programs that are broadcast in other nations) may be given an oppositional meaning by the audience. Recent research conducted in light of the concept of narrative transparency generally repudiates the past conception of the media audience as a passive receptor of media messages, and instead conceives of the audience as 'active, involved, and dynamic' (Olson, 1999: 32). Transparency is defined as a 'textual apparatus that allows audiences to project their indigenous values, beliefs, and rituals into imported media' (Olson, 1999: 5). This viewpoint proposes that audiences are capable of giving a multiplicity of meanings to any particular media message, like an American-produced soap opera in an Asian country.

Early research in mass media communication focused on determining the effects of messages on media audiences. It was assumed that the media messages were a more-or-less standard stimulus delivered to all audience members, at least if they had a similar degree of exposure to the messages. In recent decades, however, the focus of mass communication research shifted in part from determining effects, to how audience individuals give meanings to media messages. Such interpretive research assumes that audience individuals are active participants in the mass communication process. Instead of seeking to understand media effects, interpretive research aims to understand the reception process through which audience individuals give meanings to media messages. Thus each individual in a mass audience might gain an idiosyncratic meaning from the same media message. 'The way people respond to the same

programs is diverse and surprising; we all bring our own experience to bear on what we see' (Thomas, 2003: 46).

Interpretive research has shown, however, that similar individuals who talk with each other about a media message tend to gain a similar meaning from such exposure. This grouping of similar individuals who discuss the same media message is called an 'interpretive community' (Lindlof, 1987).

Different Readings of Hollywood Television Programs in Different Cultures

Liebes and Katz's (1990) landmark investigation of American and others' impressions of the Hollywood television program *Dallas* illustrates the oppositional meanings given to a television program in a variety of cultures. Some 44 focus group interviews in Israel, plus 10 in Los Angeles and 11 in Japan found that Arabs in Israel saw *Dallas* as a parable of the moral degeneracy of modernism; Russian immigrants in Israel saw the television program as an exercise in the politics of capitalism; Moroccans interpreted *Dallas* as showing that wealth itself is evil; and Israeli Kibbutzniks concluded that all Americans are unhappy (Olson, 1999). *Dallas* failed to attract an audience in Japan. Compared to US audiences, Israeli viewers were particularly impressed by the tremendous wealth of the Ewing family, and by this family's disruptive interpersonal relationships, qualities that many Israeli viewers of *Dallas* attributed to all American families.

Joseph Yusuf Amali Shekwo (1984) described how his people, the Gbagyi of Nigeria, made sense of *Dallas*. This television show was very popular, but what the Gbagyi saw was not anything particularly American. Instead, J.R. Ewing, the oil magnate in *Dallas* played by Larry Hagman, was perceived by the Gbagyi as Gbagwulu, a trickster worm from Gbagyi mythology.

The Young and the Restless made a strong impact on the culture of Trinidad (Miller, 1995). This television program was extremely popular, in part because it serendipitously addressed the calypso value of *bacchanal*, which means scandal, confusion and bringing the truth to light. Thus the audience in Trinidad perceived the American soap opera as very realistic, not in the sense that the scenes looked like Trinidad, but that *The Young and the Restless* showed the realism of Trinidadian myths.

A study of Laotian refugees living in the US found that these respondents perceived American television programs and movies like *The Exorcist*, *Incredible Hulk*, *Dracula* and *Night of the Living Dead* as representations of reality, rather than as fantasy (Conquergood, 1986). The Laotians, who share a belief in spirits (*phi*), were very attracted to American supernatural program/movies on US television. In fact, the Laotian refugees wondered how Americans, who do not believe in evil spirits, could produce such fine *phi* movies!

Similarly, the Gary Coleman character on *Different Strokes* was perceived by Australian aboriginal children as one of them, an aboriginal (Hodge and Tripp, 1986). An investigation of 20 black urban viewers of *The Bold and the Beautiful* in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa by Tager (1997) found that this American television program was very popular. The author concluded:

‘Watching television is a process of making meanings and pleasures, and the freedom of the viewer to make socially pertinent meanings of television programs often intended for viewers to procure specific pre-determined meanings from what they are watching. In practice, however, this is not always the case, as the meanings people make are determined by social and cultural factors’ (Tager, 1997: 99). This notion was also stated by Barker (1999: 170): ‘Global television does not simply reproduce a dominant or hegemonic culture with its associated identities in any clear and straightforward fashion. . . . Television does not operate as a hypodermic injection of meaning [because audiences are active].’

None of the several communication researches reviewed here deal with the effects of the *health* content of Hollywood soap operas. Very little scholarly research has been directed to this particular topic, although interpretive study of the varied readings of television texts has been conducted in the US, in the UK (Livingstone, 1990) and in Brazil (Tufté, 2000, 2004).

Effects on Audiences in Latin America, Asia and Africa

Scholars from various nations have criticized the American television and film industry for exporting programs/films to developing nations (e.g. Schiller, 1989). These critics claim that, in the pursuit of profits, US media companies destroy local cultures, supplant traditional entertainment forms and promote inappropriate cultural values. In most cases, however, these critical scholars did not gather data about whether or not cultural imperialism actually occurred, or whether the imported television programs had any effects on audience individuals. US television exports continue to be enormously popular throughout the world, as explained previously. These programs contain health messages and values that presumably shape individual behavior and social norms regarding health issues. No past research has established what effects, if any, these American-produced programs have on the immense audiences that they attract in the developing nations of Latin America, Africa and Asia. Only limited past research investigated how these programs are received by overseas audiences and what meanings they evoke.

Past research related to the present investigation includes:

1. Studies of the flows of US and other television programs in Latin America (Rogers and Antola, 1986) and in Asia (Waterman and Rogers, 1994). These investigations showed that imported American television programs are gradually decreasing over time (a) in the number of hours broadcast per week, and (b) in the size of the audience they reach (as estimated by ratings data). One reason for the increasing popularity of local television fare is the improved production quality of in-country television production. Nevertheless, American television programs still dominate the export market throughout the world, with US television programs reaching a huge international audience.
2. Evaluation studies of the effects of Hollywood-produced television programs on foreign audiences. Beginning in the early 1980s, several cultivation

studies of television effects were completed in Western Europe, Australia and Canada, which dealt with US programming (e.g. Pingree and Hawkins, 1981). Cultivation analysis argues that the greater the exposure to a certain medium (such as television), the more the culture of the audience will become homogenized on values and beliefs featured in the content of that medium's messages. A few studies focused on the cultivation effects of US television programs in Asian, African and Latin American countries (Kang and Morgan, 1988; Morgan, 1990; Tan and Tan, 1987). Even fewer studies dealt with television soap operas (Allen, 1995; Ang, 1985). Most studies of this topic concentrated on violence, rather than health-related or other prosocial content (Tulloch, 2000).

3. Evaluation studies of the effects of domestically produced entertainment–education (E–E) radio and television programs (that is, programs produced in the developing country in which they are broadcast) dealing with family planning, HIV/AIDS prevention, female equality, environmental protection, etc. These studies show that these radio and television interventions for health improvement can have strong effects (Rogers et al., 1999; Singhal and Rogers, 1999; Singhal et al., 2004; Vaughan et al., 2000). The research methods used in these E–E studies can be adapted to determine the health effects of American television programs in developing nations like India. These research methods include focus group interviews, data-gathering from highly exposed audience individuals in in-depth personal interviews, content analysis and field experiments. Unlike the broadcast of Hollywood television programs in developing countries, the E–E approach utilizes formative evaluation in developing a program, so there is less clash with local cultural values and beliefs (Singhal et al., 2004).

Viewership of Soap Operas in India

Until 1991, foreign and commercial broadcasting in India was forbidden. Then with the Gulf War, a number of foreign broadcasters started beaming their programs by satellite to cable systems and thus into Indian homes. *The Bold and the Beautiful* was among the first American soap operas to be broadcast in India. It became prime-time (evening) viewing for audiences living in the major metropolitan cities in India. This American soap opera was extremely popular with middle-class viewers due to its novelty factor, as Indian audiences were unfamiliar with television content about such explicit sexual relationships.

Over the years, as Indian language programming developed, the viewership of *The Bold and the Beautiful* and other American soap operas dropped. At one time, STAR TV, which broadcast several US serials, also made an attempt to dub these programs in Hindi in order to reach a larger segment of Indian viewers. However, this effort failed to attract Indian viewers and consequently STAR TV stopped broadcasting the dubbed versions. Localization, rather than globalization, became a key strategy in India. STAR TV decided to shed its English-language, upper-class orientation, and turned its primary channel, STAR Plus, into a Hindi-language channel. Thereafter, many

English-language programs were broadcast only to smaller niche audiences through the English-language channel STAR World.

Currently, in India *The Bold and the Beautiful* is broadcast at 3 p.m. five days a week by STAR World. Many Indian viewers claim they have outgrown this television program. While in the early 1990s *The Bold and the Beautiful* was considered to be an exciting viewing experience, fewer people are now attracted to watch this soap opera, a decline partly due to the profusion of family-oriented, intergenerational Hindi soap operas. In a city like Delhi, the number of television channels available to a viewer went from three or four in 1992, to 100 in 2003. New serials/sitcoms such as *Friends* and *Ally McBeal* have become preferred options for the English-viewing Indian audience.

Embedded Health Messages in *The Bold and the Beautiful*

The Bold and the Beautiful premiered in March 1987 in the US. It was a spin-off of an older television soap opera, *The Young and the Restless*. The new soap opera immediately climbed in the Nielsen ratings to become one of the most-watched soap operas in the US (where its audience is largely stay-at-home housewives). *The Bold and the Beautiful* is produced by Bell-Philip Television Productions, and is broadcast by the CBS network. This television program has an estimated 300 million viewers in 110 countries, and is currently the number two rated daytime drama in the US (Beck, 2004).

The story of *The Bold and the Beautiful* is set in Beverly Hills, CA, location of the Forrester family mansion. The story centers around the wealthy Forrester family, Eric Forrester and his wife Stephanie, their oldest son Ridge, son Thorne, and daughters Kristen and Felicia. Stephanie and Eric have a troubled marriage and are on the verge of divorce. The Forresters own a fashion house, Forrester Creations. Eric and Ridge are fashion designers, and Thorne works in the manufacturing end of the business.

'Tony's HIV'

Tony is Kristen Forrester's boyfriend. When Tony learns that he is probably HIV-positive, he initially denies his illness, refusing to have his blood tested. Finally, Tony agrees to a blood test, which confirms that he is infected with the HIV virus. Kristen insists on continuing her relationship with Tony even after she knows that he is HIV-positive, and they decide to get married. The couple go on honeymoon to Africa, where they visit an AIDS orphanage. After returning to the US, they decide to adopt a child from the orphanage.

Episodes dealing with 'Tony's HIV' in *The Bold and the Beautiful* were broadcast in the US from 21 July 2001 to 8 January 2002. We created a composite videotape of the 'Tony's HIV' storyline to show to our Indian respondents; it had a total running time of 32 minutes. Our content analysis of the 'Tony's HIV' found that 'HIV' was mentioned 30 times, 'AIDS' was mentioned nine times, and condoms three times. A great deal of information about HIV/AIDS, especially about living with HIV/AIDS, was conveyed, mainly by a medical doctor who was counseling Tony and Kristen.

On 3 August 2001, the day on which Tony was diagnosed with HIV (in the US broadcasts of *The Bold and the Beautiful*), and on 13 August 2001, the day on which he disclosed his HIV status to his fiancée Kristen, Tony appeared in an advertising spot at the end of the episode to urge viewers to call the toll-free telephone number for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) National STD and AIDS Hotline. The telephone number for this hotline appeared at the bottom of the television screen, while Tony stepped out of his acting role to urge audience individuals to call the toll-free number for information and counseling. The number of calls to the AIDS Hotline within the hour increased by a factor of 16 over the previous hour on 3 August, and by a factor of 19 on 13 August (Kennedy et al., 2004). These spikes in the number of callers to the AIDS Hotline occurred immediately after the broadcasts. The two educational ads by Tony encouraged members of the US viewing public to seek information and advice about HIV/AIDS.

The Birth of 'Tony's HIV'

The process through which 'Tony's HIV' appeared in *The Bold and the Beautiful* involved close collaboration between the Hollywood creative community and CDC officials. Brad Bell, the head scriptwriter and producer of *The Bold and the Beautiful*, became concerned about the devastation caused by the AIDS epidemic in Africa, and particularly about the rapidly growing number of AIDS orphans (whose parents have succumbed to the epidemic). Bell asked Ron Weaver, senior producer of *The Bold and the Beautiful*, to search for expertise on the AIDS epidemic. Weaver telephoned Vicki Beck, director of Hollywood, Health and Society at the University of Southern California's Norman Lear Center, in the Annenberg School for Communication. Prior to joining USC a few years previously, Beck had worked for the CDC. She identified two behavioral scientists in CDC's HIV/AIDS program to provide expert information for the HIV storyline in the *The Bold and the Beautiful*. One expert, Ann O'Leary, advised script writers about Tony's diagnosis with HIV, and the other expert, Andrea Schwartzendruber, was called in when the television story led to the adoption of an AIDS orphan in Africa by Tony and Kristen (Beck, 2004). Cynthia J. Popp, producer and director of *The Bold and the Beautiful*, worked with scriptwriter Teresa Zimmerman to present HIV infection as part of a love story. The intent was to balance technical information about HIV/AIDS with a romantic storyline.

In 2002, 'Tony's HIV' received the Sentinel for Health Award for Daytime Drama presented at the CDC/Populations Communications International's Soap Summits in Los Angeles and in New York. This award, established by the CDC in 2000, is to recognize 'exemplary accomplishments of daytime dramas that inform, educate, and motivate viewers to live safer and healthier lives' (Beck, 2004: 219). Judging for the award is conducted in two stages: (1) CDC topic experts review entries for the accuracy of their depictions and (2) a panel of experts from entertainment, advocacy, public health and universities review the finalists for potential benefit to the viewing audience and for their entertainment value (Beck, 2004).

In recent years, Hollywood soap operas have contained content about women's reproductive health, HIV/AIDS prevention, breast cancer detection and survival, disability, mental illness, diabetes and drunk driving, as the recipients of the CDC Sentinel Awards for 2000/1 suggest. The effects of this health content on American audiences was indicated by a CDC 1999 Health-styles Survey: 48 percent of regular viewers of soap operas (those who watched twice a week) reported that they learned about a disease or how to prevent it from a television soap opera. More than one-third (34 percent) reported taking some action as a result (Beck, 2004). Do similar audience behaviors occur when these soap operas are broadcast in India?

Data-Gathering in India

Studying the effects of health-related episodes in Hollywood television programs in developing countries poses challenges for communication research. Our research methods were mainly qualitative and open-ended in nature, as we gathered data from audience individuals who had been exposed to *The Bold and the Beautiful*. A similar research approach was followed in the aforementioned investigation of *Dallas* by Liebes and Katz (1990), and by several communication scholars who investigated the meanings given to American-produced television programs in other nations. We felt that an individual's previous exposure to a television message was prerequisite to participating in interpretive research on the meanings of the television program.

Researchers from the Center for Media Studies (CMS), New Delhi, India, were trained by the present authors to gather data about 'Tony's HIV' in the Hollywood television program *The Bold and the Beautiful*. We conducted six focus group interviews and 17 in-depth interviews in Delhi, Chandigarh and Hyderabad in March and April 2003. Respondents in Delhi represented urban viewers who were mainly Hindus, participants in Chandigarh represented the Sikh religion, and Hyderabad participants represented the Muslim religion. Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs have distinctive myths, traditions and cultural values. The individuals in each focus group interview viewed 'Tony's HIV', and then discussed this content with the help of a trained focus group leader. Our purpose was to understand the various meanings drawn from the television program of study, including understanding the process of how these meanings are formed by different individuals.

The Indian participants were all English-speaking, urban, educated and of higher socioeconomic status. The selection of respondents was based on the criteria that respondents should be familiar with the storyline of *The Bold and the Beautiful*, and should be current viewers of the soap opera or have been devoted viewers in the recent past.

The CMS team consisted of two trained male and two female researchers and two trained ethnographers (one male and one female). It proved somewhat difficult to find viewers of *The Bold and the Beautiful* to be interviewed. A screening question was used to first identify respondents as viewers of the soap opera, who were then invited to participate in the study by coming to a given location on a particular day and time. Participants in the project were

reimbursed for their travel to and from the interview site and were given a small gift at the end of their interview. In Delhi, finding male respondents for interviews about *The Bold and the Beautiful* proved especially difficult, as the program is seldom watched by males due to the mid-afternoon hour when it is broadcast. The nine interview respondents in Delhi were mainly females. In Chandigarh, 19 respondents (12 females) were interviewed. In Hyderabad, 14 viewers (six Muslims) participated. In all, 42 viewers of *The Bold and the Beautiful* were interviewed in the three cities. Some 17 responded in in-depth interviews and 25 in the six focus group interviews. All study participants completed a brief respondent profile questionnaire and signed a consent form.

Description of the Respondents

Respondents in our investigation of *The Bold and the Beautiful* in India were relatively elite, English-speaking individuals, as they constitute the main audience for imported television programs that are broadcast in the English language. Most were already quite knowledgeable about HIV/AIDS. Most were female because *The Bold and the Beautiful* is most popular among housewives in India. The viewing audiences were mostly over 30 years of age. Recent changes in scheduling of *The Bold and the Beautiful* in different time slots and on different channels explained why many audience individuals had stopped watching this program on a regular basis.

Audience Interpretation of Message Themes

Here we summarize the meanings that Indian respondents as interpretive communities gave to messages embedded in the American television program regarding sexual openness, female assertiveness, concepts of female and male beauty, social acceptance of people living with HIV/AIDS, impact and interpretation of HIV information, response to HIV treatment (anti-retroviral drugs) and health behavior change.

Sexual Openness

‘Rinku’² was repulsed by the fact that Eric Forrester has a sexual relationship with his daughter-in-law. She says: ‘[A] father-in-law is a person who is a substitute for your father in your husband’s place. How can you have a relationship with him and share all the things that you share with your husband? It’s something real bad.’ Naveen concurred: ‘The openness . . . it is definitely vulgar. It promotes adultery.’

Regarding the sexual openness of *The Bold and the Beautiful*, Anuradha said: ‘We cannot relate this to our Indian society – their explicitness, how they talk about sex, their past relationships, it does not fit into our Indian culture. . . . We don’t just leave a guy and marry his father – it doesn’t happen in our lives.’ The distance of the television program from personal reality is felt acutely regarding the portrayal of relationships. Said Spiti: ‘I have been married for six years. I cannot think of any other guy. So when I see these relationships

in *The Bold and the Beautiful*, I cannot relate to them at all.' Nadeem said that 'Sometimes I find it [*The Bold and the Beautiful*] funny . . . sometimes it hurts my sensibility and sometimes it appeals to me. I am quite liberal . . . but sometimes I feel that certain characters should not react to a given situation in a certain manner – and when he or she does that, it hurts my sensibility.'

Some respondents drew parallels between the extramarital affairs depicted in *The Bold and the Beautiful* and what is happening in India, highlighting the contextual differences. Nagma said: 'One thing is certain – that extramarital affairs have increased but how are they [shown in *The Bold and the Beautiful*] different from the ones that I see [here in India]? I think over there [in the US] it has a lot to do with the physical aspect, which is not the case with the people I know here, because it has to do with the general depression in [marital] relationships. . . . Here problems between married couples arise because they don't address many issues. Eventually it becomes such a problem that they end up breaking off or having an affair with somebody else. More serious issues [in real life] are not shown. . . . So extra-marital affairs have increased here but not for the same reasons as those that are being shown [in *The Bold and the Beautiful*].'

The openness in sexual relationships as portrayed in the American television program was, however, admired by many Indian respondents. In fact, some felt that Indians need to emulate such openness in their own lives. Nagma said: 'I think somewhere along the line I watched this serial because I feel that when I become a mother I would definitely want to provide space to my child, so that he should have the guts to come and tell me the worst thing that he may have done in his life. He may have a different set of values, whatever, but he should have the space to come back home and tell me about it . . . when I saw Ridge come back and talk to his mom, I would say to myself, why can't I do that?'

On the other hand, Minu, a Christian, believed that this US soap opera was normalizing deviant and undesirable social behavior in India. She felt that the soap opera celebrates all that is weak and timid in the human character and that it should have been named 'The Timid and the Ugly' – 'because of the values and wrong messages that they are giving to youngsters. People do have extramarital relationships or children out of wedlock; you know it happens. But if you go on watching this serial, I feel that subconsciously we will accept these things as normal. So when you are put in a tight corner, I'm afraid we might compromise, thinking that there's nothing wrong in it since the whole world is doing it.' In fact, the pastor at her church advised her and other church-goers to avoid watching *The Bold and the Beautiful* as it glorified un-Indian and anti-Christian values.

The consensus of our respondents is that The Bold and the Beautiful is far removed from Indian culture and values. This distancing is perceived as having both a positive and a negative side. For instance, Rinku felt that issues of sexuality and morality are taboo in Indian society. 'They [actors in *The Bold and the Beautiful*] don't feel bad about discussing these things in the open. I can only discuss it with my friends. I can't go and tell my mom about this; she would be embarrassed and so would I. It's different in India. There [in the US]

everything is open.’ However, many Indian respondents, like Minu (quoted earlier) rejected the US soap opera as providing negative role models for Indian viewers.

Assertiveness of Female Characters

Independence, assertiveness and empowerment of the women in *The Bold and the Beautiful* appealed to Indian women. Sonia responded that *The Bold and the Beautiful* depicts gender equality: ‘The women are quite strong. If their men cheat them, they do the same. They are not weak characters, they keep on moving, no depression.’ Added Simran: ‘She should be bold enough to handle any situation. She should not get dominated by any stuff nor should she care about or give a damn about anything . . . that’s what’s shown in *The Bold and the Beautiful*.’ Rinku said that the US television program is not just about ‘looks’. ‘They portray the boldness in the women, their capabilities, what they want, their efficiency. The serial is not based only on looks and beauty.’ Many Indian respondents noted the assertiveness of females in *The Bold and the Beautiful* and generally approved of it.

In the context of man–woman relationships, Seema pointed out that there are no barriers for the women in *The Bold and the Beautiful*. ‘Abroad, people [women] don’t bother. OK, fine, I’m in love with a man 20 years elder to me and I’m gonna be vocal about it. Here [in India], it’s different . . . they would try and hide it because it’s not common, anything that’s not common or is slightly different, they want to hide it, not be vocal about it. That’s the difference.’

The female characters in the US soap opera provided role models of empowered, assertive women to Indian audiences.

Television viewing in India is generally a family affair, as most households own a single television set. So if a television program is already being watched by another member of the family, a latecomer must watch that program. We found a distinct discomfort among people who watch the television program of study with other family members, due to its sexually explicit nature. Said Seema: ‘There are many intimate scenes. . . . I’m not comfortable watching them with my parents, [but] with my brother, that’s okay.’

Said Rinku, who began watching the Hollywood soap opera regularly when she was in seventh grade: ‘Suppose my mom comes to know that I’m watching; she starts shouting, “Why are you watching this? Why can’t you watch a good one [television program]?”’ Parental disapproval of *The Bold and the Beautiful* was commonly expressed by our younger Indian respondents. The episodes featuring Eric and Brooke’s relationship, culminating in their marriage, evoked strong emotions among viewers, as mentioned previously.

The taboo nature of the explicit sexual relationships shown in The Bold and the Beautiful led many Indian viewers to watch it privately, or only with others of their generation.

Masculine and Feminine Ideals of Beauty

Indian viewers pick up fashion cues and grooming tips from soap opera characters, but most do not directly imitate the styles that they see on their television screen. They nevertheless shape their ideas of fashionable clothes, accessories, body weight and general appearance. Stated Nadeem: 'Indian men's fantasy was always well-endowed women but . . . today men want [women with] good figures, long, slim legs and [the right] vital statistics.' In *The Bold and the Beautiful*, he said: 'There is a lot of attitudinal dressing, which hasn't caught on in India. For instance, if a lady is wearing a cream dress with sharp colors and a tight belt, then you can make out she is a conservative person.' Good physiques are a norm on the American soap opera. Said Kranti: 'They all have very well worked-out bodies – perfect bodies! It's about ideal bodies, ideal lifestyles, ideal everything.'

Some viewers point out that the concept of masculine beauty was practically non-existent on Indian television before the advent of *The Bold and the Beautiful*. Ramesh pointed out the standards of male beauty in the soap opera, 'From a male perspective, I don't remember any male character in this serial [*The Bold and the Beautiful*] that has a paunch [protruding stomach].' Said Nadeem: 'Practically all male characters have strong jaw lines like Robert Redford. This thing was never seen before – hair, skin, OK . . . but jawlines, never.' Rajeev agreed: 'I have not seen a single male character who has a paunch.' In contrast, most Indian television actors and actresses are plump by American beauty standards.³

Some Indian viewers feel that there is no way that they could wear the clothes depicted in the television program. Said Simran: 'We do observe their dressing, their styles, what's in fashion . . . but we can't change our ways of dressing. There are limits . . . you cannot even dream of wearing some of the dresses they do even at hi-fi society parties here.' Rinku was very influenced as a young girl: 'When I used to watch it [*The Bold and the Beautiful*] in the seventh grade, I found them so beautifully dressed and looking gorgeous.'

Confidence, body posture, grooming, good looks and certain personality traits seem to be coming together in a new definition of beauty in urban India. As Sonia stated: 'You get motivated when you see that they [some of them] are quite old but they carry themselves so well, . . . they are so well maintained. I feel I don't like their hairstyles, because they all have short hair but then I like the way they dress up, the kind of makeup they wear.'

Farheed was impressed by the way the soap opera characters dress and carry themselves. He admits that he would like to copy 'The American accent – it's the in thing you know and you can be quite successful', implying that talking with an American accent makes a positive impact on others. As Kamlesh admitted: 'I first started watching the serial because I thought it was a good way of developing my personality – it gave me tips on personality development.'

Nadeem felt that television serials like *The Bold and the Beautiful* shaped fashion trends in India, at least displaying what is permissible to be shown on television, if not emulated in real life: '*The Bold and the Beautiful*, *Santa Barbara* and *Baywatch* have made a woman's brassiere acceptable to be seen

in public. It may not be acceptable [if women are seen wearing them] on beaches in real life, but on the screen it is acceptable – it is no longer considered obscene.’

Viewers of The Bold and the Beautiful felt that the definition of masculine and feminine beauty has began to change in India under the influence of imported television programs.

Identification with Television Characters

Gossip about the sexual behavior of television characters is common in India. Televised interpersonal relationships also generate much public debate. Rinku recalled that when a woman character in the Hollywood soap opera had an extramarital affair, it was a topic of discussion among her friends: ‘How can she do that?’ Seema said that although she did not discuss episodes or characters, her friends often did: ‘It was general chatter about what happened in the last episode: “Oh, he shouldn’t have done that” or “Oh, he’ll finally go back to her” – that kind of general chatter. It was essentially about sexual relationships.’ Sometimes discussions occur when regular viewers miss certain episodes. Rakesh stated: ‘I think I missed an episode which I had seen where Sheila is trying to steal someone’s baby, something like that was happening, so I was inquisitive about it as to what happened.’

Most viewers do not identify with particular television characters, or if they do, only in certain situations. Said Kranti: ‘It’s something that I would like to watch. Not something that I identify with because I don’t lead that kind of life.’ Naveen rejected any suggestion of identification with television characters, saying: ‘No way . . . it’s a fantasy. Besides it’s too complicated even to fanatize about.’

Indian respondents maintain that there is no similarity between the life portrayed in *The Bold and the Beautiful* versus the Indian situation where arranged marriages are the norm and changing partners is frequently definitely forbidden. Virginity until marriage, especially for women, is a must in India. Some respondents admit that these matters are changing in India. Simran stated: ‘If you feel the guy is not good for you, you can switch to another because the generation has changed and a lot of things are changing.’

Rakesh rationalized that he neither feels close nor distant to the soap opera’s characters but at some level the stories/situations do connect with him: ‘I will not say that they are very close and I will not say that they are distant. Some situations, I identify with. I don’t think these serials were conceived with an Indian audience in mind, so obviously most of the situations are not as convincing to an Indian as maybe a Hindi serial is. But yeah! It’s OK. If these situations were unbelievable, I don’t think I would have watched them, so it’s somewhere connecting with me, that’s why I am watching it.’

Perceptions of ‘Tony’s HIV’

Each of our Indian respondents viewed a 32-minute videotape of the ‘Tony’s HIV’ episodes. Mahesh stated: ‘This message was good: Everybody was helping

that guy [Tony] rather than trying to find out things like how he got it [HIV]. They try to help him, adjust with him, make him feel good rather than make him feel guilty about what he has done. So that thing was good.' Parag commented: 'Don't give up [on] the patient. The guy's detected with HIV but his girlfriend did not leave him, she supported him, whereas in India, people would leave the patient.'

'One must take care of people affected with HIV', stated Maya. 'If a person is HIV-positive, he should not give up hope. He should work towards living his life as a normal man rather than feel guilty that he is HIV-positive. Also, his girlfriend really loves him and is willing to sacrifice her life', said Simran. 'This has a social message, rather two messages. AIDS, HIV-positive and certainly [the] layman's version of what the ailment can do. The second message is about adoption. The HIV-positive person adopting a child; these two are interlinked', commented Naveen.

Minu, who during the video prescreening discussion criticized the Hollywood soap opera for being frivolous and for propagating promiscuity, was very impressed with how the storyline of 'Tony's HIV' tackled a grave issue like AIDS. 'It's a very good thing, very important for the viewers, especially the youngsters, especially when you show it like this – they will accept it more readily.'

'I think he [Tony] did the right thing. He did not keep her in darkness. He was not like I have AIDS and now I have to live with it so why bother about others. He did not keep it to himself. He said this to his girlfriend, to his love, he cared for his love', stated Farheed. Kranti felt that few people would have been as honest about their health condition as Tony was shown to be. 'He was honest enough, but I don't think anyone would be that honest. Like he says, "I will lose my career, my friends, I will lose my family. I will lose everything."' He was honest about it because he was supposedly in love with her so he cared enough. I don't think there are many people like him. People are selfish. Yeah!' said Kranti.

Indian respondents generally had positive reactions to the 'Tony's HIV' episodes, although they felt that self-disclosure of HIV/AIDS status could not happen in India, where HIV/AIDS is highly stigmatized.

Reactions to 'Tony's HIV'

The Bold and the Beautiful may have reduced the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS in India somewhat. The message that it is appropriate to disclose your HIV-positive status was well received, however it was still thought that such disclosure would lead to discrimination by others in India. Caring and treating the HIV-positive person in a humane manner is considered an ideal, even though an improbable reaction.

HIV/AIDS is highly stigmatized in India, perhaps more so than in almost any other nation (Singhal and Rogers, 2003). Most viewers admired Kristen's reaction to Tony's disclosure that he was HIV-positive. They felt she truly loved him and was willing to sacrifice her life for him. At the same time, they felt

that while it is admirable, it is also unrealistic, as few people would have the courage to marry a person who is HIV-positive and face the risk of contracting the illness herself. 'I don't think such a thing would have happened [in reality]. If you were to tell your girlfriend, I don't think she would be like "Oh! I am cool!"', commented Rakesh. 'Very few cases [are] like hers [in real life]. If we have a person like Mother Theresa, followers of her, OK, that's fine and all. But in today's life they [women] don't adjust to these kinds of conditions', said Manjunath.

Indian respondents felt that the situations depicted in 'Tony's HIV' were highly implausible, particularly Kristen's decision to marry the HIV-positive Tony. Kranti rationalized: 'She [Kristen] says "I don't look at it as a sacrifice." I think eventually, or at some point of time, she would definitely think of it as a sacrifice. . . . It's portrayed as if she thought about it. But until you are faced with it, you don't know. Tomorrow when he has got marks all over him, his immunity is gone, he is hospitalized and you are [she is] living between the hospital and the house, child and your job, things are not as rosy as you would think today. Today the guy is healthy; he still leads a normal life. You don't have that much responsibility but later on it would definitely change.'

Added Minu: 'The attitude of the girl [Kristen] was excellent. That was the correct approach. Is it realistic? Is it possible? That is the question. Otherwise it is very good. It is how it should be. She was talking about their marriage vows and everything went off so perfectly. But in real life, I have my doubts as to how many people will take this attitude; it's really good but I don't know whether it is realistic.'

Most respondents feel that while the episodes about 'Tony's HIV' provided a great deal of information about HIV and AIDS, it did not bring out the day-to-day problems of living with an HIV-positive person. While admiring Kristen for her bold decision, many viewers feel that it would not be possible to do so in real life. Said Rinku: 'They can't have children of their own. They have to adopt somebody which will take a long time.' Naveen emphasized the lack of detail provided about adoption. For instance, he said that when Tony and Kristen decided to adopt a child, many issues were left unexplored. 'There may be a possibility that the child can contract AIDS by coming into contact with say the razor that Tony is using. Such situations are not dealt with.'

While viewers justify Tony and Kristen's reactions, most viewers found it difficult to accept Eric and Stephanie's [her parents] response to the news that Tony is HIV-positive. Most felt that had such an event happened to an Indian man, the parents of the girl would definitely not have accepted Tony. Respondents unanimously felt that the parents' reaction to Tony's disclosure was totally implausible. One respondent points out that in the West parents are perhaps not as involved in their grown-up children's decision-making process and that may be the reason for the way that Eric and Stephanie accepted Tony despite his HIV-positive status.

'Very good thing [their reaction]. Normally parents don't react that way – it's not possible. They were very cool about the HIV thing you know; HIV is something that you will not want to be hanging around with. Why take myself. I will not want to hang around with a guy or a girl having HIV; I will keep a

distance. But the parents reacted so coolly. Yeah, it cannot be true – it's like throwing their own daughter in a well', explained Farheed.

'I think they were very broad-minded and accepted it. In India, no parent would accept that happily but they were very broad-minded; they accepted it very openly. So what if you are HIV-positive? Because they [Indian parents] know that their daughter's husband will die in two or three years or four years, but they would hate their daughter to be alone at such a young age. I'm not sure if an Indian parent would accept it', said Seema.

While disclosure of an individual's HIV-positive status in India was considered possible to a certain degree, most Indian respondents said that acceptance of an HIV-positive person is unrealistic. Compassion and sympathy toward HIV-positive persons have begun to develop, but full acceptance is not considered possible in the Indian context.

Perceptions of HIV

Most respondents in India claimed that they were already well-informed about HIV and AIDS. Said Naveen, 'I am already aware . . . but such information needs to be disseminated as a lack of awareness leads to cases like the one in Kerala where two HIV-positive schoolchildren were not allowed to sit in the classroom.'

The 'Tony's HIV' episodes dwell on the course of treatment for Tony, explaining how the medicines would work and focusing on possible side-effects. However, at no point does the soap opera mention the cost of the treatment, a very important factor from an Indian patient's point of view. Lack of information on costs and alternative treatments is commented upon by some viewers. They feel that while the suggested treatment is relevant for people from some well-to-do families in India, many HIV-positive people come from the lower strata of society, for whom the cost of the anti-retroviral drugs is prohibitive. Some feel that there is a greater risk of such people infecting others because they cannot afford the drug treatment and they do not behave in a responsible fashion even after they are infected with HIV.

If Tony were Indian, 'He would check the availability, accessibility and affordability of the treatment', said Naveen. Added Kranti: 'It would depend on the financial background [of the person] and in terms of the [cost of] medicines and hospitalization. It is expensive. We don't have that kind of cover [insurance] that those guys do. So I think that would be the first thing [that an Indian would determine] because I know these treatments are very expensive.'

'I will tell you even very educated people would consider options like going to a *sadhu maharaj* [holy man]. Meditation is very good – this is part of our culture in India. I may not go to the *mandir* [temple] regularly, but I love to do my *puja* [pray]. I will ask God what wrong have I done', said Anuradha.

Indian respondents felt The Bold and the Beautiful's HIV treatment-related messages about anti-retroviral drugs, especially their high cost and side-effects, are essential information that should have been provided by the soap opera. Since the cost of anti-retroviral medications is high, it is felt that alternative treatments and options should be also provided.

In general, *Indian respondents felt that 'Tony's HIV' showed an ideal situation regarding HIV infection, but one that was far removed from the Indian reality.*

Adoption Would not be Possible in India

The 'Tony's HIV' episodes suggest that Tony and Kristen could look forward to a happy future by adopting a child, which is appreciated by Indian viewers. However, Indian respondents were skeptical about this option being available to Indian couples in a similar situation. 'Indians prefer to have their own children and are very reluctant to adopt', said Rinku, because there is a bias against adoption. However, others feel that adoption is increasingly becoming an option for childless couples in India and they felt that adoption is the best solution for a couple who are in a situation like that of Tony and Kristen. 'You can find many cases where people have adopted children in India', said Farheed.

Toll-Free Helpline Would not Work in India

Toll-free helplines are an easy way to access information and also ensure privacy, feel many viewers. While some respondents are aware that there is a toll-free telephone helpline for AIDS information in India, no one could recall the number. However, one respondent pointed out that it is unlikely that Indians would use a toll-free line as they would be loath to discuss HIV/AIDS with others because of the strong stigma attached to the disease. Comments elicited from our respondents about the issue are illustrated by Simran's comments: 'Persons who are suffering from HIV can get information by telephone. If they don't want to talk face-to-face, they can talk on the phone for advice and precautions and everything. So this number is for those who hardly want to face the doctors, hardly want to make an issue of it. It's better they talk on the phone.'

'If the Americans are airing this serial in India, they should put the contact number for India as well', said Naveen. The US toll-free number was included in the video of 'Tony's HIV' shown to our Indian respondents. 'I will be honest, if I had AIDS in this city, I would not be in this city, as 20 people talk. . . . I would leave this city. If I can afford it, I will go abroad. If I cannot afford to do so, I will definitely go to Delhi or Bombay and believe me that anybody would do it. So toll-free number, "Ki Jaroorat Nahi Padegi India Mein" [You won't need a toll-free number in India]', said Kranti.

While the majority response of Indian viewers was that the toll-free phone lines providing HIV-related information would not work in the Indian context, some respondents felt that incorporating a toll-free number for India might help the public. Respondents felt that people in India would not feel comfortable discussing their HIV status with an unknown person over the telephone.

Conclusions

Indian viewers of *The Bold and the Beautiful* ascribed various meanings to the health messages about HIV in the television soap opera. Respondents interpreted the assertiveness of female characters as a desirable attitude that should be emulated by Indians. Messages relating to sexual explicitness depicted by the soap opera characters were interpreted generally as undesirable, leading to promiscuity, and resulting in the spread of HIV. Sexual openness, partner switching and interpersonal relationships mainly based on sex are impossible in the reality of India today. Respondents felt that many of the television messages about dress and fashion styles have been picked up by some Indians. The Hollywood television soap opera modified the nature of male and female fashion and concepts of physical beauty in India. However, sexually explicit television messages have little impact on respondents. A few respondents claimed that the soap opera is influencing moral standards in India, mainly in a negative direction.

Respondents declared that socially, culturally and in reality, it is not possible for a girlfriend or her parents to accept an HIV-positive person, as there is still a strong stigma attached to HIV/AIDS in India. Positive messages in 'Tony's HIV' about medication for HIV are critically processed as impossible in India due to the high cost of anti-retroviral drugs. Adoption of a child by an HIV-positive couple is generally regarded as unthinkable in India. Indian viewers tend to characterize *all* Americans as behaving like the characters on *The Bold and the Beautiful*, as Liebes and Katz (1990) found to be the case for Israeli viewers of *Dallas*.

We only interviewed a small sample of Muslims, and they did not seem to be highly fundamentalist. We found no important differences in the perceptions of health-related messages among our Hindu, Sikh and Muslim respondents. All respondents interpreted the 'Tony's HIV' episodes in a generally similar way, perhaps due to the urban elite characteristics of viewers of an English-language imported television program in India.

Some differences were apparent across age groups. While respondents of all ages believed that the sexual content on *The Bold and the Beautiful* was 'too explicit', the older age group, relative to their younger counterparts, displayed a more conservative attitude toward notions of premarital sex, multiple partners and overt sexual discussions. Some differences were also apparent across gender lines. The freedom, autonomy and bold lifestyles enjoyed by the women characters in the Hollywood soap opera seemed to make an impression particularly on female respondents.

Overall, the American soap opera *The Bold and the Beautiful* did not have a strong, immediate impact on Indian viewers. Fashion and male and female sexuality may have been altered to a certain extent. Some respondents felt that producers of Hollywood soap operas should customize their health messages specifically for the Indian population. The stigma attached to HIV/AIDS in India is strong and affects the meanings given by Indian viewers to 'Tony's HIV'.

Embedded HIV messages in *The Bold and the Beautiful* did not seem to

lead directly to much change in perceptions of health behavior in India. However, it may be possible for long-running, popular programs like *The Bold and the Beautiful* to gradually influence, and reverse, the negative perception of HIV/AIDS, removing the stigma at least among urban, elite and youthful audience members. Our study of Indian respondents' interpretations of *The Bold and the Beautiful* was limited by our relatively small sample of Indian respondents. However, we hope that our research approach of focusing on the health content of Hollywood television programs in a country like India will lead to further investigation by other communication researchers.

Notes

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1. The results of audience interpretations of health messages about condom use in *Friends* are reported elsewhere (Rogers et al., 2003).
2. We use pseudonyms for all respondents in order to protect their identity.
3. American television programs broadcast in India in the past decade seems to have influenced a shift in the ideal female body shape from round to thin, a change accompanied by increasing rates of bulimia and anorexia, health problems that were previously almost unknown in India (Crabtree and Malhotra, 2000; Malhotra and Rogers, 2000).

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