
METACONSUMPTIVE PRACTICES AND THE CIRCULATION OF OBJECTIFICATIONS

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Abstract

This article analyzes an intersection of materiality and language use. I argue that verbal practices, generally overlooked in material culture studies, are an integral dimension of consumption. Types of talk – both referential and indexical – can illustrate how people mediate relationships with objects, as well as with each other. Drawing on ethnographic research in Silicon Valley, California (1999–2001), I present examples from middle-class South Asian American communities. In these closely-knit social contexts, I examine how people discursively create objectifications through talk and consumption of visual media such as video and photographs. My examination of these language practices reveals that people not only form relationships with objects they own, but also with objectifications – verbal and visual representations – of objects they borrow, rent, or imagine. Social theorists have remarked on how people can use contests of status and display associated with consumption to ascend into higher social classes. I consider how youth and adults engage in language use and consumption to instead display identity and status within their own community.

Key Words ◆ consumption ◆ language use ◆ materiality ◆ South Asian diaspora ◆ youth

On a visit to the Kapoors, a middle-class South Asian American family in Silicon Valley, California, I arrived as their two teenage daughters, Meru and Jasbir, were about to visit their relatives who lived on their

street in San Jose. Meru, a senior in high school, squealed, 'You have to come with us to see the new baby and CLK!' and led me to her aunt's house. After congratulating her aunt and uncle about the baby, I quietly admitted to Meru and Jasbir that I could not remember who CLK could be from the many Kapoor family events I had attended. Astonished, Jasbir exclaimed, 'Who? What are you talking about?' Meru laughed, 'The CLK! The Mercedes Benz CLK Convertible. Don't you remember our cousin Sim's graduation party? Sim's dad grabbed the mike and yelled, "your real present isn't here yet! CLK, BABY, CLK!"' The Mercedes Benz CLK convertible, affectionately referred to by Meru and Jasbir Kapoor, and me in this article, simply as 'CLK', received nearly as much attention as the new baby that joined the family around the same time.

CLK illustrates an interesting case, for this car did not garner notoriety by simply sitting in a driveway next to the Lincoln Navigator Sim's father bought for himself or by cruising the congested roadways of Silicon Valley. Rather, its most widespread fame came from talk about it and from its appearance in family media. Although that afternoon I had the opportunity of meeting CLK in person, for many family members and friends, their most frequent interactions with CLK was through its appearance in videos and photographs. Talk about the CLK was both referential, which described the various attributes of the car itself, as well as indexical, which alluded to the broader sense of style it connoted for other members of the Kapoor family. The Kapoors, like other families in their community, routinely displayed such visual media for friends and family who visited and accompanied these viewings with verbal narrations and extensive commentary of the documented event. Conversations in which CLK was lovingly described to friends and family, and images of its central place in videotapes of wedding processions and arrivals at parties circulated far beyond the car itself.

The CLK, like other examples I present in this article, illustrates a seldom-explored dimension of material culture – namely, language use. Relationships between language and material culture have been explored through metaphor (Tilley, 1999), semiotic ideologies (Keane, 2003), and even the inadequacy of words to describe relationships with objects effectively (Miller, 1998b). I examine how language practices mediate both people's relationships with objects, as well as with one another in the context of consumption. Scholars have illustrated how objects themselves can be crucial to understanding consumption (Appadurai, 1986; Douglas and Isherwood, 1996; Miller, 1995), yet the discursive dimensions of this process remain underexamined. As a complement to studies of consumption that look at both commodities in social context (Miller, 1987; O'Dougherty, 2002; Patico, 2002) and the socially produced meanings of particular objects (Kopytoff, 1986; Weiner, 1992), I present another perspective on the relationship between people and commodities.

In this article, I examine the process by which people use talk to form and maintain relationships with objects as well as objectifications, and how socially produced meanings from this process circulate and become significant within a community. Focusing on objectifications – the externalized meanings and values that subjects create about objects in social context (Myers, 2001) – provides an insightful vantage point from which to discuss discursive aspects of consumption. The emergence and circulation of objectifications is especially evident through talk; such talk occurs in conjunction with home media – photographs and videos that people circulate among families and friends – which viewers accompany with narrations about the clothing, cars, and other objects pictured within. In this context, owners as well as non-owners of commodities form relationships with these objects by relying on borrowed, rented, or even imagined encounters with them. Consider the example of CLK. Although the car belongs to their cousin, Meru and Jasbir regard the car as part of their extended family and narrate this ownership through their descriptions of the car in their various photographs and videos. This process of creating and circulating objectifications through talk, which I here call ‘metaconsumption’, addresses how these seemingly fleeting moments of verbal and visual signification are transformed into objectifications that endure and circulate. Metaconsumptive practices, I argue, underscore how language use can shape consumption and the related dimensions of identity, status, and community.

I base this discussion in ethnographic data drawn from research among a middle-class South Asian American (hereafter Desi¹) community in Silicon Valley, California. Noting that values underpinning consumption and style in this diasporic community are, as elsewhere (Gell, 1986), culturally specific and contextually driven, I contextualize metaconsumption in a broader discussion of consumption, materiality, and language in order to illustrate how it works within this specific community. With the technology boom and subsequent bust of the late 1990s and early 2000s as the backdrop, I discuss how middle-class Desi youth and their families have formed visible communities in Silicon Valley. Two social realms that I identify as essential for the creation and circulation of objectifications are family and community social activities, and teen social time. Both these interactional spaces are dominated by a common aesthetic that transcends generational differences to form a distinctive community style. Ethnographic examples presented illustrate how people articulate and circulate these notions of style through metaconsumption. I conclude by reflecting on the impact of these processes on identity formation and status for individuals and families in their communities.

MATERIALITY, OBJECTIFICATION, AND METACONSUMPTION

Material Culture Studies has emerged as a prominent area of inquiry that focuses on how people engage with objects, the objects themselves, and meanings that emerge through objectification. Consumption, the social process by which individuals and communities engage with material culture, enables people to enact and signal various types of social information. Two dimensions of consumption most relevant to my present discussion are status and identity. Bourdieu (1984), through his fine-grained analysis of socialization in France, illustrates how contests of social status are enacted through consumption practices. Similarly, in his notion of 'conspicuous consumption', Veblen (1953) exposes this practice as an arena for settling competing claims to status and power. He argues that objects are used as social markers to signify social class, especially in larger societies where people judge by appearances in the absence of personal relationships. Yet, consumption is rarely linked to status alone (McCracken, 1990; Miller, 1987; Rutz and Orlove, 1989). Countering Veblen, Douglas and Isherwood (1996) argue that consumption is not simply about envy and keeping up with one's neighbors, and note that although some social environments are individualistic and competitive, others are governed by social codes that operate under different logics. Despite other competing values, status can nonetheless factor strongly into how commodities are regarded (O'Dougherty, 2002). This was especially the case for middle-class Desi families in Silicon Valley, who were deeply invested in maintaining relationships with their extended family and community members but nonetheless engaged in contests of status with them. Indeed, the consumption practices that I observed were primarily undertaken to impress one's own community rather than a broader, anonymous public.

Alongside status, consumption is also central to shaping identity (Friedman, 1994), as well as kinship, emotional expression, and relationships (Miller, 1998a). Miller (1995) identifies consumption as a main arena of struggle over difference of selves and values. As Douglas and Isherwood also remind us, 'consumption uses goods to make firm and visible a particular set of judgments in the fluid process of classifying events and persons' (1996: 45). In this sense, middle-class Desis highly valued certain types of objects and display as a means of defining themselves to their families and communities. Although luxury automobiles and other aesthetic choices are indicative of their tastes in Silicon Valley at the turn of the millennium, their interest in objects of status has long been a preoccupation. The specific social tastes I describe here are a current version of a continuing practice in which people use objects to represent themselves to those around them.

Although consumption has been described as a language of communication, it is most often considered in the *absence* of words. Appadurai notes the classic opposition between 'words' and 'things' in western thought and argues that the things themselves must be studied to understand how human transactions can enliven them (1986: 4–5). Indeed, studies of consumption have overwhelmingly privileged a version of symbolic communication in which objects alone, in the absence of words, communicate meaning (Barthes, 1972; Baudrillard, 1988; Hebdige, 1979; Willis, 1977). When language has been discussed in the context of consumption, it is primarily to note its inability to describe adequately various dimensions of materiality. Miller (1998b) argues that linguistics and languages are limited in their variety and potential compared to material culture. For Tilley (1999), metaphor can give form to ideas precisely because literal language seems inadequate. He asserts, 'material metaphors do not just reflect social realities, they play an essential role in the description, definition and redecoration of those realities' (Tilley, 1999: 271). Taking a cue from Tilly's investigation of metaphor, I demonstrate that other uses of language can also play a productive role in defining and recasting material culture.

Indeed, returning to words in the context of things promises some productive insights. Voloshinov (1973) identifies linkages between the linguistic and material dimensions of the sign, and Keane has similarly called for a connection of the linguistic sign back to the material world by rigorously examining modes of objectification (2003: 432; see also Irvine, 1989, Latour, 1993). In addition to metaphor, referential utterances are notably linked to materiality. Miller's description of people using language 'as a form of legitimating' their choices yet often acting differently than their statements provides one such instance of referential language use about objects and consumption practices (1998b: 13). In my research as well, much language use about consumption is referential and directly describes the objects themselves. Yet, indexical uses of language are equally salient. Indexicality, a linguistic function which enables speakers to point indirectly to complex notions, allows speakers to signal entire social systems of meaning without having to explain them directly (Cavanaugh, 2004; Silverstein, 2003). Peirce (1955) originally discussed indexicality in the context of the sign but not language exclusively; thus indexicality has been used to discuss words *or* things, but rarely in conjunction. The indexical uses of language can, along with commodities, signal meanings beyond either commodities or language alone.

The potential signification that occurs in this intersection of language and consumption emerges most clearly through objectification. As a process by which objects signify meanings and values for people in distinct social contexts, objectification indexically mediates social processes (Myers, 2001: 23). Drawing on Miller (1987), Myers writes: 'In

objectification, cultural objects externalize values and meanings embedded in social processes, making them available, visible, or negotiable for further action by subjects' (Myers, 2001: 20). Objectification can be understood as a process, in which an object becomes or is recognized as socially meaningful. It can also be regarded as a thing – as the socially produced meaning of an object in a certain setting. Objectifications are always context-specific and are not generally thought to perdure apart from the object itself and beyond the social context in which they are generated. Yet, through talk, certain objectifications can be created and circulated in lieu of the object itself.

A key question, then, is what do people do with objectifications? Myers asserts that 'objectifications of social life are appropriated by the subjects they recursively produce' (Myers, 2001: 22). In my research, I found that objectifications were verbally produced and circulated, potentially conferring status to those who were able to affiliate with them by speaking about them directly or indexing them in narrative. This appropriation of objectifications is characterized by a degree of reflexivity often associated with speech practices. Silverstein notes that pragmatics refers to 'the meanings of linguistic signs relative to their communicative function' (Silverstein, 1996: 193) and identifies types of language that enable speakers to reflect upon their utterances. 'Metasemantic' speech events, for example, are moments when speakers reflect on the meaning of their own speech while 'metapragmatics' allow for an analogous conceptualization of the pragmatic structure of language (Silverstein, 1993; Silverstein, 1996: 216). Such a logic of reflexivity – where speakers analyze how language is used to produce a particular utterance – draws attention to additional dimensions of meaning that can be extracted from a speech act, as well as the potential power of these 'meta' processes in shaping future language use. If we apply a similar logic to objects, meanings about consumption are socially signified through objectifications. Analyzing how people discuss and use objectifications to suit their needs and interests can lead to new layers of meaning that became affiliated with the original act of consumption. In this context, while consumption practices refer to meanings created by the circulation of objects through display in particular social contexts, metaconsumption refers to the creation and circulation of objectifications, rather than the objects themselves, through talk. In this sense, the objectification, rather than the object itself, is shared, circulated, and consumed, and such an objectification can impart status to and shape identity for those who are able to lay claim to it linguistically.

Before turning to the specific contexts in which this process operates, a brief discussion of objects themselves as well as their character as they circulate, seems necessary. Objects in cultural contexts have been described to have social lives (Appadurai, 1986), biographies (Kopytoff,

1986), and even agency (Gell, 1998). Certain objects, as well as people's associations with them, are highly regarded in certain social settings. Gell (1998) asserts that 'things' can function as social agents and that social agency can not only be exercised relative to things, but also by the things themselves (Gell, 1998: 17; see also Latour, 1993). In this Desi community, highly valued objects such as luxury automobiles and high-end electronics are especially instrumental in connoting prestige. If these objects can mark social status, can objectifications do so as well when they circulate? Weiner argues that a possession owned by one person 'exists in another person's mind as a possible future claim and potential source of power' (Weiner, 1992: 10). Her concept 'keeping while giving' examines the social power objects can bestow as they circulate, and how the significance of a particular object can endure beyond the owner to others who are connected to it. Similarly in metaconsumption, objects, as well as objectifications, can potentially shape social status and identity. It may seem paradoxical that people affiliate themselves to objects without actually possessing them, and that such claims would be socially recognized as meaningful. Yet, the ways in which associations with objects are articulated and the visual documentation that support these assertions hold a good deal of currency in this community. A closer look at the composition and character of the middle-class Desi communities in which this occurs will provide a fuller picture of this process.

MIDDLE-CLASS DESIS IN SILICON VALLEY

Over the past several decades, Silicon Valley has been regarded as a dynamic place of innovation (Darrah, 2001). The high-tech field and other industries in this region have shaped local notions of progress and contributed to defining values and aspirations for its residents (English-Lueck, 2002). One outcome of this development has been an exceedingly high cost of living, which has especially affected those working among the lower echelons of the high-tech industry.² During the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s, the high tech industry drew Desi families from South Asia and regions of the South Asian diaspora (Eisenlohr, 2004; Hall, 2002; Khan, 2004; Shukla, 2003) as well as parts of the US and California (Gibson, 1988; Leonard, 1992). The families in my study arrived in Silicon Valley in the late 1970s and early 1980s and represent a range of class backgrounds. I use the terms 'middle-class' and 'upper-middle-class' to indicate a family's class status according to the size of their home, neighborhood, occupation, educational background and English proficiency, though these distinctions tended to be more fluid than completely discrete (Devine and Savage, 2005; Halle, 1984; Liechty, 2003; Skeggs, 2005). Notably, these terms were rarely used or referred to overtly by Desis themselves, despite a concerted focus on material

culture as a marker of wealth. Other similarities – especially religion, language, nationality, and sometimes caste – were far more overt categories around which people formed communities. Geography also organized community formation, as families tended to socialize with those within a 30-minute drive of their homes. Elsewhere I discuss aspects of social life for both middle- and upper-middle-class Desis and examine consumption and language practices in several different middle-class Desi communities (Shankar, in preparation). Here, though, I present examples from one large, middle-class Hindu and Sikh Punjabi-speaking community and draw on upper-middle-class Desi communities for specific contrastive points.

Most middle-class Desi adults were employees of local Silicon Valley technology companies and worked on assembly lines, as janitorial and cafeteria staff, and local delivery people. Occasionally they were partners in small businesses, such as co-owning a convenient mart or liquor store. Until the dramatic crash of the dot.com industry in 2000, these adults had been in this region at least a decade and benefited from ample work opportunities, job stability, and often stock options. The majority of these families occupied the same modest homes they bought over 20 years ago when they moved to Silicon Valley. When they first arrived in the late 1970s and early 1980s, extended families often had to pool their resources and buy homes to be shared by two to three families until they could amass enough capital to eventually own their own homes. By the time I began research in 1999, most middle-class youth lived with their nuclear family and sometimes a live-in grandparent in a single-family home in diverse neighborhoods populated with Asian Americans, Latinos, and African Americans of a similar class status.

Living a far more upscale lifestyle, upper-middle-class Desis mirrored predominant media images of Silicon Valley Desis – as engineers, managers, CEOs, and venture capitalists. In these families, at least one of the parents had an upwardly mobile career, a bachelor's degree or higher, and was conversant in English. During the 1990s when Silicon Valley was still flush with disposable income, upper-middle-class families that had been scattered around Fremont and San Jose had taken their profits from the technology boom and used them to move to newly built gated communities. These professionals lived in large, well appointed homes with luxury automobiles they continually upgraded. Their teenage children attended high-performing public schools with other wealthy Asian American and Anglo American youth, were most often bound for competitive four-year colleges, and aspired to make their mark on the high-tech industry, medicine, or some other professional field.

When the price of Silicon Valley real estate skyrocketed and continued to appreciate rapidly in the late 1990s, most middle-class families could not afford the price of moving into a larger, grander home. Despite their

lack of residential mobility, their home equity and job security during the 1990s afforded them some access to luxuries not typically associated with middle-class living, including luxury automobiles and high-end home electronics. Even the few who had earned significantly more by shrewd investments and business ventures generally remained in their middle-class neighborhoods to be close to family and community. This was the case with Sim Kapoor's family, who owned the CLK and other possessions out of range for most of their fellow community members. Although they could have moved to a gated community in the hills when their family profited handsomely from a business venture, Sim's father explained to me that he preferred to stay close to his brothers' families and friends, and in the neighborhood where he had established his social life. Instead of moving, they renovated their current home and began to buy luxury automobiles. Sim's family, like a handful of other families, had the wealth and lifestyle to no longer be middle-class like the majority of people with whom they socialized, but still considered themselves part of this middle-class community.

Although most middle-class adults in my study were fortunate to hold steady jobs until the 2000 stock market crash and have limited their unemployment to short stints since then, the lack of career advancement for these parents underscored the importance of strong community support, values, and social life outside of work. Their notions of success, progress, and mobility were, like other immigrant groups in the area (Freeman, 1989), community specific and locally defined. Youth in middle-class families by and large aspired to be wealthy but not necessarily through lengthy undergraduate and graduate programs that lead to long-term job stability or upward class movement. As residents of middle-class neighborhoods, these young people went to lower performing schools where getting into a college-bound track could be challenging. Although parents were involved in their children's schooling to varying extents, they were often limited by their own education and lack of knowledge about local school systems.

Unlike upper-middle-class Desi youth, success for middle-class youth was rarely articulated solely in terms of educational achievement or long-term career advancement. More often, parents defined upward mobility as their children having a better life than they did in terms of commodities, homes, and other material acquisitions. Especially in a place like Silicon Valley, where extraordinary wealth had become commonplace, pressure to display success to one's community was compelling. The ability to make money as a means to acquiring these status-conferring items, whether temporary or long-term, was a valued asset. Consumption, an important social practice during the boom, remained so despite economic decline and occurred in particular social contexts, as I discuss later.

COMMUNITY CONTEXTS OF OBJECTIFICATION

Closely-knit middle-class Desi communities can provide an illustrative environment for both displays of consumption as well as the circulation of objectifications about particular objects. These geographically concentrated social circles in which people either knew each other well or were at least acquaintances could number into the hundreds. I identify two overlapping arenas of interaction and circulation – extended family and friends, and youth-specific domains. The first arena consists of middle-class Desis in Silicon Valley who formed tight social networks through frequent socializing and geographical proximity. In the suburban sprawl of Silicon Valley, middle-class Desis regularly made an effort to forge and maintain community ties. Communities generally formed along religious and linguistic lines, which resulted in aggregations of families from Gujarat, Karachi, and Fiji all socializing among themselves. While there was some intermingling, these groups were so large and established that people barely had time to fulfill their own social obligations of weddings, graduations and dinner parties, let alone routinely venture outside of their circle.

For families in this community and others I studied, socializing was not a frivolity or simply a leisure activity; rather, it was a central part of how bonds of community were forged, maintained, and reproduced with the next generation. Seeing friends and family was a daily occurrence, and seldom did days go by without social calls and casual get-togethers. For instance, Mrs Kapoor, mother of Meru and Jasbir, explained to me how her family and her husband's four brothers had all moved from Yuba City in search of more regular and profitable work than in the peach orchards where their family had worked prior to moving to Silicon Valley. The five brothers initially bought and shared two homes in San Jose, and eventually bought three more homes nearby. They have created community out of what looks – to the untrained eye – like undifferentiated track housing, by dropping by each other's homes daily and being intricately involved in each other's lives. On most days at 3 p.m., when she returned from her shift that started at 6 a.m. as a quality inspector at a microfilm company, Mrs Kapoor made *chai* (tea) and *samosas* (savory pastries) in anticipation of the steady flow of family members that subsequently appeared.

Participating in a supportive community was not without its difficulties, including rampant gossip about transgressions, especially concerning youth. As many of the youth in this community attended school together, there was a great deal of peer policing at school – a place usually free from parental surveillance (see Shankar, in preparation). Yet, there was also a sense of solidarity and shared cultural and linguistic practices. Youth used the phrase 'kickin' it' to refer to this time together

and the range of practices it involved. For middle-class Desi youth, kickin' it fostered a sense of closeness between them and the numerous cousins, family friends, and siblings with whom they attended high school (Shankar, 2004a). In this second arena, teens discussed commodities, media, and lifestyle choices and often debated the desirability of certain objects over others. Youth also used this time to discreetly discuss problems and difficulties about school or home life, and other social issues, but seldom as a time to rebel outright against their families' values. This is a departure from studies of college-age Desi youth (Maira, 2002; Sharma, 2004), in which they more readily engage in activities that may not meet parental or community approval. The young people I spoke with did not agree completely with their parents on all points but nonetheless strongly expressed their desire to maintain membership in their community through adulthood.

In family contexts, middle-class Desi youth were socialized to participate in intergenerational, rather than peer-exclusive interaction. They reported enjoying minor and major family and community events, and readily interacted with adults and peers alike. Harjot, a middle-class boy, reported how he spends a lot of his leisure time: 'On the weekends we chill with our grandparents in Yuba City, or with aunts in Sacramento, or in San Jose. We visit family a lot, I have lots of cousins, some are older and done with high school. But we all kick it together.' This sense of ownership and pride in spending time with family and community was a commonly expressed sentiment among the middle-class Desi youth. Gossip, humor, and tastes were often shared between generations, and values and aesthetics were shaped jointly in this context.

These community contexts shape how these Desis practice consumption, and how objectifications can circulate. As Gell (1986) illustrates, consumption practices can conform to prevalent social values in a community. In this case, where some previously middle-class Desis could have used their new wealth to gain entry into higher socioeconomic communities, they opted to maintain bonds of kinship and community instead. Young people were also interested in participating in community-based consumption and display, especially as a means of shaping the aesthetic of a community they intend to remain a part of in the future. Most often, displays of status were accomplished through high-end consumer goods: luxury automobiles, large screen TVs, and other 'big ticket' items. Displays of status also occurred through talk, where verbal affiliation with particular objects owned by extended family members was prestigious as well.

Talk about certain types of objects, such as a new cars or televisions, was far more common than conversations about jewelry or other items they may have inherited – ostensibly heirlooms. If these latter items were owned, they usually surfaced during weddings and other special

events, but were seldom brought into everyday conversation as objects of prestige. While their value was acknowledged, they did not seem to have the same cachet. This was perhaps due in part to the fact that their value was not as easy to ascertain as a new Mercedes, which was unequivocally agreed to be a marker of status in a way antique jewelry or a *sari* may not have been. It may seem paradoxical that middle-class Desis displayed their mass-produced commodities that would soon be replaced by newer models more overtly than potentially unique ones that had endured generations. On this point, Weiner astutely notes that despite capitalism's driving need for obsolescence, people still aim to form inalienable relationships with objects, even mass-produced ones (1992: 155). Kopytoff remarks on this phenomenon as well and asserts that while works of art and other distinctive objects are sure to have histories, homogenized commodities still have biographies and are classified and reclassified according to categories that shift with changes in context (Kopytoff, 1986: 90).

From this perspective, even a mass-produced automobile like CLK, the famed Mercedes of the Kapoor family, has a different significance in this social circle than identical ones may have elsewhere. CLK marks the arrival of some members of the Kapoor family into a lifestyle they had never imagined when they worked in peach orchards in Yuba City 20 years prior to moving to Silicon Valley. In contrast to an upper-middle-class Desi professional who might own the same car, the biography of CLK is particular to the Kapoors' family history and standing in their community. The ways in which this object is discussed in conversation, and how members of the extended family form relationships with it, are specific to this community at this time. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, CLK was emblematic of a broader sensibility that melded aspects of Desi aesthetics as well as an emergent American style called 'bling'.

'Desi Bling' as an Aesthetic Choice. For middle-class Desis in Silicon Valley, style was often a serious preoccupation in which they desired to display aspects of their South Asian heritage while also participating in distinctive local trends. Using an amalgam of youth terminology, I call this aesthetic 'Desi bling', to refer to a depoliticized emulation of hip-hop aesthetic infused with distinctively South Asian elements. 'Bling', a term from hip-hop lexicon, refers to showy diamonds and jewelry that are often part of a broader lifestyle replete with luxury automobiles, branded apparel, high-end electronics, and mansions fitted out with every imaginable amenity. In the late 1990s and early in this century, bling was an aesthetic prevalent in many social environments in the US and worldwide. Indeed, the term has become so widely used in popular media that the Oxford English Dictionary added it to its online update in 2003. Although the term originated from hip-hop, its ubiquitous usage

among northern Californians was usually devoid of the complex racial, class, and gender-based politics of hip-hop music.

Middle-class Desi youth in my study used the word 'bling' or its original form 'bling bling' to refer not only to diamond and gold jewelry, but also to other signifiers of a particular flashy style. These included high-end cars and large SUVs that were fully loaded with top of the line audio systems, seat upholstery, and other embellishments; as well as home theater and sound systems, apparel such as branded clothing, sneakers, and other accessories. While referring to them generally as bling, youth additionally described these objects as 'mad tight' (very stylish, highly enjoyable) and respected people who were able to own them because they made 'hella bank' (lots of money). Some youth reported taking aesthetic cues about bling from hip-hop videos filled with luxury cars, mansions, and fine clothing and jewels, while others credited their hip friends as their motivation to acquire bling. Unlike other Desi youth who have musical aspirations to become hip-hop artists (Sharma, 2004), youth in my study primarily adopted material dimensions of hip-hop style. Youth discussions of style, however, went beyond bling to broader definitions of what it meant to be Desi – from talking, gesturing, humor, and comportment, to clothing and hairstyles, to cars they drove and parties they threw – as a part of their aesthetic. These characteristics worked *with*, rather than *against* styles such as bling.

In this sense, rather than wholly emulating bling, they engaged in bricolage (Hebdige, 1979) by selectively choosing aspects of the aesthetic and combining them with other elements that made them uniquely Desi. Indeed, influences from South Asia and elsewhere factored prominently into defining this style. Anyone who has witnessed a South Asian wedding may recall the dazzling displays of jewelry, gold-embroidered silks, and gilded decorations applied to any surface that can support their weight. Recent Bollywood films, which further this aesthetic by featuring lavish weddings and lifestyles replete with branded items (Ganti, 2004), are widely watched and extremely popular in the South Asian diaspora (Gillespie, 1995; Shankar, 2004b; Srinivas, 1998). Examples of what I am calling Desi bling push these meanings of style even further. In a culture that has long valued jewelry, fine clothing, and other material markers of status, Desi bling is a newer incarnation of familiar styles of consumption that now includes the massive SUV and high-end home electronics that abound in northern California.

Rather than this style remaining distinct to one generational group (Gelder and Thornton, 1997), Desi bling was constructed and shared across generations and molded to meet the specific tastes and standards of this diasporic community. With their families, youth discussed objects they desired, especially cars. The centrality of automobiles in social life (see Miller, 2001) is not to be underestimated in California. Like their

parents and many Californians, Desi teenagers are entranced by automobiles and note their importance in the construction of style. As indexes of Desi bling, cars were a consistent point of focus and commentary. Not only did the youth and their families discuss the cars themselves, but also associated people in their community with specific automobiles. Such intergenerational sharing was both a strategic way for teens to invest in their communities and shape them to their tastes, as well as a method of influencing their parents' purchasing decisions about items about which they felt strongly. In turn, parents often took cues from their teens about cars, electronics, clothing, and apparel. These intergenerational consumption practices play a prominent role in shaping family and community life.

PRODUCTION AND CIRCULATION OF OBJECTIFICATIONS

Desi bling, though easily recognizable to the trained eye, took considerable effort for middle-class Desis to display. For many middle-class Desis, affiliations to Desi bling occurred verbally through objectifications. As I discussed earlier, people talked about objects referentially by describing the physical attributes of an object and how it fitted into an event or lifestyle, and indexically by indirectly signaling a larger aesthetic and lifestyle. Upper-middle-class Desis' lives were filled with Desi bling, and talk about it was occasional and usually referential. Generally people mentioned what they themselves bought, rather than affiliating with their relatives' purchases. Quite the opposite, middle-class Desis used talk as their primary link to objects to which they had limited access. Middle-class Desi youth – especially restricted by their lack of purchasing power – were particularly reliant on this practice to establish connections with objects to which they would otherwise have little access. When kickin' it at school, youth discussed the Desi bling their immediate or extended family had acquired, thus creating and circulating objectifications of these objects verbally. While they occasionally brought photographs to supplement their discussions of Desi bling at school, kickin' it with peers usually did not involve the types of visuals available at home, and occurred in the absence of either objects themselves or images of them. At home, visual media worked together with talk as a mode of objectification through which people displayed and affiliated with Desi bling.

Objectification through Video and Talk. The ways in which objectifications circulate and take meaning apart from the objects themselves will be illustrated through the following examples of metaconsumptive practices. Such practices underscore the closeness of extended families

as they rely on one another to display status to community members. While talk alone was effective to some extent, most youth seemed to prefer the modes of objectification available to them at home, where talk about objects people owned or claimed access to was most often coupled with visual documentation. Visual records of one's family and community (Kolar-Panov, 1996) provided endless potential for repeated group viewings and conversations. Depending on the importance of the event and the financial ability of the host, professional videographers were hired. Accompanied by their own lighting sources and assistants, who sometimes shot additional footage with a second camera, this sort of media documentation captured events in great detail. The coverage was thorough, beginning with passengers emerging from cars that pull up to the venue through the last moves made on the dance floor. Once produced, VHS and DVD copies were made and distributed widely to friends and family. Videotaped weddings, birthday, and graduation parties were reviewed and commented upon in social group contexts. Families watched video recordings of events repeatedly and remarked on what people were wearing, cars in which they arrived, and other parts deemed important. Some family member – usually a teenager – had the remote close at hand in order to pause and rewind for extended commentary on particular guests. The remote holder was also in charge of forwarding through parts not worthy of commentary – usually speeches, religious ceremonies, and dining. This careful manipulation of visuals enabled the most effective commentary – distilled talk about elements worthy of metaconsumption.

Narrating videotapes in this manner enabled people to identify particular objects as Desi bling and verbally link themselves to these items vis-à-vis relationships with their owner. In one such video viewing, I was able to review an event I had initially forgotten – the verbal gifting of CLK to Sim by his father. The professionally produced videotape captured every aspect of Sim's graduation party held at a restaurant by his family with about 200 guests, including myself. The final version of the hours of footage of people dancing, eating, giving gifts, and socializing had been slickly edited and overdubbed with music to the extent that I could barely recognize it as the event I had attended (with the unfortunate exception of finding myself on the dance floor). As I watched with several members of Kapoor family in their living room, they sang along at times to the remixed *bhangra* tracks overlaid to guest arrivals and dining, forwarded through speeches and ceremonial gifting (except to pause on Sim's father announcing his graduation gift of a CLK to his son), and retold the entire event through the images on screen – from the history of every car to the outfits each guest wore.

Associations with particular objectifications contributed to shaping social status for families within their community. During the viewing,

Meru and her younger brother were especially taken with their older cousin's new red Audi convertible, whose arrival they replayed several times. Their close relationship to this cousin was included in the narration. This verbal link, which related the noteworthy Audi and the Kapoors' closeness to its owner, enabled the Kapoors to establish a relationship to the Audi as well. Verbally referencing their cousin's Audi, either while viewing its image or in other social contexts by referring to it as 'our cousin's Audi' or 'our family's Audi', indexed an example of Desi bling that Meru and her brother could not afford, but had some access to through their close relationship to their cousin. As the objectification of the Audi as a Kapoor family car circulated through narratives and video, the aim and expectation of this verbal strategy was for Meru and her brother to become associated with the Audi, and the prestige it communicated, in their community.

Indexing status through these types of verbal and visual objectifications was usually quite deliberate. In the foregoing example, the Audi and its owner managed to arrive during a window of time when they would likely be captured on video and pulled up to the front of the venue where the videographer was stationed rather than simply parking and walking to the entrance. Indeed, the potential status of being captured on video was important to many middle-class Desis who felt they had an object worth their community's attention. Consider the case of Mrs Kalra, a middle-class mother of four girls who confided in me her long-standing desire to own a Lexus. She explained that with their limited incomes and four daughters to care for, a new Lexus was out of their price range, but this did not keep her from wanting it. One Sunday afternoon, I waited in the parking lot of a restaurant, where I was to meet Mrs Kalra and two of her daughters for her niece's *mayan* (a wedding event). As I was on the lookout for their pre-owned Toyota Camry, I watched the videographer hired for the event pan across the lot to focus on a gold Lexus sedan without recognizing its owners.

Like some others in her community, Mrs Kalra's dream to own Desi bling had finally become a reality. Mrs Kalra rolled down her window to wave at the camera while her daughters climbed out of the car. She then pulled into a parking spot and exclaimed proudly, 'We got a Lexus!' When I asked how, Mrs Kalra explained, 'We bought a pre-owned one from 1995. It has 80,000 miles but it looks new, doesn't it?' The ceremony inside the restaurant was starting, but we lingered in the parking lot to appreciate the car's myriad features. Mrs Kalra was interested in having her arrival in the Lexus documented in order to display Desi bling to extended family and friends who would acquire and watch this video. Her daughters were equally invested in being taped emerging from the Lexus dressed in their Desi finery. Objectifications of the Lexus, which perhaps only car aficionados could recognize as being pre-owned, circulated as

they discussed the details of the event at school with their peers, and with friends and families who came to their house to watch the video. In this instance, other relatives could potentially affiliate themselves with the Lexus through its appearance in the videos and their relationship with the Kalras.

In the cases of the Audi and the Lexus, their owners displayed their Desi bling in the interest of generally increasing their status in their community. For some middle-class Desis, ensuring that objectifications reached specific viewers was paramount. For the Chawlas, having the image of their family owning Desi bling circulate to their daughter's in-laws-to-be was very important. The Chawlas, unlike the Kalras and Kapoors, had not accrued as much wealth as their friends. As a single-income family who lived in a small home in a modest San Jose neighborhood, luxury automobiles were beyond their reach. They did, however, decide to purchase a massive projection screen TV as a gift for their son's 28th birthday. Janvi Chawla, his youngest sister, told her friends at school that she and her family had recently gone shopping and bought a TV for her brother, as well as furniture intended to impress her older sister's in-laws to be during her upcoming wedding ceremonies. When she invited her friends and me to come over and see these new acquisitions, she explained that the TV was now to reside at her house, since her brother thought it was too large for his apartment. At her house, Janvi motioned at the new sofa set but quickly guided her friends and me into the kitchen to see the new television. In the corner of the small kitchen that once housed a dining table and chairs sat a giant projection-screen television. The entire kitchen had been rearranged to accommodate it, with their dining table pushed to a corner and chairs placed in various bedrooms. Facing the TV was the old sofa from the living room, as well as a mat and cushions on the floor, together serving as a makeshift eating/viewing area. Now a focal point of their small home, the television had transformed the Chawla kitchen into the central video and Bollywood film viewing location for their family.

For the Chawlas, the projection television became a marker that potentially elevated their status to their daughter's in-laws. A few months later, Mrs Chawla told Janvi to invite me to watch a video of events of her daughter's wedding, which I had attended. '*Baito, baito* (sit down)', Mrs Chawla said to me, motioning at the kitchen sofa as Janvi inserted the videotape and turned on the large TV. Although I was present at these events, I now saw them from a very different perspective. While I recognized several extended family members whom I had met at the events, as a viewer, my eye was continually drawn back to the television, which served as the backdrop of nearly every shot. While we watched, Mrs Chawla instructed Janvi to pause at particular moments as she talked about new members of her family and things they had said about

the Chawla home. She especially remarked about compliments the television had received from her daughter's in-laws, and recalled how she explained to her guests that they had bought it as a gift for their son. The television appeared to be a central personality in various videos of events held in their home, and talk about it circulated along with the videotapes. Even though most viewers of their videotapes would not have the opportunity to see the image of the television on the machine itself, they would likely hear of its biography which Mrs Chawla took great trouble to circulate widely. In this metaconsumptive practice, objectifications of the TV would circulate through the video as well as talk about how and why it was acquired. The social life for this objectification, like that of the Audi, CLK, and Lexus, circulated well beyond those who saw it in person or spoke to the Chawlas individually. The community context in which this occurred enabled a movement of video and accompanying talk that far outlasted single viewings or conversations.

Photographs, Objects, and Narratives. Like videos, photographs were also used to create and circulate narratives about style. Photographs were most often shown in more intimate groups and were less of a spectacle than video tended to be. Photographs often elicited commentary that not only indexed style but also narratives too personal to share in larger groups. During an afternoon visit to Simran and Preeti Kalra's house when their parents were still at work, the two sisters invited me to look at their collection of heavily beaded and embroidered *salwar kameez* (long top with *pyjama*) and *lehenga* (shorter top with skirt) sets that they had purchased for various events. Within minutes they had covered every bit of space in their bedroom, including my lap and their younger sisters', in gleaming outfits of brightly colored embroidered silk. As Simran impatiently smacked hangers against one another, attempting to locate specific items she had in mind, Preeti sat down next to me with a bulging photo album and began detailed descriptions about each outfit. 'I wore this blue one (pointing to the object on her bed) for my *chacha's* (uncle's) wedding last year', Preeti noted as she directed my attention to the photo in which she appeared wearing the outfit. Together with Simran, she began filling in details about the wedding, how her uncle met his bride, the various guests present, and what the rest of her family wore to the wedding. Although the outfits were present in the room, the sisters directed far more attention at the photographs of them, additionally remarking on every guest's ensemble and each automobile that appeared noteworthy. 'That's the Escalade my *chacha* rented to take them from the *gurdwara* (Sikh temple) to my *chachi's* (aunt)'s house for the *doli* (a wedding ceremony). We checked it out inside - it was *hella* (extremely) nice, with a DVD player inside', she said proudly as she pointed to the various interior angles of the SUV pictured and her uncle

regally lounging inside. The sisters explained that these details of outfits, transportation, and similar features were very important to them as they considered their own weddings. Indeed, examining the lifestyles of others not only sharpened the sisters' desire for Desi bling, but evoked aspects of their lives to come.

Photographs were especially useful in this regard, as stories about objects and people could be told in a relatively discreet manner, and were most often done so out of earshot of parents, older family members, and siblings unable to keep secrets. During the photo and clothing viewing in Preeti and Simran's room, Preeti pined, 'For my wedding, I want something like that, but with more *zari* (gold embroidery) on the skirt, you know, like, really bling', as Simran finally found the object for which she had been searching. After shooing her two youngest sisters out of the room and closing the door, she unwrapped a resplendent red outfit and began to narrate a lengthy tale of a marriage that had been arranged for her, about which she had felt ambivalent. Pulling out photos of her prospective match, she looked at them along with the outfit and said that they didn't share the same tastes or sense of style. She didn't feel ready for marriage at 19, and said that this wasn't how she had envisioned her wedding unfolding. She concluded by explaining that she had convinced her parents that she could not go through with the marriage, and so the outfit waited for her in the closet.

In this case, objects, photos, and narrations colluded to express style. The sisters used these together to identify the types of lives they sought to have, and the objectifications to which they were most drawn. Desi bling was displayed through owned objects such as Preeti's ornate wedding outfit, objectifications, including the rented Escalade, and imaginings of the future based on images from past events. Status was here, as in other instances, an important consideration in self-presentation. Aware of the type of weddings she imagined having and the lifestyle they wanted to lead, Simran's preemptive move to not proceed with the marriage worked not only in the interest of her finding a more suitable partner, but also in maintaining her sense of style in this community.

Renting and Imagining Desi Bling. While owning Desi bling or affiliating with objects owned by extended family were preferred options for displaying status, there was also a third possibility: renting. Rented sound systems and automobiles, often newer and more powerful than those people owned, were a readily available way to create a specific style and aesthetic for an event. Though people admitted that these objects were rented, they were nonetheless considered to add value to an event. Stereo systems rented for house parties were reminders that small homes could still sound and appear large for an evening. During a joint birthday party for Lucky and Meru Kapoor, two cousins who were

turning 18, their other cousins decided to rent a sound system that Sim described as 'off da' hook' (unbelievably good). The party was held at Lucky's family's place, a modest, one story home in a crowded neighborhood. Family and friends packed into the small living room with overflow accommodated in the garage and front yard. Guests spent the early part of the evening admiring and complimenting each other's outfits, jewelry, and up-do hairstyles while one of Meru's cousins walked around with a camcorder. As people ate and mingled, Meru and Lucky's cousins began to cart in sound equipment and began setting up. The sound system assumed a significant portion of the room and displaced more guests into the garage and outdoors. The speakers – powerful enough for a nightclub – nearly scraped the ceilings after they were placed on their speaker stands. Remixed *bhangra* music began to pump through the room, popping balloons and reverberating up and down their street. The room soon filled with any and all ambulatory guests who danced well into the night.

As with numerous other videotaped events, this one grew in stature as the video and narratives of the party circulated through their community. Although I attended the party, on my next visit to the Kapoor house, I was treated to a full photo and video show about the party, including a running commentary about noteworthy material aspects, of which the sound system was lauded as a key feature. When family friends who were unable to attend the party stopped by the Kapoor house, they were invited to view the videos and were debriefed on aspects of the party that made it memorable. Remarks about the stereo in this context indexed a broader set of stylistic concerns for the Kapoors. As an extended family that was interested in being known in their community for conducting themselves and hosting events that epitomized Desi bling, the rented stereo accomplished this goal.

As people talked about objectifications of cars, stereos, and televisions in association with certain families, questions of ownership could even fade out of the conversation. Indeed, as objectifications circulated, ownership becomes less central and other types of associations of these participants become more essential. Rented automobiles were especially popular during special events, as arriving at a wedding or a prom in a tight car was a marker of prestige. While watching a video of Meru's uncle's wedding, Meru excitedly described how she and her cousins designed the *barat* (the groom's horseback wedding procession with firecrackers and music), and explained, 'These American horses get scared by the firecrackers and noise, so we decided to do it different. We rented these hella nice cars and drove in them instead.' In the video we watched, one of numerous copies that had been freshly dubbed and distributed to friends and families in the region and beyond, Meru quickly fast-forwarded through the religious prayers in the beginning to

the automobile procession of the mile-long trip to the *gurdwara* (Sikh temple). 'We all had our bling on that day', she noted, pointing to the attractive motorcade and occupants of each car dressed in their finery while her brother and mother chimed in with comments. Although only a few members of the Kapoor family could afford to own such cars, it was a source of great prestige that they were able to rent these cars to perform this *barat* in this style. In this metaconsumptive practice, objectifications of the rented cars embellished by talk during viewing enabled the Kapoor family to become known for staging a far more prestigious ceremony than would otherwise have been possible.

THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF OBJECTIFICATIONS

Metaconsumptive practices can provide yet another analytical dimension to understanding material culture. The analysis I present offers insight into how consumption and language use inform status and identity in this diasporic community, and how an upcoming generation of youth engages in these cultural and linguistic practices to make a place for itself in Silicon Valley. Metaconsumptive practices index family-based, rather than individual identities. The type of prestige garnered by an objectification is seldom sought for an individual; more often such attempts affect an entire nuclear, if not extended, family. Instead of creating a completely exclusionary relationship through owning objects, metaconsumption enables those who do not possess objects some connection to them in the eyes of their community. People acquire and display objects or affiliate themselves to objectifications primarily to gain respect and elevate their social standing *within* their own community, rather than to seek entry into a different group altogether. Middle-class Desi families who had the means to move into an upper-middle-class community opted not to do so because other values prevailed. Indeed, ties of family, caste, religion, and language trumped consumption as a basis for social affiliation. Yet, it is precisely because of these values that metaconsumptive practices are so fraught with meaning. Especially in Silicon Valley, where narratives of prosperity and progress abound while middle-class Desis contend with rising home prices and cost of living, pressure to appear successful to one's community is especially strong. Owning Desi bling or indexing it through metaconsumptive practices constitutes style and connotes prestige in this context. As a prevalent aesthetic during a time of economic boom and subsequent decline in Silicon Valley middle-class Desis, Desi bling offers insight into why people valued certain items enough to not only own them, but to link themselves to their objectifications. Laying claim to objectifications of Desi bling through family or rented objects was not as prestigious as ownership but nonetheless highly valued.

I return to the question of why objectifications should matter enough to circulate in this manner, and what they accomplish socially. Keane argues, 'The multiple uses, mobility, and desirability of objects allows them to extend the agency of their producers and original transactors. But the same properties entail the possibility that they will become detached from their transactors altogether' (1997: 73). In this vein, I have attempted to show how objectifications are reliant upon visual and oral narration for their circulation. Objects with words, rather than instead of words, can convey additional layers of meaning about consumption. Objectifications, which can be ephemeral, are memorialized through visual media and continually signified through talk. To revisit Gell's (1998) assertion that objects can have agency, in certain social contexts, so too can objectifications. Combined with visual images and narratives, they can travel widely and impart status to those associated with them. That objectifications can circulate much further than the objects themselves is amply demonstrated by the fact that, although none of you will most likely ever see or ride in CLK, it has nonetheless made an appearance here.

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Notes

1. The term *Desi* means fellow countryperson and refers to South Asians living outside of the Indian subcontinent (primarily in the UK, USA, Canada, Africa, Australia, Mauritius, the Caribbean, and Fiji). The term does not specify country of origin within the Indian subcontinent.
2. The provocative documentary *Secrets of Silicon Valley* (2001) shows the lesser-reported, often exploitative labor practices of some high-tech companies.

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