Identities on call: Impact of impression management on Indian call center agents

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Abstract

Call center agents located in India present themselves at work in a manner that stands in stark contrast to their non-work identities. The impression management tactics they use include using Western names, foreign accents, and scripts that convey physical proximity to customers. This study examines the cognitive demands placed on call center agents as they manage such impressions. The data show that the cultural differences between customers and agents and the use of a telephone as a communication medium intensified demands on agents. In coping with these demands, the agents reassessed their work and non-work identities. At one end of the continuum, some of the call center agents segmented their non-work identities from their work identities. At the other end, call center agents chose to experiment with and incorporate parts of their work identities into their non-work identities, thereby creating hybrid identities. This article discusses implications of these findings for impression management and identity exploration.

> My family knows I am Jessica, and my sister teases me as Jessica. Aruna and Jessica are *now* the same; I have associated with it for more than a year. Sometimes I pick up phone at home and say, "Hi − this is Jessica speaking." (Female, age 25, tenure 3 years)

To be effective, call center agents who are located in India and service customers in the United States must present personas at work that are very different from their non-work

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identities. Such impression management tactics include using a Western name, embracing a foreign accent, and following scripts that convey physical proximity to customers (Mirchandani, 2004; Pal and Buzzanell, 2008). Impression management serves many purposes in organizations. Individuals engage in impression management in order to develop a professional image (Ibarra, 1999; Roberts, 2005), build credibility in a new work role (Ibarra, 1999), and influence interviewer judgments when applying for a new position (Fletcher, 1990; Gregory and Webster, 1996). Likewise, service providers use impression management to smooth relationships with customers (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993). In this article, I study how call center agents in India use impression management to induce their customers to pay off outstanding debts.

Ideally, impression management "incorporates and exemplifies the officially accredited values of the society" (Goffman, 1959: 35). It is a creative endeavor that takes into account both the target audience and the context of the social interaction (Goffman, 1959). Individuals use audience reactions to verify their identities (Burke and Stets, 1999; Down and Reveley, 2009). In this sense, context appropriate behavior provides legitimacy and coherence for individuals.

Managing impressions effectively can be a cognitively demanding task in any situation. This is because it requires exhibiting strategic behaviors (Baumeister et al., 1989; Bozeman and Kacmar, 1997) that involve "an attempt to affect the perceptions of her or him by another person" (Schneider, 1981: 25). It may include "any behavior by a person that has the purpose of controlling or manipulating the attributions and impressions formed of that person by others" (Leary and Kowalski, 1990; Tedeschi and Reiss, 1981: 3). These demands are enhanced in situations where individuals must switch back and forth between contexts that are very different from one another. This is the case for Indian call center agents who must exhibit a "work identity" that is very different from their "non-work identity." Work identity, consistent with Goffman's interactionist perspective, refers to the self that is present in interactions at work with customers and other organizational members, whereas non-work identity refers to the self that is present in interactions with individuals who are not involved with work.[1]

The use of lean communication media to interact with customers across cultures makes impression management even more complex. Such interactions are becoming increasingly common because cost advantages have driven service arrangements to geographically dispersed locations. Service providers use media such as email and telephones to span time zones and cultures (Aneesh, 2006; Patel, 2010). Lean media are limited in their ability to transmit informational cues, such as facial expression, visual gaze, or overall demeanor of a person (Buzzanell et al., 1996; Daft and Lengel, 1986). Instead, verbal aspects of impression management become important. Over the telephone, for instance, call center agents must be more attentive to voice and aural cues in order to reduce social distance with their customers (Giles, 1973; Giles and Ogay, 2006).

The cognitive demands of such attentiveness during impression management are likely to increase if the audience is perceived to be in a more powerful position (Schlenker, 1980). Indian call center agents perceive power imbalances associated with post-colonial social values as well as bureaucratic supervisory styles. Some researchers view call center work as the subordination of Indian workers to the interests of the Western world (Taylor and Bain, 2005). This effect is rooted in India's historical colonization by the

British and continues to impact the perception of an uneven distribution of power in favor of a Western customer (Bhabha, 1994; Said, 1993). The call center agents feel all the more powerless because of a "Tayloristic" management style that dictates the speed and quantity of their work (Deery et al., 2002; Noronha and D'Cruz, 2009).

These issues surrounding impression management over telephones and across disparate cultures motivate the following question: How do people cope with impression management demands that emerge as a result of fundamentally different contexts? To address this question, I performed an in-depth qualitative study of Indian call center agents. The analysis draws upon multiple strands of literature: impression management, communication accommodation theory, and identity.

The findings of this study confirm that impression management with overseas customers is a cognitively demanding task for the call center agents. Some agents responded to these demands by segmenting their work and non-work identities. Others chose to experiment with and incorporate parts of their work identities into their non-work identities. These findings extend our understanding of how impression management can lead to identity explorations.

The article is organized as follows. First, I review the demands that call center agents in India confront as they try to manage impressions during client interactions. Then, I describe impression management tactics used by the call center agents and the impact these tactics had on the agents. In the discussion and conclusion sections, I explore the implications of the study − specifically how impression management and communication adaptation theories apply in situations where individuals must bridge very different cultural contexts using a lean medium.

Background

Call centers in India

Call centers operating in India are part of a growing software and service industry. As of 2012, this industry comprised 25 per cent of India's exports, generating nearly 2.8 million direct and 8.9 million indirect jobs (NASSCOM, 2012). This sector has had indirect effects on educational reforms in India, growth of the domestic information technology market, and a renewed emphasis on innovation and corporate efficiency (NASSCOM, 2012). Personal income from the jobs created in this manner has fueled demand for luxury goods in a neo-liberalized India (Oza, 2006).

Notwithstanding these economic benefits, some researchers have argued that outsourced services from India represent a form of cultural imperialism and postcolonial Western exploitation. For instance, cheap labor provides Western customers with inexpensive goods and services at a time (night for the agents) that is more convenient for American customers than for Indian service providers (Taylor and Bain, 2005). From this perspective, the call center agents are "cyber-coolies" (Ramesh, 2004) and "the global proletariat" (McMillan, 2006).

Call center agents in India operate under organizationally mandated rules for impression management. These require "accent neutralization," the use of a Western name (or an alias), and the projection of geographic proximity (e.g. Mirchandani, 2004; Pal and

Buzzanell, 2008; Poster, 2007). More recently, however, some call centers have discarded the use of Western accents or names and have settled for neutral accent-based interactions with customers. This study was conducted in a call center where agents were trying to emulate the personas of their Western customers.

Like traditional immigrant workers, call center agents "migrate virtually" for a part of the day; that is, they try to blur the "distances" between themselves and their customers without migrating physically (Aneesh, 2006; Verma, 2006). Noting that issues surrounding economic capitalism tend to dominate social concerns, researchers have begun to question the social impact of call centers. Some suggested that call centers generate hybrid connections with the local culture, opening up a "third space" between Western artifacts and the manner in which they are adapted in the East (Bhabha, 1994; Frenkel and Shenhav, 2003, 2006). Cohen and El-Sawad (2007) proposed that because of the co-existing possibilities for resistance and change, the outsourcing phenomenon lends itself to a fragile order. Pal and Buzzanell (2008) reported emotional anguish among call center agents stemming from the use of Western names and the loss of family time. Others found reassertion of national identity among call center agents when their customers suspected their real national identities and abused them (Das et al., 2008; Poster, 2007). All of these studies point to the utility of carrying out in-depth and comprehensive analyses of the demands that call center agents confront and the impact of their work on their identities.

Impression management demands

Impression management is a goal-focused activity directed toward a target audience (Schlenker and Wowra, 2003). Individuals observe and interpret environmental cues to choose attitudes and behaviors that are most beneficial to their role performance in front of an audience (Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 1980). This social performance includes the use of verbal and non-verbal behavior for individual expression (Goffman, 1955). Strategies that have been noted for successful impression management include drawing on prototypical expert behavior (Ibarra, 1999) or engaging in simulated acts, wherein individuals pretend to align their values with those of a social group or an organization to which they aspire to belong (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993).

Adherence to role-related expectations set forth by the audience confers legitimacy upon the role-holder (Goffman, 1959). As a result, impressions that are appropriate in one context (e.g. when a person is at work) may not be appropriate in another (e.g. when a person is not at work). Audiences at work include customers, co-workers, and supervisors. Individuals may engage in impression management with supervisors to obtain superior performance evaluations, with interviewers to influence their judgments, and with customers to build better relationships. These workplace behaviors (e.g. projecting oneself as respectful or hard-working) may not be appropriate or necessary for goals and audiences in the non-work context (e.g. with family and friends).

Differences in work and non-work contexts are almost always present. However, as noted earlier, call centers script and structure the impressions to be presented to Western customers in stark contrast to the agents' non-work Indian selves. These differences represent a greater distance between work and non-work identities than what an individual confronts in a typical work situation, and place unusual demands on call center agents.

The use of a telephone medium to manage impressions with customers (compared with face-to-face interactions) adds to the agents' impression management demands. Face-to-face interactions represent a rich medium that can bridge different frames of reference, especially when ambiguity is involved (e.g. across cultures) (Daft and Lengel, 1986). During face-to-face interactions, individuals can communicate their attitudes and negotiate their membership in social groups. This is done either verbally, or through social and contextual cues, such as an individual's attire (Pratt and Rafaeli, 1997), or the physical setting, such as the office arrangement (Elsbach, 2003). Such visual cues are known to communicate expertise and credibility to customers (Ma and Agrawal, 2007). Moreover, eye contact and appropriate nods are known to communicate conscientiousness and competence (Burnett and Motowidlo, 1998). All in all, rich media allow for the exchange of more precise and detailed information and convey greater accuracy. Such an exchange leads to a perception of being able to influence negotiations and arrive at collaborative solutions (Purdy et al., 2000; Wichman, 1970).

Much like face-to-face interactions, impression management over the telephone requires synchronicity, whereby individuals have to think on their feet and maintain their "act" throughout. And yet, communicators over a telephone cannot access the visual cues that can guide them in impression management. They also lack the flexibility of computer-mediated communication (e.g. social media) whereby they can exaggerate their social or personal representations. For example, on a computer, individuals may create an "avatar" − an online persona (Bargh et al., 2002) − that conveys status and influence (e.g. Lampel and Bhalla, 2007). Finally, communicators who use telephones do not possess the temporal flexibility of online media for a delayed response (or a gap of silence) without disrupting the interaction (Turner and Reinsch, 2010).

Verbal communication is an integral part of the impression management carried out over the telephone. Consequently, communication accommodation theory (Giles, 1973),[2] with its linguistic and sociological underpinnings, offers a useful way to examine the verbal aspects of impression management strategies. According to this theory, individuals make adjustments in their interactions with others so as to create, maintain, or decrease social distances defined by their social groups (such as cultures, status, or generation) (McCann and Giles, 2006). In the process, communication serves the purpose of both exchanging information and negotiating social category memberships (Giles and Ogay, 2006).

Convergence is an accommodative strategy that participants employ to reduce mutual social distance (Giles, 1973; Putnam and Street, 1984). Convergence is defined as the use of a wide range of linguistic (e.g. speech rates and accents) or paralinguistic (e.g. pauses and utterances) behavior that brings actors closer to those with whom they are interacting (Giles and Ogay, 2006). Divergence, on the other hand, is defined as use of altered speech that distances individuals from their communication partners and emphasizes contrastive group identities (Bourhis et al., 1979; Soliz and Giles, 2012).[3]

To convey appropriate social and contextual cues, telephone users must rely on voice quality, pitch, and volume, and the use of pauses (Purdy et al., 2000). Linguistic choices have the potential to depict a desire to approach and draw closer to preferred individuals, or to avoid and distance oneself from non-preferred individuals (Buzzanell et al., 1996). Interactants must choose their words carefully to convey formality or informality,

credibility and social similarity (Giles, 1973; Reid, 1977), and even script their greetings and personal identification to ensure a smooth interaction (Schegloff, 1977). Appropriate scripts and verbal cues are important in facilitating communication convergence and creating more positive attitudes among the interactants (Buzzanell et al., 1996). Appropriate voice frequency and the ability to communicate dominance or deference demonstrate convergence with higher status partners (Gregory and Webster, 1996). In a cross-cultural communication context, appropriate accent, pauses, and speech rate are necessary to create positive affect between the interactants (Cai and Rodriguez, 1996; Thakerer et al., 1982) and reduce misunderstandings (Giacalone and Beard, 1994).

The use of telephones to provide services is commonplace and increasing because it is a relatively inexpensive communication medium. Call centers have made use of this medium, but have structured impression management to ensure customer service quality. This places demands on agents beyond the ones they confront while interacting with customers from a different culture and working with a perceived lower power status. All they can rely on are the limited cues that the telephone offers to comprehend audiences and shape impressions.

Although emerging literature on service providers/call center agents recognizes impression management demands, it does not pay as much attention to understanding how service providers cope with these demands. This is important to understand because global service arrangements (call centers included) are here to stay and may only increase over time. The remainder of this article describes the study that was conducted and the findings that emerged.

Research method

Research setting

The study was carried out in two call centers located in NOIDA and Gurgaon, both close to New Delhi and home to several outsourcing businesses. The centers catered to multiple organizational clients and handled different types of calls, including sales, help desk, and debt collection. The focus of this study was on medium-term debt collection calls that entailed intense agent−customer interaction.[4] During these calls, the agents urged the customers of client organizations (e.g. a defaulting customer of Safeway) to pay their overdue bills, worked out a payment plan, and attempted to extract a small payment from them. For the agents involved, building trusting relationships with their customers was important in negotiating a settlement.

Each call center agent handled about 200 calls a night in both call centers. A debt collection call that was automatically generated by a computer system would be directed to the first available agent in a queue. The agent would then access the transaction history of the customer on a computer screen. The agent would ask to speak to the defaulting customer. About half of the time, an agent was unable to reach the target person and the call was terminated. There were four distinct phases to a typical collections call: opening, fact-finding, negotiating, and closing. Agents used scripts during the opening and closing segments of a call such as, "Hi, this is (agent name) speaking on behalf of (name of the client company) located in (town in the United States). May I please speak to …?" At that

point, the agent would verify the first and last name of the customer, and state the purpose of his/her call. Then, the agent would review the customer's records and request payment while updating customer data on a computer screen. In closing, the agent would summarize the discussion and reiterate the sum of money the customer had agreed to pay. Customers could interject at any time and terminate the call. As with other call centers, the agents in these call centers were evaluated based on the amount of money they were able to collect and the way that they had handled their calls (Taylor and Bain, 2005).

The agents worked in 10−35 member teams, and each team had a leader. All calls were recorded for quality and security purposes. The agents worked through the night and took breaks that included meals provided free of charge by the call centers. The managers of the call centers noted that the annual turnover rate in the industry averaged around 75 per cent. Job demands were not the primary reason for such high turnover. Instead, turnover was driven by the competitive salaries offered by other call centers − a pattern that is consistent with previous studies of Indian call centers (Thite and Russell, 2010).

The office buildings, like other call centers in India, were furnished with modern furniture and were centrally air-conditioned. Such a work environment was very different from the hot and dusty non-work environment that the agents were exposed to outside the call centers. Moreover, each call center had generators to provide an uninterrupted power supply. This ensured that computers and telephones could operate at all times. There was a high level of security at the entry points to the call centers. No recording devices (e.g. diskettes, tapes, or paper) were permitted to enter or leave the buildings, to ensure that sensitive information, such as social security numbers, credit card details, and bank accounts, would be secure within the premises. The call centers followed all the security requirements set forth by their clients in the United States. I was able to gain access to these research sites through acquaintances in academia and industry. Along with such access came the opportunity to interview call center agents and their managers. I sought special permission to use an electronic voice recorder to record the interviews.

Sample

I chose respondents with the goal of creating systematic variance in the sample. To achieve this, I asked the call center managers to first categorize the entire set of call center agents by tenure, gender, and age. From this list, I randomly selected participants to ensure representativeness. The sample included 52 call center agents, 10 team leaders, and six top management personnel from both centers. I included managers and team leaders to understand the precise nature of the work (e.g. skills required for collections calls), problems confronted by the centers and the industry (e.g. high turnover and rising wages), performance criteria (e.g. revenue generation and call quality), and work practices. The agents ranged in age from 18 to 32 years with an average age of 22. Some pursued college correspondence courses as they worked. Some were married and had children. There was an almost equal distribution across genders in the two call centers, as reflected in the study sample. The average tenure of the agents was 1.2 years in the industry.

Data collection

The call centers operated on three shifts between 4.00 p.m. and 8.00 a.m. to coincide with time zones in United States. I visited the centers when these shifts were most active, between 5.00 p.m. and 4.00 a.m. This time frame offered me access to managers and agents during the peak call center activity periods. I attended team meetings and agent training sessions on: (a) using appropriate voice and accent; (b) handling objections; and (c) exhibiting empathy. The trainings also educated agents about their customers' life-styles (e.g. major holidays and popular sports) and pertinent economic and legal issues (e.g. banking systems and social security).

The interviews with the agents and their managers were semi-structured and lasted for about 30 to 45 minutes each. All interviews were one-on-one and took place in a private office. These private interviews ensured confidentiality and added depth to the data. I shared meals with the agents and traveled with them in company provided transportation so as to observe them during non-work hours more closely. My Indian roots helped me to blend in with the agents, who occasionally slipped into Hindi while conversing with me. This indicated a certain comfort level in discussing difficult issues and their belief that I would be sensitive to the nuances of the Indian culture. In addition to the interviews, I listened to 13 live calls and received copies of 30 recorded calls with customer identities and other sensitive information removed. These additional data helped me cross-validate agent−customer interactions. I took notes based on the recorded calls and used them to verify customer−agent interactions.

Data analysis

Two students pursuing Master's degrees transcribed all the interviews. The transcriptions were between five and 10 single-spaced typed pages per person (overall, 411 single-spaced typed pages). I typed in the field notes myself (22 single-spaced typed pages) and verified the accuracy of all transcriptions against the original voice recordings. I paid close attention to the accents and emphases of the agents, as these provided information about their attitudes and feelings. I used an iterative process of collecting and analyzing the data simultaneously, and seeking new data based on the information deemed important by prior informants. Through such a process, I achieved theoretical saturation; that is, no additional themes emerged with additional data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

I followed the constant comparison method in conducting the analysis. In the first step, I used sentence analysis to unitize the data (interviews and field notes) and looked for the major idea within each sentence (Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 120). This process helped me to identify concepts as they emerged. Using open coding, I grouped the concepts into categories (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). In Table 1, these are represented by first-order categories. In addition, two students read a sub-sample of the coded texts. There was similarity across 85 per cent of the codes. When there was lack of similarity, or if the students perceived that the text required a new code, we discussed the differences. The final code assignment was based on mutual consensus of all three coders. This process alleviated a single researcher bias.

Table 1. Theme illustrations.

First-order categories	Exemplary quotes
Theme 1 (second-order): Presentation preparation	
Accent	I don't have first-hand experience since I've never been to the US. But all the words I try to imitate are based on Hollywood movies and television shows.
	I try to be as real as possible, to sound as real as possible to an average American. If you say "OM-ha" like it is written, they know you're not calling from US. I take advantage of my nasal drawl and I try to drag as far as I can to "Oma-a-ha".
Visualization	I listen to the sounds from the other end – dogs barking or kids crying. It gives me an idea about the family of this person.
	What I find most exciting about this work is that I get to talk to people from a different country. I try to understand their lives. I create an image of this person as I am talking.
Rehearsal	You start living with your name. Once my friend called me at home and I picked up the phone and said "Shirley here," and he said, "Oh, I was trying to reach Preeti." So I tried to make an excuse saying that I was expecting call from a friend who calls me Shirley.
	Some people will carry on the accent outside their work. It all depends on their openness to learning. If I am a person who is open to learning I will carry my accent with me all the time.
Theme 2 (second-order): Customer feedback	
Negative feedback	People think we are taking away American jobs … they shout at us, they don't want to talk to us.
Positive feedback	Sometimes I get an appreciation call because I have been able to help out a person. The person says, "God bless you" and that makes my day.
Theme 3 (second-order): Segmentation	
Physical and mental	I am a different person at home and a different person at work. I don't think I want to mix the two. I come here to work, I work and then I leave.
	At first when I used that accent I thought people will ask, "Are you OK?" My mom and dad would laugh at me. So I would not use the accent outside work.
Theme 4 (second-order): Hybridization	
Cultural attitudes	I like the US culture. There is a lot of openness in expressing thoughts and feelings. People are honest about their feelings. I have started respecting other people's emotions in India as well. I have started empathizing (even though it is in Hindi).
	When I first started working I would get upset talking to people who were divorced. There is so much divorce in US and you get to hear things like "I am a stepfather or I am a stepdaughter." I was not used to it. But now my thinking has changed, I now accept that divorce is OK.

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

First-order categories	Exemplary quotes
Self-esteem	Jim (alias) has made Arun more confident … I am able to handle different kind of people. I can now speak without nervousness.
Consumptive imitation	This is good – you see more American type of behaviors. Some places in Delhi, such as the mega-malls and multiplexes, look American – like any other developed country you see in the movies. I know many people in my office who have taken a home loan, have their own vehicles. If they've been at a call center for three to four years they all have cars. People are thinking, "Before I get married, I should have a house and a car."
Independence	People have become more confident; girls are working at night. This is very unusual for our Indian society. I enjoy who I am and what I am doing. I am not the same as I was when first joined. I can take care of myself, just like the Americans.

Next, I carried out axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), whereby I searched for relationships between and among the sub-categories at a conceptual level. I categorized them into higher-order themes (second-order codes, Table 1). This process facilitated quick reference to similar concepts and their representative examples that could be collapsed into fewer categories and themes.

Having determined the dominant themes, I moved to the next level of analysis and looked for relationships across the themes. To facilitate this process, I iterated between the data and existing literature to determine possible explanations for these relationships. This analytical strategy helped to clarify the dynamics associated with impression management over the phone and the impact it had on those involved.

I shared a summary report of the findings with managers from both call centers. Their reactions confirmed and helped to elaborate the findings. For example, the managers indicated that they were aware of accent changes among some agents and that they would encourage these agents to assume trainer roles; they corroborated the difficulties of night shifts and the stress that these entailed. They also confirmed growing independence among the agents.

Findings

The data and analyses demonstrate the presence of cognitive demands associated with impression management strategies (including the use of an alias, rehearsal, and visualization) used by the call center agents as they interacted with their customers. In coping with the demands, some agents segmented their work and non-work identities. Others chose to experiment with and incorporate parts of their work identities into their non-work identities. I discuss these findings in this section.

Cognitive demands in impression management

Use of an alias. The strategies that the call center agents used to manage impressions were similar to those documented by past researchers (e.g. Mirchandani, 2004; Pal and Buzzanell, 2008; Poster, 2007; Taylor and Bain, 2005; Thite and Russell, 2010). Following organizationally mandated rules, the agents used scripting, locational masking, accent neutralization, and aliases of their choosing. These convergence-seeking strategies were meant to create an impression of geographic, temporal, and contextual proximity in order to reduce the social distance between the agents and their customers (Giles, 1973). Past research suggests that perception of reduced social distance can lead to higher trust and cooperation between the interactants (Ma and Agrawal, 2007; Putnam and Street, 1984).

In analyzing the data, I focused on the meanings that the agents attached to the organizationally mandated rules and the impact impression management had on them and their customers. For instance, the aliases that the agents used contrasted sharply with naming conventions in India. Indian names are often based on religious and social identities (Nandy, 2002). Assuming a different name can potentially signify not only a different nationality, but also a different religious affiliation, thereby generating dissonance (Das et al., 2008; Pal and Buzzanell, 2008). Perhaps it was an attempt to reduce such dissonance that the agents in this study tried to justify their choice of Western names. Sometimes, their choices indicated a desire to be viewed as a sophisticated person with a high status. One agent noted:

> To me, my name Williams is British – I thought of Prince William when choosing my alias. People in America think the British are more sophisticated. I thought that customers might think that I am calling from UK. It is better than being called Andy or Rogers, Williams is more sophisticated. I think of myself as royalty – it helps me get into the psyche of Steve Williams. (Male, age 22, tenure 13 months)

Other agents reported that their Western names and accents gave them the necessary confidence to interact with their customers. For example, one call center agent reflected upon how her alias cued her to use a Western accent and that these linguistic and paralinguistic strategies offered convergence possibilities to her with her customers (Giles and Ogay, 2006):

> My alias really helps me get into the psyche of the customer. If I was to say "Hi, I am Paromita calling," then I feel like an Indian; but, if I say "Hi, I am Christine calling, sir," you see, my voice changes! So having a different name really helps in placing me closer to the customer. (Female, age 22, tenure 30 months)

"Getting into the psyche of the customer" helped her better prepare and experience reduced power differences which placed her "closer to the customer," that is converge with the customer (Cai and Rodriguez, 1996; Gopal et al., 2003). The agent associated a specific accent with her traditional Indian name. But she noted the confidence in her voice as she switched to "Christine." These examples provide evidence that impression

management rules not only legitimize the imitation of a Western persona, but also facilitate conveying the impression. By using rule-specific names and accents with a telephone medium, the agents could in fact construct temporary imaginary avatars of themselves, analogous to what individuals create in social media with computer assistance. These avatars were advantageous for the agents in conveying status and power to their customers (e.g. Lampel and Bhalla, 2007).

Rehearsal. Another strategy evident in the data was the deliberate rehearsal of impression management rules. For instance, I witnessed some call center agents rehearsing their accents as I rode on the bus with them on my way back from the call centers. Deliberate rehearsal is a process that engages a person's cognition and memory (e.g. Paivio, 1971; Sternberg et al., 2009). The continual rehearsals made the agents' simulations of their impressions less effortful in front of difficult audiences, especially at a time of night when it was not easy to remain focused. Such cognitive demands go beyond the demands placed on call center agents in the United States, where employees do not have to assume surrogate identities or work at odd hours of the night.

   As illustrated by the comment from a different call center agent at the beginning of this article ("Sometimes I pick up phone at home and say, 'Hi, this is Jessica speaking'"), other agents also reported that they answered their home telephones as if they were at work. Impression management rules became deeply internalized and habitual after a certain point in time. Stated differently, and drawing from Goffman's (1959) observations, constant practice "back stage" helped the agents perform "front stage."

Visualization. Visual cues are known to have a powerful impact on triggering identity-related thoughts and behavior (Dutton et al., 1994; Elsbach, 2003; Pratt and Rafaeli, 1997). Not only were relevant contextual cues absent at the call centers but, more problematically, cues that were present were asymmetric to customers' contexts. The agents encountered co-workers who wore traditional Indian clothes, ate Indian food, and exchanged stories about their traditional families. These contrasts were exacerbated by different physical environments at work and at home. One call center agent observed:

> In India, electricity is not guaranteed. You go home and find there is a power cut. It is hot and humid and it is difficult to sleep after a full night's work. The power cuts can last anywhere from a few hours to a few days while the temperature outside is 40° [C]. But when I am here, I forget all that. (Male, age 24, tenure 10 months)

The agent had to first make a conscious attempt to suppress the ambient cues outside of work and then position himself within appropriate work-related cues. With summer temperatures hovering around 40° C, the agent tried to forget what returning home would be like.

   The call centers facilitated symmetric imagery by placing pictures of the client organizations, cities, and products near the agents' cubicles. The clocks on the call floor displayed the time zones of their customers. During their training, the agents saw videos depicting their clients' environments (e.g. the surroundings in Chicago). Some of the agents reported visualizing customers' surroundings to "psych" themselves up (see Table 1 for other examples). One call center agent noted:

> You really visualize … when you call a customer. I think about what he or she would look like. Is she a nice lady? Just by [listening] to their voice, I think this person seems to be very nice. Sometimes, there will be doors creaking. The doors creak, and I imagine a cottage with snow on the roof. It makes me imagine about the people there. What would they be doing, a nice family, a nice backyard … (Female, age 25, tenure 2 years)

The image of a cottage and snow are atypical of the Indian context. Yet, over the phone, this agent tried to situate herself close to her customer simply by paying close attention to the aural cues. Some agents mentioned constructing a mental image of the face associated with the voice over the telephone. The agent had limited cues to understand the customer's context, and yet these cues were important in shaping the interaction. In contrast, the presence of visual cues during face-to-face meetings would have obviated the need for such imagery.

The use of an alias, practice, and visualization all added to the cognitive intensity of impression management as the agents interacted over a lean medium with customers across cultural and linguistic boundaries. This was consistent with the work requirements, that is, the importance of gaining customers' compliance. It is important to note here that issues surrounding power asymmetries between East and West may have continued to prevail even though the call center agents were the ones who were collecting outstanding dues from their customers. Medium-term debt collection is different than simply helping a customer to book an airline seat or fix a computer problem. It is not an interaction in which information is exchanged. It is one in which payments must be negotiated and the negotiation implicates power between the interactants. Clients, who for historical reasons are viewed as being more powerful, push back, and call center agents must carefully maneuver this power play. In addition, the incentive structure of collections calls in which agents are paid based on the amount collected makes the agents all the more cautious, yet eager to seek accommodation from their customers.

Customer reactions

Both interview data and call observations suggested variance among customer reactions. Some customers responded neutrally, whereas others were curious about the agents' locations and their identities. The customers were especially reluctant to share personal information when they suspected that the agents were strangers halfway around the world. Some expressed anger at the loss of American jobs overseas. Many customers reportedly doubted the agents' competence. At times, the feedback was explicit and unrestrained, even insulting and confrontational.

Negative feedback signaled an impression management failure to agents and accommodation avoidance by customers (McCann and Giles, 2006). The following quote reflects one such instance:

> People resent call agents from India. Perhaps they think that we are good for nothing people, we can't even spell their names right. There was this one person I spoke to. I told him I am Indian. I asked him "May I have your name please?" "My name is John …," and he actually spelled the word J-o-h-n for me! … it is not like we are living in the dumps here. (Female, age 25, tenure 2.5 years)

The agent perceived that the customer subscribed to cultural stereotypes through remarks such as "we are good for nothing" or "living in the dumps." The stereotype communicated inadequate competence and education of Indians. As literature suggests, an individual's identity is embedded within a social group (Tajfel, 1981), as well as within a national identity (Das et al., 2008). Thus, when their social group or a national identity was attacked, it is very likely that the agents took it personally.

On a different note, this particular quote also illustrates the limitations of lean media in generating legitimacy, even when an individual may be able to communicate authoritatively (Mitra, 2002). Trust can be betrayed easily when a customer concludes that a person is not who he or she claims to be. As Goffman (1959) points out, such failures to convey impressions consistent with one's role can cause individuals to lose their right to enact that role; this could have been threatening to the agent.

Then there were instances when the agents questioned the very reason for subjecting themselves to situations where their work and non-work identities could come under attack. For example, one relatively inexperienced agent noted:

> People shout at me and curse me. Sometimes, I wonder why I am taking all this crap on behalf of [name of company]. I don't even know where it is or what Minnesota [company headquarters] looks like. Why am I doing all this to myself? Sometimes they call us "bloody Indians." (Female, age 23, tenure 1 year)

Here the agent felt that the very customer that she was trying to impress devalued her non-work identity. The racial undertones of this incident are consistent with Taylor and Bain's (2005) findings that when international customers discover that a call center agent is from India, they respond with anger laced with racism.

Feedback of this kind from customers illustrates the demands of impression management in the presence of a difficult and/or unknown audience. For the agents involved, it became apparent that contexts are difficult to understand, power asymmetries are reinforced, and lean media are difficult to navigate.

Impact of impression management

The data suggest that the agents tried to cope with scripted impression management demands in different ways. At one end of the continuum, some agents reinforced partitions between work and non-work contexts to combat the threat of negative feedback to the agents' non-work identities. At the other end of the continuum, because impression management offered the agents a new way to think about themselves, some agents incorporated customer characteristics into non-work contexts, thereby creating hybrid identities (e.g. Frenkel and Shenhav, 2003; Ibarra and Petriglieri, 2010).

Segmentation. Negative customer feedback signaled failed impression management efforts and resulted in agent discouragement. Almost all call center agents received feedback of this kind. However, some (36% of the sample) felt particularly threatened by it. Consistent with previous findings (e.g. Breakwell, 1983; Kreiner et al., 2006), these agents evaluated and sought justification in customer feedback. Some agents reported

taking steps to reinforce existing boundaries between their work and non-work identities, whereas others devalued the importance of the feedback. For example, the data suggest that several agents used the office building as a cue to partition their work and non-work identities. When they entered the call center buildings, these agents began associating with their aliases and when they left the building they switched back to their non-work identities. Their interpretations of their work roles also helped them create these partitions. For instance, as one agent reported: "For me, this is a job. I have to take care of my family. I do my job and I leave. I don't care if I have to pretend to be someone I am not" (Male, age 30, tenure 6 months).

This particular agent who had worked for only six months was willing to accept the mandated role requirements. But, he was clear that he was not going to let these requirements impact his non-work identity. By minimizing the significance of his work alias, he was able to preserve his non-work identity even as he maintained a productive work identity.

Other agents used their aliases to remind themselves of the two distinct contexts characterized by presence or absence of emotional restraint. For example:

> Karen has taught me not to lose patience with people, but Kiran [real name] is not a professional person – I lose temper with my friends, and I can be myself. When I am offline, but still at work, I insist that people call me Kiran. I love my name and wouldn't have people call me Karen. (Female, age 22, tenure 8 months)

The agent here found her non-work identity to be an escape from the rigid requirements of impression management rules at work. The agent associated different identities to her non-work name and to her work alias. In signaling an attachment to her non-work identity, she sought reinforcement from her friends and family by insisting that they call her Kiran.

Agents such as Kiran exemplify restraint by their displays of patience and courtesy towards more powerful customers (McCann and Giles, 2006). They are compelled to conform to work norms (i.e. reluctantly accommodate) so customers do not feel uncomfortable (Soliz and Giles, 2012). Indeed, the outward display of desired behavior was inconsistent with how they personally would have liked to respond to their customers. The quote from Kiran draws attention to a possible motivation to segment work and non-work identities.

Some agents questioned the importance of work rules that subjected them to situations where their non-work identities could be attacked. Previous research noted that when confronted with a threat to their self-worth, individuals may reconstrue the feedback and devalue its importance (Breakwell, 1983). This is evident in the observation offered by a respondent:

> After all, it's just business. Why don't we use our original names or whatever? Why are we hiding the fact that we are from India? We should openly say that we are calling from India; everyone knows that. After all, Indian engineers and doctors work in the US and they are respected. Why should we hide our identities? (Male, age 29, tenure 9 months)

In this particular instance, the agent felt that he would be able to display his competence and perform his job without having to rely on the simulated accent or a Western identity. He pointed out that customers in the United States were familiar with Indians; Indian engineers and doctors were perceived as competent and did not have to suppress their non-work identities. In the process, the agent devalued the importance of the impression management rules, suggesting that he was unwilling to let his non-work identity be impacted by these work rules.

Hybridization. At the other end of the continuum, agents (23% of sample) were inclined to experiment with parts of their work identities in their non-work context and evaluate reactions from those around them (Ibarra, 1999). They would then consider incorporating the personas mandated by impression management into non-work contexts. These hybridizations were evident in changes in their attitudes (e.g. towards money), self-esteem (e.g. feeling more powerful and independent), and behaviors (e.g. using a foreign accent) (Table 1). Some agents were intrigued by the possibilities that their work identities opened up for them. They demonstrated their newly acquired Western accents and mannerisms to family and friends. One agent reported having fun with her accent in the presence of her family, who reinforced this behavior: "My family knows that my alias is Kathy. Sometimes they ask me, 'Why don't you talk to us like Kathy?' I will imitate Kathy, if I am in a good mood" (Female, age 23, tenure 20 months).

The agents' interactions with customers also made them aware of other speech patterns that they could adopt with their family members. One female agent, who had been working for two years, observed how she found herself using words like "sweetie" or "baby," and conversing at a slower pace, much like her American customers. She reportedly found this to be more appealing as she interacted with those around her.

For some call center agents, work provided an opportunity to live vicariously. One agent commented on her use of a Western accent when shopping:

> I'm proud to have that accent. You know, when I go shopping, I sometimes speak with an American accent, and *then* people notice me. I think in India, we go ga-ga for anything that has to do with the "firangs" [foreigners] − the American ways. (Female, age 26, tenure 3 years)

The use of an acquired accent allowed this agent to present herself to those around her as a more powerful affiliate of Western culture (i.e. a "firang"). Having practised the accent for three years, it had become effortless for her to use the accent while shopping. Speaking English in India continues to be a symbol of success (Cohen and El-Sawad, 2007; Poster, 2007), offering the youth in small towns and rural areas credentials for upward mobility (Oza, 2006). The organization's work rules had enabled the agent to develop English competency. As this agent experimented with her new behavior, she experienced favorable outcomes. Interestingly, the same skills that helped her (and other agents) converge with their customers at work were now useful for diverging from her non-work audiences. Through this divergence, the agent was able to increase social distance and communicate her upwardly mobile status to merchants as she shopped (e.g. Giles, 1973). Although asymmetric with her non-work audience, the agent's skills at using a Western accent offered her a view of a possible self (Markus and

Nurius, 1986). These examples of experimentation are similar to what Ibarra (1999) called creating provisional selves, where individuals experiment with new behavior and look for reactions from those around them about who they are becoming.

But, beyond comfort with their names or their accents, the data reveal an even deeper connection to aliases among the call center agents. Consider the following statement:

> My friends from work call me Sandra. Yeah, that has become a part of me now − Sandra. I am more of myself when someone calls me Sandra. I can recognize that's me. I carry it with myself when I go home. My family says, "Keep that in your office and when you come back home, come as Sangeeta." I say, "After two years don't expect me to do that now." It's been really hard for me to get Sandra into Sangeeta. Now it's difficult to get her out of my system. (Female, age 24, tenure 3.5 years)

Getting *into* Sandra had proved to be challenging for this agent. Even when she was not working and even when she confronted family resistance, this agent now found it difficult to separate her non-work identity from her work identity. Her attempt at managing impressions had taken its toll. The cognitive effort that she had expended over three and a half years ("It's been really hard for me") led to blurred boundaries between the call center agent's work (Sandra) and non-work identities (Sangeeta). In fact, enforcing these boundaries was now proving difficult for her.

The agents identified other similarities between their non-work and work identities. The agents observed how their work identities had infiltrated into their non-work identities – now characterized by financial freedom and sophistication. Six of the call center agents noted the impact of credit-based living in the West on their own spending habits and how these contrasted with their parents' habits. This view is consistent with the historically conservative norms of credit use in India, where debt is traditionally associated with exploitation by unscrupulous moneylenders (Naponen, 1992). Families strongly discourage spending beyond a person's means. However, because of their exposure to the possibilities of obtaining credit cards and bank loans, and their understanding of lending regulations, the agents reported a growing ease with borrowing money. For some of the agents, the possibility of owning a house or a car early in their careers was an attractive option. They reported that their friends also lived on credit, and that they felt it was important for them to be a part of this group. Mega-malls and multiplexes offering international name brand goods had become favorite places to meet friends. These findings validate reports from earlier studies that call center agents hope to achieve material advancement and high social status (Pal and Buzzanell, 2008).

Three female agents mentioned that they had moved into their own rental apartments to shorten their commutes to the call centers. One noted how living away from her family within the same city was a departure from the cultural norms in India where young women live in tightly knit family structures. Her parents were not comfortable with her living independently, as such a lifestyle provokes negative stereotypes of socially immoral women in India (Fernandes, 2006: 165; Patel, 2010). The agent noted that she had interacted with several young women living independently in the United States, and that knowledge had made her comfortable with her decision. Her experiences and explanations were consistent with the view that women in a neo-liberalized India

associate "modernity" with confidence and assertiveness (Oza, 2006), and that living on one's own is one such marker of independence.

Evidence of parts of the work identities permeating the agents' non-work identities was particularly strong among those who had been working as call center agents for over 2 years (among the 78% of those who had worked for over two years in any call center). From the reports of the agents, one can only infer that changes were occurring at a deeper level: in their attitudes toward money, family relationships, and lifestyles.

Discussion

Impression management can place cognitive demands on individuals under any circumstances. These demands arise from the choices that individuals make as to how they would like to present themselves in the contexts that they confront. In this study, because of scripted rules, the agents did not have a choice about what information they could offer or leave out. Other sources for cognitive demands included cultural differences, their perception of power imbalance, and unfriendly responses from customers. Exacerbating these demands was the lean medium that the agents used to connect with their customers. Nuances such as tone of voice were the only way to gauge a customer's level of accommodation (Giles and Ogay, 2006) in collecting outstanding dues.

Impact of impression management

In response to impression management demands, the call center agents sought out appropriate coping strategies, the outcomes of which lay on a continuum. At one end of the continuum, the agents chose to reinforce boundaries between their work and non-work contexts (i.e. the segmentation approach). At the other end, the agents experimented with images that they projected to their customers, absorbing parts of their customers' attitudes and behaviors into their non-work identities (i.e. the hybridization approach).

The literature offers insights as to why the agents may have segmented their work and non-work identities (Breakwell, 1983; Goffman, 1959; Kreiner et al., 2006; Swann, 1983). For one, agents' work identities were devalued when their customers doubted the legitimacy and competence of the agents. Moreover, many customers communicated social distance from the agents even as the agents were compelled to carry out norm-appropriate communications (McCann and Giles, 2006). These reactions motivated the agents to question the validity of the organization's impression management rules. At the end of their work day, the agents transitioned from their work identities to their non-work identities using the cues of their office buildings and their aliases (e.g. Kreiner et al., 2006). Likewise, previous research shows the importance of visible markers, such as work uniforms (Pratt and Rafaeli, 1997), or office decor (Elsbach, 2003), that individuals use in boundary management across different social contexts. In the case of the call center agents, too, it appears that role transitions were enabled by physical markers and their aliases. The segmentation was particularly evident in those who were threatened by attrition in their non-work identities. However, the contextual differences between their work and non-work identities made them aware of their preferences and helped them decide how to define their identities.

At the other end of the continuum, call center agents ended up with hybrid identities that emerged as they operated in a "liminal space" (Bhabha, 1994). As Bhabha (1994: 4) noted, interaction between the East and the West "opens up the possibility of cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy." The impression management rules from work permeated into non-work contexts. The call center agents' interactions with Western customers generated hybrid identities, a "third space" between Western artifacts and the manner in which they were adapted in the cyber colonies (Frenkel and Shenhav, 2003, 2006). This liminal space represented a transitory and a transformative phase for the agents. In this liminal space, the agents could experiment with or play-out a possible self, without fear of violating any rules imposed by their work (Ibarra and Petriglieri, 2010). This was evident in the agents' willingness to carry their work identities to non-work contexts where they were not bound by impression management rules (e.g. independent living arrangements, foreign accents, confidence, and a positive attitude towards loans). They were also comfortable with friends calling them by their alias names. In other words, some of the agents were willing to experiment with the social identities that their names represented (e.g. Das et al., 2008).

However, one caveat must be noted. The emergence of a hybrid identity cannot be solely attributed to an agent's interactions with Western customers. The agents had been exposed previously to Western advertisements and television programs aimed at convincing Indian consumers to embrace "modernity" (Fernandes, 2006; Oza, 2006). As Oza (2006: 82) noted, "The consumer goods came to articulate a discourse in national status and worth" in a neo-liberalized India, and "the coveted foreign-made goods fed growing middle class aspirations of upward mobility and success." Moreover, a higher disposable income offered the agents the means to increase their consumption patterns and adopt a lifestyle that was consistent with their customers in the United States. Ironically, in doing so, the agents overlooked the consequences of reckless spending that their debt-ridden customers confronted and exposed themselves to similar outcomes.

Differential coping

Why did some agents segment their work and non-work identities while others did not? After all, they were all exposed to similar work conditions. The current data do not offer a conclusive answer to this question. Nevertheless, the data do suggest certain tentative explanations that offer promising avenues for future research. Specifically, it is possible that the tenure of the call center agents and their work engagement may determine whether or not they segment or hybridize their identities.

The data also indicate that the cognitive toll from the need to manage impressions was all the more enhanced for the agents who were new to their jobs as they were concerned about using appropriate words and accents. However, this changed over time as the agents gained experience and customer interactions required less effort. In this regard, Hochschild (2003) and Elfenbein (2007) noted that when service providers must display emotions that are inconsistent with their feelings, such displays require less effort with experience. Similarly, the agents in this study became more confident in their customer interactions over time. Their experiences had routinized the process of presenting themselves (e.g. Schlenker and Wowra, 2003), reducing the drain on their cognitive resources.

And, as this occurred, the agents became open to exploring hybrid identities in their non-work domains (e.g. using their accents with family or feeling comfortable living independently).

In the context of a qualitative study, it is difficult to fully tease out all the mechanisms underlying these possibilities. Because of the high turnover rate in the industry, it was not possible to track the agents for an extended period of time, and this is a limitation of this study. Based on the data, it is difficult to say whether the changes in the agents' identities were transitory or permanent. For instance, it is possible that the call center agents, once they quit their call center jobs, reverted to their earlier attitudes and behaviors. Drawing such conclusions would require a researcher to begin with a large sample size and engage in persistent tracking as the agents move from one organization to another over a long period of time.

Research implications and contributions

In almost all professions, individuals are required to present a front that is audience-specific. This is consistent with context-appropriate impression management (Goffman, 1959; Leary and Kowalski, 1990). However, given the vivid differences that the Indian call center agents confronted between their work and non-work contexts, and the limitations of the lean medium that they used, impression management became especially demanding. To cope with these demands, the agents had to manage their role transitions carefully. The agents either created boundaries between work and non-work identities, or allowed their impression management techniques at work to permeate into their non-work identities. These findings speak to the circumstances under which impression management may lead to identity exploration in the form of either segmentation or hybridization. They also suggest potential for examining identity dynamics associated with accommodation (or non-accommodation) that lie at the core of interactions, as communication accommodation theory suggests (Giles and Ogay, 2006).

In addition, the study extends our understanding of the social impact of call center work. Previous work (e.g. Mirchandani, 2004; Pal and Buzzanell, 2008; Poster, 2007) identified the use of structured work rules and the impact these can have on family lives or individual identities. This study digs deeper into the underlying causes for such outcomes. It shows that the cognitive demands entrenched in rehearsal and visualization, as well as the processing of customer feedback, led to identity exploration. Moreover, whereas previous studies noted actual or hoped for changes in the call center agents' behavior, this study identifies the role of tenure in moving people towards hybridization.

In making these contributions, the article brings together many strands of literature that complement each other to show how impression management can lead to identity exploration. Some of the insights from this study highlight the complementarity between communication accommodation theory and impression management literature. Specifically, impression management literature focuses on presentation choices individuals make to create a favorable impression on their audience. In this study, much of the presentation was mandated by the organization, and the agents had to cope with the demands of work rules. Communication accommodation theory draws particular attention to the linguistic and paralinguistic cues that individuals use in this process.

Adding to the complementarities of these two literatures are the insights offered by the cognitive psychology literature. The data show that in addition to the behavioral aspects of using names and accents, conscious visualization and rehearsals can also play an important role in impression management. In sum, the study highlights the benefits of utilizing insights from these different literatures.

The study adds to the identity, impression management, and communication accommodation literature in other ways by examining the complexities associated with interactions across a lean medium and across cultures. Use of a telephone medium limits the cues available for impression management. At the same time, it provides a degree of anonymity and freedom that allows individuals to be creative in their presentations. These dynamics make us aware of the issues involved in impression management in situations where work is carried out across international boundaries.

At a broader level, the study illustrates how organizational practices have an impact on identities that extend beyond the work context. Most of the cross-cultural management research is based on the premise that cultural context is (or should be) a determinant of organizational practices (e.g. Hofstede, 1994). As such, the emphasis has been on choosing culturally appropriate practices to ensure individual or firm effectiveness. The results from the current study demonstrate that organizations sometimes impose practices that are antithetical to local cultures, norms, and behaviors. A potential outcome of such practices is to create a sub-culture within the non-work context. Thus, the study provides another lens to view cross-cultural management research whereby organizational practices may influence local culture.

Transferability of findings

The focus of this study was on call center agents from India. I examined impression management in a relatively unique setting, that is, a setting with vast cultural differences between call center agents and customers that had to be traversed using a lean communication medium. The patterns noted in this study may be transferable to other settings and occupations in which individuals are compelled to carry out impression management that is incongruent with their non-work identities.

One such example is that of international expatriates who are encouraged to behave in accordance with local values and norms (Maertz et al., 2009). What is considered important for gaining accommodation in one culture (e.g. respect for hierarchy) may not be as important in another. This is because social structures, practices, and values affect individual communication in culturally distinct ways (McCann and Giles, 2006). Therefore, impression management strategies are an important aspect of cross-cultural training and the expatriate preparation process (Giaclone and Beard, 1994). Use of these strategies reduces social exclusion and psychic distance of expatriates from co-workers and customers, and facilitates assimilation into the local context (Mendenhall and Wiley, 1994).

At the same time, other studies reveal the difficulties expatriates have experienced in readjusting to their home countries upon their return because of a newly developed preference for the host country culture (Sussman, 2000). However, we have little information concerning the long-term effects on expatriates' identities when they engage in

culturally appropriate impression management. With globalization, such inquiries become increasingly relevant. The findings from this study can help inform future studies in this and other related areas.

Conclusion

This study adds to the growing evidence concerning the social impact of call center work on Indian call center agents. It describes how work and non-work identities become susceptible to reassessment, particularly when agents manage impressions across highly dissimilar contexts using a telephone medium. The results hold implications for work carried out across increasingly porous geographic boundaries. As we move toward global workplaces where most work is conducted via increasingly lean media, it raises the question regarding how individuals might manage identities associated with multiple social realities simultaneously.

Notes

1   At the risk of oversimplification, I restrict the contexts that individuals confront in their daily lives to work and non-work. Indeed, individuals confront multiple contexts even within their work and non-work contexts.
2   I thank an anonymous reviewer for these inputs.
3   Other strategies that signal lack of accommodation include maintenance (persisting with the original style), underaccommodation (unwillingness to appreciate needs of recipients), and overaccommodation (characterized by diminutives or patronizing talk) (e.g. Giles and Ogay, 2006).
4   By comparison, in long-term collections, agents interacted with habitual defaulters or customers with low probability of debt payment. The agents tracked down the defaulters, warned them of repercussions, and were permitted to use subverted threats to extract payments, without a need to build rapport. In short-term collections, the agents simply reminded defaulters of their debts and possible repercussions if payments were not forthcoming.

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