

# USING FILMS TO LEARN ABOUT THE NATURE OF CROSS-CULTURAL STEREOTYPES IN INTERCULTURAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION COURSES

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INSTRUCTORS OF INTERCULTURAL business communication courses inevitably face the challenge of providing cross-cultural experiences in the classroom, and students are eager to have real exposure to other cultures. One way of simulating the feel of entering another culture is through films. This article provides a way of teaching about the recent award-winning film *Slumdog Millionaire*. It shows how this film can be used in direct reference to concepts related to stereotypes—concepts that are discussed in most prominent intercultural communication textbooks. It also illustrates how survey results of Indians about their attitudes toward the movie can enrich the class discussion and preserve the voice of the culture of interest.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review addresses three areas. First, it reviews the use of films for intercultural training. Second, it describes the emphasis on stereotyping as part of intercultural training programs. Finally, it provides a short justification for the selection of *Slumdog Millionaire*.

## Intercultural Learning Through Films

Intercultural training literature has consistently recommended the use of films for intercultural learning (Bhawuk & Brislin, 2000; Champoux, 1999; Littrell, Salas, Hess, Paley, & Riedel, 2006; Summerfield, 1994;

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Varner & Beamer, 2005; Verluyten, 2007, 2008). As Mallinger and Rossy (2003) state, films are a “uniquely rich medium for the purpose of studying culture” (p. 609). One of the primary benefits, particularly among university students, is that films are entertaining, engaging, and in many cases stimulate curiosity toward other cultures:

Students today have become accustomed to learning through multimedia and are easily bored or distracted by more traditional pedagogies. As a generation raised on television, film, and computers, they are more receptive to these new forms of information. Film is likely to improve retention by providing strong images and emotional content. (p. 609)

Films can be a valuable intellectual exercise in deciphering other cultures. Students observe plots and characters that can reveal communication processes, socially acceptable behaviors, and underlying cultural values. With guidance from instructors, films provide a means of conceptualizing cultures in terms of theories and constructs of culture (e.g., individualism and collectivism). Simultaneously, instructors can help students identify nuances and ambiguity in cultures that are not readily apparent through formal theories (Bhawuk & Brislin, 2000; Mallinger & Rossy, 2003; Tidwell, 2001).

Films are emotional exercises as well. Since they show the “hopes, dreams, challenges, and fears” of ordinary people (Mallinger & Rossy, 2003, p. 610), scholars have found that films can enhance empathy and nonjudgmentalness, considered important characteristics of intercultural effectiveness (Mallinger & Rossy, 2003; Mendenhall, Kuhlmann, & Stahl, 2001; Tidwell, 2001).

One of the strongest arguments for using films for intercultural learning is that they simulate the natural observation process that takes place when encountering other cultures. Most people gain their deepest impressions through their senses—what they see, hear, and feel upon entering a new culture. Perhaps more so than any other sense, people remember and attempt to make sense of what they see when entering another culture for the first time (Verluyten, 2007, 2008). In the context of an intercultural business communication course, watching international films “promotes visualization of theory” (Tidwell, 2001, p. 7).

Although many intercultural experts recommend the use of films for intercultural learning, there are few academic works describing

specific films or specific approaches to use in teaching about culture. A few notable exceptions include Mallinger and Rossy's (2003) approach to teaching about *Gung Ho* and Tidwell's (2001) approach to teaching about *The Joy Luck Club* and *Fools Rush In*.

### **Stereotyping Across Cultures**

Nearly all intercultural communication textbooks contain a description of the nature of stereotypes across cultures, typically near the beginning of the materials. Two forms of stereotypes that are specifically addressed in this article are *projected cognitive similarity* and the *outgroup homogeneity effect*. Projected cognitive similarity is when "you know someone else's perceptions, judgments, attitudes, and values because you assume they are like your own" (Varner & Beamer, 2005, p. 22). The outgroup homogeneity effect is defined as follows:

The outgroup homogeneity effect is the tendency for people to see members of an outgroup as less diverse and more stereotypic than the members of that group see themselves. We have a tendency to see outgroup members as highly similar (i.e., homogeneous) yet view ourselves and our ingroup members as unique and individual. (Neuliep, 2009, pp. 168-169)

Simply put, projected cognitive similarity is the tendency to assume that members of other cultures have the same values that we do, and the outgroup homogeneity effect is the tendency to think that members of other groups are all the same.

Most intercultural experts cautiously consider stereotypes essential since they are "cognitive process[es] necessitated by our limited capacity to handle complex data" (Dimnik & Felton, 2006, p. 130). Yet, stereotypes can easily become inaccurate, ethnocentric, and dysfunctional; therefore, students should be trained to avoid such dysfunctional stereotypes of other cultures (Dimnik & Felton, 2006; Varner & Beamer, 2005). For this article, it is assumed that individuals inevitably develop stereotypes—consciously or unconsciously—of other cultures. Sometimes these stereotypes are constructive, and sometimes they are dysfunctional and hurtful.

Films and television shows are particularly influential in creating and reinforcing stereotypes for several reasons. First, they engage the audience more intensely and leave deeper impressions than other media.

Second, they rely on using a few distinct traits to help the audience immediately recognize social group types. Third, they build on successful stereotypes that have been portrayed previously in film. Thus, the stereotypes become even more entrenched. This is the case for cultural groups as well as many other types of groups such as occupational groups (e.g., accountants) or religious groups (e.g., Amish) (Dimnik & Felton, 2006).

Whereas nearly all intercultural training scholars focus on the positive potential of films for intercultural learning, ethnic studies and media communications scholars more often than not point out how films leave strong images of other cultures that are ethnocentric and negative (Berg, 2002; Mastro, 2003). For example, among European Americans, it has been shown that exposure to negative features of ethnic groups in TV dramas has contributed to negative views of those groups (Mastro, 2003). In many cases, affected groups decry inappropriate stereotyping in films. For example, the movie *Alladin*, which many Americans consider a harmless film, was strongly opposed by the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee since it “perpetuates the tired stereotype of the Arab world as a place of deserts and camels, of arbitrary cruelty and barbarism” (Wingfield & Karaman, 1995, p. 7).

### **Selection of *Slumdog Millionaire***

The movie *Slumdog Millionaire* is useful as an intercultural learning tool for several reasons. Since it performed so well at the box office and won high publicity awards such as an Oscar for Best Picture, many students will have seen the movie or will know something about it. Furthermore, the popularity of the movie makes getting copies of the movie far more accessible. For these and other reasons, it is not surprising that many online websites are devoted to teaching about the movie (e.g., <http://www.filmeducation.org/slumdogmillionaire/>).

In terms of learning about stereotyping, this movie is ideal. It is highly probable that many Americans will never have seen an Indian film other than *Slumdog Millionaire* and will have had little exposure to Indian culture at all. (Many people would consider *Slumdog Millionaire* a quasi-Indian film: It is based on an Indian novel, codirected by an Indian, and includes many cast members and other movie crew members from the Indian movie industry; however, it was directed by a British director and financed and marketed primarily through the Western movie

industry.) Thus, many Americans will have formed impressions about Indian culture and society largely based on this movie.

This article takes a new approach and addresses several of the limitations of existing scholarly work on teaching about culture through films. First, this article focuses on a current and immensely popular movie, which increases interest among students and allows instructors to gather teaching resources developed by many other educators. Second, it focuses on a specific set of theoretical concepts important to intercultural business communication courses (stereotyping). Third, and most importantly, it employs findings of a survey of Indians to keep the Indian voice present in interpreting the movie.

## **DATA COLLECTION**

To collect data that could be used in a lesson about stereotyping, a survey was developed that explored Indian attitudes toward the movie *Slumdog Millionaire*, Indian culture and society, viewing of Hollywood films, and Americans in general. Survey questions included Likert-type scale, yes/no, and open-ended questions. All Likert-type scale questions were converted to percentages of respondents who agreed, much like many political approval ratings reported in the news. One of the survey questions asked respondents to list their favorite three Hollywood movies. The movies were coded for year of screening, rating, and reasons for rating based on information found at the website [www.filmratings.com](http://www.filmratings.com).

The survey was completed by 120 Indians who were currently university students in the United States or who had graduated from a U.S. university within the last year. Respondents were found by contacting presidents of Indian student associations at three major universities in the United States. Each of these presidents sent the online survey link to members of their associations at their universities. The total number of Indian student association members who were sent the survey link was 345, yielding a response rate of approximately 35%.

The viewpoints of Indian students studying in the United States are particularly helpful for the following reasons. First, they are the largest international student group in the United States (Institute of International Education, 2009). Therefore, American students are quite likely to interact with them on campuses. Lessons that include Indian students' viewpoints might inspire some American students to become more interested in Indian students on their campuses. Second, Indian students

studying internationally quite likely represent the values, beliefs, and attitudes of Indians with whom American students are most likely to interact during their careers—they will likely occupy the positions that involve cross-cultural work with Americans.

All survey questions and survey results are available at the following website: <http://sites.google.com/site/slumdogmillionairelesson/>. On the homepage, a PowerPoint presentation called “Survey Millionaire Survey Results” can be downloaded, containing a fairly comprehensive summary of results. This file is referenced throughout this section, and instructors can adapt it to their specific class needs. Statistics are primarily descriptive (percentages) in nature for two reasons. First, the purpose of the survey is not to make definitive statements of cause and effect or even correlation. Rather, the survey results are intended to foster flexible discussion about issues related to stereotyping through the many voices of Indian students. Second, the statistics are on a level that all undergraduate students can understand, thus avoiding the need for instructors to interpret the statistical findings for some students.

It should be noted that this exercise was specifically designed for American students, and some of the survey results are most applicable to Americans. However, the majority of the study results are impressions that Indians have of the movie *Slumdog Millionaire* and aspects of Indian culture. Therefore, the survey results can be adapted for use in classrooms of any culture.

## **TEACHING ABOUT STEREOTYPING ACROSS CULTURES**

Nearly all intercultural communication, intercultural business communication, and intercultural sensitivity training course materials introduce the concept of stereotypes early in the course. Using survey results from Indian students in the United States about their attitudes toward the movie is a way of using the voice of the target culture (in this case Indians) to help students (in this case primarily Americans) understand the nature of stereotyping across cultures. Survey results are used to discuss stereotyping across cultures in the following five ways:

1. Understanding how one’s own culture is stereotyped
2. Understanding how films and popular culture can influence and perpetuate stereotypes

3. Understanding how projected cognitive similarity can influence stereotypes
4. Understanding how the outgroup homogeneity effect can influence stereotypes
5. Understanding how members of target cultures would like to be perceived

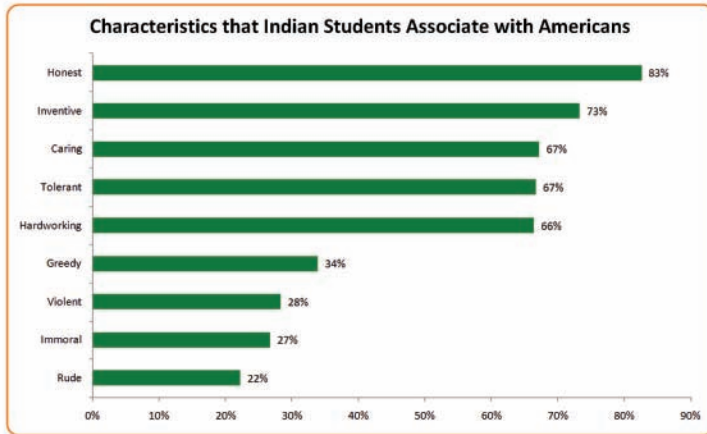
### **Understanding How One's Own Culture Is Stereotyped**

A valuable method of sensitizing students to stereotyping is to first help them recognize stereotypes that members of other cultures may have of them. Students often become more interested in the nature of stereotypes when these stereotypes are directed at them; after all, these stereotypes seem more personal. Students placed in this situation become more sympathetic to how members of other cultures may feel when they are stereotyped in ways they perceive as incorrect, unfair, or unflattering. Furthermore, they gain some insight into the preconceptions that members of other cultures may have of them during initial intercultural interactions.

To sensitize students to stereotypes that members of other cultures may have of Americans, survey results related to overall impressions of Americans are provided in Slides 11 through 31. The slides are based on survey questions about characteristics that are associated with Americans (positive: honest, inventive, caring, tolerant, hardworking; negative: greedy, violent, immoral, rude). These survey questions were based on a Pew Global Attitudes survey (Kohut, Allen, Doherty, & Funk, 2005). The PowerPoint slides compare impressions held by Indian students surveyed for this learning exercise with those held by representative samples from 16 nations in the original Pew Global Attitudes survey. An example of one of these slides is provided in Figure 1, which depicts the Indian students' general impressions of Americans.

Many of the slides contain actual statements of the Indian students in response to the question *What is your main impression of Americans?* These statements tend to contain richer information and allow for additional discussion about the nature of stereotypes that are formed. Slide 24, for example, contains several common statements with the general theme of "Friendly, but. . ." Statements include "Americans

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**Figure 1.** Example Slide Used in Understanding How One’s Own Culture Is Stereotyped

are very friendly. But if they think you are not useful to them with their business, they don’t care about you anymore”; “Americans are a polished people with good manners outside but with no feelings inside”; and “They are nice and helpful, but everything in business sense. Also everything is dealt in a professional manner not in a personal sense.” These statements allow American students to consider why Indian students might feel this way and think about which Indian cultural values are at play with their clear distinction between politeness and genuine concern or feeling.

As with all parts of this exercise, it is important for instructors to emphasize that these various stereotypes are not shared by all members of a culture. Furthermore, the various statements made by the Indian students should not necessarily be construed as positive or negative, and in most cases, it is difficult to identify the strength of opinion or emotion behind these statements—some statements may be casual observations, whereas others may be deeply entrenched viewpoints. A more constructive approach is to simply consider why these impressions *may* exist among *some* Indian students. Instructors may even

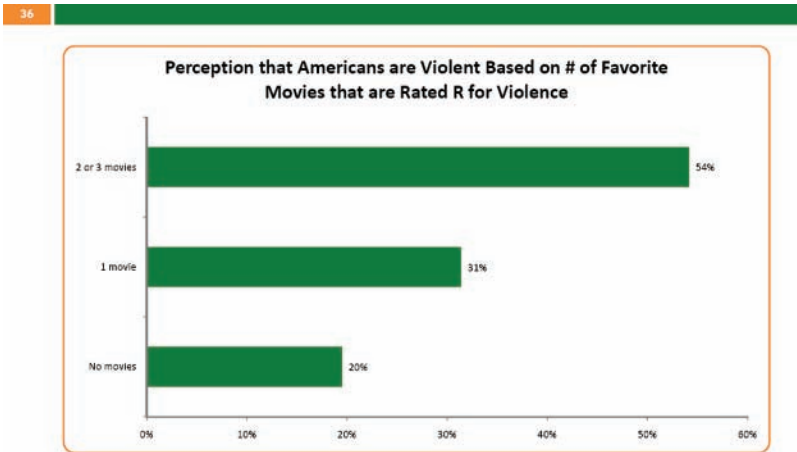


consider how questions such as *What is your main impression of Americans?* might increase the likelihood of stereotypical thinking. This could lead to an even more in-depth question about how the wording of questions throughout a course on intercultural business communication could impact stereotypes of other cultures.

### **Understanding How Films and Popular Culture Can Influence and Perpetuate Stereotypes**

Slides 32 through 38 show results of Indian students' watching of Hollywood films. These slides help students consider how American films might affect how members of other cultures stereotype Americans through products of popular culture. Similar to the rationale for first discussing what others think of American culture, students more easily understand how misperceptions can be formed and amplified through film. For example, Slides 33, 34, and 35 demonstrate that most Indian students (56%) watch American films avidly (over 21 films per year), watch more R-rated films than those of any other rating, and watch many films (35% of the films listed) that contain significant violent content. To illustrate a possible connection between film-watching and perceptions of Americans, Slide 36 (see Figure 2) shows that among Indian students who chose no R-rated American films with violent content among their favorite three films, 20% associated violence with Americans. Among those who chose one R-rated American film with violent content among their favorite three films, 31% associated violence with Americans. Among those who chose two or three R-rated films with violent content among their favorite three films, 54% associated Americans with violence.

When discussing the potential stereotypes that members of other cultures might gain or deepen due to watching American films, it is important not to become too embroiled in a debate about cause and effect—scientifically proving causality is difficult in this case. In this study, it is impossible to unequivocally state that watching American films with violent content causes members of other cultures to associate violence with Americans. The larger goal is to sensitize students (in this case Americans) to how films *might* influence *some* members of other cultures. It certainly allows Americans to think about what images of their culture and society are projected. Furthermore, it allows



**Figure 2.** Example Slide in Understanding How Films Influence Stereotypes

these same students to better sympathize with the harmful stereotypes that *might* be developed by *some* Americans when watching *Slumdog Millionaire* or other international films.

Once students have thought about how their own culture might be stereotyped due to films, they are better prepared to identify the degree to which international films may be accurate and representative of aspects of other cultures and societies. Slide 41 is a good starting point in this discussion—it shows various cultural elements shown in the movie and the degree to which Indian students consider these elements accurate. For the most part, strong majorities considered the movie accurate, with items such as the music (91%), corruption (86%), clothing (79%), and playfulness of children (77%) as generally accurate. Fewer respondents were willing to identify other aspects as accurate, such as the economic development (58%), images of homes (59%), and romance (60%).

While these various elements of the movies are frequently identified as accurate, they are not considered representative. To illustrate this point, instructors can use various slides (62–79) containing open-ended comments made to the question *If you're worried that Americans might have some misperceptions, what misperception are you most worried about?* For example, there are dozens of statements similar to the

following: “Having been born & raised in Mumbai, it suffices to say that this is far from reality for a majority of the approximately 18 Million people who live there” (Slide 63); “Not all are mature enough to understand what is going on in reality. . . . This movie could serve as a catalyst to increased misconception in rest of the world’s mind that India is in bad shape” (Slide 65); and “See, if an American after watching *Slum Dog Millionaire* thinks, that is India—it will be like an Indian watching ‘*The Color Purple*’ and thinking that is America” (Slide 64). It is important to point out the way in which inaccuracies in the film can offend Indians. For example, many statements are similar to the following: “It is extremely distressing to see that creators of the movie choose to portray and project a very small part of India (as Mahatma Gandhi put it, the sewerage inspectors from the west!). They have completely chosen to ignore the rich cultural heritage, architecture, history, and the philosophy of India!” (Slide 73).

### **Understanding How Projected Cognitive Similarity Can Influence Stereotypes**

Intercultural communication textbooks often provide examples of how projected cognitive similarity across cultures frequently results from the observation that members of other cultures have similar popular culture tastes. Slides 37 through 39 are a good basis for explaining how this might happen. Slide 37 shows the Indian students’ 10 favorite American films. American students will recognize them as immensely popular films in the United States. Slide 38 shows the 10 favorite movies based on online votes (most of which are from Americans) on the most popular online movie database. This demonstrates the strong commonality between what the Indian students call their favorite films and what many Americans consider their favorite films. For example, the following movies that are top 10 favorite films among the Indian students are also in the top 10 movies on the IMDB database: *The Shawshank Redemption*, *The Godfather*, and *The Dark Knight*.

Seeing this similarity in movies could lead some American students to assume that Indian students are quite similar. Some students might even use the ethnocentric term “Westernized” in reaction to these commonalities. Slide 39, however, shows that Indian students, although having many overlapping movie interests, consider their culture largely different from American culture. This slide shows that 86% of Indian

students consider the difference between American and Indian culture as *large* for cultural norms and values, with large differences perceived by 82% for customs, 48% for work values, 53% for youth culture, and 81% for overall culture.

### **Understanding How the Outgroup Homogeneity Effect Can Influence Stereotypes**

Another common problem with stereotyping that is described in intercultural communication textbooks is the outgroup homogeneity effect, or the tendency to assume that while there is a lot of diversity in one's own culture, there is a lot of similarity in other cultures. Results from many of the questions in the survey can help students begin to recognize the extreme diversity in Indian culture and society. Looking at several slides about characteristics of survey respondents allows students to consider some of the differences within India. For example, Slide 9 shows the religious background of survey respondents, where Hindu, Christian, and Muslim groups are listed. This would be an interesting opportunity for instructors to talk about the immense religious diversity in India and mention the many world religions that originated in India. Slide 10 shows the percentage of respondents from five major geographic regions in India. This likewise provides an opportunity to describe the varying geographic characteristics of India and explain that like the United States (in fact, probably more so than the United States), each region has unique cultural characteristics.

In the "Regional, Gender, and Age Differences" section (Slides 55–61), the various slides show how attitudes vary by these demographic variables. For example, Slide 56 shows pride in various aspects of Indian culture by region. In terms of the movie, 45% of those from South India are proud of *Slumdog Millionaire*, compared to 38% in West India and just 27% in North India. As far as the Indian movie industry goes, 82% of those from North India are proud of it, compared to 73% in South India and 56% in West India. Slide 57 shows impressions of Americans by region. Whereas 91% and 90% of those from West India and North India consider Americans hardworking, just 55% of those from South India do.

Slides 58 through 61 show various differences by age group and gender. Generally speaking, these slides illustrate some large differences. For example, those in the oldest group (31 years and older) are far less

likely to be proud of any aspect of Indian culture and society, including the movie *Slumdog Millionaire*. The older Indian students also are more likely to give high marks to Americans in terms of honesty and inventiveness, yet at the same time they are more likely to associate negative traits such as greediness and violence with Americans. Generally speaking, Indian women tend to have more pride in all aspects of Indian culture and society except democracy, compared to Indian men. Women have slightly less positive attitudes than men in terms of attitudes toward Americans.

The point of discussing these various demographic differences is to begin a discussion about diversity within Indian culture. Rarely emphasized in cross-national models of cultural differences is the variation within cultures. By providing differing views based on region, gender, and age, instructors can help students avoid the stereotyping associated with the outgroup homogeneity effect.

### **Understanding How Members of Target Cultures Would Like To Be Perceived**

The first four learning objectives described primarily focus on avoiding inappropriate stereotypes. The final learning objective about stereotypes deals more with developing constructive perceptions—identifying how members of target cultures would like to be viewed. This allows students to develop positive impressions of target cultures (a key objective in most intercultural training programs) and reflect on the important role of identity in culture. Furthermore, it will enhance students' ability to show respect across cultures, an important cross-cultural communication skill.

Slide 42 is a good slide to begin discussing how Indians would like to be perceived. It illustrates areas of Indian culture that Indians are most proud of. Whereas most Indians are not proud of the movie *Slumdog Millionaire* (40% are proud of it), strong majorities are proud of Indian culture and society, 74%; Indian businesses, 71%; the Indian movie industry, 68%; and Indian democracy, 66%. Many of the open-ended comments from the survey also can initiate discussing ways in which Indians would like to be perceived. A strong theme from the open-ended comments is that Indians are proud of the richness of their culture—the deep bonds of families and friendships, the industriousness and ingenuity of the Indian people, and cultural products such as food

## Lack of Positive Aspects of Indian Life (cont.)

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"The movie portrayed the negative side of the cultural, economic and social aspects. However, India has a prominent place in the world history not for these reasons. ***It's not that the movie misrepresented or misinterpreted India but, it doesn't project the positive aspects well enough*** because, maybe the director feels it's not necessary to support his story telling. ***To me, India is about it's family bondings, inter-personal relationships, music, great educational standards, hard-working people, economic development, balance between classic culture and modernization, technology, great minds, great food...*** There are lots of other good aspects which are not projected well enough (maybe they are not needed to support the story of the movie)."

**Figure 3.** Example Slide in Understanding How Target Cultures Would Like To Be Stereotyped

and art. For example, Slide 72 (see Figure 3) is a typical statement made that lists many aspects of India's culture that Indians are proud of.

There are many online sources to show students a better and richer image of Indian culture. Two slides contain information that is particularly helpful. Slide 81 shows a list of Indian movies that the Indian students most recommend for American students who want to learn about Indian culture through films. All of the movies contain IMDB links for additional information (see Figure 4). Slide 88 contains a list of major Indian multinationals (with links to their corporate website) (see Figure 5). The strong economic development in India is a deep source of pride for most Indians, and many Indians want to be viewed as hard working, well accomplished, and smart. Furthermore, since the goal of intercultural business communication courses is to ultimately describe the role of culture in business situations, asking students to peruse these various websites is a good way to segue into positive and constructive images of Indian business.

### SUMMARY

This article has presented a method for teaching principles of stereotyping across cultures that are included in intercultural business communication courses. This method involves using the film *Slumdog*

## What Bollywood Movies do Indian Students Recommend?

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Rank	Title (# of Students Recommending)	Year	IMDB Link
1	Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India (20)	2001	<a href="http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0169102/">www.imdb.com/title/tt0169102/</a>
2	Rang De Basanti (12)	2006	<a href="http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0405508/">www.imdb.com/title/tt0405508/</a>
3	Swades: We, the People (11)	2004	<a href="http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0367110/">www.imdb.com/title/tt0367110/</a>
4	Taare Zameen Par (11)	2007	<a href="http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0986264/">www.imdb.com/title/tt0986264/</a>
5	A Wednesday (9)	2008	<a href="http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1280558/">www.imdb.com/title/tt1280558/</a>
6	Dil Chahta Hai (9)	2001	<a href="http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0292490/">www.imdb.com/title/tt0292490/</a>
7	Jodhaa Akbar (7)	2008	<a href="http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0449994/">www.imdb.com/title/tt0449994/</a>
8	Sholay (7)	1975	<a href="http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0073707/">www.imdb.com/title/tt0073707/</a>
9	Cahk Del India (6)	2007	<a href="http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0871510/">www.imdb.com/title/tt0871510/</a>
10	Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (5)	1995	<a href="http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0112870/">www.imdb.com/title/tt0112870/</a>

Figure 4. Slide Showing Indians' Recommended Bollywood Films

## Some Major Indian Companies

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- [Infosys Technologies](#)
- [Bharat Forge](#)
- [Essel Propack](#)
- [Godrej Consumer Products](#)
- [Mahindra & Mahindra](#)
- [Hidesign](#)
- [Hindalco Industries](#)
- [Marico](#)
- [Suzlon Energy](#)
- [Tata Motors](#)
- [United Breweries](#)

"India's Top Global Companies" in *BusinessWeek*

Figure 5. Slide Showing Major Multinational Indian Companies

*Millionaire*. To preserve the voice of Indians in this exercise, principles of stereotyping can be taught through survey results of Indians' attitudes toward this movie.

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