

# Contesting India's Image on the World Stage: Audience Reception of *Slumdog Millionaire*

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Driven in part by developments in communication technologies, globalization in its utopian vision promises to link diverse cultures across geographic boundaries. Marshall McLuhan exemplifies this ideological promise of globalization in his description of the global village. He describes it as a world in which people would be brought closer together as they made their voices heard. According to McLuhan, "We have become irrevocably involved with, and responsible for, each other" (Croteau and Hoynes 337). Recently, global media scholars have questioned this idealistic vision of an egalitarian, mutually interdependent democracy. The flow of information and materials in a global economy seems to be privileging an elite few while marginalizing others, causing a rift in the values of a divided population. Using the representation of India as an example, this study examines the cultural effects of globalization in a postcolonial free market whose media outlets have been infiltrated by transnational capitalism.

Until economic reforms in the late '80s and early '90s, India's economy operated under a socialist model. Their rapid state-sponsored reform inaugurated "the creation of a robust global capitalist consumer economy" (Parameswaran and Cardoza 1). Such rapid economic changes in turn impacted the cultural scene in India. Both the Indian people and foreigners were given the opportunity to redefine what constitutes the Indian image. The critically-acclaimed 2008 film *Slumdog Millionaire* provides an interesting example of an attempt to define or redefine the Indian identity and is used as a central text for

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this study. Through a focus group discussion, audience reactions to the film were analyzed to reveal controversial debates over the images and interpretations that the film conveys.

With ten Oscar nominations, *Slumdog Millionaire* attained global popularity. The film was directed by Briton Danny Boyle, yet features an all-Indian cast and is set in Mumbai. It tells the story of a young boy born and raised in the severe poverty of the slums who comes to win the game show “Who Wants to be a Millionaire?” Each question he answers flashes back to a particular, and usually tragic, instance in his childhood. His hardships alongside his brother and his quest to find his one true love drive the plotline. The main characters are constantly surrounded by the hardships, greed, and violence of Mumbai.

This study focuses on audience debates concerning the validity of the film’s representation of both postcolonial India and the Western world. As context, actual socio-economic conditions in India are examined in comparison with the film’s portrayal to reveal differences in the shaping and determination of India’s cultural identity. The influence of transnational corporations and their consumer culture are analyzed within the content and production process of the film. Through critically examining audience reactions and themes within the film, this study uncovers changing cultural attitudes instigated by globalization.

India’s rapid economic reform spurred changes that are evident in current Indian media and culture. The middle class is much larger and wealthier than before; the average purchasing power has skyrocketed; there is access to a brand new market of goods and technologies that were previously unavailable; and, as a result, the Indian government has paid off a good portion of debt. The nation has become a prominent figure on the global map both politically and economically. Since India’s economic deregulation, transnational corporations have jumped at the opportunity to reach a foreign market and have vigorously promoted a capitalistic consumer culture. Corporations have created a new brand consciousness among Indians promoting an elitist culture characterized by a consumer-driven materialism. With the deregulation of Indian broadcasting, corporate giants have placed advertisements in all facets of Indian media, influencing the values and desires of a growing middle class. While part of the Indian

population buys into this new elitist culture, many oppose it or simply cannot afford it. Indians who either cannot relate or cannot afford to incorporate elitist consumer culture into their identity stand apart. *Slumdog Millionaire* depicts both facets of Indian culture, showing both a new elitist identity and the resistance to it.

Scenes in *Slumdog Millionaire* reveal a shift towards brand-consciousness characterized by elitist culture. Director Danny Boyle used scenes in his film featuring Western products from Coca-cola and Mercedes-Benz without prior consent. The two transnational corporate giants requested to be pulled from scenes that featured their brands amongst third world squalor (Brodesser-Akner 14). However, both companies run advertisements in the slums of Mumbai and have set up foreign branches within India (Brodesser-Akner 14). In the case of the film, Mercedes requested to be pulled only from scenes that showed their cars amongst the poverty of the slums. Scenes that showed their vehicles in affluent areas of Mumbai were allowed (Brodesser-Akner 14). The companies' requests show that they consciously cater to an elitist Indian culture and how those who cannot afford their brands are marginalized. While Coke and Mercedes were quick to pull their brands from the movie, they continue to pursue India's market creating an elitist brand-conscious culture that attempts to define the Indian image. The scenes in the film along with the conflict surrounding them are indicative of a changing economic scene that has caused a rift in a common Indian identity.

Economic reforms have given rise to a large middle class of consumers. The materialist desires of this class are shaped by corporations through traditional capitalistic advertising techniques (such as branding) that have infiltrated Indian media outlets. The middle class's desire for consumer products is reflected in current television media content. According to Indian television network Business India Television, or BiTV, the middle and upper classes crave new imported programming. According to Robbin D Crabtree and Sheena Malhotra, "globalization has become one of the driving key words of the Indian middle class" (370). The content that appears in current Indian media attempt to define the Indian identity based on the globalized desires and new purchasing power of the middle class.

In addition to changing images in Indian broadcast media, economic

liberalization instigated changes in the Bollywood film industry as well. Bollywood films became internationalized, thus boosting ticket prices. As a result, the film industry has begun to cater to an elitist audience, changing the images that typically appear in their films (Rao 62). Bollywood has followed the brand logic of transnational capitalism, catering only to those who can afford to participate (Rao 64). In "The Globalization of Bollywood: An Ethnography of Non-Elite Audiences in India," Shakuntala Rao argues that non-elite Indian audiences feel increasingly distanced from the themes and images depicted in Bollywood films. Non-elite audiences characterized Bollywood films as a dream world filled with lavish homes and cars (Rao 68). New themes and images reflect the growing elitist culture that globalization and transnational companies have instigated. While *Slumdog Millionaire* shows lavish homes and cars characteristic of the elitist image of India, the film also gives a full perspective of Mumbai by showing the rest of the population who are excluded from it.

In addition to excluding a large population, the consumer culture present in Indian media content often conflicts with traditional values. As Indian culture becomes more materialistic, traditional values of modesty are being left behind, especially in the area of commercialized standards of female beauty. In 1996, India hosted its first global media event, The Miss World Pageant. Indian communication company Amitabh Bachchan Corporation, Ltd. (ABCL) hosted the pageant and, along with much of the public, saw it as an economic milestone for Indian entertainment. The global media event sparked an all-time high for advertising revenue slots, instigated growth of India's multinational cosmetics industry, and promoted India as a desirable place to visit or invest in for foreigners (Parameswaran 61). ABCL sought to use the pageant to make India a global player by broadcasting India's potential as a culturally rich nation ready to wholly modernize its economy. By advertising the wealthy urban sections of India (and excluding the slums and poor rural areas), ABCL attempted to broadcast an elite image of India to the world. In addition, the concept of the pageant itself served as a vehicle for promoting Western ideals and standards of beauty. Since the pageant is a Western invention, Eastern women are held to Western standards of beauty. Speaking English is an unwritten qualifier. Many protests arose, saying that the pageants promoted

cultural and economic imperialism, sexism, Western standards of beauty, immorality, and inappropriate modes of consumption for a Third World country in poverty (Parameswaran 78). The pageant attempted to represent India as a desirable free market open to Western-based corporations.

Changes in cultural standards of beauty have in turn created a spike in the cosmetics industry. Since the middle class adheres to the elitist images present in their media culture, corporations have created products to fulfill their desires. The rapid rise in consumer culture has greatly benefited the cosmetics industry in India, using aggressive capitalistic marketing techniques to make products popular among consumers. After India's economic liberation, it was ranked the third largest import market and experienced a 25 percent increase in its cosmetic sales in just four years (Parameswaran and Cardoza 1). This sudden increase can be attributed in part to an emerging desire for skin-lightening products. Through capitalist advertising techniques, cosmetics companies have taught audiences to associate lighter skin with an elitist image. Melanin inhibiting products have swept the cosmetics market by promising to lighten the complexion of dark-skinned Indian women (Parameswaran and Cardoza 1). From magazines to televisions to films, the vast majority of female models in India are fair-skinned. In the film *Slumdog Millionaire*, Freida Pinto, the lead actress, who is described in the film to be "the most beautiful woman in the world," is unusually fair-skinned (*Slumdog Millionaire*). In India's changing capitalistic culture, light skin has become a widespread symbol of glamour and class mobility. This symbolism marginalizes dark-skinned women and further marks a clear shift towards Western-influenced elitist values.

## Method

This study is designed to investigate the following research questions:

- What does the popularity of the film *Slumdog Millionaire*, and the ensuing controversies it stirred, reveal about the tensions in defining the Indian image?
- What does the popularity of the film among Western audiences reveal about global media flows?
- What do the varying reactions to the film among Indian audiences

reveal about global media flows?

- What evidence of a developing consumer culture is present in the film and how does it relate to the actual economic situation in India?
- How do American audiences interpret/identify Western influences in the Indian film?
- How does the film and audience reactions to it highlight tensions of economic disparities?

To probe these central questions, this study adopts a two-pronged approach to collect and analyze audience reception of the film *Slumdog Millionaire*. Through a combination of online viewer response groups and a focus group screening, this study hopes to gain insight into how Indian and Western audiences perceive the film, its portrayal of India, and the impact of globalization.

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was attained in April of 2010. After IRB approval, self-created fan groups on Facebook were analyzed to collect conflicting opinions on the controversies surrounding the popular film. The group is entitled “*Slumdog Millionaire* (Official Fan Club)” and contains 6,468 members both nationally and internationally. Facebook focus groups are a form of computer-mediated communication and fall under the Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) category. According to Lindlof & Taylor, users of BBS connect online to discuss special interest topics by reading and responding to messages posted by others, which are archived and displayed in a “threaded format” (252). By collecting user-generated data from a popular global network such as Facebook, this study is able to analyze perspectives from both American and international informants who post their opinions and reactions publicly.

This study selected a Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) research approach towards qualitative research. CMC refers to any communication that occurs between two or more computers that are connected through a common network (Lindlof and Taylor 253). The advantages of this methodology include “expanded access to hard to reach populations and sites, reduced time and cost, the convenience of automatically generated transcription, and the preformatting of data analysis” (Lindlof and Taylor 254). In addition, the “anonymity and reduced cues associated with many CMC systems encourage users to experiment with the expression of elements of their identity,” producing

more expressive or opinionated data that may not be obtained from participants in a focus group setting (Lindlof and Taylor 257).

The film was also screened for a focus group of local voluntary participants. Rao's research indicates how audience reception studies illuminate the tensions concerning globalization and media representations (72). The focus group method was selected in order to elicit responses that may not arise on an individual basis. According to Lindlof & Taylor, members of a focus group "are stimulated by the ideas and experiences expressed by each other ... in a kind of chaining or cascading effect" (182). Focus group participants were recruited via e-mail and class announcements within the College of Charleston Department of Communication. Foreign culture, political, and other liberal arts clubs on campus were contacted and recruited for participants. In addition, a few communications professors offered students extra credit for participating in a body of communications research, which served as an incentive for students to volunteer. A total of 15 participants attended the screening, 14 of whom were students and the final participant was a student spouse. The married couple, the only participants who were of Indian descent, contributed a more nuanced perspective on the film.

After the 121-minute film was screened, responses were collected via a focus group discussion, which was recorded and then transcribed. Participants received a guideline of discussion questions prior to the film screening to encourage them to watch the film critically and be better prepared to discuss their opinions afterwards.

Participants were asked several questions using a guided interview protocol, which is included in the Appendix. Participants were asked to assess the representation of India and the city of Mumbai, the potential impact of a Western director (Danny Boyle), the potential of the film to offend, influences of globalized consumer culture in the film, and whether the film deserved its many awards.

In addition to the guided questionnaire, consent forms were administered before the screening to inform each participant of the voluntary nature of the study. The consent forms also informed participants that their identities would be protected to create a more comfortable and free-flowing discussion.

Data collection and analysis of audience-generated accounts

were guided by the Grounded Theory Approach, which stresses theoretical discovery over theory testing (Lindlof and Taylor 218). In this approach, processes and products of research are shaped as data is collected where “new experiences continue to alter the scope and terms of [the researchers’] analytic framework” (Lindlof and Taylor 218). With the combination of BBS groups, audience-generated responses, and integration of past research, this study gathers a broad depth of qualitative data that gives insight into the controversies and implications of the film *Slumdog Millionaire*.

## Results

Although the guided questionnaire (Appendix) was not strictly followed, it helped to foster an interesting and free-flowing discussion. One participant’s idea spurred another’s, resulting in a 35-minute dialogue that covered the premise of all ten questions. Participants’ responses worked in conjunction with the Facebook fan group responses to reveal a rich dialogue about the film. The Facebook fan group responses will be grouped with the focus group responses and analyzed in the same manner in order to add more opinionated and diverse reactions that the anonymity of Computer-Mediated Communications data provides.

Some viewers found Danny Boyle’s portrayal of India to be blatantly offensive or, at least, saw the potential for it to be offensive to Indians. They attribute this offensiveness to several different factors. The first was the one-sided portrayal of India as a place of third world squalor. Many viewers went on to attribute the film’s success in America to this stereotypical display of what some critics have called “poverty porn.” Viewers were able to understand how a sweeping third world generalization characterized by the sensationalism of severe poverty could be offensive to an Indian viewer. For example, one user from Hong Kong described the consequences that the film’s negative stereotyping has on Indian viewers:

The Western world might be perplexed at the Indian sentiments over *Slumdog*, but then perhaps they haven’t got a clue about what it feels like when every film that is based about your country is always stereotypical and degrading. How strange that the world isn’t interested in examining India’s phenomenal rise



to power, the ascent of the middle classes or the tech industry. This movie just reinforces the same old stereotypes about India to an international audience who doesn't know much better. It is offensive to any self respecting Indian. (Facebook user in Hong Kong)

A Facebook fan from Bangladesh expressed concerns about what kinds of messages are communicated about India to "First World viewers":

the political project of this movie is nothing but to create a totally new version of "terror," which is the "third world poverty," as a means of attracting the "first world viewers"...my teacher told me last week that she watched this movie in a Canadian theatre with some "first world viewers." She said, "I would have enjoyed this movie more if I had watched it alone. All viewers around me kept saying "oh my god!" "unbelievable," "how is it possible?" "pity upon them," "is this India?" etc. which ruined my total enjoyment." (Facebook user in Bangladesh)

These same concerns about the movie's representation of poverty were echoed by participants, largely constituting an American audience, in the focus group discussion that followed the screening of the film:

I've never been to India but I remember the first time I watched it I was shocked. I knew the slums were bad but it put it to a whole other level. It really puts you there and you're like, wow, is it really like that? (Focus group participant # 2)

Some focus group participants were truly shocked and took the explicit images of poverty at face value, while others questioned the accuracy and motives behind the depictions:

It's this poor India movie. It's really powerful but it's a little bit condescending because it's all negative. There wasn't even a single positive portrayal of a wealthy person. All the wealthy people that you see were gangsters...or Americans. (Focus group participant # 4)

I feel like it got so much attention because of that shock factor .

.. And Americans never see that, even though that is in America. On TV, it's all pretty, it's all clean, most of the time. We watch what we want to watch that's happy and funny...like *Gossip Girl*. (Focus group participant # 10)

In addition to a negative stereotypical portrayal, many viewers thought the Western directing of the film was also offensive to Indians. Their knowledge of India's colonial history with Britain contributed to this second factor:

It's hard to trust an outsider...it adds insult to injury. Especially in this case with the imperialistic history of an English person making a film about India and how crappy it is after English imperialism. That could have a bite to it that he didn't intend...I can see how it would rub people the wrong way because of the imperialism. (Focus group participant # 1)

Especially with the imperialism, I think.... There's a common conception in India that the West exploits them and it could be based in history and all of that. It's changing now, though, and unfortunately people don't realize that. When this movie comes out it could be taken the wrong way with some of that history. (Focus group participant # 3)

I think it would be accepted differently if it was not directed by Westerner because Britain had control of India for so long. . . I don't know how that's influenced him [Boyle] personally. But given the history, what he's learned in school has probably developed his viewpoint differently than a Bollywood director. But I felt like he portrayed so many negative sides of it and zero positive sides. Child prostitution, trafficking, crime, poverty, overpopulation, gangs, violence, it all focuses on that negative which the slums have but there's obviously good things too. (Focus group participant # 8)

While the aforementioned viewers found India's portrayal offensive or empathized with those that did, others took a different perspective. Some viewers recognized that while the depiction of India in *Slumdog Millionaire* was negative and somewhat one-sided, it was in their view

“accurate” to a certain degree. They credited Boyle with accurately portraying one portion of India, but not the country in its entirety. They did not find this limited scope portrayal to be offensive but understood how it could be misinterpreted as a full picture of India for certain misinformed viewers. While some applauded Boyle for depicting slum life accurately, others wished he had painted a broader picture of Indian life:

I know there's caste systems, but we didn't really see it, we only saw the lowest caste of people. I don't think the criminals were of an upper class. It shows us what we may think of slums stereotypically but it wasn't a broad enough picture of the whole caste system. (Focus group participant # 1)

The participants from India in the focus group applauded Boyle's accurate portrayal of the slums, yet emphasized that his portrayal depicted only one section of India, not the entire country:

I'm from India. I moved here about seven years ago. I don't think India is completely portrayed in the film. A section of India is portrayed accurately, which is the slums. I grew up watching Indian movies and I haven't seen an Indian filmmaker portray it as accurately as Danny Boyle has done. I have to give him credit for that. The point I disagree with is that it's not how all of India is today. Mumbai is just one city. There's diversity across the state, there's castes...so I don't think it's portrayed well as a whole, but a section of Mumbai, yes...I find it funny because when we saw the movie a couple people asked us, were you offended? I actually was not offended. Again, I'm a big movie buff; I admire any movie that portrays real life. This is the way of life for a lot of people in India. I don't feel ashamed of it that someone is showing this to the world because if you go to India you will see it everywhere. I'm disappointed it is like this but I'm not offended by the movie at all. Most friends of mine from India were offended, just because they're a little defensive. It's a cultural thing. (Focus group participant # 3)

Another participant identified Boyle's portrayal as limited, but accurate. They felt as though the misinterpretation was in the eyes of

the misinformed viewer, not in the film's directing:

[Boyle] wasn't trying to show all of India, just one part of it, but unfortunately for a lot of Americans that's the only movie we've seen about India and that's what they think all of it is like...some people don't care enough to find out more so they just think that is India. (Focus group participant # 11)

Some viewers went on to defend Boyle's limited portrayal saying that many films about America depict it poorly and have the potential to offend Americans. They took an equal opportunity denigrator standpoint, which recognizes offensive stereotyping from both parties. One viewer even identified an offensive Western stereotype within the film itself:

I thought it was interesting, the one American couple that they showed...that in itself was offensive. They just threw money at this little boy. Oh, we'll make it better just give him a hundred dollars. I think they even said show him the American way. Don't take the time or effort but throw money at it and it'll be ok. (Focus group participant # 4)

I think that the reason why [the film] did so poorly in India is because many people in India are too busy taking offense at the movie to appreciate it. All this BS that the movie is degrading, racist, etc. has seeped into the minds of many people who refuse to see the movie for what it really is. If you're going to take offense at the fact that this movie portrays the dark side of Mumbai, then you need to take a minute to consider the amount of movies that have come out of Hollywood that depict the bad and worse of America. (Facebook user in Toronto, Canada)

When Americans are portrayed in a certain light, Paris Hilton is the figurehead of America. I take offense to that. "You guys are all fat and dumb." It's the same thing. At the same time anyone with a head on their shoulders would watch that and say this obviously isn't the entire population. It's a problem, people do live like that and I think it's good to be aware, but to think that everyone in India lives that way is not realistic. (Focus

group participant # 4)

Some viewers found Boyle's portrayal of India to be accurate and applauded him for exposing the reality of the situation. They feel as though those who are offended by the film refuse to accept the harsh reality that so many Indians live in. Truthful exposure of inequalities seems to take precedence over preservation of Indian national pride for these viewers:

I went to India in December 2008, and this movie is serious stuff. It's the real deal of what's going on in the slums and all around India. People really are suffering and being taken advantage of like this; it's no joke. The only reason it didn't connect to the Indians in India is because they don't like how their country is portrayed in the movie...the reality released about their country through *Slumdog Millionaire* doesn't sit well with them. (Facebook user in Danbury, Connecticut)

The widespread discontent in India with the film is lame. It's 'cause they're so used to typical Bollywood love stories over and over again. Anything portraying the harsh reality doesn't fly well. (Facebook user in New York, New York)

Aside from evaluating India's portrayal, viewers were able to identify elements within the scenes of the film that pointed to new social and economic changes taking place in Mumbai. This identification shows that viewers perceive the changes that India is going through and the multiple identities that make up its culture. Focus group participant # 6 appreciated the film's depiction of a rapidly changing Mumbai:

I really noticed the heavy industrialization going on, especially in the second half of the film. In the beginning there was none of that so that was a pretty obvious development. (Focus group participant # 6)

Others, especially Facebook users, found the story line to be unrealistic, especially its happy ending. They identified the unrealistic elements of the story to be typically Western and ignorant of the actual social realities in India. They found the entire storyline to

be sensationalized or tweaked to satisfy Western ideals. Facebook participants seemed particularly enraged by the idea of social mobility being portrayed as a viable option in a culture with an ancient caste system:

SDM [*Slumdog Millionaire*] is an exaggerated story made for the Western palate. Cannot believe Danny Boyle pulled it off with so many awards, must be a genius. (Facebook user network unknown)

Social justice in India, for people of a certain caste and certain statue is almost a joke. This is not to say that there is no justice but there is a wider gap for people who face inequality and lack of resources available for these people. But the fact is that the film's entire narration seems like a germination of a terribly sadistic and complex mind with the sole aim of satisfying the Western idea of India. (Facebook user in Atlanta, Georgia)

That, to me, is *Slumdog Millionaire*: contrived, pretentious, absurd, hollow, inauthentic, a pseudo-statement about social justice. And yet today the film stands on the precipice of Hollywood's highest honour, the Academy Award for Best Picture. (Facebook user in India)

The two-pronged methodology of a focus group discussion and Facebook fan group data provided an array of responses about the film and its implications. While the focus group gave insight into the average American college student's take on the film, the Facebook responses gave stronger opinions from different cultural perspectives regarding the film. Overall, responses gave a variety of standpoints regarding the film and its portrayal of the Indian identity.

## **Discussion**

The debates over *Slumdog Millionaire* illustrate conflicts about the Indian image and identity under changing social, economic, and cultural conditions. The qualitative data collected from respondents show that the film effectively communicates these changes. The film's interpretation of India has nonetheless generated controversy

The consumerist economy that has infiltrated India since its economic reform is attempting to redefine its cultural identity as a modern capitalist nation. Part of the Indian population advocates and benefits from capitalism and celebrates the shifting image of India. Those excluded from the benefits of consumer culture no doubt feel differently. Through the film *Slumdog Millionaire*, audiences are able to see this emerging economic disparity and better understand the debate over a collective Indian identity.

The data collected in the results reveals that some viewers either took offense or empathized with those that took offense to the film's portrayal of India. Their responses illustrate an awareness of a changing environment in urban India and how certain viewers perceive the film differently according to their cultural standpoint. They identified the depiction of India as stereotypical and attribute much of the film's success to the sensationalism of the poverty in the slums. Such viewers recognize and denounce the negative image that the West has consistently painted of India. Responses show that certain audiences would rather associate Indian identity with its political-economic success and the ascent of the consumerist middle class, not with the squalor that has traditionally plagued the slums.

In concordance with this viewpoint, participants discussed the effects and implications of having a British man direct the film. Some indicated that having a Westerner depict India in a negative or stereotypical fashion was especially aggravating. In recognizing such tension, audiences take part in the struggle over who gets to define the Indian image. Their discontent with a classically Western portrayal of the country reveals that Indians, both at home and abroad, desire the power to self-define. After years of being defined by the standards of imperialist Britain, many Indians want to redefine their country's image on their own terms.

On the other end of the spectrum, some viewers supported *Slumdog Millionaire's* portrayal of India. Their responses reveal that they associate the poverty of slum life with India's cultural identity and think this sector of India should continue to be exposed. While those on this side of the debate may support the emergence of a globalized consumer culture in India, they want its successes to be placed in context with its downfalls. They defend the film's depiction of the

middle and upper class sections of Mumbai juxtaposed against the widespread poverty of the slums. Those who support this depiction want to define India's cultural image in a more comprehensive manner in which all facets of society may be seen. This side of the debate rejects an identity defined by the dominant economic system and is fearful of the homogenization of a common consumerist identity that is sweeping the middle class. Instead of defining India by its recent economic success, this side of the debate desires a diverse national identity that encompasses both dominant and marginalized groups.

Those who support a consumer-based identity for India reject the film's emphasis on the slum, fearing that audiences may not recognize India's developments and that the film may reinforce a stereotypical image of third-world squalor. However, given the results of this study, this fear has been disproved. In their responses, Western viewers have made it clear that they understand that the film only offers an accurate portrayal of one section of the country. Not one participant identified the entire Indian peninsula with the poverty of the slums. Furthermore, participants went on to empathize with Indians who may have taken offense to the film's portrayal of India and understood their fear of misrepresentation.

However, the focus group was made up of participants with a college level education or higher. This may have provided them with a background education on India, perhaps reducing the influence of inaccurate stereotypes. This is a possible limitation of the study that calls for future research. To broaden the scope of this study for future research, members of the focus group could have been selected strategically in order to get a diverse array of viewers of different ages and from different social, cultural, ethnic, and geographical areas. Perhaps then a more diverse set of perspectives about India would arise, eliciting responses that would broaden the debate about the representation of India in the film.

Based on this study, it seems that the film does not endanger a more complicated understanding of India's socio-economic diversity. In fact, *Slumdog Millionaire* may actually enhance this understanding to some extent. The film calls attention to the process of socio-economic transformations occurring in Mumbai since India's economic reform. It displays the disparities in wealth and inequalities in power that are



characteristic effects of such rapid development. While some want India's image to be strictly determined by its recent socio-economic success, others want the portrait of the nation to include sectors of the economy that have not benefitted. Although some may argue that the dominant culture should define a nation's identity, the accurate history of a country cannot be written without a diversity of individual accounts.

## Appendix

Do you find the way India is portrayed in the film to be accurate to the best of your knowledge? If no, why? If yes, what other sources help shape your knowledge of the country?

After seeing the film, how would you describe the city of Mumbai?

The director, Danny Boyle, has directed films such as *Trainspotting*, *The Beach*, and *28 Days Later*. Do you think that having a British director changes the way India is portrayed? Knowing this, does the origin of the director have any effect on perspectives or opinions on the film?

If you were a citizen of India or of Indian descent, would this film offend you? Why or why not? Do any films about America or your particular city/state offend you?

Do you think that the film serves an educational or secondary purpose?

Can you spot influences of globalization/consumer culture in the film? How is it represented? Negatively? Positively? How does product placement from companies such as Coca-cola and Mercedes-Benz affect you as a viewer?

Why do you think this film was so highly acclaimed? Was it deserving of so many awards? The film was far more popular in America than in India. Why do you think that is?

Do you find the story line to be realistic? Why or why not?

What do you think is the social, political, or cultural message of the film?

Can you identify any stereotypes? Do you find them to be accurate in the film or do you see them as unjust?

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