

# Perception Challenged by Cinema: Cultural diversity in UIUC

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## INTRODUCTION

This year's CWL/MACS 207: Indian Cinema in Context class conducted an ethnography study to analyze how Indian cinema has changed the perception of cultural diversity at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

## METHOD

Students were interviewed outside of classroom hours. Groups asked approximately ten questions, both quantitative and qualitative, to interviewees to gauge a perspective on the how diversity is seen on campus by the non-Indian students in CWL/MACS 207. Some interview questions are as follows:

1. What were your previous thoughts on Indian culture? Were they based on stereotypes?
2. Has taking MACS 207 had any effect on your perception of anything (i.e. Indian culture on campus, Indian culture in general) in any way?
3. What are some similarities that you see in aspects of Indian culture that are similar to Western culture after taking MACS 207?

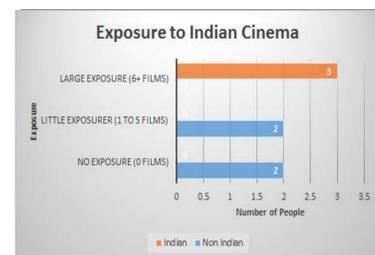
## INITIAL THOUGHTS

Interviewees were asked to give their initial thoughts on campus diversity here at UIUC. The majority of non-Indians had no prior exposure to Indian cinema prior to taking this class. The following are thoughts on what their expectations were of the class:

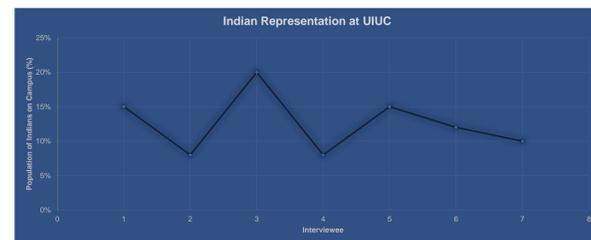
*"[I signed up for this class] to learn about the history and trend of Bollywood films"*

*"I signed up for this class strictly because I am a senior and needed a 200 level literature class to graduate. I had no heard anything about this class prior to signing up"*

*"In particular I find the style of clothing to be particularly interesting. I find a lot of Indian dresses to be colorful and much different than typical dresses around the United States"*



Students' experiences before taking CWL/MACS 207. It was not surprising to find that Indians are more exposed to Indian Cinema prior to taking the class than non-Indians.



Interviewees were asked "Based on the population of Indian students in Indian cinema (MACS 207), what percentage of the UIUC student population is made up of Indians"? It is evident that students have little knowledge on how cultures are represented on campus (on a quantitative basis). Actual percentage < 5% according to Office of Inclusion and Intercultural Relations.

## CHANGE IN PERCEPTION

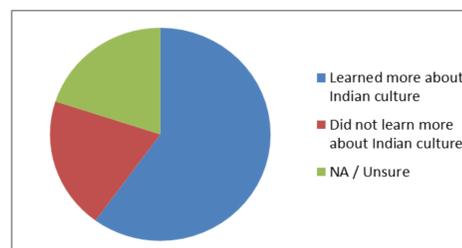
After having gone through the course and watching a number of Indian films, interviewees were asked if their initial thoughts had changed. A majority of the non-Indian students believed in the following stereotypes about Indian films before they took the class:

### STEREOTYPES

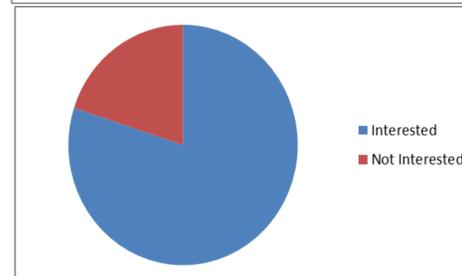
1. Bollywood films are very long and cheesy
2. Numerous song and dance sequences
3. Very melodramatic

It was interesting to find these stereotypes were actually reinforced as opposed to being broken. The following is what one interviewee had to say after taking the course:

*"Before taking this course, I thought a lot of Indian movies were kind of silly and cheesy. I seen gifs of Bollywood films on the internet, and those scenes generally involve defying physics and the real world. I also thought a lot of the acting was pretty bad.... At the time, it did not seem like I would enjoy watching Indian cinema. After taking this course, I realized that I did enjoy watching Indian cinema"*



Did students learn more about Indian culture?



Were students interested in taking additional cultural courses?



After taking CWL 207, interviewees were asked whether they thought this class would make others have a better appreciation for Indian culture. The majority of non-Indian students believed it would increase appreciation, whereas the Indian students did not think so.

## CONCLUSION

After having conducted the interviews, it was interesting to see that the stereotypes that students had before they took the class were actually reinforced, instead of being broken. However, a majority of the non-Indian students believed the stereotypes to be a part of the Indian culture itself, so the fact that the stereotypes were reinforced is not actually a bad thing. It was also found that most of the students learned more about Indian culture and were also encouraged to explore other cultural classes at the university. It is impossible to cover all aspects of Indian culture in one class, and so this class focuses on certain parts and succeeds in educating others in the said aspect.

## CONTACT

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