

Cultural representation in Evolve 1: A Critical Multimodal Study.

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Chapter 1—Introduction

English as a Lingua Franca

English language, nowadays, is considered a global language, a language of whose non-native speakers (i.e., people who learned as a second and a foreign language) are far more than those who are considered native-speakers (i.e., people whom English language is a second language) (Jenkins et al., 2017). Accordingly, the use of the word world English(es) as opposed to English has become an increasingly more appropriate description of English, considering its global status. (Jenkins et al., 2017). The spread of English, driven by globalization, has also been problematized due to its roots in both globalization and colonial and postcolonial discourses, facilitated by American and British educational institutions, as explained by Phillipson (1992, 2013) and Pennycook (1998). Irrespective to imperialism (i.e., the political and economic subjugation of others) being over, linguistic imperialism (subjugation of sociocultural life through language, in this case English) has only been increasing, and one way of that is the deploying English as a marker of socioeconomic privilege and gatekeeping of knowledge (Phillipson, 2013; Pennycook, 1998).

Nevertheless, English is currently characterized as the world's "default language", a lingua franca, to be more precise, and the language of science, business, and communication, whether online or offline. Accordingly, learning the English language is fundamental for people to advance academically, professionally, or simply to connect with the rest of the world (Jenkins et al., 2017). Despite its practical use as a global lingua franca, English language education, or languages in general, is never a neutral endeavor (Kramsch, 2009), but a site of cultural negotiation. Considering the problematic rise of English to a global language, English Language Teaching (hereafter ELT) is a critical site of scholarly investigation, particularly in the context of English as a Foreign Language (hereafter EFL) textbook. EFL textbooks are fundamental artifacts of language education, offering a rich resource wherein the sociocultural world is "represented", as Risager (2018) puts it. EFL textbooks offer a window to the world.

English in the MENA Region

In the MENA region, Arabic is considered the de facto first language of the entire region; Arabic has deep roots in Islamic identity and is also fundamental to national identities in the region (Hopkins, 2020). However, lately, the English language has been positioned as the language of social advancement, economic achievement, and business in general. This led to a tug-of-war where English is embraced, from a pragmatic viewpoint, for national advancement, and is equally rejected as English threatens both cultural heritage and identities (Barnawi & Al-Hawsawi, 2017)

This resulted in two attitudes regarding English in the region: welcoming and apprehensive. Gulf countries have increasingly implemented English language education from very early stages. For example, in 2015, Saudi Arabia introduced the age of learning English in public schools to Grade 4 and invested in internationalizing the curriculum, effectively positioning English as the primary gateway to academic success (Barnawi & Al-Hawsawi, 2017). Similarly, Oman implements English from Grade 1 as Oman considers English an integral part of national development (Jardani, 2017), while in Qatar and Emirates (U.A.E.), English language functions as a lingua franca and a medium of instruction in universities due to the large percentages of expatriates, in U.A.E. 91% are non-Emirate, leading to what is known as “superdiversity” where English is being embraced as part of students’ identities. (Hillman & Eibenschutz, 2018)

Conversely, North African countries with a long history of Western colonization have resisted the adoption of foreign languages, including English. Libya, for instance, has even banned English language teaching for about six years in the late Gaddafi regime (Aloreibi & Carey, 2017), while Morocco has emphasized the role of Arabic language to strengthen Islamic identity as a way of resisting colonial influences, but to no avail as European languages remain the language of science. (Aloreibi & Carey, 2017). This apprehension about the English language stems from the perception of English as “the language of the oppressor”, a continuation of colonialism, or a dilution of cultural identities, as feared by conservative parents and intelligentsia alike (Barnawi & Al-Hawsawi, 2017)

This division between practical acceptance and apprehension of English created “language dualism” where English is seen as a sign of modernity and global advancement, and Arabic symbolizes cultural values and traditions (Ponnuchamy, 2017)

The MENA region

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region comprises 22 countries that share a common religious identity (Islam), linguistic heritage (Arabic), and historical ties, which form the basis of a collective Arab identity; however, the failure of many sociopolitical movements, such as Pan-Arabism and Islamism, has led to a lack of cohesion. Pan-Arabism existed in the 1930s as a secular response to resist Western colonization, but failed to accommodate the region’s ethnic, sectarian, and tribal diversity (Findlay, 1994; Mir, 2019). Similarly, Islamism is characterized by the emphasis on the Ummah and Sharia law as unifying principles, but failed due to varied interpretations of Islam and the distinct socio-political contexts of Arab states (Mir, 2019; Raunch, 2009). Thus, the MENA region is vastly diverse, yet it shares some defining commonalities, reflecting an ever-present state of tumultuous sociopolitical movements. Nevertheless, recent studies such as (Almutairi et al., 2021) has contended with traditional ideas of cultural homogeneity in the region, by reevaluating Hofstede’s model assessment of the region. The authors of this study have demonstrated variations not mentioned in previous assessment such as notable differences in power distance (e.g., high in Iraq, Libya, Egypt vs. closer to average in Gulf states); individualism/collectivism (Saudi Arabia and Lebanon showing higher individualism compared to regional norms but still collectivist globally), masculinity/femininity (Libya leaning masculine, Saudi Arabia feminine); and uncertainty avoidance (Iraq very high due to instability, Egypt moderate). This suggests differences in how cultural traits are defined in the region.

While Arabs and Islam are dominant in the MENA region, linguistic and ethnic minorities such as Berbers and Tuaregs in North Africa (e.g., Morocco and Algeria), Kurds in Iraq and Syria, maintain cultural and linguistic identities that predate the Arabs’ influence. In addition, there are Christian and Jewish communities in the Levant (Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria) and North Africa (Egypt) (Yahiaoui & Al Ariss, 2017).

Additionally, clothing, as a physical manifestation of culture, embodies aesthetic and social norms (Stillman & Micklewright, 1992) and differs significantly in the MENA region. While cultural clothing, such as the *thawb* (a long, mostly white dress), is worn by men in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, it is typically white, featuring a stiff collar and buttons at the chest. In Bahrain and Oman, men wear the *dishdasha*, while in the U.A.E., the *kandura* is distinguished by its collarless design, wider fit, and knee-length tassel. Men also accessorize with the *kofia* (a white skullcap), *ghutrah* (a white head covering), *shmagh* (a white-and-red head covering), and *igal* (a head rope) (Martinez, 2017; Ingham, 2014). A common theme across clothing in Gulf countries is the embracing of their culturally specific attire as everyday wear, often considered national dress. In contrast, other countries have adopted mainly globalized, westernized styles, with traditional clothing more prevalent among minorities or lower-middle-class communities (Stillman, 2000).

For women, cultural attire includes the *hijab*, which broadly refers to head, hair, or body coverings, the *niqab*, covering the face but leaving the eyes visible; and the *abbayah*, a black robe. *Burqa*, a full body cover including the eyes, is also a pattern of clothing for some Muslim women (Amer, 2014). Lastly, hybrid attire, which blends two or more cultural clothing styles, such as wearing a hijab with Western suits or casual clothing, is an attempt to converge tradition and modernity.

Critical investigation of culture in EFL textbooks

With the rise of critical theory and pedagogy, language educational materials, including textbooks, have received considerable scholarly attention since the 1960s, which has included an examination of cultural representation in relation to pedagogical, ideological, and political interests (Risager, 2023; Ulum & Köksal, 2019). Cultural representation, as defined by Risager (2018), is the “sociocultural content” (p. 13) in EFL textbooks. Themes of cultural representation are varied and complex, including virtually all aspects of human life (Risager, 2018). Cultural representation as knowledge is subjective and socially embedded in pedagogical discourses of cultural hegemony. As indicated by Foucault (1976), cited in Risager (2018), knowledge of the world—in this case, sociocultural knowledge in EFL textbooks—is perspectival and subject to the cultural narratives of the publishers. The process of representing sociocultural knowledge (i.e., depicting sociocultural practices

in EFL textbooks, for example) is better known as *recontextualization* (van Leeuwen, 2008). Recontextualizing culture in EFL textbooks, then, has been extensively problematized in the literature, as it promotes the cultural hegemony of certain groups while marginalizing, stereotyping, and trivializing others, effectively positioning textbooks as auxiliary artifacts of maintaining cultural hegemony. It is widely established that learning a foreign or second language goes beyond acquiring linguistic knowledge to potentially *enculturating* individuals by influencing how they perceive the world and themselves as well (Alptekin, 2002; Kramsch, 2009; Ulum & Köksal, 2019). Practices of cultural hegemony in EFL textbooks have been documented extensively in the literature (Alshenqeeti, 2020; Alsaif, 2016; Ulum & Köksal, 2019; Dong et al., 2019; Lee & Li, 2019; Prihatiningsih et al., 2021)

Present study

Building on the investigation of cultural representation in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, this study seeks to address an existing methodological gap in the literature. Most investigations of cultural representation in EFL textbooks have tackled local culture as a single, homogenized, and monolithic entity, equated mostly with national culture, thereby obscuring the cultural diversity of the region (Alshenqeeti, 2020; Alsaif, 2016). Previous studies treat the local culture as Saudi or Arab culture. The present study, however, addresses a cultural content in *Evolve 1*. This book is intended for a broad audience of the entire MENA region. The aim of this study is then to examine how cultural representation is distributed among the diverse cultural groups within the MENA region, including the Gulf, Levantine, Maghrebi, and other MENA cultures, and how they are respectively foregrounded, marginalized, or omitted.

Additionally, after carefully investigating cultural representation in the MENA region, few studies have adopted mixed-methods to enrich the counts of cultural markers with qualitative exploration. Even fewer attempted a semiotic multimodal framework of analysis to integrate not only the frequencies of cultural references but also to explore the different representational strategies that embed ideologies. To address this gap, this study adopts:

1. Visual Analysis

- *Quantitative coding*: Every image is catalogued and coded by cultural category (Source, Target, International). Frequencies are calculated to reveal the overall distribution of visual content.
- *Qualitative categorization*: Images are further classified by setting (e.g., familial, professional), representation type (collective vs. individual), attire, gender composition, and specificity (generic vs. specific), following van Leeuwen's (2008) framework for visual representation.

1. Textual analysis

- Quantitative corpus-based approach: informed by corpus-analysis tools, linguistic items are coded by cultural category (Source, Target, International) to quantify relative emphasis.
- Dialogue investigation:
 - *Quantitative*: The Total number of dialogues and participating speakers is counted across cultures.
 - *Qualitative*: The tenor is examined using the framework proposed by Martin and Rose (2007) for solidarity and power relations within conversations.
- Reading Passages
 - *Sociosemantic inventory*, informed by van Leeuwen (2008), readings are analyzed for representational strategies employed by social actors (e.g., inclusion, suppression), with frequencies calculated per culture type.
 - *Genre and field analysis*, informed by Martin and Rose (2007) and Martin (2009), involves classifying passages by genre (e.g., factual, story and argument) and Field (e.g., education, travel), and accounting for the frequencies of each and their convergence across cultures.

By deploying this framework, this research offers both the academic rigour of statistical large-scale content coding and the interpretive depth of multimodal

discourse analysis. This framework will result in a fine-grained and context-sensitive account of how diverse MENA cultures are represented in the textbook.

The structure of this thesis is as follows. Firstly, in Chapter 1, I provide the literature that provides the theoretical foundation that contextualizes this thesis. Secondly, in Chapter 3, I present a detailed account of the methodology employed in every step, from data collection to analysis, utilized in the research, as well as a consideration of the validity and reliability of the methods. Following that, in Chapter 4, I provide descriptions of the research findings. In Chapter 5, I provide a nuanced discussion of the findings, relating them to current scholarship on cultural representation and hegemony, and address the study's limitations. Lastly, in Chapter 6, I conclude the thesis by summarizing the major themes highlighted in the research, implications for stakeholders, and future directions.

Chapter 2—Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework from which the present thesis is conceptualized. In Segment 2.1, I provide a brief overview of the evolving understanding of culture as a concept within academic fields. Then, in Sections 2.2 and 2.3, I explore the symbiotic relationship between language, foreign language, and culture, drawing on various disciplines, including anthropology and social science. Following that, in Section 2.4, I explain the different concepts and frameworks upon which this study is built, including cultural representations and modes of cultural representation. Lastly, in Section 2.4, I provide a synthesis of studies concerning cultural representations, highlighting limitations that motivate the objectives and research questions in this thesis.

2.1 Culture

Traditionally, culture has been conceptualized as an “essence” shared by members of a social group, encompassing artistic expression, customary practices, and a collective mode of life, and is grounded in a common history and linguistic code (Hall, 2025; Young, 1995; Eagleton, 2016). This essentialist paradigm posits that such an underlying essence endows groups with homogeneity, for example, manifesting the “Arabness” of Arab communities. It further rests on notions of historical continuity and rigid cultural boundaries, portraying individuals mainly as representatives of their cultures (Bradley, 2018). However, due to globalization, digital technologies, and social media, the essentialist views of culture have been undermined by tearing down cultural boundaries and amplifying intra-group diversity of experience. Indeed, Holliday (2005) thus reconceptualizes culture as an emergent social force rather than a geographically bounded entity.

Contemporary theories portray culture as fluid, socially constructed, and shared meanings, values, and practices (Hall, 2025; van Dijk & Tuen, 2009). It is enacted and negotiated through discourse and semiotic practices within power-laden contexts (Pennycook, 2006; Kramsch, 1998), and it emerges in overlapping “small cultures” such as families or interest groups (Hopkins, 2017). According to this

dynamic perspective on culture, individuals retain agency by actively shaping and modifying cultural meanings through intercultural contact.

Accordingly, this study conceives culture not as a static essence but as a fluid phenomenon. However, despite embracing culture as fluid and socially constructed, for practical reasons, this study necessarily applies a strict cultural coding of cultural references informed by the provided contexts in the textbook, which may reify cultural boundaries and obscure real-life complexity and hybridity.

2.2 Culture and Language

The role of culture in shaping language and vice versa has been a scholarly interest for ages. After all, culture is the cradle in which language appears and evolves, while language is a prism by which culture is communicated and represented. This relationship necessarily raises questions regarding the extent to which language and culture influence each other.

Situating linguistic analysis in culture stems from the ethnographer Bronislaw Malinowski, who perceived language as part of human behavior, extending beyond mere expression and embedded in sociocultural context (Senft, 2007). Frustrated by the inadequacy of traditional grammar in his work with Trobriand Islanders, he proposed a model in which words are examined within their practical use in a given culture. In his “ethnolinguistic” model, he argued that the *context* in which the word is used is what gives it its distinctive meaning, not any inherent feature of the word (Senft et al., 2009). J. R. Firth expanded Malinowski’s idea of context to account for more linguistically motivated *context*. Firth accounted for linguistic analysis, ranging from phonology to semantics, all within a sociocultural context. Dell Hymes elaborated further on the sociocultural context by situating linguistic analysis in a more ethnographic approach that establishes differences among cultural groups, as indicated by the cultural communicative norms (Hymes, 1974)

Recent insights from Cultural Linguistics (Sharifian, 2017) provide evidence for the constitutive role of culture in language, conceptualizing it as a repository of cultural knowledge. This is evident in conceptual metaphors, which create the cognitive scaffolding through which people make sense of experience and communicate shared understandings.

Building on Malinowski's contextual approach to language, the principle of linguistic relativity, as advocated in the early works of anthropologists Edward Sapir (1884–1939) and Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897–1941), posits a more dynamic and constitutive role for language. This notion evolved to be known as the “Sapir-Whorf hypothesis”. Sapir argued that linguistic vocabulary and categories reflect human lived experiences. In other words, important phenomena get labeled linguistically and then gain importance. Whorf, on the other hand, examined the spatiotemporal linguistic representation in the Hopi communities. Whorf suggested that ways of encoding time, specifically in Hopi communities, are starkly different, which suggests a worldview in which time as a phenomenon is understood completely differently from that in nations where time is viewed as segmental intervals in Standard Average European (SAE) languages, such as English (Sapir, 1929; Whorf, 1956). While influential, this hypothesis was misinterpreted to suggest a more restrictive and deterministic role of language, formulating what is known as “linguistic determinism”. Later scholars have embraced a more moderate role of language (Gumperz and Levinson, 1991) suggest that language indeed influences thoughts, but it does so in a less rigid manner; language influences thoughts, rather than entirely determining them.

2.3 Culture and Foreign Language

Foreign language learning does not involve simply mastering grammar and memorizing numerous words; it can be considered as a way of cultural immersion, where learners inevitably encounter and negotiate underlying cultural models deeply embedded in languages.

As Alptekin (2002) puts it, foreign language learning can be understood as a form of enculturation, as learners are not only required to master linguistic knowledge but also are positioned to adopt the cultural framework inherent to the target language. Moreover, according to Kramsch (2009), language learning is influenced by social and cultural conventions associated with it. This understanding of language learning goes beyond mastering grammar to mastering appropriate communication styles, social values, and culturally specific interactional norms. Kramsch notes that this process can be both constraining and empowering for learners. While learners may experience a sense of limitation in their initial expressive capacities as they strive to “sound right” to the target speech community, this very process also opens up opportunities to access and articulate different facets of self and identity through the

new linguistic and cultural repertoire they acquire (Norton, 2000; Hopkyns, 2017). This understanding highlights foreign language learning as a central site of cultural and identity negotiation.

According to Bonvillain (2019), languages embody shared conceptual constructions of reality – cultural models – which are ideologically laden and shape perception, values, and social practices. Thus, acquiring a foreign language entails engaging with and internalizing, to varying degrees, these underlying cultural models. At its heart, this process involves a culturally transformative engagement (Kim, 2001), inviting learners to step into new ways of thinking and seeing the world, which inherently challenges and broadens their existing beliefs.

Thus, both language and culture have a well-documented influence on each other, and these insights suggest that attempting to teach or learn a language without addressing its cultural context is a fundamentally misguided endeavor. Additionally, these insights, particularly regarding foreign language learning as a form of cultural immersion, legitimize the cultural investigation of pedagogical materials and their respective role in shaping learners' intercultural understanding of the world and themselves.

2.4 Cultural Representation

2.4.1 Cultural Representation in EFL Pedagogies

Cultural representation in EFL textbooks, or as Risager (2018) puts it, “sociocultural content” encompasses a plethora of themes involving all aspects of human life from identity formation to accent variation. Moreover, cultural representation can be categorized into three categories, following Cortazzi & Jin (1999)'s as cited in (Risager, 2023): Source Culture (hereafter SC), which concerns the learner's local culture; Target Culture (hereafter TC), which typically include Anglophone cultures/contexts in EFL textbooks; International Culture (hereafter IC), which encompass all other cultures. This sociocultural content is represented through various modes of representation, primarily textual and visual representation, each necessitating different analytical attention.

2.4.3 Constructing Cultural Representation in EFL Pedagogies

Ideology is not only an abstract set of beliefs, but also a powerful force that actively shapes how cultural practices are represented (van Leeuwen, 2008).

Consequently, both textual and visual representations are not neutral modes of information; rather, they *recontextualize* everyday social practices—socially regulated behaviors such as conversational conventions, forms of address, or kinship terminology (van Leeuwen, 2008)—to reflect underlying power structures and normative assumptions interests of the institution from which they emerge in dominant cultures (Ulum & Köksal, 2019). In essence, the texts found in EFL materials are constructed representations of communication that have been filtered through specific ideological lenses, to fulfil the publisher’s end goals.

According to (van Leeuwen, 2008), *recontextualization* refers to the process by which social practices—originally embedded with specific meanings, values, and cultural differences—are extracted from their everyday contexts and then transformed into standardized, institutionalized texts or discourses (i.e., the discourse of EFL curriculum designs that is present in EFL textbooks publishers). Drawing on Bernstein’s concept, as elaborated by van Leeuwen (2008), recontextualization involves shifting knowledge and practices from their original production environments (e.g., dynamic, lived experiences) into formats that serve predetermined functions within institutions, such as educational settings. In the context of EFL textbooks, recontextualization is showcased in how the rich, culturally and contextually grounded practices of language use are converted into fixed, proceduralized discourses. This process is driven by a broader trend of “the supersedure of meaning by function,” where, as Max Weber (1977) as cited in (van Leeuwen, 2008) argued, social actions become oriented not by the original meanings or values but by efficiency, standardization, and a “one size fits all” approach. Consequently, rather than presenting language and culture as diverse, fluid, and context-specific, EFL textbooks often reproduce them as homogenized representations—adhering to rigid pedagogical templates that privilege dominant ideologies and marginalize local or alternative cultural practices (Guest, 2010). For instance, when textbooks present a “standard” form of English, they often privilege particular native-speaker norms (such as British Received Pronunciation or American General American) while marginalizing alternative English varieties. This perspective promotes a narrow view of what is appropriate language variety. It establishes a cultural hierarchy by suggesting that specific “accurate” ways of speaking and behaving are inherently superior to others. Beyond linguistic content, van Leeuwen

(2008) argues that the multimodal elements, as embedded in ideological frameworks—such as images—play an equally significant role in transmitting ideological meanings. Thus, by examining the semiotic resources and modes of representation—such as the inclusion or exclusion of social actors, role allocation, and the framing of cultural symbols (van Leeuwen, 2008)—scholars can uncover the subtle ideological dynamics that shape the cultural representations. The purpose of such critical analysis of textbooks is to help expose cultural hegemonic practices and discourses, as well as provide theoretical insights for reconceptualizing equitable and culturally aware curricula.

2.4.4 Cultural Representation in EFL Textbooks across the World

Recent literature broadly examines cultural representation in EFL textbooks globally, revealing diverse regional trends and methodological approaches. Studies across Southeast Asia show a complex picture of Anglophone and local culture inclusion, often unbalanced with local elements in lower status and persistent stereotypes, while Latin American research points to Anglo-centric overrepresentation potentially marginalizing local identities (Dong et al., 2019; Lee & Li, 2019; Prihatiningsih et al., 2021) European studies uniquely highlight political influences on EFL curricula promoting multilingualism (Bessie, 2018), contrasting with the MENA region where internationally published textbooks often prioritize Anglophone cultures (Alsaif, 2016; Alshenqeeti, 2020), potentially alienating learners, although localized MENA textbooks may lack internal diversity (Aoumeur & Ziani, 2022).

The methodologies used in these studies range from discourse analysis (Alsaif, 2016) to multimodal semiotic analysis (Prihatiningsih et al., 2021), and include mixed-methods approaches (Lee & Li, 2019). Collectively, these studies have their strengths and limitations in examining cultural content. However, many of cultural studies, particularly in the MENA region, have focused on cultural representations in EFL textbooks as a means of national identity. Moreover, methodologically, studies in the MENA region often lack thorough cultural investigation, relying either on content analysis of textual representations only (Alsaif, 2016; Aoumeur & Ziani, 2022; Alshenqeeti, 2020) or corpus analysis (Almujaiwel, 2018), which are limited in qualitative interpretative analysis. Mixed methods, as in Alzubi et al. (2023), emerge as a suitable bridge between the rigor of quantitative approaches and the richness of qualitative methods. Despite employing mixed-methods approaches (Alzubi et al.,

2023) and, these approaches appear to neglect social semiotic perspectives which is necessary for understanding nuance in different meaning-making modes of cultural representation (Veltri, 2015)

Building on the existing research, several critical methodological and conceptual gaps are highlighted. Limitations in studies from the MENA region suggest conceptual and methodological gaps, including the need to integrate social semiotic analyses that examine both textual and visual data equally. Furthermore, cultural content in textbooks in the MENA region has been treated mainly as a static entity, typically equated to national identity. Accordingly, there is a substantial need for a nuanced treatment of culture, with heterogeneity at the forefront of the analysis.

2.5 Objectives and Questions of this research.

This research examines the cultural content in an EFL textbook designed for English language learners from the MENA region. This research deploys a mixed-methods research design to:

1. Establish a comprehensive mapping of cultural content embedded in visual and textual data, highlighting patterns of frequency and distribution of cultural items across the entire textbook.
2. To examine how textual discourse construes cultural representation of different cultural groups, highlighting discursive patterns in textual data that distinguish different social groups.
3. To examine how visual communication strategies construct the representation of different cultural groups by uncovering visual strategies in imagery used to depict these groups.

Research Questions

This research seeks to address these questions:

1. Dominant cultural referent: In terms of representation, which cultural group is the most represented in the EFL textbook? Is there a discernible prevalence of the TC, SC, or IC groups?
2. Nature of cultural representation: How is cultural representation construed through visual and discursive discourses in this EFL textbook? How are

cultures dealt with in the textbook? Negotiated, dynamic, and subject to change or essentialized, unchanging, and static?

3. Social roles: How are social roles allocated across groups in terms of both gender and culture? In other words, are social roles used and distributed equally or more reservedly favoring certain groups of people or gender over others? Effectively maintaining social hierarchies and stereotypes or challenging them.

2.6 Summary

This chapter provides a brief overview of how culture is defined, along with an exploration of the role of language and culture, particularly in the context of foreign languages. Following that, a detailed outline of major studies on cultural representation in the MENA region is provided, highlighting some conceptual and methodological limitations that motivated the present study.

The academic landscape in the MENA region has produced extensive examination of cultural representation in EFL textbooks; however, major conceptual and methodological issues remained unaddressed. Firstly, a significant portion of studies employ frequency-based analysis, with only a few relying on semiotic perspectives. Secondly, culture, specifically local culture, has been treated homogeneously as a single entity, neglecting its heterogeneous nature. Accordingly, this research will go beyond merely frequency-based analyses of both visual and textual data to probe the culture as a heterogeneous phenomenon. This thesis will offer a nuanced perspective on how cultural identities are represented and conveyed within EFL pedagogical materials in the MENA region, moving beyond narrow conceptions of culture to a more complex appreciation of cultural heterogeneity.

Chapter 3—Methodology and Data

3.1 Research design and rationale

This study adopts a mixed-methods strategy, combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies to analyze visual and textual data from the textbook. By combining both approaches, it employs quantitative tools to map the distributions and

frequencies of cultural themes while depending on qualitative interpretation to understand their significance. (Ivankova & Greer, 2015). This design is not only helpful in addressing multilayered phenomena by exploring breadth (i.e., patterns and frequencies), but also enhances generalizability, contextualizes results, and boosts credibility through triangulation (Ivankova & Greer, 2015). This multiphase sequential design (Table 1) begins with Phase 1 which includes purely quantitative visual analysis of the cultural content and corpus-based approaches for linguistic data, then inspired by the findings in Phase 1, Phase 2 initiates a mixed-method analysis of images as well as reading passages and dialogues, codifying the visual and linguistic corpus and quantifying it. The findings of Phase 2 are presented both visually and textually. Lastly, Phase 3 involves purely qualitative analysis of images to provide a deep interpretive phase to the design.

Phases	Methods	Description
1	Quantitative	-Image count; corpus-based analysis -allocating across cultures
2	Mixed-methods	Qualitative -visual analysis of representational strategies (collective vs. individual) -analysis of reading passages using van Leeuwen’s social actor framework; genre and field analysis -tenor analysis of dialogues (power dynamics, social relations) Quantitative -frequencies of patterns across each analytical focus. -comparing across cultures
3	Qualitative	-visual analysis of images using van Leeuwen’s framework for visual representation.

Table 1: Research Design and Phases

This layering aligns with the rationales for mixed-method research design, where results from earlier stages are used to refine and inform subsequent inquiries (Ivankova & Greer, 2015). Deploying this research design will ensure a holistic and rigorous analysis of cultural content in the textbook.

3.2 Data collection

Textbook selection

The analysis is based on the EFL textbook titled *Evolve 1*. This textbook is intended for learners in the MENA region, specifically Arabic-speaking students in the region. *Evolve 1* is part of the *Evolve Special Edition* series published by Cambridge University Press (hereafter CUP) and was developed with critical insights from local experts and individual collaborators from the source culture. (Cambridge University Press, n.d.) describes *The Evolve Special Edition* series as a comprehensive four-level English course designed to improve students' speaking and writing skills using new, learner-centered methods. The series is research-based teaching materials that draw on data from the Cambridge International Corpus to produce content relevant to real-world language use, customized for the MENA region in terms of culture and language. While, it has proven complicated to gain data on usage of the textbook in the region, according to publicly available information concerning course specifications of English Language Centers (Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University, 2024; Um Al Qura University, 2024; King Abdulaziz University, 2024), three of the most prominent universities within the region implement *Evolve Series* as educational materials in their English course. These universities are homes for about quarter million students (Table 2), legitimizing the need for investigating *Evolve 1*.

University	Student population	QS Ranking (in the MENA region)
Umm Al Qura University	94,843	559 (19)
King Abdulaziz University	136,560	149 (7)
Princess Noura University (Female students only)	25,054	681-690 (Non-specified)
Total	256457	

Table 2: Sample of Major Universities in the Region

3.3 Data within the textbook

3.3.1 Visual and textual data

In this study, the term 'visual representation' encompasses all images, illustrations, photographs, symbols, and other graphic elements found in the textbooks. These visual elements provide non-verbal and embedded verbal cues (descriptive narrative/accompanying text) about cultural norms, practices, and values. They can

serve to reinforce or challenge cultural stereotypes through different visual structures. On the other hand, the term textual data refers to how language conveys cultural representation in EFL textbooks. This involves the use of vocabulary, grammar, narrative structures, and discursive practices that not only convey information about a culture but are also embedded with underlying values, assumptions, and ideological perspectives. Essentially, textual data represents cultural representation through words shaping learners' perceptions and understandings of the cultural content. These data are explicitly presented in the form of dialogues, reading passages, and more generally in the overall short narratives and texts that are not labeled as reading exercises, effectively encompassing all the written content in the textbook.

3.4 Analyses

3.4.1 Visual data analyses

Firstly, a comprehensive quantitative content analysis is conducted in order to categorize and quantify the visual data according to their cultural markers (e.g., attire, gender, setting, and embedded textual description) into one of five cultural categories: Source Culture (SC), Target Culture (TC), International Culture (IC), Mixed Cultures, and Undetermined Cultures. The results are classified numerically to establish common patterns of representation across the textbook. The frequencies and percentages were calculated to probe cultural inclusivity and balance of social representation across cultures in the book. To provide a more comprehensive investigation of cultural representation, the analysis examines which countries and regions are portrayed as idealized versions of each cultural category. For instance, if the U.S.A. is represented more than the U.K., then the U.S.A. might be positioned as a more authentic context of the English language.

Additionally, some images are presented generically, lacking contextual information, and typically depict individuals or objects. Accordingly, the research employs further web-based research to gather relevant cultural information and categorize images in a culturally sensitive manner. Primarily, this research phase involved tracing the images back to their source, which is Getty Images, according to the textbook's copyright section. Accordingly, the images' keywords used to index them were considered as additional contextual elements, for example, if an image was

described as “In the USA”, the image would then be considered a representation of the TC. Despite this additional step in the investigation, some images could not be determined as they did not provide any supporting evidence to suggest a cultural category, and thus were marked as culturally undetermined representations. To elucidate the underlying meanings and interpret these patterns and frequencies, a semiotic qualitative approach is employed. Social semiotics, as elaborated by Veltri (2015), involves the study of how people employ different semiotic modes, such as visual and verbal language, to create meaning and represent their understanding of the world, as well as shape social relations. This approach reveals the underlying ideological meanings and social implications of different patterns of representation, going beyond simply quantifying representation. Thus, qualitative analysis is utilized to interpret the patterns of representations.

This phase draws on van Leeuwen’s (2008) social semiotic framework of social actors’ representation, as elaborated in Figure 1 below, primarily focusing on the question: how are individuals represented? This framework will include investigating visual strategies that encode inclusion and exclusion, agency, and categorization (Cultural vs. biological).

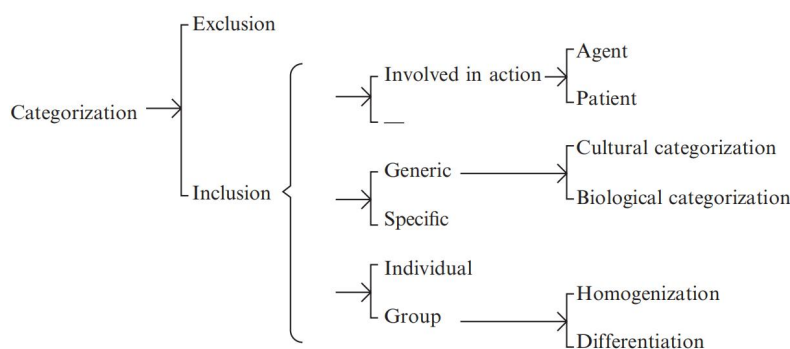


Figure 1: Visual Representation Framework, adapted from (van Leeuwen, 2008, p.147)

Due to the enormous scope of the images, this step will only be applied for the collective actors (i.e., images of human actors in groups). The representation of individual actors will include only the axis of van Leeuwen’s framework: specific vs. generic representation; actors will be analyzed according to what makes them unique such as personal identity factors, or only cultural markers that position them as part “of a certain social type” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 143) This interpretive phase focused on how patterns of representation in the textbook deploy strategies such as generic vs.

specific representation, for instance depiction of unnamed cultural figures as opposed to more individualized Western celebrity characters. The analysis circles back to quantitative approaches to quantify the results of qualitative representation, primarily by calculating different types of representations in cultures (individual representation vs. collective representations) and the settings of the images. This design aligns with the complementarity principle discussed by Ivankova & Greer (2015) as a reason for adopting Mixed-Method Research design “[C]omplementarity – to seek clarification of the results from one method with the results from the other method” (p.65).

3.4.2 Textual data analyses

For textual data, this study employs a four-layered analytical framework starting with corpus-based approaches for the whole textbook, analyzing tenor in dialogues, application of (van Leeuwen, 2008) ’s framework of social actors’ representations, lastly genre (Martin, 2009) and field analyses based on (Martin & Rose, 2007). Firstly, the corpus-based approach utilizes *SketchEngine*. This tool calculates the frequencies of linguistic items related to cultural representation, revealing linguistic patterns throughout the entire textbook. According to Heritage and Taylor (2024, p. 43), the frequency of linguistic units (e.g., words) highlights the normativity within the discourse, which then reveals the role language plays in construing cultural representation. To generate a comprehensive word list, SketchEngine was further employed to create a word list of capitalized nouns and their corresponding frequencies and relative frequencies across the corpus. Subsequently, the research categorizes nouns semantically into meaningful tables or word lists, including names, countries, cities, nationalities, languages, and cultural items (e.g., exotic foods, cultural celebrations). Further concordance analysis was employed to distinguish the double use of words, such as “Saudi”, which can be used as a nationality and as part of the name of the country, “Saudi Arabia”. Then, cultural coding of the aggregated tables is commenced to yield quantitative data highlighting patterns and emphases in linguistic choices and how specific linguistic terms are normalized in the textbook, which underpins its cultural representations.

For the second analysis of textual data, the study examines the tenor of the conversation and dialogues that happen in the textbook. Tenor, according to Martin and Rose (2007, p. 249), refers to the type of social relations between people and is realized across two dimensions: solidarity and power. Solidarity is concerned with

organizing people according to closeness, ranging from high solidarity (close) to low solidarity (distanced). Power is concerned with organizing people across a cline of authority, concerning who assumes institutional or social authority and who assumes deference (e.g., teacher–student; the teacher assumes the institutional authority). The analysis also examines the audio recordings (for the speakers’ accents) of the dialogues and the images to categorize the dialogues precisely across cultural categories. This analysis will also incorporate a quantitative dimension to quantify the findings of this qualitative analysis (number of speakers, power hierarchies, gender im/imbalance) in order to highlight the patterns of tenor that underpin representations in the dialogues. The analysis of tenor will reveal how social relations are strategically employed as a variable within cultural representation.

(van Leeuwen, 2008) The sociosemantic inventory provides a comprehensive framework, as illustrated in Figure 2 below, for analyzing how social actors are portrayed in speech. This approach is beneficial for critical discourse analysis (hereafter CDA), as it directly addresses the sociological and ideological consequences of various representation tactics that extend beyond linguistic aspects. The central question driving this inventory is how social actors are represented in English, viewed through the lens of grammar as a “meaning potential” rather than a fixed set of rules. Unlike some linguistic CDA approaches that begin with linguistic operations or categories, van Leeuwen prioritizes a sociosemantic inventory. This involves first establishing the various ways social actors can be conceptually represented before examining their linguistic realization.

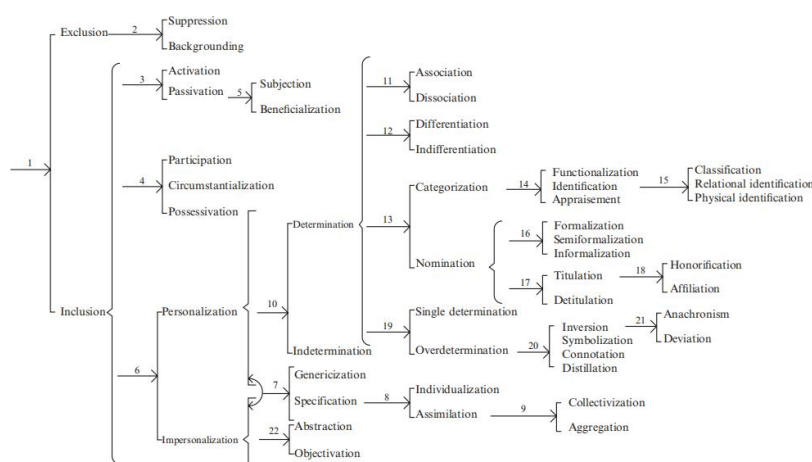


Figure 2: Framework of Social Representation of Actors, adapted from (van Leeuwen, 2008, p.52)

There are two key reasons for this approach. Firstly, language lacks a one-to-one correspondence between sociological concepts and linguistic forms (the “bi-uniqueness” challenge). For instance, sociological agency can be expressed through various linguistic means beyond the grammatical agent. Focusing solely on linguistic categories might therefore overlook significant instances of how agency and other social roles are constructed in text. van Leeuwen aims for a semantically driven analysis that captures the diverse ways a single concept can be linguistically realized (van Leeuwen, 2008).

van Leeuwen’s framework of representation of social actors is a system of chief ways by which actors are represented in discourse. This framework encompasses various linguistic and rhetorical phenomena, including transitivity, nominal groups, and references, and organizes representational strategies according to sociological concepts such as activation/passivation, personalization, indetermination, and functionalization. The system network highlights how these choices involve linguistic transformations, such as deletion, rearrangement, and substitution, which are realized through grammatical systems, including voice, transitivity, and reference, as well as lexis and metaphor. For textual analysis, adopting van Leeuwen’s sociosemantic inventory provides a robust and systematic approach to understanding how social actors are constructed in the data. It allows researchers to move beyond simply describing linguistic features (as simpler functional linguistic analysis might do) to interrogate the ideological underpinnings of these representations critically. This framework is particularly valuable for CDA as it helps to “denaturalize” taken-for-granted aspects of discourse, revealing how both explicit and implicit messages contribute to the construction of cultural representation and the perpetuation of underlying ideologies (Risager, 2018). After coding and the texts culturally and applying the socio-semantic inventory, quantitative coding is further employed by tallying all representational strategies and calculating their proportions to establish common patterns of representation across cultures.

Lastly, further qualitative analysis of the genres and fields of the reading passages. For this step, the analysis relies on Martin (2009) for the genre analysis and Martin and Rose (2007) for the field analysis. This step is essential in probing the meanings and configurations in the texts that underlie cultural representations. Embedded in systemic functional linguistics, genre and field analyses provide a

concrete understanding of how different texts convey cultural meanings across various cultural categories. Firstly, according to Martin (2009), genres are recurrent configurations of meanings. By analyzing genres such as narratives, procedures, and recounts, this study aims to uncover the types of meanings that are represented or marginalized across cultural categories. For instance, the predominance of procedural texts over narratives in a specific cultural category might be interpreted as a cultural preference for routines and processes over personal or historical storytelling traditions.

Additionally, this step will involve a quantitative analysis of the genres in each cultural category to establish patterns of cultural representation in the textbook. Secondly, the field, as defined by Martin and Rose (2007), is concerned with institutionalized or domestic activities that are ongoing. In other words, the field is related to the experiential content of the reading passages. Additionally, quantitative analysis is conducted to calculate the frequencies of genres and fields across cultures. This step is necessary for analyzing the subject matter, activities, and types of texts in the reading passages, which reflect the cultural representations in the textbook. For instance, texts that reflect cultural celebration through descriptive-type texts in only one cultural category may indicate a religious significance attributed to this cultural category.

Chapter 4—Findings

This chapter presents the findings of this research, which highlight how *Evolve 1* construes the representation of cultural groups, structured according to different media: visual first, then textual.

4.1 Visual Analysis

4.1.1 Distribution of Images Across Cultural Categories

Table 3 shows near parity in image distribution between SC (34%) and TC (33%); however, IC is underrepresented at 23% (49 images), limiting global visual input. Despite overall balance, regional biases are noted. TC visuals are dominated by the U.S. (84%), while SC is skewed towards Gulf countries (61%), marginalizing other MENA regions. IC images primarily feature Asia (40%) and Europe (33%), with less

from Latin America (26%), thus positioning American and Gulf contexts as prototypical representations for TC and SC, respectively.

Cultural category	Overall images (%)	Region/country	Images within category (%)
SC	70 (34)	Gulf	43 (61)
		SC-unspecified	18 (25)
		North Africa	9 (12)
		Total	70 (100%)
TC	69 (33)	U.S.	58 (84)
		U.K.	6 (9)
		Canada	4 (6)
		Australia	1 (2)
		Total	69 (100%)
IC	49 (23)	Asia	20 (40)
		Europe	16 (33)
		Latin America	13 (26)
		Total	49 (100%)
Grand Total	207 (100)		

Table 3: Overall Visual Representation in Evolve 1 (n=207), Across Cultures and Regions

To analyze the qualitative aspect of representation, human representations were probed for attire, gender, setting, and representation type (Table 4). Notably, differences in numbers arise because multiple representation types (i.e., representing individuals vs. collectively) may appear in a single image, while the setting remains singular. For instance, Picture 1 contains two images depicting two individuals with two representation types (2×individual), but one setting (social media).



Picture 1: Social Media Messages

Element	SC	TC	IC	Mixed	Undet.	Total(s)
Images	52	54	43	7	14	170
Attire						

Globalized/western	29	65	54	11	19	178
Culture-specific	39		11	1		51
Hybrid attire	20		4			24
Gender composition						
Males	42	46	37	12	15	152
Females	46	19	32		5	102
Age group						
Adult	74	49	59	12	19	213
Young	11	15	9			35
Senior	3	1	1			5
Total participants	88	65	69	12	19	254
Settings						
Social activity	25	23	24	3	12	88
Professional	12	11	10	2	2	37
Familial	5	2	3			10
Icons		4	4			8
Conceptual		6	1			6
Royalty	3					3
Total	45	46	42	5	14	152
Type of representation						
Individual	40	42	29	4	12	127
Collective	12	12	14	3	2	43
Total	52	54	43	7	14	170

Table 4: Aspects of Human Representation

Regarding attire, “Globalized/Western” attire constitutes the largest form of clothing in images (70% overall). Conversely, culture-specific and hybrid attire are mainly prominent in the SC (43%, 22%, respectively). This reflects the universal status of Western attire and the inclusion of SC cultural identity through their cultural clothing.

Gender representation highlights asymmetrical patterns. Overall, male participants are more frequently represented (60%) compared to females (40%). This is more pronounced in the TC (70%), followed by the Undetermined category (73%), and the Mixed category, which only represented male participants. Alternatively, the SC and IC exhibit gender parity. This suggests an equitable approach to gender in the previous cultural groups. Senior citizens are vastly underrepresented, while adults are the majority of the age groups.

As for settings, social activities dominate cross-culturally. While professionalism is common, SC emphasizes individual professionalism and includes unique elements such as family and royalty. TC, however, features more abstract themes such as success and iconicity with limited familial representation (father-son).

Types of representation involve the framing and imagery that participants use. Individual representation contains images where there is only one individual within the frame, emphasizing their individuality. The majority of representations in the textbook (75%) is individual representations. The other type, collective representation, reflects groups of people within the same frame.

The analysis of human representation reveals a dominant preference for Western values and individualism. Overall, Western attire and male figures are dominant as cultural themes and are more prevalent in TC. In contrast, culture-specific clothing and hybrid attire are primarily found in the SC, and gender parity is a distinctive characteristic of both the SC and IC. Settings in TC appear to be abstract ideals, whereas SC settings highlight culturally grounded themes such as family and social connections. Despite cultural differences, individual representation is favored cross-culturally, which suggests a bias towards global uniformity over cultural specificity and balanced representation.

4.1.3 Genericity vs. Specificity in images

As Table 5 shows, a dominant pattern of generic representation is detected in the images, particularly in collective depictions across all cultural categories. This is most evident in the IC and TC categories, where both collective and individual representations are largely generic, depicting what makes people part of a cultural group rather than individuating them. These patterns highlight varied representational strategies: the SC exhibits more specific representations, prescribing a dynamic, culturally embedded, and personalized representation. By contrast, the TC and IC representation of culture is more abstract, generic, and decontextualized, floating more than being culturally grounded.

Image representation	Type	SC	TC	IC	Total
Collective	Specific	6	4	6	16
	Generic	42	26	34	102
	Total	48	30	40	118

Individual	Specific	27	10	8	45
	Generic	13	25	21	59
	Total	40	35	29	104
Grand total		88	65	69	222

Table 5: Generic vs. Specific Representation

4.1.4 Qualitative analysis.

Qualitative analysis of IC images (Table 6) reveals an ideological tendency to present cultural “representees” rather than individuals, often through idealized and generic framing. Family scenes are depicted to represent universal emblems of middle-class unity, while visually individuated, they are not textually, reducing them to a type—a generic Western family that aligns more with the TC’s abstraction. Depictions of the two women from the Yao ethnic group and Taquile Island men emphasize cultural dress, shared activities, and similar seating positions, construing “sameness” representation. While using phones could be interpreted as nuance, it does not individuate them; it positions them as static cultural representatives and perpetuates “othering”, homogenizing, and exoticizing of non-Western cultures, stereotypical representation.





 <p><i>Image 1: Swedish Family</i></p>	 <p><i>Image 2: Hispanic Family</i></p>
 <p><i>Image 3: Two Men from Taquile Island</i></p>	 <p><i>Image 4: Two Women from Yao Ethnic Group</i></p>

Table 6: Example IC images

By contrast, TC representations blend specificity with abstraction, depicting recognizable individuals as emblems of success and aspiration (e.g., Steve Jobs, J. K. Rowling). Characters such as “Frack Silva” are individuated only when they are compared to other characters from the SC in a contrastive layout.


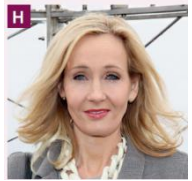


 <p><i>Image 5: Steve Jobs</i></p>	 <p><i>Image 6: J. K. Rowling</i></p>
 <p><i>Image 7: Canadian Artist</i></p>	 <p>ABOUT FRANK My name is Frank Silva. I live in Austin, Texas, in the United States. I'm American and Brazilian. The name of my company is Designs by Frank. It's in my home in Austin. I'm an art teacher, too. The classes are in my home. My phone number is (780) 555-5230, and my email is designsbyfrank@blinknet.com.</p> <p><i>Image 8: Frank Silva</i></p>

Table 7: Images from the TC.

The SC exhibits (Table 8) a tension between nuanced, individuated portrayals (e.g., an Emirati artist) and one-dimensional, functional roles (e.g., a woman labeled “Server”). Depictions of culturally recognized figures, such as King Salman of Saudi Arabia or Fazza, Crown Prince of the U.A.E., mainly represent authority.

Families from the SC exhibit different representational patterns, with families from the Gulf counties (Image 16) being more individuated, featuring contextualization text and focused frames for individuals. Meanwhile, families from North African countries (Image 15) are collectively depicted in one image with no contextualization text. While they are visually individuated, they are still culturally categorized by their visual appearance, making them a generic symbol of SC families as opposed to the other fully individuated Kuwaiti family.







 <p>server</p> <p><i>Image 9: An Arab girl</i></p>	 <p>STUDIO 10 STORE PROFILES Meet the artists</p> <p>ABOUT SARAH I'm Sarah Habbot. I live in San Diego, but I'm not American. I'm Emirati. My company is Hadad Point. My phone number is (646) 555-6033, and my email is sarah2000@hadadpaints.com. I'm an artist, and I'm a student, too. The name of my school is The Art Institute. It's in California.</p> <p><i>Image 10: An Emirati artist girl</i></p>
<p>A Look at the picture. Do you know who it is? What do you know about him?</p> <p>B READ Read the profile. Were your ideas correct?</p> <p>Usta Faizal, he's from my country, the United Arab Emirates, and is a date of birth is November 34, 1980. His real name is Shaid in Arabic but Mohammed bin Khalid Al Maktoum. You can see the second one of the Prince Sultan and he's the Crown Prince of Dubai. but he's also a poet and a photographer! "Faizal" is his poet's name. He's on Instagram with 10 million followers. I think he's really interesting.</p>  <p><i>Image 11: Crown Prince of Dubai</i></p>	 <p><i>Image 12: King Salman of Saudi Arabia</i></p>
 <p><i>Image 13: North African Family.</i></p>	 <p><i>Image 14: Kuwaiti Family</i></p>

Table 8: Images from the SC.

Taken together, the different treatment of cultural groups establishes distinct representational strategies, thereby framing individuals differently across cultures. As a result, individuals are framed as symbols to relate to, stereotypes, or individuated characters.

4.2 Corpus-Based Analysis

The corpus-analysis tool, SketchEngine, allowed for extracting two lists of capitalized nouns and adjectives, both totaling 820 tokens. These lists were further examined to culturally loaded items and semantically categorized across 7 cultural themes: cities, counties, nationalities, names, languages, cultural items, and other miscellaneous items deemed relevant to cultural representation. Lastly, concordance lines were used to differentiate homonyms (e.g., Spanish nationality vs. language).

After manually refining the corpus of 531 capitalized nouns and 20 capitalized adjectives, excluding words such as days, months, and non-relevant items, only 308 items of cultural representation are considered. These items were semantically organized across 7 major themes (Language, cities, countries, cultural items, nationalities, names, and others) as highlighted Table 9. However, due to the large number of tokens, only few examples were included. Thus, Table 9 showcases the

overall frequencies of each category across cultures, as well as the total frequency of each category. This layout enables the comparison of all cultural references and their representation across various cultures. Notably, SC slightly emerges as the most represented cultural group (38%), followed by TC (32%) and the IC (17%). This reflects focus on SC linguistic representation, a localization of cultural content to reflect familiar context through numerous Arabic names (e.g., Ahmed [30], Noura [23]), cities (e.g., Dubai [20], Salalah [71]), and culturally significant events symbolizing the religious identity of the SC (e.g., Eid [21]). Crucially, nationalities in the SC reflect mainly Gulf nationalities (e.g., Kuwaiti [7], Saudi [1], Emirati [5]). The TC, although represented more frequently than the IC, is less culturally grounded, as it lacks cultural items and fewer nationalities (only 12 instances). In contrast, the high frequency of names symbolizes equally individuated personal narratives. This could be interpreted as an avoidance of overt cultural imposition yet still maintain strong cultural presence. From the TC, the U.S. contexts, particularly in cities, emerge as dominant (e.g., San Diego [14], San Francisco [6]). The IC culture, although included, represents less than half of the representation of the other groups. Nevertheless, IC highlights the use of cultural items that identify food and cuisines, effectively positioning the IC, while being diverse through a shallow consumerist view (e.g., Locro [2], Taco [2], Italian food [2]). These patterns reflect the visual findings, where the SC and TC are represented almost equally, while the IC remains underrepresented.

Category	SC [overall]	TC [overall]	IC [overall]	Frequencies total of the whole categories
Cities	Dubai (20), Salalah (17), Riyadh (11) [108]	San Diego (14), San Francisco (6), [68]	Paris (6), Moscow (5), Tokyo, [37]	213
Countries	Kuwait (11), Oman (10), Saudi Arabia (8) [49]	e.g., USA/U.S. (8), United States (6), Canada (3), [21]	Japan (9), Mexico (8), Brazil (5), [66]	136
Languages	Arabic (2) [2]	English (15) [15]	Spanish (4), Korean (1), French (5) [12]	29
Nationalities	Omani (2),	American (12), British	French (4),	50

	Kuwaiti (7), Saudi (1), Emirati (5), Bahraini (1), [16]	(1), Canadian (1) [12]	Spanish (4), Russian (4) [22]	
Names	Al (33), Ahmed (30), Noura (23) [512]	Adam (17), Amber (13), Liz (13), [368]	Ivan (2), Ivanova (2), Katya (2) [95]	1009
Cultural Items	Eid (21), Mosque (9), al-Fitr (7) [44]	0	Locro (2), Taco (2), Italian food (2) [11]	55
Others	Keef Elhal (TV show) (1), Al Baleed Park (Landmark) (2), Dubai Mall (2) [11]	San Gabriel Street (2), Hunter University/College? (1) [3]	St. Petersburg (5), Taquile (10), Italian restaurant (1) [19]	33
Grand total	742	487	262	

Table 9: Examples of Aggregated Linguistic Tokens from the Corpus

4.3 Dialogues

4.3.1 Overview of Dialogue Distribution Across Cultures

The distribution of dialogues across cultures reveals a noticeable concentration on TC representation, as indicated by both the frequency of dialogues and the number of speakers. Table 10 indicates that TC packs a greater number of dialogues (12) and total speakers (22), emphasizing Western voices. TC dialogues demonstrate inter-gender communication (5), with equal numbers of males and females, contrasting with SC's female-oriented approach and Mixed/IC's male-dominated approach. These patterns highlight gender disparity cross-culturally and a Western-centric perspective.

	Speaker(n)	Dialogues	Male-male	Female-female	Male-female
SC	14	7	2	4	1
TC	22	11	3	3	5
IC	2	1	0	0	1
(TC; SC)	8	4	2	0	2
(IC; SC)	2	1	1	0	0
(IC; TC)	7	3	2	1	1

Table 10: Dialogues and Speakers Across Cultures

Beyond numerical distribution, conversation structure reveals underlying cultural patterns, particularly initiation roles across gender and culture. Table 11 reveals a recurring pattern of male initiation, particularly in TC, even in the Mixed

categories, irrespective of the role in the conversation (customer vs. clerk). This suggests a giving agency for TC speakers regardless of their actual role in the conversation. This further supports Western voice's emphasis in the dialogues, not only through the quantitative frequencies, but also through the conversational structure, which favors voices from the TC.

	Male initiators	Female initiator
SC	1	
TC	5	
IC		1
TC-SC	2 (TC)	
IC-SC	1 (SC)	
IC-TC		1 (TC)

Table 11: Initiation Roles by Gender

The analysis of Tenor in the dialogues involving solidarity and power reflect differing patterns.

In terms of solidarity (social distance), most intercultural conversations reflect distanced relations, while the dialogue purely in the TC and SC reflect more nuanced relations featuring more closeness, particularly the TC where more intimate (married couples) take place. The SC, however, reflect conservative social values as there are no intergender communications outside professional or familial contexts. As for power, most conversations are balanced socially with no inherent power structures detected, reflecting social and close relations mainly involving friends and families. Only one dialogue in the IC involves a professional job interview where one individual controls the conversation, therefore reflecting a hierarchal relation (Figure 3).

A Can we speak in English for five minutes?
 B Yes, we can.
 A Great. So, are you the right person for this job?
 B Yes. **I think so.**
 A Why? In a very short answer, please.

Figure 3: Hierarchical Relation in Dialogues

4.4 Reading Passages

A quantitative comparison confirms this distinction (Table 12): 58% of SC's instances involve Identification (see Table 13 for examples), while TC relies more heavily on

Categorization (58.8%) (see Table 14 for examples). Furthermore, SC texts presented the highest average of social actor representation instances per text (6.18), followed by Mixed (5.60). In contrast, IC texts had the lowest average (3.40), indicating a relatively limited engagement with the actor portrayal of the IC actors. Notably, Mixed culture texts show a marked preference for Identification (75%), aligning more closely with SC than TC, despite combining cultural elements. This is utilized to compare the two cultural groups. IC texts, although fewer in number, were distinguished by a higher rate of aggregation, and, pointing toward a residual “tourist gaze,” referred to locals as mere population statistics, which minimizes local agency. These contrasts suggest the ideological implications of actor visibility and specificity: SC and Mixed contexts foreground individual identity and agency, while TC and IC often abstract or marginalize actors, shaping different reader perceptions of social participation and belonging.

Cultural Category	Identification n (%)	Categorization n (%)	Total Instances n (Average per text)	Texts n (%)
SC	40 (58)	28 (41)	68 (6.18)	11
TC	14 (41)	20 (58)	34 (4.25)	8
IC	10 (52)	9 (47)	19 (3.40)	5
Mixed	21 (75)	7(25)	28(5.60)	5

Table 12: Distribution and Proportion of Representational Strategies

Examples of SC	Nomination and determination are highlighted in Bold as they converge, while specification in Italics.
Nomination & determination Specification	<p>Look at Riyadh. <i>He’s very busy. He’s a salesperson. He works at a store Sunday to Thursday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. He has a French class in the evening on Mondays and Wednesdays</i></p> <p>This is Fazza. <i>He’s from my country, the United Arab Emirates, and his date of birth is November 14, 1982. His real name is Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum</i></p> <p>Yesterday evening I had a really exciting meal with Hussein, <i>my old friend</i></p> <p><i>Two of our school friends</i> were there, too: Majid and Tarek!</p>

Table 13: Examples from the SC Texts

Examples of TC	Instances of genericization and assimilation as the converge are highlighted in Bold
Genericization & Assimilation	<p>Who can you find in all great companies? Great workers. (Office)</p> <p>Many of us use cars for work, travel, shopping, or fun. (Electric Cars)</p> <p>I'm helping a teacher at a school this week. Today, I'm writing my blog on a school bus (Omar's blog)</p> <p>They're not listening to the tour guide because they're talking. (Kaitlin's post)</p> <p>Bloggers sometimes write from difficult places: mountains, deserts, rainforests. (Jaime's bog)</p> <p>Other students don't like reading much. (Learning preferences)</p>

Table 14: Examples from the TC Texts

Table 15 reveals that IC, SC, Mixed cultures largely relay on factual genres transmitting culture and recontextualizing it. More particularly, SC and Mixed where factual genres account for more than 9 texts. These texts primarily function as a conduit for cultural transmission, focusing on information about cultural figures, traditions, and places (e.g., “Cairo’s Soccer Teams”). TC’s texts also features factual genres, however, crucially, argumentative texts exist in TC, where themes are negotiated as opposed to merely represented which promotes subjective engagement, learner agency, and critical thinking (e.g., “learning preferences”).

Genre	SC	TC	IC	Mixed
Factual	9	2	4	10
Story	4	3	1	1
Argument	—	4	1	—

Table 15: Genre Distribution

Table 16 elucidates thematic orientation through the distribution of Fields. SC texts show strong preference for personal narratives and tourism-oriented texts that heavily establish themes concerning heritage, memory, and cultural values. This position the SC as more socially and culturally grounded model, yet lacking of globality, when compared with the IC. TC texts feature more progressive discourses concerning work culture, education, technology, and cultural trends. This aligns the

TC texts with global discourse of modernity, individuality, a prism by which the world is seen and accessed. This suggests more broader discursive range specifically for the TC. IC texts mainly center around travel, food, and tourism in general in informational expository style, from the tourist's gaze. The Mixed cultures texts use personal and product/service reviews and work to offer a contrastive view of intercultural communication.

Field	SC	TC	IC	Mixed
Personal	3	2	1	5
Tourism	4	2	5	0
Work	0	1	0	2
Career advice	1	0	0	0
Product/Service Review	0	0	0	4
Health	1	0	0	0
Education	0	1	0	0
Technology	0	1	0	0
Cultural Event	1	0	0	0
Cultural Trend	0	1	0	0
Sports	1	0	0	0

Table 16: Fields

Chapter 5—Discussion

Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the study's findings structured according to the research questions. In Section 1, I examine which culture serves as the dominant referent in the *Evolve 1* textbook and how this shapes learners' cultural orientation. In Section 2, I analyze the nature of representation within each cultural group—SC, TC, and IC—and interrogate patterns of essentialization, universalization, and curated dynamism. Finally, in Section 3, I examine the social roles and intergroup relations depicted across these cultural contexts, with a particular focus on gender and institutional hierarchies.

A dual perspective: centering the Gulf and the U.S.

For a long time, EFL textbooks have been criticized for their dominance by the so-called Inner Circle, also known as the target culture (TC), which refers to countries where English is the first and official language. (e.g., United States, Canada, United Kingdom) (Kramsch, 1993) at the expense of other cultures, typically local or the source culture (SC). Indeed, numerous studies have documented this pattern (Dong & Duan, 2019; Prihatiningsih et al., 2021; Lee & Li, 2020; Mahmud, 2019; Alshenqeeti, 2019; Alsaif, 2016). The present study, however, finds that the SC and the TC display nearly balanced quantity. At the same time, the IC is underrepresented, although dialogue suggests a notable prevalence of Western voices compared to the SC. This attempt to incorporate more of the SC could be interpreted as a marketing strategy to penetrate the target audience market, the MENA region. According to Gary (2010), usually internationally produced EFL textbooks undergo rigorous editorial processes, including cultural and topical adaptation, in order to compete with locally produced materials. *Evolve 1* includes a Gulf-oriented content, particularly from the U.A.E., such as (cultural sites, figures, festivals, local scenarios), as well as the SC and American context as prototypical TC. These insights suggest that English is often presented as a bridge to the U.S., as dialogues frequently portray Gulf students interacting with Americans. This contrasts with the concept of English as a lingua franca (McKay, 2003), where the status of English as a global language connects diverse contexts across multiple countries. In practice, *Evolve 1* centers on the U.S.

norm: the American context is overwhelmingly used, and almost all images of TC figures are of Anglo-American origin. Similarly, studies from other contexts, such as Ponte and Alonso's (2021), found that EFL materials typically highlight only American and British culture as the TC. Thus, the most dominant cultural referent in the *Evolve 1* textbook is occupied by two cultural groups: the TC and SC, while the broader global context, the IC, is marginalized and underrepresented, effectively positioning English language as a language of communication, a bridge for the SC to interact with primarily with the U.S. This attempt could be interpreted as a strategic way of maintaining the cultural hegemony practiced by the TC over English, while localizing the content to penetrate the local market of their target intended audience, that is the MENA region. However, the representing the MENA region is very narrow neglecting many countries from North Africa such as (Syria, Palestine, and Libya) and many more even from the Gulf countries such as Qatar. It is evident that *Evolve 1* foreground the U.A.E. as representative of the SC. This could be interpreted as alignment of with the sociopolitical relations, as the U.A.E. is most globalized gulf country with the most superdiversity with non-Emiratis accounting for about 91% of the population. Additionally, this reflect the attitude towards English language in the region, where the Gulf countries have more of a positive attitude towards English as a language of progress and global engagement more than some of the North African countries, where English is seen through colonialism lens (Hillman & Eibenschutz, 2018; Aloreibi & Carey, 2017).

The Construction of Cultural Identity

The second research question examined *how* cultures are depicted. Three patterns emerge: the essentialization and exoticization of non-Western IC groups, while Western IC contexts align more closely with the TC; the generic universalism of the TC; and the dynamic, yet selective, representation of the SC. Below, I discuss each pattern linking to critical cultural theories.

1. Essentialization and Exoticization of IC.

The IC characters follow two strands: abstracted universalized Western ideals or essentialized exotic "types," with little individual agency. Essentialization occurs frequently in texts addressing non-Western places, where representation constructs a "tourist gaze," by which these places are seen, suppressing local agency, or visually

exoticizing cultural representees rather than individuals. This reflects critiques by Holliday (2005) and Guest (2003) that texts teaching culture contrastively often portray “other” non-Western peoples by reducing them to a few apparent traits. For instance, global characters appear in one-dimensional scenes (e.g., scenery setting, markets) with no dialogue or agency, just visual representation. Such essentializing aligns with Hall’s (1997) description of stereotyping as reducing people to simplistic labels identified with their physical appearance. More specifically, the IC representation in *EvoIve I* of non-Western characters showcases little individuation, emphasizing their appearances; thus, representing people as “types” rather than individuals, a core tenet of exoticization and essentialization. The work of Said (1978) on orientalism purports that the discourse of “othering” is rooted colonial discourse whereby the so-called “modern” societies such as Europeans conceptually segregate the world as: the “modern, progressive” European contexts, and the somewhat regressive and traditional “others”, establishing social structural hierarchy based on perceived superiority, a useful pretext for imperialist and colonialist discourse by which the colonizer would think of themselves as superior to the colonized (Nayar, 2015). This cultural tension gives rise to the concepts of “Eurocentrism” and “Ethnocentrism” whereby European values are perceived as universal and common-sense practices.

By contrast, those of others are reduced to a monolithic “*other*” that is perceived as divergent (i.e., exoticized) (Lee, 2023). Similarly, the findings of this study suggest that non-Western international cultures are often framed as the proverbial “other,” a site for tourism for the learner, rather than as full communicative partners. While non-Western cultures are often exoticized and essentialized, depictions of European contexts, such as Sweden or Germany, are represented generically, aligning more closely with the representation of the TC than the IC. Thus, non-Western IC characters are essentialized and exoticized by emphasizing their “otherness” and suppressing their agency, reflecting a tourist gaze effect.

2. Universalism and Normativity in the TC.

TC, especially American culture, is consistently portrayed in abstract, deculturalized terms to function as the unspoken “common sense” norm for learners, not represented as the “other” by establishing overt cultural anchoring textually, as in SC,

but negotiated as the “ideal.” Instead of representing characters in specific traditions, the textbook presents TC speakers in a variety of dynamic scenarios, ranging from workplace ethics discussions to blog-style reflections, a vlog commentary to an argumentative article on learning preferences that emphasize evaluative, critical thinking, and self-expression. This pattern aligns TC with progressive democratic values and neoliberal ideals of individualism, self-realization, and capitalist success. For instance, Guest (2010) notes that the British Council’s 2003 campaign slogan, “Teach English and Individualism,” explicitly linked English teaching to personal autonomy (p. 729); *Evolve 1* picks up this thread by featuring profiles of innovators and renowned writers, actresses (e.g., Steve Jobs, J.K. Rowling, Kate Hudson, and Kate Winslet) and prompts learners to reflect on their own career goals (in SC: Yousif’s Article about career advice). Ulum and Köksal (2019) further demonstrate that globally produced EFL materials tend to favor economy-oriented, neoliberal content, whereas local texts lean towards conservatism—an observation confirmed here by *Evolve 1*’s emphasis on self-promotion and marketable skills, as well as the individual representations that prevail cross-culturally. Fairclough’s (2018) notion of cultural models explains how such neoliberal values become naturalized. By repeatedly associating TC characters with success narratives and framing them as aspirational role models, the textbook normalizes these values as universal. Consequently, TC is positioned as a dynamic, more generic than individuated—cultural framework through which learners perceive the world.

3. Curated dynamism in the SC.

In the SC visuals and texts, cultural representation is afforded greater individuation and situational variety, ranging from family gatherings and local landmarks to workplace scenes and personal reflections, suggesting a dynamic portrayal. However, this dynamism crystallizes into two contrasting sub-representations: an essentialized North African sphere and a more fluid Arab Gulf domain. North African contexts (e.g., Cairo’s football teams, Moroccan forests) are depicted as static cultural snapshots, individuated and represented but not negotiated, whereas Gulf settings (notably the U.A.E.) are depicted through dual lenses of tradition and modernity (e.g., historic cities vs. futuristic skylines; the Crown Prince as both royal figure and social-media influencer). Consequently, the textbook portrays Gulf Arab culture as flexible and

evolving, whereas North African culture is depicted as bounded by fixed representations.

Moreover, SC representations are channeled into two overarching themes: personal narrative and superficial cultural anchoring, both of which covertly favor Western norms. Culture-specific attire is most commonly seen in traditional, family-oriented scenes, particularly among women. In contrast, hybrid attire that combines Western professional wear with a hijab is consistently linked to success and workplace competence in Western contexts. Mishra and Shirazi (2010) argue that Muslim women in the U.S. adopt hybrid attire to reconcile religious identity with professional norms; *EvoIve 1* echoes this negotiation yet omits any depiction of niqab-wearing women, an exclusion that reflects textbook publishers' reluctance to engage with controversial, from Western perspective (Mishra & Shirazi, 2010), attire (Gray, 2010). Even religious observances, such as Eid, are often relegated to surface-level "cultural events" rather than being presented as integral, socio-religious paradigms, even when viewed from the perspective of someone from the MENA region.

In sum, although SC content in *EvoIve 1* offers more individual variance, it remains a curated dynamism: Gulf Arab identities enjoy a spectrum of roles and representations, while North African and more conservative religious identities are either essentialized or entirely suppressed.

Social Roles, Gender, and Reinforcing Hierarchies

The final set of findings, concerning social roles and gender, demonstrates how textbooks can reflect and reinforce social hierarchies and gender ideologies. In terms of social hierarchy and institutional authority, dialogues often favor male Western voices, regardless of their positions, as indicated by initiation roles. This insight provides a nuanced understanding of social relations in dialogues, where institutional authority (i.e., who is being served versus who serves) in mixed-culture interactions is democratically assigned. However, an additional form of social capital (initiation role) favors TC characters more. This pattern could be construed as favouritism towards Western voices in *EvoIve 1*.

Studies in the MENA region have indicated a gender inequality where men's roles are diverse and dominant, while women's roles are stereotypical ones. (Dahmardeh et al., 2025). This study, however, found an overall numerical

representation of gender in images of Evolve 1. Male participants accounted for 70%, while women made up 30% of the visual representation. However, this imbalance occurs primarily in the TC, while IC and SC display gender parity. This research disclosed that this gender imbalance goes beyond numbers and embeds substantial ideology concerning women's roles.

The present study finds that the TC exhibits the most pronounced disparity, with women appearing in fewer than half as many images as men, despite the introduction of high-profile female figures (such as celebrities and professionals). This is intended to signal progressiveness and gender inclusion (Ponto & Alonso, 2021).

However, this inclusion is merely superficial as it only features high-end, glamorous positions while domestic roles are not represented. As a result, motherly figures are not included at all. This could be interpreted as women's worth and value are relegated to fame and glamour, but not caregiving roles.

As van Leeuwen (2008) argues, visual language serves to normalize cultural values and norms; in this case, the invisibility of mothers underrepresents the centrality of caregiving in social life. By contrast, the SC and IC categories demonstrate greater gender parity. While other studies have documented prioritization of women in the film industry over scientific contributions (Alonso, 2021), the present study indicates a unique exclusion of women from a fictional context, albeit in the TC only.

To sum up, social roles in Evolve 1 reveal a general favoritism of Western males' voices, particularly in intercultural communications. Additionally, in the TC, not only are females underrepresented but also devalued by indicating a minimal representation of women's worth and status by overrepresenting aesthetic and public spheres at the expense of motherly roles.

To summarize, the social relations within cultural groups reveal significant patterns regarding representation. Western males are portrayed and emphasized—especially in intercultural communications—while women and roles are severely limited to certain social types at the expense of others (i.e., high-end social position vs. mother figures). SC and IC mainly feature equal gender representation.

Chapter 6—Conclusion, Limitations, and Future Directions

This chapter concisely summarizes the present dissertation by restating the research problem, objectives, methodological approach, and significant findings. Following that, the chapter outlines the anticipated contributions of the study, acknowledges its limitations, and provides directions for future research.

Research problem

The English language is currently the de facto lingua franca of the world; it is the language of science, business, and general interpersonal communication (Jenkins et al., 2017), underscoring the global significance of English. However, the widespread adoption of English is not a neutral phenomenon; it is deeply interwoven with historical colonialism and postcolonialism discourses, leading to linguistic imperialism and using English as a marker of socioeconomic advantages and gatekeeping of knowledge (language knowledge, in this case.) (Pennycook, 2006; Phillipson, 1992; Phillipson, 2013). As a result, English instruction, particularly the usage of EFL textbooks, emerges as an important focus for academic research. EFL textbooks are strong artefacts that recontextualize sociocultural knowledge, potentially altering learners' perspectives on the world and themselves.

Building on the current body of literature on cultural investigation in textbooks within the MENA region, this research seeks to address the methodological and conceptual gaps. Specifically, this research aims to probe how cultural representation is distributed among diverse cultural groups within the region, and how they are foregrounded, marginalized, or omitted. Furthermore, this research moves beyond studies that treat culture as a homogenized entity and those relying on purely quantitative or qualitative research designs by implementing a mixed-method, semiotic, multimodal framework.

Methodology

To address these objectives, the research deployed a sophisticated mixed-methods design, which integrates both quantitative and qualitative approaches to visual and textual data within *Evolve 1*. The research unfolded in three phases: an initial quantitative phase for image counts and corpus-based linguistic analysis; a second mixed-methods phase involving qualitative visual analysis of representational

strategies, textual analysis of reading passages using van Leeuwen's analysis of social actors, (Martin, 2009) analysis genre, and (Martin & Rose, 2007) field analysis, and tenor analysis of dialogues, alongside quantitative analysis of these patterns; and a final, purely qualitative phase for deep semiotic interpretation of selected images using van Leeuwen's framework of visual representation. This multi-layered design enabled both the academic rigor of large-scale content coding and the interpretive depth of multimodal discourse analysis, providing a fine-grained and context-sensitive account of cultural representation.

Summary of findings

The research findings revealed a privileging of Western and Gulf-Arab contexts alongside a marked underrepresentation of broader international cultures. Visually, image distribution showcases an almost even split between the SC (34%) and TC (33%), but only 23% depict the IC. Additionally, within these regions, the U.S. and the Gulf Arab countries are highlighted as ideal representatives. Western attire appears in (70%) of human images, while culture-specific and hybrid attire are concentrated in the SC. Males' figures (60%) outnumber females (40%), particularly in the TC (70%). In terms of representation types, individual (75%) and generic framings (75%) prevail, especially in the TC and IC. On the other hand, SC shows greater specificity and contextualization.

A corpus of over 800 capitalized nouns reinforces these biases: Gulf capitals (e.g., Dubai , 22; Salalah , 17) and U.S. centers (e.g., San Diego , 23) are the most frequent, Arabic personal names and Islamic cultural items dominate SC, and other global references are minimal. Dialogues highlight a Western-centric voice. TC dialogues are more numerous, male-initiated, and inter-gender, while SC interactions are more female-oriented and socially conservative. In reading passages, SC texts rely more on identification strategies (58% vs. 42% categorization), whereas TC texts deploy categorization more often. Genres in SC cluster around descriptive reports, while TC texts feature recounts and exposition that encourage learner agency. Taken together, these findings suggest an overarching bias towards Western values, individualism, and generic representation, while SC allows for more cultural specificity, and IC is largely tokenized. These patterns suggest Evolve 1

communicates an ideology of global uniformity informed by selective cultural visibility and power.

Implications

The findings suggest prioritization of U.S. and Gulf-Arab contexts, individualistic framing, and generic representation, and exoticization of other cultures may inadvertently reinforce cultural types, gender hierarchies, and Western-centric ideology. In EFL education, materials such as Evolve 1 should incorporate more locally authentic and inclusive cultural content that reflects all aspects of the region's culture. A more balanced representation of individual and collective perspectives, ensuring equitable gender representation, can foster a more inclusive representation conducive to more engaging lessons.

Future directions

This study examines cultural representation in a single EFL textbook. However, its limited scope severely limits broad generalizations; it offers an original snapshot of how culture is portrayed across the MENA region. Accordingly, future research should employ a matrix of textbooks, comprising different publishers (local and global), educational levels, and periods, to generate more accurate and generalizable data on cultural representation across linguistic proficiency and to trace potential diachronic shifts in the regional EFL landscape. Moreover, integrating learners' perspectives will contextualize these findings by providing more feedback on the real-world impact of varied representational strategies.

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