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## Cultural Representations of Americans, Europeans, Africans and Arabs in American Soap Operas: A Corpus-based Analysis

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### ABSTRACT

Through the current world of multi-media, television has emerged as a crucial tool of both knowledge transaction and culture formation. Among various TV programs, soap operas are known to turn into one of the most culturally influential ones due to constant exposure of viewer during a long time span. One of the current issues in media studies is the biased nature of media toward minorities (Mastro, 2015). This study has been an attempt to view the way American soap operas reveal Americans in comparison with three groups of minorities (i.e. Arabs, Europeans and Africans) in American society based on the frequency of words and collocations used for their representations. Using the Corpus of Contemporary America (COCA), this meta-analysis aimed at shedding light on the perceptions expressed toward American culture and that of the selected minorities consulting with Lewis (2006) model of cultural categorization. The results showed that America is presented as a place of justice and pursuing dreams while the other countries are represented as one-dimensional nations which should be known for their forgotten art and history, recreational and leisure concessions or broken families; things which are peripheral in the real modern life.

**Keywords:** Soap Opera, Stereotype, Lewis's Model Of Cultural Categorization, American Society

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### 1. Introduction

The Media have changed the way people communicate as a society and the modes of communication being brought about through media have made it easier for people to transfer ideas in a global scope. To a large extent media can mark our conception of reality by having control over the pictures and information people receive (Littlefield, 2008). Scholars opine that the images produced and circulated by the media can determine our beliefs, attitudes and inform our behaviors (Collins, 1991; Schiller, 1973). According to Ndiaye and Ndiaye (2014), mass media colossally affect social life, individual's perception of reality, and formation of opinions and behavior patterns, along with language, and national culture. Accordingly Harris (2003), an American journalist claimed that today's

mass media are not merely a "magic window" through which the world around us were observed, it is also "a door" that let ideas in to our consciousness. Fujioka (1999, p.1) also stated that "television has been considered an influential source of information that plays a role in constructing viewers' social reality, since it conveys simulations of everyday situations and shares similar characteristics of real life events". In other words, the images, symbols, and narratives in radio, television, film, music, and other media form much of what audiences know and care about. How people come to perceive what it means to be male, female, black, white, Asian, Latino, Native American (even rural or urban) is molded by texts that media produce for their audiences, in short, media are focal to what



represents our social realities (Brooks and Hebert, 2006).

One issue in a multi-cultural society like the United-states is how to promote positive relationships among the various people groups that shape that society, particularly in large populations where people may never interact with members of other groups because of economic isolation or ethnic segregation (Kidd, 2016). In such situations, the only 'interaction' they may have is through media depiction of the co-cultural groups. With regard to the representation of various groups and the reproduction of racial and ethnic stereotypes, the media play a crucial role because they are a key filter via which groups learn about each other (Ross, 2019). Lippman (1922) argued that stereotypes are developed as mental maps to assist us handle the intricacy of peoples and communities. Thus, a stereotype is a neutral system of classification. Having said this, the modern definition of stereotype has shifted its focus to the problems inherent in portraying a co-culture employing unoriginal, limited characteristics.

Research has indicated that negative images that portray stereotypes of minority populations, including African Americans and Latinos in the United States, can result in negative interpretations of their actions (e.g., Mastro & Kopacz, 2006). Mastro and Kopacz (2006) reported that such stereotyped characters can influence policy decisions and voting behaviors. Kidd (2016) added that when people watch characters that are familiar and similar to them, they are more likely to identify with them positively. In other words, "the more similar an in-group or out-group target is to the relevant characteristic of the perceiver's in-group, the more favorable the evaluation" (Mastro & Kopacz, 2006, p. 309). On the other hand, when the shows highlight differences, they tend to see the groups negatively. Such process of selective portrayal can affect common people's sense of impartial, informed decision making because the information provided to them is biased (Murray, Schwartz & Lichter, 2001).

The media serve as a tool that people use to define, measure, and understand American society (Littlefield, 2008). According to Devine and Elliot (1995), racial stereotypes are within the cultural fabric of the United States. Many scholars have noted stereotyping and racial ideology is reproduced in a society with the help of

mass media (Abraham & Appiah, 2006). Browne, Mickiewicz and Firestone (1994) also posited that mass media are suitable to pass along stereotypes, "because they extend throughout society, and frequently serve as trend-setters, taste-makers, labelers, and the raw material for daily conversation" (p. 8). Media scholars drawing on theorists such as Foucault (1980), Hall (1980, 1996), and others argued that the media are, if not a source of dominant ideas about race and ethnicity, at least highly influential in structuring social ideas about race and ethnicity (van Sterkenburg et al. 2010). Thus, their role in, particularly, multicultural societies cannot be discarded.

Taking into account the above mentioned role of media, they serve as a system of racialization through which the dominant culture's perspective have historically been perpetuated and a public forum is created that defines and forms ideas concerning race and ethnicity. The media power is one of the new racism's crucial strategies to define and create attitudes that inform our behavior. This is due to the fact that the media is utilized to reproduce and distribute the ideologies needed to justify racism (Collins, 2004). In practice, American pluralism which was mentioned earlier, complies Anglo conformity and makes an American identity which leaves out all the groups out of the norm and realm of Whiteness (Littlefield, 2008). Such a binary attitude to the races created a hierarchy in which Anglo perceptions of race and ethnicity rules the social structure, and other non-White groups are placed in the "other" category (Littlefield, 2008). Accordingly, dominance of the international television by the U.S has been a focal concern for media scholars and policy leaders in term of television's impact on national culture for a long time (Bielby & Harrington, 2005).

In the United States, there have been several studies over the years which have explored the types and numbers of characters representing different ethnicities (e.g., Signorelli, 2009; Bielby & Harrington, 2005). In terms of ethnicity and the media, a bulk of research has focused on media content in relation to the use of racialized stereotypes, under- and misrepresentation of minority ethnic groups, and the marginalization of minority media producers (e.g., Ross, 2019). The purpose of this research has been twofold. First, it attempted to determine whether soap operas

continue the longstanding media practice of casting Americans, Arabs, Africans and Europeans as ones who embody stereotypical behaviors and characteristics or not. Second, this study has tried to investigate the cultural categories within soap operas and the “howness” American soap operas portrayal of different cultures from 2001-2012 by focusing on characters’ utterances employing Lewis’ (2006) model of cultural categorization.

Considering the above mentioned objectives, this study is designed to answer the following research questions:

1. How are Americans represented in American soap operas?
2. How are non-Africans (Europeans, Arabs and Africans) represented in American soap operas?
3. How should Europeans, Arabs and Africans be known in American society?

## **2. Background**

### **2.1 Soap Operas**

Soap operas among mediums are of great attraction among TV viewers and due to that they are supposed to be influential in culture transmission and formation. These narratives are argued to be a global cultural form in that they are “a narrative mode *produced* in a variety of countries across the globe” and are “one of the most exported forms of television *viewed* in a range of cultural contexts” (Barker 1997, p. 75). While Americans are most familiar with seriality in the form of daytime soap operas, there is such a diversity of serial forms worldwide that the genre itself is increasingly difficult to define. Most commonly, soap operas are divided into two main types based on the presence or absence of narrative closure. Open-ended storytelling is associated with serials produced in the United States, Great Britain, and Australia, while closed-ended series are more characteristic of Latin America, India, Japan, China, South Africa, and elsewhere (Allen 1997, p. 112).

Soap operas can also be divided thematically and/or structurally. O’Donnell (1999, p. 4-5) suggested that one type of serial engages primarily with emotions or melodrama (such as Mexican, Venezuelan, and U.S. series) while others engage more explicitly with political and social issues (such as Brazilian and Columbian serials). Finally, Liebes and Livingstone (1998, p. 153) argued that three prototypical forms or models can be applied to different countries’ soaps: Dynastic soaps (focusing on one powerful family), community soaps

(focusing on a number of equal, separate families and characters), and dyadic soaps (focusing on romantic entanglements, disentanglements, and re-entanglements).

### **2.2 Media and Stereotyping**

According to Fujioka (1999), stereotypes are defined as “cognitive structures that contain the perceiver’s knowledge, beliefs, and expectancies about some human group.” Once categorized as a member of a certain group, an individual is expected to possess the same characteristics (stereotypes) of that group and is evaluated on the basis of category-based attributes. Therefore, stereotypes are a set of beliefs about group characteristics or attributes. Davis and Harris (1998) defined stereotypes as a generalization about a category of people that is “negative and/or misleading” and “used to predict and explain behavior”. Stereotypes develop over time through repetitious portrayals of specific types of individuals, which eventually contribute to the formation and sustainability of stereotypes about African Americans (Devine, 1989; Hamilton & Gifford, 1976). The stereotypes can impact the racial identity development of African Americans as well as the manner in which African Americans are perceived and treated by others (Martin, 2008; Reynolds-Dobbs, Thomas, & Harrison, 2008).

Specifically, with African Americans, television is particularly a key instrument in the perpetuation of negatives stereotypes, which impact the majority of societal views of them (Tyree, 2011). African Americans have a relationship to American history that cannot be replicated by any other minority groups. The reality of slavery and the Jim Crow Era that followed placed the African American community subject to misrepresentation in mainstream American culture even before the modern idea of media started. For example, “The Mammy” stereotype is the description of a black woman who works as a nanny or housekeeper (West, 1995). One of the earliest depictions of the mammy stereotype comes from the 1852 novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. It is rooted in the real-life experiences of female slaves who were domestic workers in white households, where they cooked, cleaned, and were responsible for taking care of the master’s children.

Generally the mammy was portrayed as an old, overweight, dark-skinned woman. As time passed, the mammy stereotype evolved. In 1889, Aunt Jemima was a clear



depiction of the mammy image. The television sitcoms *Maude*, *That's my Mama*, *Gimme a Break*, and *What's Happening* continued to use this archetype. The Mandingo stereotype is based on rhetoric used during slavery asserting that black men were primitive and hypersexual. The rhetoric that characterized black men as brute was used even after the emancipation of slaves to further separate blacks from whites, and to discourage mixed race relationships. Positioning black men as sex-crazed fiends made it easier to enforce accusations of rape and murder, contributing a rise in lynching. The Mandingo stereotype exists in modern day media in the form of thugs, gangsters, or other black male characters who lack empathy, and only show a penchant for violence and sexual activity. The independent black woman, an archetypal type of black woman, has been depicted as being narcissistic and emasculating to men in her life (Harris, 2015). This stereotype is closely related to the angry black woman stereotype. Rather than responding to unfair treatment in anger, however, the independent black woman behaves selfishly to serve her own personal interest and creates a reality where she does not need anyone to provide for her because she provides for herself.

Ultimately, the idea of “a strong independent black woman who don't need no man” is prevalent in modern media content. The Jezebel stereotype presents black women as sexually promiscuous seductresses (Mitchell & Herring, 1998). In many ways, this stereotype was meant to be the anti-thesis of the submissive and pure elements associated with the ideal Victorian woman. The insatiable sexual appetite of the Jezebel was used as justification for sexual assault of African-American women throughout slavery and the “Reconstruction Era”. The “Drug User/Dealer” stereotype emerges from media reporting tactics used during the war on drugs (Wise, 2001). Under President Nixon, the “War on Drugs” disproportionately targeted African-Americans, and was used to disrupt black communities and black community groups, such as the black panthers. This stereotype found its life originally via news broadcasts, where African-Americans were disproportionately shown being arrested. The “Financially Needy” stereotype is also referred to as the welfare queen stereotype. Studies showed that media portrayals of poverty lead to a dramatic overestimation of

African-Americans living under the poverty line (Levin, 2013).

Ibrahim (2009) attempted to chronicle the various American media that have been studied by scholars for their portrayal of Arabs, and the methods used by these scholars. The results they achieved led to a more comprehensive understanding of how Arabs have been portrayed and why. An increase in qualitative analysis of American media images of Arabs would add further rich detail and nuance to the existing body of research literature. Further individual-level research is highly recommended, by the incorporation of more in-depth interviews with journalists, editors, reporters and producers, as well as surveys of foreign correspondents. During the last part of the 20th century, the Arab-American Anti-discrimination Committee (ADC) began to gain momentum in the effort to document and protest negative media stereotypes. The ADC reports on hate crimes detail the potential impact of derogatory media representation on Arab and Muslim communities all over the US.

### *2.3 Lewis Model of Cultural Categorization*

The Lewis (2006) model can be an approach to describe national cultures. This outlined most fully in the book *When Cultures Collide* (Nicholas Brealey 2006). Lewis model focuses on values and communication and how these affect behavior, particularly in working life. The model is applied by Lewis (2006) to areas such as presentation, meetings, leadership, language of management, motivation, teams and trust. It was developed as a practical tool which could easily be applied, in order to help employees behave in more productive ways in multicultural situations rather than purely as a means of analysis. Although the model, as any model, is a simplification of reality, it is always presented as such, in the context of a description of the many and complex layers of culture such as regional, educational, professional, gender, class, religious, generational, ethnic, corporate and personal. Figure 1 depicts the cultural categories (and sub-categories) of Lewis model schematically by which the corpora of soap operas have been investigated.

Cultural Categories		
LINEAR-ACTIVE	MULTI-ACTIVE	REACTIVE
Talks half the time	Talks most of the time	Listens most of the time
Does one thing at a time	Does several things at once	Reacts to partner's action
Plans ahead step by step	Plans grand outline only	Looks at general principles
Polite but direct	Emotional	Polite, indirect
Partly conceals feelings	Displays feelings	Conceals feelings
Confronts with logic	Confronts emotionally	Never confronts
Dislikes losing face	Has good excuses	Must not lose face
Rarely interrupts	Often interrupts	Doesn't interrupt
Job-oriented	People-oriented	Very people-oriented
Sticks to facts	Feelings before facts	Statements are promises
Truth before diplomacy	Flexible truth	Diplomacy over truth

Figure 1: Adopted from Gates, Lewis, Bairachnyi and Brown (2009, p. 43)

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research Design

The theoretical and conceptual orientation encompass this study is referred to as “critical/cultural studies.” Critical/cultural studies represent the salient contemporary approach on media and culture. Cultural studies utilize interdisciplinary approaches necessary for understanding both the media’s role in the production and reproduction of inequity and for the development of more equitable and democratic societies. This study privileges textual analyses of media that explicate power relationships and the construction of meaning (Byers & Dell, 1992). This is a Meta-analysis study which is a “systematic quantitative technique used to ascertain relationships among variables which is a valuable and popular research tool” (Emmers- Sommer and Allen, 1999, p. 486). Scholars suggest that meta-analyses help illuminate misperceptions, and offer a comprehensive evaluation of theoretical standpoints (Allen, 2009). However, as Li and Tang (2012, p. 406) suggest, “sometimes meta-analyses can be limited in examining a topic with a varied spectrum of sub-topics, as in the case of media representations of Muslims and Islam”. Thus, in addition to the meta-analyses an analytical discussion of the result is also presented to support the findings of the meta-analyses.

#### 3.2 Instruments

Data for the study have been received from Corpus of Contemporary America (COCA). The “Soap Opera corpus” contains 100 million words of data from [22,000 transcripts](#) from American soap operas from the early 2000s, specifically covering years 2001-2012 which serves as a great resource to look at [the language](#) of these cultural shows. For the sake of this study, four nationalities have been chosen, namely, Europeans, American, Africans and Arabs, each from one continent to examine their representation in American soap operas. The

study is done on the basis of 100 first and most frequent words that collocate each of these nationalities in the time span of 2000 to 2012. In order to be able to choose culturally representative words and their context, Lewis’s cultural categories were selected as the theoretical framework of the study.

#### 3.3 Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

To collect the needed data, a content-based meta-analytical approach (Kamhawi & Weaver, 2003; Li & Tang, 2012; Matthes, 2009) was applied and its content was taken from COCA. In the first step, a quantitative measure was used to examine cultural categories of Lewis’ model, and then the collocations with the nationalities were focused (the 100 most collocated words with the four selected nationalities were noted).. An in-depth quantitative approach was taken to determine the most significantly frequent words which were associated with each nationality using AntConc software. A qualitative approach was also employed to conduct an analytical review and identify the most common themes or topics related to the portrayal of the four nationalities in the media with in their context. The themes were also associated with Lewis’s model to verify if their presentation deviated from Lewis’s categorization of the nationalities or not (Figure 2).

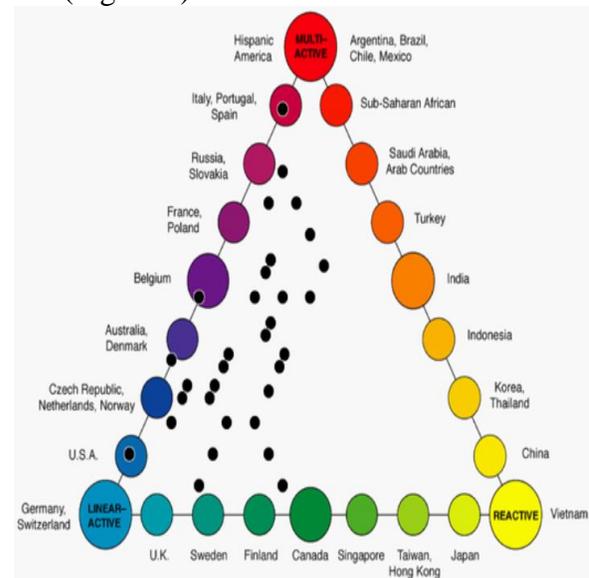
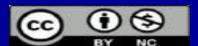


Figure 2: Adopted from Gates, Lewis, Bairachnyi, and Brown (2009, p.54)

### 4. Results and Discussion

#### 4.1 Results

In order to answer the first question of the study, the word “American” was typed in to the COCA corpus search engine and the words that have been collocated with it were selected for the time span of 2001 to 2012. The provided data based on the previously selected option showed the 100



most frequent words that appeared with the word American the first 15 of which included:

Table 1: The 15 most frequent words collocated with the word “American” in COCA

	CONTEXT	FREQ	ALL	%	MI
1	AN	221	130066	0.17	5.16
2	SOUTH	51	1419	3.59	9.56
3	AFRICAN	45	109	41.28	13.08
4	CITIZEN	42	614	6.84	10.49
5	DREAM	35	9890	0.35	6.22
6	WOMAN	30	48639	0.06	3.70
7	NATIVE	29	87	33.33	12.78
8	HISTORY	27	6936	0.39	6.36
9	AMERICAN	24	1169	2.05	8.75
10	ASSOCIATION	23	385	5.97	10.30
11	CAPITAL	21	453	9.34	3.76
12	JUSTICE	19	567	4.43	6.90
13	RED-BLOODED	18	562	6.23	4.89
14	SYSTEM	13	900	1.45	5.78
15	ACENT	11	519	6.7	3.89

However, as mentioned by Lewis (2006), Americans are categorized as culturally linear-active which are described as talking half the time, doing one thing at a time, planning ahead, polite but direct, partly reserved, confronting logic, trying to preserve their face, rarely interrupting others, job-oriented, stick to facts and truth before diplomacy. Thus, with these cultural attributes in mind six of the words which could be related to these cultural aspects were selected from the list of 100 results, including dream which represents their future orientation: Justice, red-blooded, system, job-oriented and accent. And some others which were not in the list but associated with American culture generally, such as, icon, culture, freedom and cheeseburger. Among these collocated words “dream” had the highest frequency and “cheeseburgers” the least. As obvious all these collocations are statistically significant due to the fact that the MI score is higher than 3.00.

In order to answer the second question of the study, the 100 collocated words with the word “African” in COCA were focused for the time span of 2001 to 2012. The first 15 of the most collocated words included:

Table 2: The 15 most frequent words collocated with the word “African” in COCA

	CONTEXT	FREQ	ALL	%	MI
1	AMERICAN	45	3445	3.56	5.78
2	AN	36	45679	6.98	3.98
3	COSMETICS	29	1189	42.56	7.98
4	ARTIFACT	28	568	9.78	6.89
5	WOMEN	15	4563	3.89	7.89
6	AMULET	13	48639	6.98	6.11
7	WOMAN	12	890	15.90	12.78
8	ART	10	2345	1.98	3.98
9	BLACK	9	8907	4.89	7.45
10	WILDLIFE	8	6789	5.97	5.40
11	ARTWORK	6	3452	5.90	3.76
12	HARDSHIP	5	8970	4.43	11.89
13	MARKET	3	4567	6.23	4.89
14	DIAMOND	3	9089	5.23	5.78
15	LIFE	3	567	6.7	3.89

Having mentioned these, once again based on Lewis’s categorization of cultures, Africans are talkative, they do several things at once, they plan grand and outline only, they are emotional, display feelings, confront emotionally, have good excuses, often interrupt others’ speaking, are people-oriented, put feelings before tasks and finally their conception of truth is flexible. Based on these items the following cultural words were extracted from the list of collocated words with African. Art, artists, artifacts, artwork and talented artists are all words that can be related to both their emotional and feeling display aspects. Other words like market, company and money can be associated with the idea that culturally they are people oriented and talkative and may have active roles in money-related businesses. Some other cultural aspects can be related to African but are not in Lewis’s list are wildlife, wild and diamond. Regarding the representation of “Europeans” in American soap operas in the time span of 2001 to 2012 the collocated words with this target word were investigated. The following figure presents the words collocated with the word “European”.



Figure 3: Collocated words with the word “European” in COCA

As it is discernible the words “tour”, “division”, “passport”, “market”, “honey moon” and “vacations” are notable. Associating European countries with travelling and the destinations for Americans’ vacations and honey moons, distributing market for American goods can be culturally meaningful. Regarding Arabs, unlike the previous three cases in which the corpus provided a wide range of collocations from which the highly frequent ones on top of the table were selected and presented, only 10 findings were presented. This poor representation of Arab in soap opera might suggest the less consideration of Arabian culture in American soap operas. Noticeable collocated words are “keep”, “small”, “families”, and “descent” which may refer to Arabs’ small families in America and their relations.

	CONTEXT	FREQ	ALL	%	MI
1	NATION	2	168	1.19	17.16
2	SMALL	2	5372	0.04	12.19
3	A	2	1571931	0.00	3.97
4	DESCENT	1	59	1.89	17.67
5	FAMILIES	1	2682	0.04	12.16
6	KEEP	1	82165	0.00	7.23
7	DOING	1	114973	0.00	6.74
8	AM	1	142274	0.00	6.43
9	SOME	1	159134	0.00	6.27
10	OF	1	1007100	0.00	3.81
	TOTAL	13			

Figure 4: Collocated words with the word “Arab” in COCA

#### 4.2 Discussion

As observed in the findings above words that collocated with “America” in American soap operas are mostly associated with the “American Dream” and have had positive connotations like the words “justice” and “dream” which had the highest frequencies. However, the most frequent word collocated with “Africa” was American which shows the high frequency of African-American usage in soap operas. Other than this, culturally “Africa” mostly collocated with art-related terms, such as “artifacts”, “art” and “artwork”, which can be associated with emotional aspect of multi-active African countries. Having said this other characteristics mentioned in Lewis’s model are not represented significantly in the soap operas such as their people orientation tendency. With regard to “Europeans” travel, trade and recreation-related words were noticeable. Furthermore, “Arabs” are not mentioned less than other nations in soap operas and mostly collocated with family and household relationships.

Findings of this study are to some extent in line with Lewis’s presentation of different cultures however, some of those

cultural aspects cannot be traced for some of the nations. This finding is in line with Ibrahim’s (2009) claim of Arabs disregard and their negative representation in media. Results of the study are also in line with Harris’s (2015) who asserted that black male characters are represented as those who lack empathy as no word related to their people orientation could be traced in the corpus.

Nonetheless, unlike previous studies on Africans and American which showed Africans as those who only show a penchant for violence and sexual activity and black woman as being narcissistic and emasculating to men in her life (Harris, 2015), the word women did not have any collocations with “African”. Moreover, the words terrorism and violence which commonly co-occurs with “Arabs” in different media modes (Khouri, 1998; Khouri et al., 1992, 1996) could not be found in the corpus of the soap operas. Considering the non-neutral connotations of the statistically meaningful collocations with the selected nationalities in COCA imply that American soap operas are not culturally impartial. Soap operas are more socially determining than the cinema due to their wider range of audience and younger, less-professional, immature viewers.

#### 5. Conclusion

This study was one of the first attempts which tried to illuminate the biased nature of soap operas as one of the manifestations of American media for representing the minor cultures in American society via the quantitative analysis of huge corpora of characters’ utterances and collocations. Findings showed that among the four investigated cultures, the word “Americans” was meaningfully collocated with positive and affirmative adjectives which represent the meaning of a utopia to the audience. On the other hand, the other three cultures were collocated with peripheral attributes like recreational leisure activities (Europeans), historical art and ancient artifacts (Africans) and unimportant household relationships and problems (Arabs). This can be in line with the precedented thirst of Americans to show themselves culturally superior to other minorities.

This study was limited in the number of ways, first, the corpus available for the study was limited to the years 2001-2011 and newer corpus of the recent soap operas was not available to do a comparison study. In addition, the results that the search engine provides are limited to script of the episode,



so findings of this study and conclusions drawn upon them are exclusive of the visual representation of the same nations. Further research is needed to focus on other minor cultures in American society. Similar studies can be done on other media types to attest the findings of this study.

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