Research Article

DECOLONIZING THE DISCIPLINE: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE PSYCHOLOGY CURRICULUM AT ZAYED UNIVERSITY

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This study explores how colonial discourse is reproduced, resisted, or reimagined within the psychology curriculum at Zayed University, using Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis within a critical theory paradigm. As higher education in Arab and other non-Western regions continues to rely on Western-centric models of knowledge, psychology, rooted in Euro-American epistemologies, offers a particularly relevant site of inquiry. Guided by Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, the research unfolds in three phases. Phase 1 involved a textual analysis of course syllabi and textbooks to identify patterns of epistemic dominance, theoretical exclusions, and the framing of psychological knowledge. Phase 2 used reflexive narratives written by the authors, three student-researchers, to examine how institutional discourse is internalized or challenged. Phase 3 extended the analysis into applied settings through semi-structured interviews with seven recent graduates working or interning in the field. Findings reveal a persistent privileging of Western theories, limited cultural representation, and varying levels of student and graduate resistance. This study also highlights the significance of researcher positionality, particularly when insiders conduct critical work within their institutions. This research calls for a more inclusive, context-sensitive psychology curriculum in the UAE, one that centers local epistemologies, supports collective well-being, and moves away from universalist assumptions.

***Keywords**: Critical Discourse Analysis, Decolonial Education, Psychology Curriculum, Higher Education in the UAE, Cultural Representation, Postcolonial Theory*

1. Introduction

The discipline of psychology has been predominantly shaped by Western values and perspectives, leading to the marginalization of non-Western knowledge systems (Castell et al., 2018). This has fostered a myth of universality in psychology (Maldonado-Torres, 2017), creating an epistemic hegemony where one view of knowledge dominates and subordinates all others (Alexander & Tureen, 2022). The emphasis of these Western frameworks on individualistic traditions can be problematic as they may not suit varying cultural contexts. This issue is

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compounded by the fact that much of psychology's prominent research is rooted in WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) experiences, which are then typically applied to the rest of the world (Henrich et al., 2010).

This cultural mismatch hinders adequate knowledge production. Western psychological theories may not align with other values and cultural norms, such as West Asia, as the emphasis on individualism can conflict with the collectivist orientation of many Arab societies (Heath et al., 2016). For example, a high proportion of Arab Muslim students turn to religious coping mechanisms, such as prayer, during times of psychological distress instead of psychotherapy (Al-Krenawi et al., 2004). A Western-centric curriculum that fails to integrate these realities can alienate clients and reduce the effectiveness of psychological interventions, underscoring the need for a culturally appropriate approach to psychology education and practice in these regions (Litz & Scott, 2016). The purpose of this study is to critically examine the undergraduate psychology curriculum in the UAE to assess the extent of colonial influence and identify opportunities for integrating culturally relevant, particularly Islamic and Arab, psychological frameworks.

2. History of Higher Education in the UAE

Since its founding in 1971, the UAE has rapidly developed its higher education system, often relying on imported Western curricular models, especially in the social sciences (Gallagher, 2019; Ridge, 2014). English remains the dominant language of instruction, and psychology programs in particular have been shaped by American and British frameworks (Badry & Willoughby, 2015). Despite growing interest in mental health and investments in psychology education, the field continues to depend heavily on Euro-American theories and training. This creates a disconnect between academic content and the cultural and religious contexts of Emirati students (Alhebsi et al., 2015).

Many Arab universities, including those in the UAE, rely heavily on Western psychological frameworks in their curricula, which, while supporting international alignment, may limit the integration of culturally grounded Arab and Islamic perspectives (Gergen et al., 2015). Similar critiques have been raised in Jordan and Saudi Arabia (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2004). Though the field of psychology is expanding in the UAE (Kassie, 2023), challenges such as a shortage of Emirati professionals and limited local research persist (Al-Yateem et al., 2017). Developing culturally grounded psychological frameworks is essential to building a mental health system that reflects local values and contributes to a globally inclusive understanding of psychology (Pennington, 2016).

3. Postcolonial and Decolonial Theories

Postcolonial and decolonial theories provide crucial frameworks for understanding how colonial legacies continue to shape knowledge systems, particularly in psychology. Postcolonial theory, grounded in the work of Edward Said, critiques European colonialism’s cultural dominance and exposes how the West constructed the “Orient” as primitive to justify domination (Said,

1978a, 1978b; Hamadi, 2014). Said's concept of "imaginative geography" revealed how colonialism relied on fictional contrasts between the civilized West and the backward East (Adams et al., 2015). He advocated for intellectuals to challenge orthodoxies and represent marginalized voices (Ashcroft & Ahluwalia, 2009).

Gayatri Spivak extended these critiques by urging scholars to question Eurocentric assumptions and foreground the voices of the subaltern (Praveen, 2016). Homi Bhabha introduced key concepts such as hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence, arguing that colonial encounters produced mixed cultural forms that disrupted colonial authority and binary thinking (Burney, 2012; Chakrabarti, 2012; Umar & Lawan, 2024; Shumar, 2010).

Decolonial theory builds on these ideas by arguing that coloniality persists beyond formal colonial rule. Walter Mignolo emphasized that modernity is inseparable from coloniality and described it as an ongoing "logic of oppression" embedded in knowledge systems (Mignolo, 2007; Woons & Weier, 2017; Serrano-Muñoz, 2021). He called for epistemic disobedience, rejecting Western universalism and embracing multi-epistemic perspectives (Jatuporn, 2024; Nguyen & Chia, 2023; Paraskeva, 2019).

Linda Tuhiwai Smith advanced these ideas by critiquing Western research methodologies as complicit in colonial exploitation (Mignolo, 2011; Smith, 2021; Bhatia, 2020). Her call to decolonize research emphasizes redistributing power in knowledge production and actively involving Indigenous communities in shaping educational content (Battiste et al., 2002).

4. Current Study

This study examines the extent to which the psychology curricula in Zayed University (ZU) reflects colonial influences versus culturally relevant perspectives, particularly those of the Islamic and Arab worlds. To this end, the research seeks to answer the following questions: (1) To what extent do undergraduate psychology programs in the UAE incorporate Western versus local or Islamic psychological frameworks? (2) How do graduates perceive the cultural relevance and inclusivity of their psychology curriculum? (3) What recommendations can be made to enhance the cultural appropriateness and effectiveness of psychology education in the UAE?

The significance of this research lies in its potential to guide the development of a psychological education that resonates with the lived experiences, values, and belief systems of people in the UAE. In a nation marked by rapid modernization and a growing focus on mental health, creating a curriculum aligned with the local population is a crucial step toward improving mental health care. By critically examining the curriculum through a decolonial lens, this study contributes to the broader project of advancing socially just and locally grounded mental health practices.

5. Methodology

5.1 Research Context

Zayed University (ZU) is a federally funded institution in the UAE that holds dual accreditation: it is accredited internationally by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE), one of the six regional accrediting bodies in the United States, and nationally licensed and accredited by the Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA), the quality assurance body under the UAE Ministry of Education. It holds two locations; Dubai and Abu-Dhabi.

The undergraduate psychology program is housed within the College of Natural and Health Sciences, which, during the 2023–2024 academic year, was the only college at ZU with fully female student enrollment. During the fall 2023 and spring 2024 semesters, a total of 16,265 students were enrolled at Zayed University across both the Dubai and Abu Dhabi campuses. Of these, 835 undergraduates were enrolled in the psychology program.

The Dubai campus reported a student-to-faculty ratio of 9:1, and Abu-Dhabi of 12:1. University-wide, the faculty included 391 members holding doctoral degrees, with the most commonly represented nationalities being American, Emirati, and British (Zayed University, 2024).

This context is particularly relevant when analyzing curricular content through a decolonial lens. The reliance on English-language instruction, the predominance of Western faculty, and the program's structural alignment with American accreditation standards raise critical questions about whose knowledge is being centered, how cultural perspectives are integrated, and what educational assumptions shape the teaching of psychology to Emirati students.

5.2 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, critical discourse approach rooted in the critical theory paradigm, which prioritizes the examination of power, ideology, and social inequality in language and systems. We employed Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to investigate how colonial discourse operates within psychology education at ZU. In the UAE context, Fairclough's concept of hegemony highlights how psychology education is structured by the dominance of Western knowledge, resulting in an imbalance that privileges certain ways of knowing (e.g., individualism, empiricism) while excluding or devaluing indigenous, spiritual, or Arab-Islamic approaches. This reinforces discursive inequity, where one worldview is normalized and others are systematically overlooked. CDA particularly looks into how language influences hegemony, with an interdisciplinary scope. The main objective of CDA is to be able to derive obscure ways in which language is interwoven with power, and strive to foster inclusive and equitable social change. It is also important to note that CDA takes into account the impact of globalization and the usage and impact of English as a global language. Making it a "vehicle and source of much of the globalization of the order of discourse" (Fairclough, 2001). As investigators, we decided to implement Fairclough's CDA method because it enables us to explore the interaction between text, reflexivity, and social impact, creating a unified and complete understanding of the system and our interactions.

Fairclough's CDA allows for analysis at both the micro (linguistic/textual) and macro (institutional/social) levels. Fairclough's three-dimensional framework: (1) textual analysis, (2) discursive practice, and (3) social practice, guided our multi-phase design. This framework also promotes researcher reflexivity, encouraging us to critically examine our positionality within the discourse.

5.3 Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis Framework

5.3.1 Phase 1: Textual Analysis

In Phase 1, we analyzed 16 course syllabi and 12 assigned textbooks from the 2024–2025 academic year. These documents were selected based on their centrality in shaping core disciplinary knowledge. We coded for recurring terminology, theoretical frameworks, and patterns that suggested Western universality, epistemic dominance, or a lack of cultural contextualization. The aim was to uncover how curriculum texts position psychological knowledge, whose voices are privileged, whose are excluded, and how cultural representation is framed.

5.3.2 Phase 2: Discursive Practice (Reflexive Narratives)

Phase 2 explored how discourse is internalized by students. Each of us three student-researchers wrote reflexive essays on our academic journey in the psychology program. These narratives were thematically analyzed to identify how we accept, resist, or reinterpret institutional discourse, particularly around coloniality, cultural erasure, and epistemic inclusion. This reflexive phase allowed for deeper engagement with our dual roles as researchers and participants, enabling insights into how institutional narratives are reproduced or challenged from within.

5.3.3 Phase 3: Social Practice & Participants

To examine how discourse travels beyond academic settings into professional and applied contexts, we conducted semi-structured interviews with seven recent graduates of the psychology program.

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, leveraging academic, professional, and personal networks. Before each interview, participants completed a brief demographic survey collecting basic background information. Interviews were conducted via Zoom, lasted approximately 30 minutes, and were audio-recorded with informed consent.

Interview questions explored four main areas: (1) educational experience, (2) application of academic knowledge in the workplace, (3) perceived cultural relevance of the curriculum, and (4) suggestions for improvement. This phase sought to reveal how institutional discourses, especially those rooted in colonial frameworks, are either maintained or disrupted in real-world settings.

5.4 Participants

Seven participants were selected based on the criterion that they had graduated from the psychology program at ZU and were actively applying their academic training in a professional setting, either through full-time employment or internships. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling and were primarily contacted via LinkedIn. This sampling method was appropriate given the small population of ZU psychology graduates and the exploratory nature of the study. Participation was voluntary, and no compensation was provided. Given the insider nature of the research, where some participants shared prior social or academic relationships

with the research team, we acknowledge the potential for shared assumptions and social desirability bias. However, this shared background also fostered rapport and openness, creating a conversational dynamic that encouraged rich, candid responses.

5.5 Procedure

Each interview followed a semi-structured protocol developed in alignment with the study's research questions. The structure allowed for flexibility to explore themes while maintaining consistency across participants. Prior to the interview, participants filled a Google Forms survey that collected their demographic information. Interviews were conducted one-on-one over Zoom, with only one or two researchers present to ensure participant comfort. Example interview questions included, *"How would you describe your overall experience in the undergraduate psychology program?" and "Were there topics, voices, or perspectives you think were missing or underrepresented in your education?"* All sessions were transcribed verbatim, following the standards outlined by Poland (2015).

5.6 Researcher Positionality

The research team is comprised of three Emirati undergraduate psychology students (two women, one man) studying at Zayed University. As insider researchers, our lived experience within the same academic environment provided us with access to nuanced interpretations of curricular and discursive patterns. This perspective allowed for deeper cultural and contextual understanding. We engaged in critical reflexivity, challenging our assumptions, sharing observations, and engaging in peer debriefings to ensure analytic transparency and rigor. In Phase 2 of the Results section, we expand on our educational journey in relation to this study.

5.7 Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at ZU. All participants received an information sheet outlining the study's purpose, procedures, and data usage. Informed consent was obtained before each interview. Participants were debriefed about their rights, and all responses were kept confidential and pseudonymized. Audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored and accessible only to the research team. Upon completion of the analysis, audio files were deleted.

6. Results

6.1 Phase 1: Textual Analysis

During Phase 1 of the CDA, we identified four overarching patterns in how psychological knowledge is framed and reproduced across the curriculum. These themes point to deeper ideological structures embedded in educational discourse, including (1) Epistemic Hegemony and Universalism, (2) Absence of Cultural Grounding, (3) Institutional Reproduction of Colonial Knowledge, and (4) Tokenistic Inclusion Without Epistemic Integration. Together, these themes

illustrate how the curriculum positions Western knowledge systems as authoritative while marginalizing or superficially engaging with local epistemologies.

The first theme, *Epistemic Hegemony and Universalism*, captures the pervasive dominance of Western psychological frameworks throughout the curriculum. Across both syllabi and textbooks, psychological knowledge is positioned as culturally neutral and universally applicable, often omitting any reference to regional, indigenous, or non-Western epistemologies. This framing reflects what decolonial scholars refer to as epistemic hegemony, wherein Euro-American models are treated as normative while others are marginalized or excluded altogether (Aziz & Anjum, 2025). Table 1 presents key excerpts that illustrate how universality is constructed through language, theory, and pedagogy.

Table 1. Epistemic Hegemony and Universalism

Text Excerpt	Text Source	Discourse Feature	Interpretive Note
"Treatment of mental illness prior to modern psychology, Freud, Adler, and Jung. Psychology's progression toward modern evidence-based practices."	PSY 413 Course Syllabus	Western Hegemony in Mental Health	Assumes Western psychotherapy models are the gold standard of mental health treatment, ignoring culturally specific healing practices.
"And children everywhere reach major language milestones in a similar sequence."	Development Through the Lifespan (Textbook)	Universalist Framing	Presents developmental milestones as biologically predetermined and consistent across cultures, minimizing local variation.
"Individual presentation: students are expected to analyse their own personality using some personality theories that they have learned throughout the course."	PSY 330 Course Syllabus	One-size-fits-all Model	Neglects culturally situated views of selfhood, personality, and development found in collectivist or spiritual traditions.
"Existential Therapy... Person Centered Therapy... Gestalt Therapy... Behavior Therapies... Feminist Therapy... Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)"	PSY 310 Course Syllabus	Discursive Universalism	Western theories dominate the syllabus, marginalizing local and non-Western epistemologies.

The second theme, *Absence of Cultural Grounding*, refers to the systematic omission of regionally specific knowledge, theorists, or frameworks from the psychology education. While some assignments mention cultural relevance, the core theoretical material remains disconnected from the UAE's sociocultural and religious context. This reinforces a pedagogical gap where students are taught abstract, decontextualized knowledge with little reference to their own lived realities. Table 2 outlines key instances where cultural perspectives are overlooked, treated superficially, or absent.

Table 2. Absence of Cultural Grounding

Text Excerpt	Text Source	Discourse Feature	Interpretive Note
"Early psychological intervention theories and strategies: Treatment of mental illness prior to modern psychology, Freud, Adler, and Jung"	PSY 413 Course Syllabus	Lack of Cultural Contextualization	Ignores non-Western frameworks that could offer culturally relevant approaches to mental health.
"Examine theories through cases from the cultural perspective of the UAE."	PSY 207 Course Syllabus	Case-Based Localization	UAE culture is treated as a site of application rather than as a producer of developmental theory, reinforcing Western paradigms as the default.
"Emphasis will be placed on exploring cognitive disorders... and how they are assessed and treated both worldwide and within the U.A.E."	PSY 325 Course Syllabus	Global Diagnostic Framing	The course centers on clinical assessment approaches but does not explicitly include cultural or spiritual models of cognition, limiting epistemological diversity.
"Much of the behavioral research that you read about in this text was conducted with college students in the United States. These participants are not necessarily representative of people in general."	Methods in Behavioral Research (Textbook)	Cultural Sampling Bias	Acknowledges reliance on WEIRD samples but stops short of addressing the broader epistemological implications of generalizing from them.

The third theme, *Reproduction of Colonial Knowledge Systems*, reflects how the curriculum actively reinforces the authority of Western epistemologies through institutional and instructional structures. This includes privileging Western diagnostic models, canonical authors, and research methods rooted in WEIRD populations. These patterns reveal how the curriculum not only reflects colonial knowledge hierarchies but also reproduces them by training students to replicate them in their academic work. Table 3 summarizes examples where institutional gatekeeping and knowledge reproduction are most visible.

Table 3. Reproduction of Colonial Knowledge Systems

Text Excerpt	Text Source	Discourse Feature	Interpretive Note
"Individual Differences Introduction to Holland code psychometric"	PSY 371 Syllabus	Psychometric Individualism	Assumes universal applicability of the Holland Code, ignoring cultural and contextual variation.
"This course provides an introduction to research methods in psychology."	PSY 366 Syllabus	Methodological Coloniality: Absence of Emirati Research Practice	No engagement with Emirati research context; reinforces Western norms as methodological standard.
"Chapters 1 and 2. Taken from Ogden, J. (2012). *Health Psychology: A Textbook* (5th edition). Maidenhead: Open University Press. Taylor (2018). *Health Psychology,* 10th edition. McGraw-Hill Education."	PSY 375 Syllabus	Epistemic Dependence	Centers Euro-American theories and sources; marginalizes local health epistemologies.
"PERMA model Research Methods"	PSY430 Syllabus	Rethinking PERMA	Centers Western ideas; overlooks cultural variations in defining well-being.

The final theme, *Tokenistic Inclusion and Symbolic Culture*, addresses instances where culture is acknowledged in principle but not in practice. In these cases, diversity and localization appear only as add-ons, surface-level references to the UAE objectives that are not meaningfully embedded into theory, content, or learning outcomes. This symbolic engagement creates a dissonance between pedagogical language and curricular substance. Table 4 presents excerpts that illustrate this rhetorical inclusion of culture without epistemic integration.

Table 4. Tokenistic Inclusion and Symbolic Culture

Text Excerpt	Text Source	Discourse Feature	Interpretive Note
"This project will involve developing a mini-qualitative research study applying cultural psychology within the UAE context."	PSY 430 Course Syllabus	Tokenistic Inclusion of Culture	While students engage with the UAE context in assignments, the framing positions local culture as an area for application rather than a source of psychological theory.
"This course explores cultural similarities and differences in psychological processes, behavior, and mental health."	PSY 451 Course Syllabus	Aspirational Inclusion	While the course aims to explore cultural differences, it does not reference local cultural frameworks or decolonial perspectives, resulting in a gap between global rhetoric and regional specificity.
"Relate this stage to the UAE culture and examine the effects of Social Media on this stage."	PSY 207 Course Syllabus	Symbolic Inclusion, Not Epistemic Integration	Local culture is included only to illustrate Western theories, reinforcing a model where psychological knowledge is produced in the West and passively applied elsewhere.
"Understand how mental health is addressed in different societies, including the UAE."	PSY 340 Course Syllabus	Symbolic Inclusion	While the course lists cultural awareness as a goal, the actual content and weekly topics remain grounded in Western frameworks, reflecting rhetorical inclusion without curricular integration.

6.2 Phase 2: Reflexive Practice

6.2.1 Author 1: Cycle of Psychology Literature Gap in the UAE - A Reflexive Account of Inertia

As a recent graduate of the psychology program who was deeply immersed in its curriculum, demonstrated through consistent academic excellence, active classroom engagement, and critical reflection, I approached the program as an intellectually invested participant rather than a passive learner. I came to realize that while our textual analysis in Phase 1 captured the assigned readings and course content, it overlooked a vital layer of meaning-making: the teaching instructors and classroom dynamics themselves. The discursive dimension of how psychology was taught, through lectures, discussions, and assessments, varied significantly depending on the professor. Some instructors encouraged critical reflection on the Western foundations of psychological theories, but most did not. Their differing degrees of engagement with multiculturalism profoundly shaped how we, as students, interpreted the material.

I vividly recall that only two courses explicitly invited us to consider the cultural limitations of dominant psychological frameworks. In one of them, the instructor remarked: *"Some of the psychological frameworks, such as Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory, might not apply to your culture, so keep that in mind."* While this acknowledgement was meaningful, it was also brief and rare. More often, cultural reflection was delegated to assessment tasks, where we were asked to "apply theories to local examples" without being given the critical tools to do so. In this way, the curriculum placed the burden of contextualization on students, rather than building it into the core of the learning experience.

As students, many of us encountered a moment of academic inertia, particularly when attempting to locate relevant psychological literature from the UAE. While it is true that the field is still emerging in the region, this absence was amplified by the Western-centric lens of our education. We were taught through imported frameworks, case studies, and methodologies, making it difficult to envision psychology as rooted in our context.

Despite being immersed in the psychology curriculum, we were never exposed to the academic climate or research directions within our own country. As students, we were encouraged to read, analyze, and cite global literature, mostly Western, but rarely were we pointed to what was happening locally. This created a disconnect: while meaningful work was underway in the UAE, we had no sense of it, and thus no opportunity to build on it. From a discursive standpoint, this reflects how institutional discourse can render local knowledge invisible, even within national education systems.

This reflection illustrates how the psychology curriculum, as both a textual and discursive system, shapes students not only as learners but also as carriers of specific epistemologies. In the absence of deliberate and sustained decolonial engagement, both content and pedagogy, the cycle of cultural disconnection and epistemic dependency is likely to endure.

From my standpoint within this academic context, the lack of culturally grounded psychology education bleeds into academic projects and sustains a cycle of dependence on Western frameworks, ultimately deepening the research gap in the UAE.

6.2.2 Author 2: Slides Over Substance — A Reflexive Reflection on the Absence of Textbooks

As a current psychology student, I draw on reflexive analysis to explore a recurring pattern I've experienced throughout my coursework: the inconsistent and often absent use of textbooks. In the psychology program, textbook distribution is centralized: students don't purchase their books, and instructors typically don't select them. A pre-selected textbook is provided by the university, often outdated and rarely integrated into lectures or assessments. As a result, many students choose not to borrow it, and instructors often abandon it entirely, opting instead for the materials they create themselves using different resources. This practice makes the textbook — and the knowledge it holds — peripheral to the learning experience, shaping not only how knowledge is consumed but also which epistemologies are emphasized or excluded in the classroom.

In our broader research, we analyzed psychology textbooks used in the program and noted how they predominantly reflect Western theories and frameworks. However, in my personal experience, instructors rarely asked us to engage with these textbooks directly. While some professors incorporated textbook content into their slides, others relied more heavily on personal

knowledge, professional experience, or selective summaries. The extent to which textbook material was used — or not — varied across courses, but the common pattern was clear: we were rarely expected to read or refer to the textbooks ourselves. Over time, this practice quietly shaped my perception of what counts as academic knowledge and how deeply I am expected to engage with it.

I remember feeling relieved at first and even telling myself, *"Without textbook readings, it felt like there was less pressure — fewer pages to manage alongside other assignments."* But eventually, I began to feel like something was missing. Sometimes I would open the textbook out of curiosity and realize how much richer the explanations were compared to the simplified bullet points we saw in lectures. There were critiques, examples, and even cultural discussions that never made it into our slides.

This way of learning sends a clear message: surface-level understanding is sufficient. It discourages deeper reading, critical thinking, and intellectual exploration. Psychological knowledge is reduced to key terms and testable theories, often detached from their historical context, cultural limitations, or alternative perspectives. As students, we're trained to study efficiently, but not reflectively. For Emirati students, this has deeper consequences. In a context that emphasizes Emiratization, expanding the mental health workforce, and building a knowledge economy, an education system focused on memorization over critical thinking risks producing practitioners who replicate existing models rather than question, adapt, or contribute to them. This weakens efforts to develop a psychological infrastructure that is both innovative and rooted in Emirati values and needs.

From a discursive standpoint, this practice shapes how knowledge is consumed: slides become the official narrative, while textbooks — with their nuance, complexity, and potential for critique — are sidelined. Our learning environment rarely encourages us to question where knowledge comes from or what might be missing.

Through a decolonial lens, this disengagement also hides the Western roots of many psychological theories. Without full texts, we miss the citations, cultural assumptions, and historical positioning behind ideas, making it harder to critique them or imagine local alternatives that reflect our own contexts.

Ultimately, the way curriculum is delivered — what is assigned, emphasized, or excluded — reinforces certain ways of thinking. The absence of textbooks is not just logistical; it reflects a broader system that favors efficiency over depth and familiarity over critique. As a student within this system, I continue to ask what we're losing — and what a more critically engaged psychology education could look like.

6.2.3 Author 3: Absence of Arab theorists and its impact on self-perception

As a psychology student, I'm using reflexive analysis to unpack how the curriculum was not just taught, but lived and interpreted during my academic journey. This isn't about bias; it's about leveraging my insider perspective to reveal the hidden power structures within the discourse and acknowledge the moments of dissonance I experienced. This insight is central to a decolonial analysis. Much of my psychology education, particularly concerning social topics, was framed almost exclusively through Western models that were established as universal.

While initially impressed by their structured logic, a persistent feeling of disconnection quickly emerged. My community's understanding of suffering, healing, or even societal progress rarely found a voice in these materials. It was as if a significant part of my own lived experience, and that of the broader Arab context, simply didn't exist within the theoretical frameworks presented. This wasn't passive learning. My mind was actively filtering and questioning, realizing that the curriculum wasn't just transmitting knowledge but profoundly shaping my identity and sense of epistemic belonging. Crucially, the absence of Arab theorists within the readings and discussions implicitly suggested that meaningful knowledge production resided solely in Western regions. This rendered the Arab world largely invisible as a source of intellectual contribution, which began to subtly impact my sense of scholarly potential.

The pervasive use of Western authors in nearly every course implicitly privileged specific types of knowledge, suggesting they were the most valid or essential. It felt like anything valuable had to originate elsewhere, reinforcing the notion that non-Western perspectives were less rigorous or even irrelevant. I vividly recall the sense that if a concept wasn't presented by a White scholar, it automatically carried less weight, deemed not a "universal truth." For instance, when discussing family roles, specific details within Arab culture were often either overlooked or generalized under broad Western psychological categories. This glaring absence created a void, making it incredibly difficult to integrate academic teachings with my reality and cultural understanding. This lack of diverse intellectual representation, particularly from my cultural background, began to affect my self-perception as a novice scholar; it raised questions about the validity of my cultural knowledge and my potential to contribute meaningfully to the field. My internal resistance to this perceived universalization exposed a critical epistemic dissonance: the vast gap between the presented "universal" knowledge and my own culturally situated experiences. Unfortunately, academic discourse can marginalize diverse ways of knowing and even diminish one's sense of intellectual worth.

6.3 Phase 3: Interviews

Table 5. Participant Demographics

Category	n	%
Nationality		
Emirati	5	71.4
Non-Emirati	2	28.6
Age		
Mean (SD)	23.43 (1.29)	
22–23	4	57.1
24–26	3	42.9
Year of Graduation		

2023	4	57.1
2024–2025	3	42.9
Work Duration		
< 6 months	4	57.1
> 6 months	3	42.9
Final CGPA		
2.7–3.65	3	42.9
3.67–3.9	4	57.1

7. Interview Results

Through coding and thematic analysis, four overarching themes were identified across all participants' reflections on their critical experiences as employees and recent graduates of the psychology program at Zayed University.

7.1 Theme 1: Navigating Western-Oriented Education

This theme explores participants' perceptions of the psychology curriculum's dominant Western orientation and how they responded to it. When asked about the cultural relevance of the program, many participants noted that it was heavily Western-focused. One participant expressed:

> "I feel like we were studying them, like 80%, everything was Western, the research, even the experiments they did were all from them, so sometimes because these examples are from them you feel like this thing only happens with them, you can't, maybe not everyone will be able to understand that no, this thing happens in our culture because we're just studying their culture."

As this quote illustrates, the dominance of Western content limited students' ability to apply or relate psychological knowledge to their own cultural context. Participants also highlighted that the problem was not only the cultural disconnect but also the outdated nature of the material. One graduate explained:

> "I think it's so like underwhelming as a student to be taking in and studying for four years and then you realize that some of these cannot be applied anymore yeah actually as a student if you go into a clinical setting you get in a way bombarded by reality because you try to bring up these theories you studied with the doctors or psychologists and they just look at you and say this is outdated so that's something that happened to me."

When asked whether they had critically reflected on the curriculum during or after their studies, responses varied. Some participants explained that they tended to disengage from

content they felt was irrelevant to their cultural or religious context. One participant said: *"Even when I'm studying psychology, like if a piece of information doesn't match our religion or like whatever, it doesn't get stored."*

Others shared that they did not critically reflect at the time and accepted the knowledge as given, even if it conflicted with their beliefs. One participant recalled:

> "I wasn't that much aware because I thought OK we should agree with them even like sometimes learning most of these these theories during the class I remember like thinking is that even right? is that even correct? however like we were learning for the sake of learning but at the end of the day I always took from this program is whatever as I said resonates with me and whatever I left is whatever I think that OK this is not something that I agree with this is not something that basically aligns with my beliefs."

Most participants emphasized that the curriculum was Western-centric. Their navigation strategies ranged from passive acceptance of the material to active disengagement, particularly when the content was perceived as culturally irrelevant or misaligned with personal beliefs.

7.2 Theme 2: Instructor's Role

While many participants noted a lack of cultural context in the formal curriculum, nearly all graduates acknowledged the efforts made by certain professors to integrate regional concepts into their teaching. One participant described how the use of local examples made lectures more engaging: *"(Dr. X) always tried to bring in examples that would relate to us so it felt engaging and it felt like I could focus on her without being distracted."*

Other participants also shared that some instructors encouraged them to challenge and critique the application of Western frameworks within their cultural context. However, because this approach was not embedded in the formal curriculum, such practices were not consistent across all classrooms or instructors. Despite this inconsistency, participants appreciated professors who, even without deep familiarity with Emirati culture, made efforts to initiate culturally relevant discussions. One participant reflected:

> "I think something that was good about those theories is just some professors actually like encouraged us to challenge those theories in our assignments for example sometimes we would write we would be critical of them but it's only some professors who were a bit more they did value discussion in the class so remember there were there were opportunities to critique them."

Another echoed this sentiment, highlighting how meaningful classroom dialogue, not the curriculum itself, fostered critical thinking and cultural reflection:

> "there are times where actually I think not the curriculum but the class discussions were what really like allowed me to critically think and learn about our culture so that it wasn't involved in the curriculum but if the professor encouraged discussion and stuff that was helpful."

Participants also noted that some professors encouraged them to conduct local research, particularly for assignments and final-year projects. These efforts, although not standardized, were seen as instrumental in helping students connect psychological concepts to their local context.

Overall, participants agreed that instructors played a pivotal role in localizing their education. Whether through class discussions, culturally relevant examples, or encouraging regionally grounded research, the professors' individual teaching approaches contributed significantly to bridging the cultural gap in the curriculum. As one participant summarized:

> "it's not just the course or the curriculum itself like the general curriculum it's what the professor wants us to take away from the course and how they designed the syllabus for the courses and their approach to teaching I think that's also really important."

7.3 Theme 3: Culturally Grounded vs. Contextually Distant Courses

Most participants mentioned that culturally relevant content and diverse perspectives were primarily encountered in the 400-level *Cultural Psychology* course, which is a mandatory part of the program. One participant noted:

> "maybe also cultural psychology we talked a bit about other um when it comes to like Emirati Arab culture it was good that that was kind of part of every assignments that they asked us to kind of include any Emirati perspective or perspective so that's was something positive."

Another participant shared that the course helped her feel more prepared to work in culturally diverse environments:

> "I believe it did that prepare me to work in a culturally diverse place um they've highlight they would highlight cultural sensitivity and highlight openness to diversity throughout the course of cultural psychology and I think that's really facilitated the uh a more uh an openness and me to accept the different like different types of people."

Interestingly, and without being prompted directly, several participants brought up the 400-level *Positive Psychology* course, offering critical reflections. They expressed that the content often felt redundant, culturally inapplicable, and at times invalidating, particularly in the context of mental health. As one participant explained: *"the general theme of positive psychology to me always felt like to 'choose happiness' like vibes which kind of comes off like invalidating."*

Another participant echoed this critique:

> "I feel like positive psychology—if it wasn't a whole course because till now uhhh like I'm not really convinced by it, so okay if you want to teach us about it give us an overview or something because even when we took it as a course, if you want to show us that there's another side of psychology—I don't feel like it was very effective or something. To the point that I didn't feel I benefited from it at all."

These contrasting reflections illustrate how certain courses, particularly *Cultural Psychology*, were remembered positively for their relevance and application, while others, such as *Positive Psychology*, were viewed as lacking in contextual value and critical depth.

7.4 Theme 4: Future Recommendations

This theme highlights the various suggestions participants offered to make the psychology curriculum more culturally relevant and inclusive of Emirati contexts. Drawing from their personal and professional experiences, many graduates proposed ways to integrate local culture into the

program, one of the most common suggestions being the inclusion of a course on Islamic Psychology. As one participant stated:

> "I wouldn't say exactly in Emirati because it's not in Emirati exclusively but I would say that I would definitely want to have for example Islamic psychology integrated into the curriculum I feel like that is something that should be in our curriculum and should be promoted and should be constantly you know reminded as people who are first of all Muslim."

Participants also emphasized the need to study cultural norms that shape mental health and development, such as the practice of polygamy, and to address rising mental health trends within the UAE. One participant highlighted the significance of addiction as an emerging issue:

> "I really think uh studies into drug abuse and the prevalence of drug abuse amongst the male Emirati should be highlighted more instead of more I feel like there's many new in that area and I feel like more um there should be more awareness of this issue because when I was working at [Hospital X] there was a high prevalence of drug abuse amongst men."

In addition to course content, participants collectively advocated for greater engagement with local research, particularly work conducted by Emirati researchers. There was a call for faculty and institutions like Zayed University to collaborate more actively with other organizations in the mental health field. One participant shared: *"I think by integrating research done by uh in the UAE by integrating uh uh maybe psychiatrists and professionals who worked in the field and getting their perspective yeah cultural sensitivity."*

These recommendations reflect a strong desire among graduates for a psychology program that is not only academically rigorous but also socially grounded, contextually relevant, and reflective of the cultural and religious realities of the UAE.

8. Discussion

This study investigated the influence of Western epistemic hegemony on psychology education in the UAE, using Zayed University as a case study. Through a three-phase CDA, our findings reveal a curriculum that systematically privileges Western psychological frameworks while marginalizing local and Islamic knowledge systems. The textual analysis of syllabi, reflexive accounts from student-researchers, and interviews with recent graduates converge on a central conclusion: despite growing mental health awareness in the UAE, the academic training of its future professionals remains largely disconnected from the cultural and religious realities of the population it aims to serve. These findings confirm and empirically substantiate the concerns raised by scholars regarding the uncritical importation of Western psychology into Arab contexts (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2004;Gergen et al., 2015).

8.1 Contributions and Significance

The central contribution of this research is its empirical demonstration of how coloniality operates at the micro (textual), discursive (pedagogical), and social (professional) levels within a

non-Western academic institution. While postcolonial theory has long critiqued the universalist claims of Western disciplines (Said, 1978a, 1978b; Mignolo, 2007), this study provides evidence of these processes in action.

The findings from Phase 1 challenge the notion of a "neutral" curriculum, illustrating how the selection of textbooks, theoretical models, and citation practices actively reproduces Western epistemic dominance. The identified themes of Epistemic Hegemony and Reproduction of Colonial Knowledge Systems are not passive reflections but active discursive practices that reinforce the idea that valid psychological knowledge originates primarily from the West. This directly supports Mignolo's (2007) assertion that coloniality persists not as a historical artifact but as an ongoing "logic of oppression" embedded in knowledge systems.

The reflexive narratives in Phase 2 make a unique contribution by giving voice to the "subaltern" student perspective, a viewpoint often absent in curricular research (Spivak, 2014). These accounts elaborate on the lived consequences of a decontextualized education. The feeling of disconnection, the impact on self-perception as a future Arab scholar, and the perpetuation of a local research gap are significant findings.

The interviews in Phase 3 support and elaborate on these findings, confirming that the cultural disconnect is recognized by graduates now working in the field. Their experiences highlight how the curriculum fails to adequately prepare them for the realities of practice in the UAE, validating critiques that Western-centric training can reduce the effectiveness of psychological interventions (Litz & Scott, 2016). Our findings also align with Shahin et al. (2025), who highlight the impact and importance of localization in the UAE. The graduates' clear and consistent recommendation for integrating Islamic psychology and local research provides a powerful mandate for curricular reform.

Participants commonly described the Positive Psychology course as culturally dissonant, repetitive in content, and insufficiently nuanced in addressing the complexities of mental health. Their reflections suggest that Positive Psychology, as presented in their training, failed to resonate with their lived experiences or with the sociocultural realities of clients in the UAE. These concerns echo longstanding critiques in the literature that Positive Psychology, while promoting strengths, happiness, and well-being, is often rooted in individualistic, Western ideals that may not translate across cultural contexts (Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008; Miller, 2008). Issues students explained may relate to how Yaaqeib (2021) localizes content but leaves the epistemic frame intact. It relies on Adair's framework that operationalizes "indigenization" as a measurable process within established criteria rather than unsettling how knowledge itself is produced or validated. Scholars argue that the field tends to universalize concepts such as happiness, flourishing, and self-actualization without adequately accounting for cultural variability (Eid & Diener, 2001; Uchida et al., 2004). When taught without cultural adaptation, the course can unintentionally marginalize or invalidate non-Western perspectives (Fernando, 2010).

8.2 Researcher Positionality in Interpreting Interviews

As recent graduates and students of the Zayed University psychology program, we approached the interviews not only as researchers but as peers with shared institutional, cultural, and educational experiences. This positionality enabled us to interpret participants' reflections with a nuanced understanding of the classroom dynamics, course content, and emotional tensions

described. When graduates spoke about disengaging from Western content or feeling culturally misrepresented, we could relate to these moments not just theoretically, but experientially.

We too navigated syllabi that privileged foreign perspectives, felt the impact of instructor efforts, and encountered the discomfort of learning frameworks that did not reflect our values or realities. Our insider status allowed us to engage deeply and empathetically with participants' critiques and recommendations. At the same time, we recognize that our proximity to the program may shape which patterns stood out most strongly to us. This reflexive awareness guided our analysis and helped ensure that we approached these themes with both clarity and accountability.

8.3 Alternative Explanations

While a decolonial lens interprets these findings as a product of epistemic hegemony, alternative explanations must be considered. The dominance of Western frameworks may not be an intentional act of exclusion but a pragmatic consequence of other factors. These include the global dominance of English-language academic publishing, a lack of readily available and translated high-quality Arabic textbooks, and institutional pressures to align with international accreditation standards that often favor Western models. Moreover, faculty may have been trained exclusively within Western systems, leading them to reproduce what they know.

8.4 Strengths, Limitations, and Transferability

The primary strength of this study lies in its multi-phase, critical discourse design, which allows for triangulation between textual data, reflexive experiences, and participant interviews. The insider positionality of the research team afforded a nuanced understanding of the cultural and institutional context, fostering rapport with participants and enabling deeper insights. However, this study has limitations. The focus on a single institution limits the direct transferability of the findings to all universities in the UAE or the broader Gulf region. Although the interview sample was small (n = 7) and purposefully selected, this design served as a methodological strength by allowing for deeper, more nuanced exploration of participants' lived experiences and culturally embedded perspectives.

Therefore, the transferability of these findings should be considered with care. While the specific curricular details may be unique to Zayed University, the overarching themes of epistemic dependence, cultural mismatch, and the pivotal role of individual instructors are likely resonant in other higher education institutions across the region and in similar postcolonial contexts. These findings are not intended as a universal descriptor but as a lens through which educators and institutions can begin to question their curricula.

8.5 Ethical Considerations, Future Directions, and Implications

The central ethical challenge encountered was navigating the dual roles of the researchers as students, peers, and investigators. Maintaining confidentiality and mitigating social desirability bias were paramount.

The findings of this study have significant implications for psychology education in the UAE. A key insight is the urgent need to move beyond tokenistic inclusion of culture. This calls for a fundamental redesign of course content to integrate Islamic psychological perspectives, regional case studies, and locally relevant research. Instructors should be supported through professional development in critical and culturally responsive pedagogy. The critique of the Positive Psychology course further highlights the importance of evaluating the cultural appropriateness of imported psychological models.

At the institutional level, university leadership can build on existing strengths, such as the growing interest among students in culturally grounded research, by actively recruiting faculty with expertise in regional and Islamic psychology. Policies could also be developed to incentivize the creation and adoption of locally relevant teaching materials. Collaboration with other UAE universities and mental health organizations would further strengthen an emerging ecosystem for producing and disseminating local psychological knowledge.

The interviews and reflexive process revealed a shared desire among participants for more emphasis on producing local research while developing critical awareness of non-local frameworks. Although the field is still developing regionally, this stage of growth represents a valuable opportunity to shape a uniquely UAE-centered psychological discourse. As researchers and active participants within this system, we believe that empowering students with the skills to critically engage with diverse perspectives is essential for advancing culturally responsive education.

This qualitative study lays the groundwork for future investigations. Quantitative surveys across multiple universities could assess the prevalence of the perceptions identified here. Further research should explore the specific barriers to decolonizing curricula. Finally, action research projects that involve developing and evaluating a culturally grounded psychology course module would be a vital next step.

A curated list of recommended readings on decolonial research in higher education for both students and researchers is provided in **Appendix A**.

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APPENDIX A
READINGS ON DECOLONIAL RESEARCH IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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