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Perceptions of the United States and Its Foreign Policy among Algerian EFL University Students: Cultural Affinity, Policy Criticism, and Anti-American Sentiment

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Abstract:

This study examined how Algerian EFL university students perceive the United States and its foreign policy, and whether these perceptions are affected by media exposure. Using a convergent mixed-methods design, data were collected through an online questionnaire. General perceptions of the United States were more positive than perceptions of its foreign policy, suggesting that cultural appeal and political evaluation may differ. U.S. economic and cultural involvement in the Middle East was viewed more favorably than its political and military involvement. Media consumption was not linked to either perception measure. Thematic analysis identified students' critical views of U.S. foreign policy and expressions of anti-American sentiment. The findings indicate that students distinguish between the United States as a country and its foreign policy.

Keywords: *Algeria; Anti-American sentiment; EFL students; foreign policy perceptions; media exposure; United States perceptions.*

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

Public opinion about the United States is rarely consistent. However, various surveys and discourse-based research throughout the Arab world have revealed that individuals from these countries are able to admire the culture of the United States while simultaneously rejecting the policies that the country implements abroad (Jamal et al., 2015; Katzenstein & Keohane, 2007). Such distinctions are apparent even within the country of Algeria. Authors Zoubir and Aït-Hamadouche (2006) described a 'twin movement' within the nation; the people in general have resentments towards the United States regarding its policies towards the Middle East, yet they continue to appreciate the nation for its cultural products. Moreover, these sentiments have reportedly taken on new importance in the past few years following the outbreak of the Gaza war in October of 2023. According to a survey of countries across the Arab world published in December of 2023 and January of 2024, 94% of those individuals in the region had developed negative opinions of the United States following its role in the war in Gaza, and an additional 76% of those individuals stated that their opinion of the United States had deteriorated as a result of these revealed viewpoints (Arab Center Washington DC, 2024).

Algerian EFL students, enrolled at the university, occupy a particular position within this broader scope. Unlike the general population samples used in most research on Arab views of the United States, EFL students engage with English language media, entertainment, and online content as part of their academic lives rather than through random exposure.Their engagement with American cultural materials is more directly connected to their academic experience than is typically captured in general population surveys. This raises a question that existing literature has not directly addressed: do students regularly exposed to American cultural materials display the same distinction between cultural appreciation and policy criticism identified in broader Arab and Algerian contexts, and how is this distinction linked to media exposure?

The present study addresses this question using data collected from EFL students at the University of Batna 2 (between March and May 2025).

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Existing research on international perceptions of the United States has examined two dimensions particularly relevant to this study: evaluations of U.S. foreign policy and the influence of American cultural products in shaping perceptions of the United States. Scholarship on foreign policy attitudes and the United States' international image has provided important insights into how the public interprets American political actions, while research on cultural influence and media has explored how American cultural products contribute to perceptions of the United States. However, less attention has been given to how Algerian EFL university students distinguish between cultural attraction and political criticism, and how these dimensions interact in shaping perceptions of the United States.

EFL and intercultural competence research has primarily focused on language learning motivation, intercultural competence, and engagement with target cultures. Less attention has been given to how EFL students interpret broader political issues related to the countries and cultures they study, including perceptions of the foreign policy.

As a result, existing literature has rarely examined how perceptions of American culture, evaluations of U.S. foreign policy, and media exposure are related to one another among Algerian EFL university students, particularly in the context of recent geopolitical events in which the United States was involved. This gap is important because EFL students represent a population with sustained engagement with American cultural and history materials while also

forming evaluations of U.S. political actionss.

1.3. Purpose of the Study

This study aims to examine how Algerian EFL university students perceive the United States as a country and how they perceive and judge U.S. foreign policy, with particular attention to the relationship between cultural perceptions, policy evaluations, and media exposure. It, also, explores how students explain these perceptions and whether engagement with American cultural content is linked to their views of the United States and its foreign policy.

1.4. Research Questions

The study is guided by four research questions:

RQ1. How do Algerian EFL university students perceive the United States as a country, compared with how they perceive its foreign policy role in the Middle East?

RQ2. How are students' primary sources of information and exposure to American entertainment media associated with their general perceptions of the United States and their perceptions of its role in the Middle East?

RQ3. What themes emerge from students' open-ended reflections on U.S. foreign policy, historical events, and cultural differences?

RQ4. To what extent do the quantitative patterns identified in RQ1 and RQ2 converge with, or diverge from, the qualitative themes identified in RQ3?

1.5. Significance of the Study

This study connects research on Algerian perceptions of the United States with EFL and intercultural competence research, two areas that have largely developed separately. For research on Algerians' perceptions of the United States, it offers a focused look at university EFL students situated within an English language learning context in which American media and cultural materials are commonly encountered, rather than a general public sample considered independently of its language learning context and media habits. For EFL and intercultural competence research, it treats foreign policy attitudes as a measurable outcome in their own right, rather than as background context for language learning motivation. Practically, the findings speak most directly to English language teaching at institutions similar to the one studied here, where instructors regularly draw on American media and cultural materials. Understanding how these students distinguish their general perceptions of the United States and views of its cultural influence from judgments of its foreign policy may inform how intercultural competence and critical media literacy are taught alongside the language itself.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Soft Power, Hard Power, and the Central Puzzle

Nye (2004) distinguishes between a country's hard power - its ability to force others through the use of military and economic power - and its soft power, which is derived from the attractiveness of a country's culture, values, and policies. This distinction is useful in understanding the present study because different types of publics may respond differently to a country's cultural and governmental characteristics. For instance, the fact that Algerian EFL students had positive views of the U.S. overall yet had negative views of its Middle East policy is simultaneously indicative of both the relationship between these two concepts and their differences. Related to these concepts, however, is a second question: whether the students'

negative views were based specifically on rejection of the policies of the U.S. government and its agencies, or based on a rejection of the country and its culture altogether.

2.2. Anti-Americanism in the Arab World and the Gaza Inflection

Anti-Americanism encompasses several different types of attitudes. Katzenstein and Keohane (2007) have distinguished between anti-Americanism that is based upon a general dislike of the identity of the United States as a country and anti-Americanism that is based upon a dislike of specific policies of the United States. Studies of the literature of the Arab world, such as that of Jamal et al. (2015), indicate that the anti-Americanism that is prevalent in some of those regions is actually based upon reactions to the policies of the United States rather than any inherent dislike of the country in general. Other studies, such as that of Blaydes and Linzer (2012), have determined that elements like religiosity and political competition among the country's elites can also impact anti-American sentiment within the region. Studies like that of Glas and Spierings (2021) have been able to determine that these factors interact differently within the different countries within the Arab region. Thus, anti-Americanism within the Arab world does not appear to have a unified structure and is not necessarily directed against the United States and its society in particular; rather, it is mostly based upon reactions to specific policies of the United States and as a result of the regional context in which those Arabs live.

For Algeria specifically, Zoubir and Aït-Hamadouche (2006) describe a long-standing "twin movement": popular resentment toward U.S. Middle East policy alongside continued state-level cooperation and individual appreciation of American cultural products. Moreover, recent regional evidence shows that negative evaluations of U.S. Middle East policy have become especially pronounced since the outbreak of the Gaza war. A sixteen-country Arab Opinion Index survey conducted after October 2023 found that 94% of respondents viewed the U.S. position on the war negatively, while 76% reported that their view of the United States had become more negative because of it (Arab Center Washington DC, 2024). The Gaza war therefore provides an important contemporary context for examining how Algerian university students evaluate U.S. foreign policy.

2.3. Media Exposure and Political Perception

Because perceptions of distant countries and conflicts are often formed through mediated information rather than direct experience, media exposure provides an important context for understanding how students evaluate U.S. foreign policy. Cultivation theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976) proposes that sustained exposure to a media environment shapes how audiences perceive social reality, with heavier exposure producing views closer to the mediated world than to direct experience. The theory was developed in relation to broadcast television, a centralized medium with a relatively uniform message system. Contemporary entertainment and social media environments differ considerably from this original media context, as exposure is often more varied and individually selected.

Therefore, cultivation theory cannot be transferred uncritically to the present context, although its core premise remains relevant: repeated exposure to symbolic environments may be associated with how audiences understand social and political realities beyond direct experience. This issue may be particularly relevant to EFL students, whose language learning may involve regular engagement with English language entertainment, news, and online content, including content produced in the United States.

2.4. EFL Learners: Cultural Attitudes, Critical Awareness, and Behavioral Expression

Three further perspectives help explain why EFL students may hold different general and specific policy evaluations of the United States and why negative policy attitudes may not necessarily translate into action.

First, Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model distinguishes integrative motivation (identification with and openness toward a target-language community) from instrumental motivation, which reflects practical reasons for learning a language. This distinction helps explain why English learners may develop openness toward target-language media and cultural products, while leaving open the possibility that such openness does not translate into approval of U.S. foreign policy.

Cultural openness, however, does not necessarily imply that individuals are uncritical of the target culture or its government policies. Second, intercultural communicative competence, as described by Byram (1997, 2021), includes a component that assesses critical awareness of the practices of the target culture. Thus, while the study did not directly assess this component of Byram's model, it is a component of the model that can help to explain why a student might be simultaneously positive about many of the cultural products of America yet critical of some of its policies. Furthermore, even among those students who have negative evaluations of many of the foreign policies of America, those evaluations do not necessarily lead to expressed opposition to those policies. Third, Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior may help to explain this distinction between attitudes and behaviors. At the same time, this model was utilized only in the interpretation of the item that assessed whether the students have expressed opposition to the United States policy toward the Middle East region of the United States.

2.5. Synthesis and Research Gap

The literature indicates that general perceptions of the United States may differ from evaluations of specific U.S. foreign policies. Research across Arab contexts further indicates that negative attitudes are often policy-specific and shaped by political and social context, with the Gaza war making U.S. Middle East policy especially salient. Media environments provide an important context through which distant countries and conflicts are understood. For EFL students, engagement with English language media, including U.S. produced content, may coexist with critical evaluation of U.S. policy, while negative policy attitudes do not necessarily result in expressed opposition.

Despite these connections, previous research has rarely examined how general perceptions of the United States, evaluations of U.S. Middle East policy, reported media exposure, and students' own explanations relate to one another among Algerian EFL students. Existing research on Arab anti-Americanism has mainly focused on general populations, whereas EFL and intercultural competence research has rarely treated foreign policy evaluation as a distinct area of inquiry. The present study brings these strands together among Algerian EFL university students.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study uses a convergent mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017), in which quantitative and qualitative data are collected through the same instrument at the same time, analyzed separately using methods appropriate to each type of data, and then merged during interpretation to see where the two strands agree, disagree, or add to one another. This

design fits the study's purpose: the closed-format items measure the pattern of students' perceptions, while the open-ended items capture the reasoning behind them, and neither strand alone answers RQ4, which asks specifically how the two relate.

3.2. Participants

Participants were 121 students at the University of Batna 2, a public university in northeastern Algeria whose Faculty of Letters and Foreign Languages houses one of the country's English departments. Recruitment used convenience sampling; while the questionnaire targeted EFL students, it was open to any student who received it, which is reflected in a small number of respondents from outside the English department. Most respondents were female (94, 77.7%) compared with male (25, 20.7%; 2 undisclosed, 1.7%). The majority were aged 17–21 (88, 72.7%), with smaller groups aged 22–25 (25, 20.7%), 26–30 (3, 2.5%), and over 30 (3, 2.5%; 2 undisclosed, 1.7%). Most were enrolled at the Licence level (L1–L3; 95, 78.5%), with smaller numbers at the Master's level (M1–M2; 20, 16.5%), in Engineering (2, 1.7%), and with more than five years of university study (2, 1.7%; 2 undisclosed, 1.7%). The overwhelming majority were students of foreign languages, primarily English (114, 94.2%), with small numbers from humanities and social sciences (1, 0.8%), economics and business (1, 0.8%), and unspecified other fields (3, 2.5%; 2 undisclosed, 1.7%).

3.3. Instrument

The questionnaire was created specifically for this exploratory study to determine the perceptions of the United States by students. The questions were created to help answer the research questions regarding the students' perceptions of the country in these areas.

The survey was distributed through Google Forms and contained 27 questions that were arranged into four categories:

Demographic items (5): age, gender, study level, field of study, and general political interest.

Closed-format items (15): items measuring students' overall perception of the United States; their view of the U.S. role in the Middle East; their evaluation of U.S. involvement across four specific areas (economic, political, cultural, and military); perceived impact of U.S. policy on regional peace and security; perceived prioritization of economic interests over human rights; views on whether anti-American sentiment is justified; whether they have personally expressed opposition to U.S. Middle East policy; primary source of information about the United States; perceived transparency of U.S. policy decisions; whether international news outlets portray the United States accurately; frequency of American entertainment media consumption; and perceived influence of that media on their own views.

Multi-select items (2): factors influencing students' perceptions of the United States (select all that apply), and, for those who reported expressing opposition, the form that opposition took.

Open-ended items (5): reflections on how specific events (the Iraq War, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, and Gaza) have shaped their views; the role of cultural differences in shaping Algerian perceptions of U.S. policy; what the United States could do to improve its image in Algeria; and two general open-response items inviting any additional comments.

The questionnaire was administered in English, and all open-ended responses quoted in this article are reproduced as students originally wrote them, with no translation involved.

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed online and completed voluntarily and anonymously; no identifying information was collected. Data collection ran from March 6 to May 17, 2025, roughly ten weeks and approximately eighteen months into the Gaza war, and responses were recorded automatically in a linked spreadsheet.

3.5. Data Analysis

Closed-format items were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, and means and standard deviations for the 5-point ordinal items), together with Spearman's rank-order correlations and chi-square tests of independence, with Cramér's V reported as the effect-size measure for the chi-square analyses. Because correlation assesses association rather than differences between paired responses, a Wilcoxon signed-rank test was also used to determine whether ratings on the two paired perception items (general perception of the United States and perception of the U.S. role in the Middle East) differed.

Statistical significance was assessed at $\alpha = .05$. As a conservative sensitivity analysis across the eight inferential tests reported, an adjusted Bonferroni threshold of $\alpha = .00625$ was also applied. Statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics. The two gender comparisons were not specified by the research questions and were therefore reported as exploratory post hoc analyses rather than planned tests.

Open-ended responses were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach. Responses were read repeatedly to identify recurring meanings; initial codes were generated inductively from repeated references to specific events, values, historical memory, and cultural-political distinctions in students' own wording; and these codes were then grouped into broader themes.

The integration of the two strands of analysis employed a convergent design approach. The results for each research question were organized separately but also together in a joint display to compare the findings of the two forms of data collection and analysis.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

Participation in this study was completely voluntary, and there was no compensation for participants. Each participant was made aware of the purpose of this study prior to the collection of their responses, and they were always able to withdraw from the study at any time prior to submission of their responses. No names or other identifying information were collected from the participants.

4. Results

4.1. Sample

The sample comprised 121 respondents, whose demographic characteristics are reported in the Participants section. Valid response counts for the closed-format items ranged from 114 to 119, representing 94.2% to 98.3% of the full sample.

4.2. Quantitative Results

RQ1: General Perception of the United States and Perception of Its Role in the Middle East

Students' general perception of the United States ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.05$) was positively associated with their perception of the U.S. role in the Middle East ($M = 2.24$, $SD = 1.18$), $\rho = .306$, $p < .001$, $N = 119$. Students with more favorable general perceptions therefore tended to evaluate the U.S. role in the Middle East more favorably, although the association was modest.

A Wilcoxon signed-rank test showed that students' general perception ratings were significantly higher than their ratings of the U.S. role in the Middle East, W = 336.00, p < .001. Of the 119 respondents, 77 rated the United States more favorably in general than they rated its Middle East role, 12 showed the opposite pattern, and 30 gave identical ratings on the two items.

Table 1 presents the same pattern using collapsed response categories. Among the 51 respondents with a positive general perception of the United States, 30 (58.8%) nevertheless evaluated its role in the Middle East negatively.

Table (1):General Perception of the United States and Perception of Its Middle East Role (N = 119)

General perception	Negative Middle East role perception	Neutral Middle East-role perception	Positive Middle East role perception
Negative (n = 25)	23	2	0
Neutral (n = 43)	27	9	7
Positive (n = 51)	30	7	14

Note. Negative and positive categories combine the "very" and "somewhat" response options.

Evaluations of U.S. involvement across four specific domains followed a similar pattern. Economic development received the most favorable evaluation (M = 3.56, SD = 1.26), followed by cultural influence (M = 3.17, SD = 1.29). Political stability (M = 2.58, SD = 1.29) and military influence (M = 2.79, SD = 1.23) received less favorable evaluations.

Table (2): Perceived U.S. Involvement in the Middle East by Domain

Domain	M	SD	Positive	Neutral	Negative	n
Economic development	3.56	1.26	55.7%	24.3%	20.0%	115
Political stability	2.58	1.29	26.7%	21.6%	51.7%	116
Cultural influence	3.17	1.29	46.5%	21.9%	31.6%	114
Military influence	2.79	1.23	26.7%	34.5%	38.8%	116

Note. Positive responses combine "very positive" and "somewhat positive," whereas negative responses combine "very negative" and "somewhat negative."

The responses to the related policy items were mostly critical of U.S. foreign policy. Eighty-one of the 119 respondents (68.1%) indicated that U.S. foreign policy had not positively affected regional peace and security within the areas of focus for this research project. Furthermore, one hundred four of the 118 respondents (88.1%) indicated that the United States tended to prioritize its economic interests over human rights in the regions with which it was often involved in its foreign policy, and 86 of the 119 respondents (72.3%) indicated that the country often did not provide sufficient transparency regarding its policy decisions.

For the question of whether anti-American sentiment in the region was justified, 45 of the

118 respondents (38.1%) indicated that the sentiment was justified, while 30 (25.4%) indicated that the sentiment was only partially justified. Additionally, 14 (11.9%) indicated that the sentiment was not justified, and the remaining 29 (24.6%) were not sure of the answer to that question.

Regarding the question of whether any of the respondents had personally expressed opposition to United States policy in the Middle East, three responses were invalid due to the contradiction of the answer within the response itself. The remaining responses indicated that 45 (38.8%) of the respondents had expressed opposition to that policy, 54 (46.6%) had not expressed any such opposition, and 17 (14.7%) either did not wish to answer the question.

RQ2: Information Sources, Media Exposure, and Perceptions of the United States

Social media was the most frequently reported primary source of information about the United States (n = 77, 64.7%), followed by international news outlets (n = 31, 26.1%), Algerian news outlets (n = 8, 6.7%), and personal interactions (n = 2, 1.7%). One write-in response (0.8%) was classified as other.

For the chi-square analyses, the primary information source was collapsed into three categories: social media, international news, and other sources. The other-sources category combined Algerian news outlets, personal interactions, and the write-in response. Primary information source was not significantly associated with general perception of the United States, $\chi^2(4, N = 119) = 2.18$, $p = .703$, Cramér's $V = .096$, or with perception of the U.S. role in the Middle East, $\chi^2(4, N = 119) = 5.74$, $p = .219$, Cramér's $V = .155$. In each analysis, three of the nine expected cell counts were below five; these results were therefore interpreted cautiously.

Seventy-eight of 119 respondents (65.5%) reported that American entertainment media had fully (n = 46, 38.7%) or partially (n = 32, 26.9%) influenced their perception of the United States. However, entertainment-consumption frequency was not significantly associated with general perception of the United States, $\rho = .100$, $p = .277$, or with perception of the U.S. role in the Middle East, $\rho = .177$, $p = .054$, $N = 119$.

Table 3 presents the percentages of negative responses within each entertainment-consumption category.

Table (3): Entertainment Consumption Frequency and the Two Perception Measures

Consumption frequency	Negative general perception	Negative Middle East role perception	n
Daily	9.7%	67.7%	31
Weekly	19.4%	67.7%	31
Monthly	17.4%	52.2%	23
Rarely	33.3%	73.3%	30
Never	50.0%	100.0%	4

Note. Negative responses combine the "very negative" and "somewhat negative" categories. The "Never" category contained only four respondents and should therefore be interpreted cautiously.

When respondents were asked which factors had influenced their perceptions of the United States, with multiple selections permitted, media and entertainment were the most frequently selected factor (63 of 118 respondents, 53.4%). This was followed by U.S. foreign-policy events (57 respondents, 48.3%), cultural influence (53 respondents, 44.9%), economic policies and globalization (28 respondents, 23.7%), and personal interactions (21 respondents, 17.8%).

4.2. Exploratory Gender Analysis

Gender was not included in the research questions and was examined as an exploratory post hoc comparison. At the unadjusted significance level, gender was associated with whether respondents viewed anti-American sentiment as justified, $\chi^2(3, N = 118) = 9.11$, $p = .028$, Cramér's $V = .278$. Among respondents with valid answers, 16 of 25 male respondents (64.0%) selected "yes," compared with 29 of 93 female respondents (31.2%). Female respondents' answers were more evenly distributed, with 26 (28.0%) selecting "partially" and 26 (28.0%) selecting "unsure."

Gender was not significantly associated with whether respondents reported expressing opposition to U.S. Middle East policy, $\chi^2(2, N = 116) = 0.30$, $p = .859$, Cramér's $V = .051$.

Statistical significance was assessed at $\alpha = .05$. As a conservative sensitivity analysis across the eight inferential tests reported, an adjusted Bonferroni threshold of $\alpha = .00625$ was also applied. Under this criterion, the Spearman correlation and Wilcoxon signed-rank test addressing RQ1 remained statistically significant. None of the information sources, media exposure or exploratory gender analyses met the adjusted threshold.

4.3. Qualitative Results

Table 4 summarizes the four themes identified through thematic analysis, together with their data sources, descriptive evidence, and illustrative quotations.

Table (4): Qualitative Themes

Theme	Basis	Descriptive evidence	Illustrative quotations
1. Regional events as reference points for policy criticism, with perceived double standards as a subtheme	Regional-events item (n = 110)	Gaza was referenced in 30 responses (27.3%), Israel in 30 (27.3%), Iraq in 29 (26.4%), and Palestine in 22 (20.0%). Within this broader pattern, "double standard(s)" appeared in five responses and "hypocrisy" in three.	P29 stated that the United States "funds atrocities while lecturing others about human rights." P21 described U.S. policy as showing "double standards."
2. Colonial memory and anti-colonial identity	Cultural-differences item (n = 99)	Colonial-related wording appeared in 18 responses (18.2%). References to history, religion, independence, and sovereignty also recurred across the responses.	P40 stated that "Algeria's colonial past with France" influenced skepticism toward Western powers. P29 wrote, "We remember history: the U.S. called our independence fighters 'terrorists' too."
3. Gaza as a recent and emotionally salient reference point	Regional-events item (n = 110)	Gaza was referenced in 30 responses (27.3%), Israel in 30 responses (27.3%), and Iraq in 29 responses (26.4%).	P47 wrote that images of destruction and civilian casualties in Gaza, together with U.S. vetoes at the United Nations, had "a lasting emotional impact."
4. Explicit separation of American culture or people from U.S. policy	Responses across the open-ended items	Six respondents explicitly distinguished American culture or people from the actions of the U.S. government or its foreign policy.	P21 criticized U.S. foreign policy but noted that Algerians "still enjoy things like American music, movies, and technology." P118 stated that the "American government is not the same as the American people."

Note. Event-reference percentages are not mutually exclusive because a single response could mention more than one event. A response could also contribute to more than one theme.

Themes 1 and 3 drew on the same regional-events item but captured different aspects of the responses. Theme 1 concerned how respondents interpreted the events they cited, particularly through criticism of U.S. policy and, in a smaller subset, perceptions of hypocrisy or double standards. Theme 3 concerned the comparative prominence and emotional salience of Gaza within those responses.

Theme 2 situated students' evaluations within Algeria's colonial history and anti-colonial identity. Respondents referred to independence, sovereignty, foreign interference, and solidarity with other formerly colonized or oppressed populations when explaining Algerian attitudes toward U.S. foreign policy.

Theme 4 was less frequent than the other themes but provided direct examples of respondents distinguishing American culture or people from the conduct of the U.S. government. These responses illustrated how favorable or neutral attitudes toward aspects of American society could coexist with criticism of U.S. foreign policy.

4.4. Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Results (RQ4)

Table 5 integrates the main quantitative findings from RQ1 and RQ2 with the qualitative themes identified under RQ3.

Table (5): Joint Display Addressing RQ4

Basis	Quantitative result	Qualitative result	Integrated interpretation
RQ1	General perception ratings were significantly higher than ratings of the U.S. role in the Middle East, $W = 336.00$, $p < .001$. The two ratings were also positively associated, $\rho = .306$, $p < .001$.	Six respondents explicitly distinguished American culture or people from U.S. government policy (Theme 4).	The qualitative findings illustrate the aggregate difference between general and policy-specific evaluations. However, this distinction was stated explicitly by only a small number of respondents.
RQ1 and RQ3	A large majority of respondents, 104 of 118 (88.1%), reported that U.S. foreign policy prioritized economic interests over human rights.	Some respondents interpreted regional events through perceived hypocrisy or double standards, particularly in relation to Gaza, Israel, Palestine, and Iraq (Theme 1).	The qualitative findings elaborate on the quantitative pattern by showing how some respondents understood the perceived conflict between U.S. interests and its stated commitment to human rights.
RQ2	Media and entertainment were selected as an influence by 63 of 118 respondents (53.4%). However, neither primary information-source category nor entertainment-consumption frequency was significantly associated with the two perception measures.	No separate media-related theme was identified in the qualitative analysis.	Respondents frequently identified media as influential, but the measured source and consumption-frequency variables were not significantly associated with their perception ratings.
RQ3	No closed-format item directly measured the influence of Algeria's colonial history on perceptions of U.S. foreign policy.	Respondents connected their evaluations to colonial memory, independence, sovereignty, and resistance to foreign interference (Theme 2).	The qualitative findings added historical and cultural context that was not captured by the closed-format items.

The difference between the perception of the United States in general and its role in the Middle East is one of the clearest findings from this research. These two ratings are positively

associated with one another, but the perception ratings are more positive overall. The qualitative findings help to reveal some of the reasons for the negative evaluations of U.S. policy, particularly in relation to the Middle East. While both categories of media and entertainment are named as potential influencers of public opinion, neither of the two categories is significantly associated with either of the perception measures.

5. Discussion

5.1. The Culture–Policy Split (RQ1)

The central finding is that Algerian EFL students at the University of Batna 2 hold a moderately positive general view of the United States (M = 3.28 on a 5-point scale) alongside a clearly negative view of its role in the Middle East (M = 2.24), with the difference confirmed by a paired Wilcoxon signed-rank test ($p < .001$). The two judgments were positively but only modestly associated ($\rho = .306$, $p < .001$), suggesting that students distinguished between their general evaluation of the United States and their evaluation of its regional policy. This pattern is consistent with Nye's (2004) distinction between the attractiveness associated with soft power and evaluations of a government's conduct abroad: a country's cultural appeal and its government's foreign-policy actions can be evaluated on different terms by the same person. The domain-level data sharpen this interpretation, with economic and cultural involvement rated more positively than political and military involvement. The findings therefore indicate that the culture–policy split is evident within an EFL student population, where relatively favorable general evaluations and views of cultural involvement can coexist with critical judgments of U.S. foreign policy.

This finding extends, rather than confirms, Zoubir and Aït-Hamadouche's (2006) account of a "twin movement" in North African attitudes. Their framing was built on the coexistence of state-level cooperation and individual-level ambivalence. In the present study, the ambivalence within a single group of respondents appeared structured rather than diffuse: it was more pronounced in political and military evaluations than in economic and cultural evaluations.

5.2. Media Exposure: A More Modest Story Than Expected (RQ2)

The media-exposure findings do not provide strong evidence for a simple relationship between entertainment-media frequency and perceptions of the United States. Frequency of American entertainment consumption was not significantly associated with general perception of the United States ($p = .277$) or with perception of its role in the Middle East ($p = .054$). Nor was the type of source on which students relied most—social media, international news, or other sources—significantly associated with either perception measure. Neither entertainment-consumption frequency nor primary information source was therefore significantly associated with perceptions in this sample, although the source-category findings should be interpreted cautiously because of sparse expected cell counts.

Cultivation theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976), however, was developed in relation to a comparatively centralized broadcast-media environment, whereas roughly two-thirds of the respondents identified social media as their primary source of information about the United States. Social media represents a more fragmented, personalized, and self-selected media environment in which exposure frequency alone may not adequately capture the type, tone, or political orientation of the content encountered. The contrast between students' self-reported media influence and the absence of significant associations between the measured exposure variables and perception scores suggests that perceived influence and measurable exposure patterns may represent different aspects of media effects. These findings should not be

interpreted as evidence that media are unimportant, but rather as an indication that broad measures of consumption frequency and primary source may be insufficient to capture the complexity of contemporary media exposure. This possibility remains a direction for future research.

5.3. What the Qualitative Data Contribute (RQ3, RQ4)

Four qualitative patterns add texture that the closed-format items could not provide on their own.

First, some of the reasons that the students provided for their view of the U.S. policy as inherently negative are due to the perception of hypocrisy of the United States regarding human rights. While this perception is not a means of establishing that the 88.1% of students who indicated that the United States prioritizes economic interests over human rights in the Middle East are thinking of the nation in this way, such references in their answers to the question do help to indicate that this is the rationale of at least some of the students for the United States' negative perception.

Second, another of the answers that was provided by some of the students was in relation to the historical context of Algeria's experiences with colonization and its subsequent war of independence. For instance, one of the students responded: We remember history: the U.S. called our independence fighters terrorists' too.While not an answer that directly relates to the issues of the Middle East in general, these answers can be understood through the lens of Byram's (1997, 2021) concept of critical cultural awareness.

Third, the issues related to the Middle East that were discussed by the students include references to Gaza, Israel, and Iraq. Gaza in particular received a relatively high number of references (30 of 110 responses, or 27.3%), along with Iraq (30 responses, or 27.3%) and, to a lesser extent, Iraq (29 responses, or 26.4%). It is possible that the emotional connection that some students have with the issue of Gaza is in part related to the ages of the majority of the students. For instance, while the Iraq War may have occurred prior to the adulthood of the majority of the students, the war that erupted in Gaza began in October 2023 while these students were still in adolescence or adulthood. Thus, the issue of Gaza may be better known by some students than others related to the Middle East.

Fourth, while there is a difference between the general perception of the United States (or America) of the Middle East and the evaluation that the United States has of the Middle East, only six of the students referenced the idea that the people and the culture of America are separate from that of the United States government. Thus, while these students did indicate one type of evaluation of the country or its government, they did not indicate the other. This distinction may be reflected in their answers rather than within their own answers as to their self-conceptions of the nation. An interview-based study could help to investigate such a distinction within these students.

In addition to these separate findings regarding the reasons for the negative perception of the United States by the students of Algeria, another exploration of these answers revealed a difference between the responses of the male and female students. A higher percentage of the males than the females indicated that their sentiments against the United States were justified (64.0% of the males indicated justified sentiment compared with only 31.2% of the female students). Furthermore, no correlation was detected between the gender of the students and their answers regarding opposition to the U.S. policy. While Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior may help to explain the difference between the genders regarding their sentiment against the United States, as the attitude of an individual towards an object is one of the factors that influence their behavior, such a factor was not measured within this study. Furthermore, as such a relationship did not meet the threshold adjusted for significance, such an answer is only

preliminary to understanding the extent to which gender and sentiment towards the United States are related.

5.4. Implications of the Findings

The main contribution of this study is showing that, among Algerian EFL students, favorable general evaluations of the United States and critical evaluations of its role in the Middle East can coexist rather than necessarily replace one another. The difference between these evaluations remained statistically significant after the Bonferroni adjustment was applied, although only six students explicitly articulated this separation in their open-ended responses. The findings therefore suggest that this distinction is more visible in aggregate response patterns than in direct self-descriptions.

Two tentative pedagogical implications follow:

First, concerns that engagement with target-culture media may necessarily lead to more favorable evaluations of that country's political conduct are not supported in this sample. Entertainment-consumption frequency was not significantly associated with students' perceptions of the U.S. role in the Middle East, suggesting that exposure to American cultural products alone does not appear to determine policy attitudes. At the same time, the findings indicate that EFL learners may engage with aspects of a target culture while maintaining critical evaluations of its government's actions. This supports the relevance of intercultural approaches that encourage learners to examine cultural products, political contexts, and competing perspectives without reducing engagement with a target culture to either uncritical acceptance or complete rejection.

Second, the contrast between students' self-reported media influence and the weak statistical associations involving measured exposure variables suggests that media literacy instruction may benefit from focusing not only on exposure frequency but also on content, sources, and the ways media environments shape interpretation. Because students did not often explicitly describe the distinction between culture and policy, intercultural competence instruction (Byram, 1997, 2021) may also provide a framework for helping learners articulate and critically reflect on distinctions they appear to make implicitly.

Taken together, the four research questions point to a coherent pattern: students in this sample distinguish between cultural and policy evaluations of the United States, while the media exposure measures examined were not associated with these evaluations. Their interpretations are also situated within broader historical and cultural frameworks, including Algerian experiences of colonial memory and regional political concerns.

6. Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when reading these findings.

Sample and generalizability: All 121 individuals were recruited through convenience sampling from the University of Batna 2. All participants were female (77.7%), between the ages of 17 and 21 (72.7%), and involved in foreign language programs at their collegiate institutions (94.2%). Thus, while this sampling strategy ensures that the participants are related to the phenomenon of interest (as EFL learners), the findings generally describe this specific sampling of individuals rather than Algerian university students in general. Furthermore, because there were few male and non-young participants in the study, any comparisons that included these groups should be interpreted with caution.

Measurement: The items that measured the students' perceptions of the United States and its Middle East policy used closed-format answers that represented individual measures of the

participants rather than a scale of items that would allow for the measurement of a more complex concept. Furthermore, the concept of media exposure was only measured in regard to the students' exposure to entertainment media. Thus, it is possible that these findings are not fully representative of the complexity of these concepts, especially since the lack of relationship between media exposure and each of the two perception items may be due to the measure of the variable rather than the concept itself.

Design and causal inference: Because this research study used a cross-sectional survey design, the findings that relate to the variables of interest (especially those related to the media exposure variables) cannot establish causality between those variables. For instance, it is possible that those who consume more media possess the perceptions that the study found regarding the United States and its policy; those who have certain perceptions of the United States and its policy tend to consume more media with those negative (or positive) features, or that both media consumption and perception are influenced by a third variable related to the United States. Furthermore, the data were collected during a specific time period related to the Gaza war; therefore, any findings related to the students' opinions on the policy of the United States regarding the Gaza region may have changed with the development of the war. Thus, the findings are based on a specific moment in time of these students' perceptions of the United States.

Statistical power: Because the chi-square tests for information sources used measures of expectations of certain variables of interest (and because the sample size was limited to 121 individuals), the statistical power of the study was limited, especially for the secondary analyses. For the secondary analyses that utilized the Bonferroni correction of an alpha level of .00625, only the analyses of the two variables related to RQ1 (and the Spearman correlation test and the Wilcoxon signed rank test) were statistically significant. Thus, the findings of the gender comparisons and the relationship between entertainment media exposure and each of the two perception variables should be examined with caution.

These limitations mainly relate to the generalizability of the findings related to the media exposure variable. Thus, the main finding and answer to the research question of the relationship between the two variables of interest (students' perceptions of the U.S. as a country and its Middle East policy) remains the main finding of the study.

7. Conclusion

This study examined how Algerian EFL university students perceive the United States as a country in comparison with its role in the Middle East, how media exposure is linked to those perceptions, and how students justify their views. Using a convergent mixed-methods design with 121 students at the University of Batna 2, the study found that general perception of the United States and perception of its regional role were positively associated but differed significantly in level. Students evaluated the United States more favorably in general than they evaluated its role in the Middle East. This pattern is consistent with Nye's (2004) distinction between cultural attractiveness and evaluations of government conduct abroad and indicates that relatively favorable general evaluations can coexist with criticism of U.S. foreign policy.

The secondary quantitative findings were modest. Entertainment and media consumption frequency was not associated with either general perception of the United States ($p = .277$) or perception of its involvement in the Middle East ($p = .054$). Primary information source was also not associated with either perception measure, although these findings should be interpreted cautiously. The exploratory gender association concerning whether anti-American sentiment was considered justified did not meet the adjusted Bonferroni significance threshold. These patterns require further examination in larger samples.

The qualitative data added context that the closed-format items could not provide. A subset of students framed their criticism of U.S. policy through perceived hypocrisy or double standards, while others drew on Algeria's history of colonization and national liberation when interpreting contemporary events. Gaza was among the most frequently referenced regional events and appeared to function as a salient reference point for some respondents. Despite the clear quantitative difference between general and specific policy evaluations, only six respondents explicitly distinguished American culture or people from the conduct of the U.S. government. This distinction was more visible in the aggregate response pattern than in participants' explicit personal descriptions.

So, the study findings suggest that students in this sample evaluated the United States generally and its foreign policy on different, though related, terms rather than expressing a single undifferentiated attitude. For EFL and intercultural competence pedagogy, the results point to the value of media literacy instruction that attends to content, sources, and interpretation rather than exposure frequency. It is also suggested that intercultural instruction may help learners articulate and critically examine distinctions between cultural engagement and political judgment.

This study contributes to the limited research tackling perceptions of U.S. foreign policy specifically within an EFL university population rather than a general public sample. A larger multi-institutional sample, interview based follow-up capable of probing the culture policy distinction directly, and replication beyond the specific period in which these data were collected (March to May 2025, approximately eighteen months into the war in Gaza) would help establish the extent to which these findings apply beyond one cohort at one Algerian university.

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