

Ivana Ercegovac*

Faculty of Applied Media
Fujairah Campus Al Faseel
Higher Colleges of Technology, UAE

Romana Srncova**

Faculty of Applied Media
Fujairah Campus Al Faseel
Higher Colleges of Technology, UAE

Fatima Hassan Alraeesi***

Faculty of Applied Media
Fujairah Campus Al Faseel
Higher Colleges of Technology, UAE

CULTURAL NARRATIVES IN ANIMATION: EXPLORING EMIRATI LIFE THROUGH FREEJ

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This paper presents a content analysis of the Emirati animated series Freej, with a special focus on the episode Global Village. The study examines how the series portrays Emirati cultural practices, particularly through the lens of visual storytelling and humor. By analyzing key scenes such as bargaining at the Rajasthan Art booth, visiting various cultural pavilions, and participating in globalized cultural practices, the paper highlights the tension between tradition and modernity. Freej serves as both a preserver of cultural heritage and a critique of modernization, using humor to make culturally specific practices accessible to a broad audience. The findings reveal that Freej effectively navigates the complexities of cultural representation, using visual exaggeration and humorous storytelling to depict Emirati identity in a rapidly globalizing world. The study also draws parallels between this analysis and broader media portrayals of culture, emphasizing the role of animation as a medium for both preserving and adapting cultural narratives.

Keywords: media portrayal, Freej, Emirati culture, animation, visual storytelling, visual communication, cultural representation, narrative, cultural identity

1. Introduction

Freej (Arabic: فريج), the first Emirati animated series (Sayfo, 2015) created by Mohammed Saeed Harib, has been a groundbreaking cultural artifact in the UAE since its debut in 2006 (Balakrishnan, 2015). The series, which centers on the lives of four elderly women in a traditional neighborhood¹ of Dubai (Almarzouqi, 2022), captures the delicate balance between tradition and modernity in Emirati society. By focusing on everyday challenges and incorporating humor, Freej has resonated deeply with both local and international audiences, earning a reputation for its vivid portrayal of cultural practices and the nuances of Emirati life (Mullally, 2019).

* iercegovac@hct.ac.ae

** rsrncova@hct.ac.ae

*** H00444225@hct.ac.ae

¹ Freej is the word for neighborhood in Emirati vernacular Arabic. The show is in Emirati Arabic and it was broadcasted in UAE with English subtitles.

In one of the interviews, Harib has noted that *Freej* was originally inspired by his grandmother and other women from his childhood, whose stories provided the foundation for the main characters: Um Saeed, Um Saloom, Um Allawi, and Um Khammas. At its core, *Freej* serves as a cultural text, portraying pre-oil Emirati traditions and values in a modern context.

The characters reflect different aspects of Emirati identity, including loyalty to family and tradition, as well as the challenges of adapting to modern life (Chaibah, 2013). Through exaggerated yet familiar portrayals, the show critiques the complexities of cultural preservation in an era of rapid social and economic transformation (Almarzouqi, 2022). New ways to pass traditions and values to younger generations are constantly found (Simeunović Bajić et al., 2023), and *Freej* is most certainly a dynamic platform that helps preserve the cultural heritage and collective memory of the Emirati culture.

In terms of research, even though there is a quite a few studies that focus on cultural representation in media, there is still not enough of those that explore how animated series (particularly within the Emirati context) function as tools for both preserving cultural heritage and engaging with global audiences. This study tries to fill that gap by examining *Freej* as a crucial medium for transmitting cultural values and traditions to younger generations, while offering a modern means of cultural preservation.

This paper analyzes the episode titled "Global Village" and explore how the show utilizes visual storytelling and humor to depict cultural practices. The bargaining scenes, in particular, offer a lens into the social dynamics of negotiation in Emirati markets, a practice that serves as a microcosm for the broader tension between tradition and modernity.

The analysis aims to address two main research questions:

1. How does *Freej* depict cultural practices?
2. What roles do visual storytelling and humor play in representing Emirati culture?

To answer these questions, this paper will use content analysis to examine the episode's use of humor, character interactions, and visual elements to reveal deeper cultural narratives. Through this analysis, the research aims to demonstrate how *Freej* not only entertains, but also serves as a valuable cultural text, preserving and reflecting on the traditions of Emirati life in a rapidly changing society.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Cultural Representation in Animation

In recent years, scholars have increasingly recognized animation as a powerful tool for cultural representation and a platform for fostering intercultural dialogue. Animation

transcends linguistic barriers, allowing creators to embed culturally specific narratives within a visual medium that can be understood universally (Worasamutprakarn, 2021). Research has demonstrated that animation, particularly in regions such as MENA and Southeast Asia, plays a crucial role in preserving and promoting national identity through culturally grounded storytelling (Ghani et al., 2015; Samir Abdel Azim, 2021; Esseku et al., 2023). For instance, animated works that focus on local customs and traditions serve to reinforce cultural values in an increasingly globalized world. Animation not only provides entertainment but also educates viewers about distinct cultural practices, often in ways that live-action media may not fully capture (Abdullah & Abdullah, 2020). This concept is aligned with findings from Sagheer et al. (2024), who highlight how nonverbal communication and visual storytelling can enhance cultural representation by engaging viewers beyond language, making cultural symbols and gestures more accessible to diverse audience. The visual nature of animation allows for the exaggeration of culturally specific practices in ways that are instantly recognizable to local audiences, while also being entertaining to international viewers (Balakrishnan, 2015). This strategy serves as both a form of cultural preservation and a means to introduce elements of a particular culture to outsiders (Hasri et al., 2020). This blending of global appeal with local specificity makes animation a unique and effective medium for cultural storytelling, as it can resonate deeply with both local communities and the broader international audience.

2.2. Visual Storytelling in Animation

Visual storytelling is a core aspect of animated media, providing a rich medium through which narratives can be conveyed without the need for extensive verbal communication. This technique emphasizes the power of symbolic imagery, character design, body language, and nonverbal cues to communicate complex emotions, ideas, and cultural values (Oh, 2017; Botsis et al., 2020). Recent studies suggest that visual cues in animation, such as the depiction of traditional markets, architecture, and attire, help in grounding stories within specific cultural contexts (Lee, 2010). Buehring & Vittachi (2020) assert that visual storytelling in animation can be particularly potent in futures thinking and transmedia storytelling, where it helps communicate speculative scenarios through imagery and emotional resonance. Animation relies heavily on nonverbal communication elements such as facial expressions, gestures, and proxemics to express emotions and narratives, making it an ideal medium for conveying stories in multicultural contexts. For example, Sabri and Adiprabowo (2022) explored how nonverbal communication in animated films such as *Leaving Home* can be universally understood through hyperbolic visual symbols, despite cultural differences. Their study demonstrates that the visual language of animation allows for complex, culturally specific emotions to be conveyed across linguistic boundaries.

In a study of animated short films like *Umbrella*, Sagheer et al. (2024) further elaborate on how proxemics, oculosics, and kinesics are utilized to enrich storytelling without words, again relying on visual cues such as body language and facial expressions to convey the full emotional weight of a scene. This approach not only deepens the audience's connection with the characters but also ensures that the story's emotional and cultural underpinnings are conveyed effectively, even to those unfamiliar with the specific cultural context.

2.3. Humor as a Tool for Cultural Commentary

Humor is a central component in many animated series that seek to address cultural issues or reflect on societal changes. Research has shown that humor in animation often functions as a mechanism for social commentary, allowing creators to address sensitive issues in a more accessible manner (Hasri et al., 2020; Fazal, 2024; Rokhmah et al., 2024). Humor in animation is also noted for its capacity to reduce social resistance to change by framing cultural critique in an entertaining manner. Scholars have explored how animated characters are used to embody cultural stereotypes in a way that encourages audiences to reflect on their own biases and practices (Shaver, 2021). In culturally specific animated works, humor often emerges from the juxtaposition of traditional practices with modern or foreign elements, creating a space for both critique and celebration of cultural identity. Rokhmah et al. (2024) highlight how humor in animation can break down cultural barriers, allowing audiences to engage with complex social issues in a lighthearted and accessible way. This comedic approach is particularly effective in animations that critique globalization or modernization, where traditional cultural values are contrasted with contemporary societal changes. Humor, in this sense, becomes a tool for reflecting on the challenges of cultural preservation in a globalized world. Research by Abdullah & Abdullah (2020) demonstrates how humor in Southeast Asian animation serves as a cultural bridge, making potentially controversial or sensitive cultural discussions more palatable to both local and international audiences. Also, humor is often used to emphasize the absurdities of cross-cultural encounters, as seen in animations where characters navigate modernity while clinging to their cultural roots. This technique not only makes the content more engaging but also allows for a nuanced discussion of identity and cultural hybridity, underscoring the tension between maintaining tradition and embracing modernity (Belkhyr, 2013). In this way, animation uses humor as a subversive tool to reflect on the changing dynamics of cultural life in an increasingly interconnected world.

3. Methodology

This research employs qualitative content analysis as the primary method to examine the cultural representations and visual storytelling elements in the *Freej* episode titled

Global Village. Content analysis is an effective approach for systematically analyzing media content to identify patterns and themes related to cultural narratives, especially in animated series (Krippendorff, 2018). The analysis focuses on how Freej portrays cultural practices and how humor and visual storytelling convey deeper cultural meanings.

The analytical framework, which focuses on content analysis of visual storytelling, humor, and cultural representation, directly addresses the research questions posed in this study. By systematically coding key elements such as character behavior, cultural symbols, and visual cues, this framework allows for a detailed examination of how Freej depicts Emirati cultural practices. It also enables an exploration of which role humor and visual storytelling play in representing and critiquing cultural identity, aligning with the research questions' focus on the intersection of tradition and modernity in Emirati life.

3.1. Episode Selection

The episode Global Village was chosen for analysis due to its rich depiction of Emirati culture in the context of a multicultural space. The episode serves as a microcosm of the tension between tradition and modernity, making it an ideal case for studying how Freej negotiates cultural identity through animation. The episode features main cultural practices, particularly bargaining, which are integral to Emirati markets and social interactions.

3.2. Data Collection

The primary data for this study comes from a close viewing of the selected episode. Key scenes that highlight Emirati cultural practices, such as interactions in the marketplace, were identified for deeper analysis. Special focus was placed on the bargaining scenes, as they provide a lens into traditional Emirati practices and their representation in modern animated media.

3.3. Analytical Framework

Content analysis was guided by the following analytical categories:

Cultural Practices: Analysis of scenes that depict cultural rituals, social norms, and traditions. This includes how the characters' actions reflect traditional Emirati values, such as perseverance, negotiation, and social interaction.

Visual Storytelling: Examination of how visual elements such as character design, body language, setting, and color schemes are used to convey cultural messages. Special attention was paid to exaggerated facial expressions and gestures that emphasize the humor in the negotiation process.

Humor as Cultural Commentary: The study explores how humor is used as a tool for cultural critique, especially in scenes that contrast traditional practices to modern

influences. The focus is on how the show uses humor to depict the resilience of traditional Emirati values in the face of rapid modernization.

3.4. Coding and Analysis

The episode was watched multiple times to identify major themes and cultural symbols. Scenes were transcribed, and visual elements were coded based on the analytical categories mentioned above. Coding involved breaking down the visual and narrative elements of each scene, identifying recurring symbols, and analyzing how humor and cultural practices were represented through both dialogue and visual storytelling (Neuendorf, 2017).

4. Analysis

Throughout the episode Global Village, Freej utilizes visual storytelling and humor to convey cultural practices.

The episode begins with the four main characters—Um Saeed, Um Saloom, Um Allawi, and Um Khammas—leaving for the Global Village, a popular attraction in Dubai that showcases cultural pavilions from around the world. Each of the characters embodies a specific aspect of Emirati life, which influences their choices upon arrival. This section focuses on the most important moments in the episode, analyzing how visual storytelling, humor, and cultural representation are utilized to portray their experiences at the Global Village.



Figure 1: Main characters exploring different cultural experiences

When they arrive at the Global Village, the women are immediately presented with a variety of cultural experiences. This scene sets the stage for the episode's thematic exploration of global versus local culture. The Global Village itself is depicted as a vibrant, colorful place, filled with different cultural pavilions representing various countries. Each pavilion offers unique products, food, and experiences, symbolizing Dubai's role as a hub of global cultural exchange.

The characters split up to explore different pavilions based on their personalities and interests:

- **Um Saeed**, practical and rooted in tradition, is focused on buying fabric for her new dress, representing her adherence to cultural customs like modest clothing and her role in maintaining traditional practices such as bargaining.

- **Um Khammas** and **Um Saloom** are interested in visiting the Kenyan village, where Um Kammas later bargains for drums, reflecting the curiosity for adventure and excitement.

- **Um Allawi** wants to visit the French pavilion to buy a book on etiquette, symbolizing her desire to balance tradition with the more refined aspects of global culture.

The splitting of the group reflects how different characters interact with globalization. This scene emphasizes that, while they share the same cultural background, their individual interests shape their experiences in the globalized setting of the Global Village. One of the humorous moments in the episode occurs when the women visit the amusement park and dress up in Wild West sheriff outfits (Figure 1). The exaggerated visual imagery—Emirati women wearing cowboy hats and posing as sheriffs—serves as a humorous cultural contrast. It highlights the playful interaction between local Emirati identity and global cultural elements. The use of visual storytelling here is key to the humor, as the show plays on the juxtaposition of traditional Emirati women adopting roles



Figure 2: Um Saeed's bargaining scenes at Rajasthan Art Booth

associated with American culture. Their facial expressions, excited body language, and exaggerated cowboy poses make this scene memorable and serve to critique how foreign cultural elements are often consumed for entertainment in globalized settings. This scene can be seen as a metaphor for how Dubai, as a city, incorporates global influences while retaining its unique cultural identity.

The main bargaining scene unfolds at the Rajasthan Art booth (Figure 2), where Um Saeed decides to buy fabric for her dress. Her choice of fabric—a material identical to the one she is already wearing—adds a layer of humor, as it reflects her attachment to tradition and reluctance to change, even in a globalized environment.

The bargaining process is depicted in multiple scenes, with Um Saeed negotiating the price with the salesman. The animation uses close-up shots of her determined facial expressions, paired with the vendor's increasingly bitter to desperate looks, to build humor. The scene reflects the cultural significance of bargaining in Emirati markets, where negotiation is a respected and expected part of the purchasing process. In Emirati culture, bargaining is not just about economic exchange (Elsa et al., 2019); it is a social practice that reinforces relationships between buyer and seller. The scene emphasizes this cultural practice through visual cues, such as hand gestures, raised eyebrows, and exaggerated reactions. The repetition of the scene throughout the episode reinforces the importance of bargaining in Emirati life, contrasting it with the more rigid, fixed-price culture that often characterizes globalized commercial spaces.

In contrast to Um Saeed's focus on tradition, Um Allawi's wish to visit the French pavilion highlights her interest in global cultural practices. She purchases a book on etiquette, symbolizing her desire to navigate both Emirati and global social norms. The scene is lighthearted, as the etiquette book represents her quest for refinement and sophistication, which contrasts with the more pragmatic concerns of the other characters. The place where Um Allawi buys the book, depicted as an old bookstore, visually contrasts with the stalls like the Rajasthan Art booth. This visual contrast reflects the characters' varying responses to global culture—while some seek to preserve tradition, others, like Um Allawi, are more open to adopting aspects of global culture.



Figure 3: Um Khammas and Um Saloom bargaining scene at the Kenyan village

Um Khammas and Um Saloom's visit to the Kenyan pavilion (Figure 3) adds another layer to the episode's exploration of cultural exchange. Um Khammas is interested in buying drums for her traditional music band, but the high price—600 dirhams—deters them. Their decision to leave without purchasing the drums reflects the characters' values, as they are unwilling to overpay despite the interest. This scene, like Um Saeed's bargaining at the Rajasthan Art booth, emphasizes the cultural importance of negotiation. In this case, the humor arises from the exaggerated price given by the vendor and the women's irritated reactions. The scene also reflects the dynamic between the characters, with Um Khammas taking a forceful role in negotiations, while Um Saloom is more passive since she is accompanying Um Khammas just because she was promised a Namlet.

At the end of the episode, the women reunite, and Um Saeed proudly declares that the vendor gave her the fabric for free². This moment emphasizes Um Saeed's pride in her bargaining skills and her belief in the social value of negotiation and the episode concludes with Um Saloom and Um Khammas deciding to send Um Saeed back to the Kenyan pavilion to bargain for the drums. The final joke—Um Saeed asking if it would be acceptable if she breaks the salesperson again—adds a layer of physical comedy and emphasizes the central theme of bargaining as a cultural practice.

5. Discussion

The Global Village episode of *Freej* offers a nuanced exploration of cultural dynamics in contemporary Emirati society, balancing themes of globalization with the preservation of local practices. Through its strategic use of humor, visual storytelling, and character

² In the scene Um Saeed says that the salesman said that this was the last thing he gave her for free, which states that this was not the first time two of them met in a similar battle.

interactions, the show provides a valuable lens through which to examine the ongoing negotiation of identity, tradition, and modernity in the UAE. Table 1 presented here offers a structured overview of main scenes from the Global Village episode of *Freej*, highlighting the interaction between characters, cultural practices, visual storytelling elements, and humor. This framework allows for a deeper analysis of how the show navigates complex cultural themes through its narrative and visual choices.

Table 1: Freej Coding Scheme

Scene	Main Characters	Cultural Practices	Visual Storytelling Elements	Humor
Arrival at Global Village	All characters	Global vs. Local	Vibrant, colorful market scene with global pavilions	Visual contrast of interests
Amusement Park & Sheriff Outfit	All characters	Global Cultural Exchange	Exaggerated facial expressions, costumes	Juxtaposition of Emirati women as cowboys
Bargaining at Rajasthan Booth	Um Saeed, Vendor	Bargaining	Close-up of faces, hand gestures, repetition of negotiation scenes	Exaggeration of bargaining process
"French Pavilion" & Etiquette Book	Um Allawi	Global Sophistication	Visuals of the bookstore, contrast to Rajasthan booth	Subtle humor in cultural refinement
Kenyan Pavilion & Drums	Um Khammas, Um Saloom Kenyan saleswoman	Bargaining	Drums, reactions to price	High price, exaggerated reactions
Reuniting and Final Bargain	All characters	Bargaining, Negotiation	Umm Saeed's pride in "free" fabric, decision to bargain for drums	Physical comedy and final joke

Source: Authors' research

The sequence of scenes outlined in the table reveals a carefully constructed narrative arc that moves from broad cultural contrasts to more specific explorations of Emirati traditions. The opening scene at the Global Village establishes the overarching theme of "Global vs. Local", setting the stage for the cultural negotiations that follow. This progression culminates in the final scene, where bargaining—a distinctly local practice—takes center stage, emphasizing the show's ultimate focus on Emirati cultural identity.

The table's "Main Characters" column highlights how different scenes focus on specific characters, allowing for a nuanced exploration of varied perspectives within Emirati society. The consistent presence of "All characters" in multiple scenes underscores the show's commitment to ensemble storytelling, suggesting that Emirati cultural identity is portrayed as multifaceted rather than monolithic. Also, it is worth saying that the women's autonomy in exploring the Global Village and making purchasing decisions indicates a

degree of female empowerment. However, the persistence of traditional gender roles (e.g., Um Saeed's focus on buying fabric for a dress) demonstrates the complex negotiation between progressive and conservative forces in Emirati society.

The "Visual Storytelling Elements" column reveals a rich array of techniques used to convey cultural meanings. From the "vibrant, colorful market scene" in the opening to the "close-up of faces" during bargaining, these visual choices enhance the narrative's cultural commentary. The contrast between scenes, such as the "visuals of the bookstore" in the French pavilion versus the Rajasthan booth, visually reinforces the show's exploration of cultural differences.

The "Humor" column demonstrates how comedy is strategically employed to highlight cultural contrasts and practices. The "juxtaposition of Emirati women as cowboys" and the "exaggeration of bargaining process" use humor to soften potentially sensitive cultural commentaries, making them more accessible to a broad audience.

The "Cultural Practices" column traces a narrative thread from "Global vs. Local" through various forms of cultural exchange, culminating in the distinctly local practice of bargaining. This progression suggests that while the show acknowledges global influences, it ultimately emphasizes the resilience and importance of local traditions.

The table reveals how each scene integrates multiple thematic elements. For instance, the Amusement Park scene combines global cultural exchange with visual humor, while the Bargaining at Rajasthan Booth scene intertwines traditional practices with exaggerated visual storytelling. This layered approach allows the show to address complex cultural issues in a nuanced manner. By structuring the episode's content in this way, Freej creates a rich tapestry of cultural commentary.

The show balances representations of global influences with assertions of local identity, using humor and visual storytelling to navigate this complex cultural landscape. This approach allows for a critical yet accessible exploration of Emirati culture in the context of globalization, potentially fostering dialogue about cultural identity among its audience. Future research could explore how this structured approach to cultural representation in animated media influences public perceptions of national identity and traditions in rapidly globalizing societies like the UAE.

6. Conclusion

This study explored how Freej, through its visual storytelling and humor, offers a rich portrayal of Emirati life and culture, particularly within the context of the Global Village episode. The show effectively balances the depiction of traditional cultural practices, such as bargaining, with the influence of modern globalization, using humor and exaggerated visual elements to bridge these themes. The content analysis of this episode shows how

animation, as a medium, can serve as both a preserver of cultural heritage and a reflection of modern societal challenges.

In the context of media portrayals, Freej aligns with the observations that media reflects and shapes socio-cultural realities (Ercegovac, 2023). This means that media plays significant role in, not only entertaining, but also mirroring societal values and cultural norms (Miletić & Miletić, 2021). Freej encapsulates the ongoing negotiation between tradition and modernity within Emirati culture. The interaction between humor, cultural values, and modern global influences in Freej shows how media can both preserve and adapt cultural narratives for diverse audiences. Freej's approach aligns with the broader discourse on cultural representation in animation. Scholars argue that animation, due to its visual flexibility, can effectively communicate complex cultural narratives in a way that resonates across different contexts (Lindgren, 2020; Rudy et al., 2022). In the case of Freej, the use of culturally specific visual symbols and humor allows the show to reflect on modernization while maintaining a deep respect for local traditions. The recurring emphasis on bargaining as a culturally significant practice is a prime example of how Freej navigates the tension between preserving local customs and engaging with globalized commercial practices. The success of Freej in portraying these cultural dynamics speaks to the power of media in reflecting and shaping cultural identities. The show's use of humor and visual storytelling serves not only as entertainment but as means of preserving cultural heritage in an increasingly globalized world.

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