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Cultural Identity and Gender Representation: A Comparative Study of Cultural Figures in English and Italian Textbooks for Foreign Learners

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Abstract

This article offers an overview of the presence of prominent figures from British, American, and Italian cultures in English and Italian language textbooks designed for foreign learners. The acquisition of a foreign language necessarily involves understanding the sociocultural norms and values associated with it. Consequently, language textbooks increasingly include lexical and visual elements that serve as vehicles for the culture of the target language. The study focuses on identifying names and corresponding images of culturally significant individuals within six textbooks—three for English and three for Italian—targeted at intermediate-level learners. These textbooks, published within the last ten years, are currently used in foreign language classes at the Goce Delcev University in Stip, North Macedonia. The selected examples are examined according to several parameters, including the relative frequency of female and male representations, the type of material used (textual mentions or visual illustrations), and the relationship between text and image (whether accompanied by descriptive context or not). Furthermore, the analysis takes into account the domains of activity associated with the represented figures and incorporates a diachronic comparison to identify changes in cultural representation across textbook editions over time.

Keywords: textbooks, culture, foreign language, gender representation, sociocultural competence, cultural awareness

1. Introduction

In the field of language education, textbooks for foreign language learners convey a considerable amount of implicit cultural information through the selection and presentation of linguistic forms and communicative contexts. While this cultural input may not be immediately apparent, it plays a fundamental role in the development of both linguistic competence and intercultural awareness. Especially in foreign learning contexts, the textbook often represents one of the main—if not the only—sources of exposure to the sociolinguistic and cultural realities of the target language community (e.g., Italian, British, or American), thereby becoming a crucial medium for shaping learners' perceptions and representations of the target culture.

This situation places a considerable degree of responsibility on the authors of L2 textbooks, as learners of a foreign language are directly influenced by the didactic input offered through these materials. Such input functions not only as a vehicle for linguistic competence but also as a conduit for acquiring sociocultural knowledge. Textbooks, therefore, serve a dual role: they are pedagogical tools for language instruction and, simultaneously, instruments for the transmission and reinforcement of cultural representations. As such, they have become an object of increasing scholarly interest within the domains of applied linguistics and language education.

With the rise of the communicative approach, sociolinguistic inquiry has increasingly turned its attention to the contextualized use of language, aiming to identify linguistic features that are characteristic of specific cultural environments. This line of research explores how native speakers draw on different language varieties to fulfill communicative intentions across a range of social and interactional contexts. Despite these developments, the persistent assumption that “one language equals one culture” (Kramsch, 2013, p. 66) continues to inform much of the discourse in language education. The cultural dimension present in many language textbooks typically includes excerpts from canonical literature, representations of national artworks, and references to political institutions and symbolic elements of state identity. These components, often perceived as representative of a unified cultural narrative, tend to reinforce a monolithic and idealized image of the target culture. As Kramsch (2013) points out, such cultural content remains deeply rooted in notions of national heritage,



which are actively promoted by governmental bodies and university departments of foreign languages and literature.

Culture is a complex and multifaceted concept whose definition varies significantly depending on the disciplinary lens through which it is examined. Anthropologists, ethnographers, sociologists, psychologists, and linguists have all offered distinct interpretative frameworks, each emphasizing particular dimensions of culture in line with their respective research paradigms.

One widely cited definition describes culture as “everything that is not nature” (Pavan, 2000: 78). From this perspective, culture is seen as a system of artifacts produced by a given society, encompassing both intangible elements—such as beliefs, values, opinions, knowledge, and artistic expression—and tangible, everyday practices, including customs, habits, and shared behavioral norms.

This definition, originally articulated in the 19th century by Edward Tylor, portrays culture as a static and monolithic construct attributed to a specific social group (Chan et al., 2015). In contrast, contemporary perspectives have moved beyond viewing society as culturally homogeneous, instead recognizing it as a multiethnic, multicultural, and dynamic entity shaped by the forces of globalization. As Chan et al. (2015: 5) emphasize, “culture is no longer viewed as a fixed, unitary, and bounded phenomenon, but as a fluid and flexible interactive and interpretive tool.”

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) explicitly acknowledges intercultural competence as an integral component of the overall learner competences, which are founded upon declarative knowledge, practical skills, and appropriate attitudes (Council of Europe, 2001). Within this framework, intercultural communicative competence encompasses the ability to identify and interpret cultural similarities and differences, as well as the social construction of boundaries between ‘in-group’ and ‘out-group’ members.

However, Kramsch (2013) expresses a nuanced critique regarding the outright dismissal of the native speaker model, highlighting that cultural identity remains closely linked to the attributes of native members within a national community, those who share both the national language and its associated cultural practices. She observes that “in all these cases culture is tied to the characteristics of native members of a national community who speak the national language and share in its national culture” (Kramsch, 2013: 70), thus underscoring the ongoing significance of this model within language education discourse.

Balboni and Caon (2015) emphasize the necessity of moving beyond traditional culture teaching towards a perspective centered on intercultural communication. Intercultural learning, generally understood as synonymous with the development of intercultural competence, goes far beyond merely acquiring knowledge about social practices prevalent in a particular speech community, such as common communication styles, customs, festivals, and so forth. One cannot conceive of modern European foreign-language education without the intercultural dialogue between cultures. According to Balboni and Caon, “intercultural communicative competence is connected with the recognition of differences in habits, value systems, and many paralinguistic aspects that define the characteristics of persons as members of the national community” (2015: 25–26).

One of the fundamental educational principles in foreign language teaching, as noted by Balboni, is the inseparability of language and cultural context: “It is necessary to turn to culture to understand the language better” (2015: 136).

Similarly, Spinelli discusses culture as a social construct that accompanies national culture with a broader notion of cultural identity (2006: 178).

According to Yuen (2011: 459), language can be understood as an “artefact” or a coded system of signs and symbols (products) employed to signify thoughts and perspectives, facilitating communication (practices) among different individuals (persons). This conceptualization highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of language, which functions not merely as a tool for transmitting information but also as a medium through which cultural and social identities are expressed and negotiated. Consequently, gaining proficiency in a language involves more than mastering its grammatical and lexical components; it requires an understanding of the various cultural dimensions embedded within the context in which the language is used. This encompasses, in particular, the ability to recognize how other cultures are represented and perceived within that specific society. Language, as a carrier of values, norms, and worldviews, embodies not only the culture that produces it but also mediates the cultures of others. Therefore, learners of a foreign language are inevitably exposed, through educational materials such as textbooks, to a range of cultural representations that shape their comprehension not only of the language itself but also of the associated cultural contexts.

Over the past three to four decades, the field of language education has witnessed a significantly greater volume of publications focusing on language teaching, language learning, and language learning strategies than on the teaching of culture, cultural learning, or culture learning strategies.



Hall's (2012) work references cultural strategies primarily within the scope of communication strategies. One of the most influential theoretical frameworks for understanding intercultural communication is Edward T. Hall's model distinguishing between low-context and high-context cultures. Based on the manner in which information exchange occurs, communication can be broadly categorized into high-context and low-context modalities. Edward T. Hall is regarded as a pioneering scholar in this domain, particularly through his seminal work *The Silent Language*, in which he was the first to employ the term "intercultural" to describe interactions between speakers belonging to different cultural backgrounds.

Culture, therefore, emerges as a central barrier to effective communication, since each group conveys information through specific codes that require a particular interpretative key, whether explicit or implicit. This study does not aim to address the broader issue of culture itself nor to analyze the ways in which culture is presented in textbooks, as there is already an extensive body of research dedicated to this topic. Instead, the present research focuses on a comparative quantitative analysis of the representation of figures from British, American, and Italian cultures in English and Italian language textbooks intended for foreign learners. Both textual citations and visual representations are examined with the goal of identifying potential imbalances or biases within the educational materials.

2. Methodology

From a methodological standpoint, the research was structured into several phases, following a systematic approach designed to ensure an analysis that is both comprehensive and comparable across the selected textbooks. Each textbook was meticulously examined page by page with the objective of identifying all references to real female and male figures, focusing in particular on four key dimensions: quantity, quality, frequency, and type of citations.

In the initial phase, the analysis centered on the quality of the citations. A distinction was made between simple mentions, which limited themselves to stating the name and surname of the individual, and more detailed references that provided additional biographical or professional information. These included interviews, narrative excerpts, informative articles, or texts dedicated to the person's life story or professional activities. This differentiation allowed for an understanding not only of the presence of the figures but also of the degree of visibility and prominence afforded to each character.

Subsequently, the quantitative aspect was addressed through a systematic tally of the number of occurrences for each figure within the textbook. This enabled an assessment of the frequency with which particular names appeared, thereby indicating their relative centrality within the didactic discourse.

Finally, the analysis extended to the typology of citations, encompassing not only textual references but also iconographic representations. The presence of photographs, drawings, or illustrations accompanying the cited figures was verified, with special attention paid to the visual form through which these individuals were portrayed.

Moreover, the research was further enriched by an examination of the pedagogical approaches used to introduce and discuss these figures. Additionally, a diachronic comparison was conducted to identify any shifts or developments in cultural representation across different editions of the textbooks over time.

3. The sample

For the purpose of this study, a sample of six textbooks—three for English and three for Italian as a foreign language - was selected. The focus was placed specifically on textbooks utilized in English and Italian language courses at the Faculty of Philology of the Goce Delcev University of Stip, as these materials reflect well-established editorial choices in linguistic education.

The selected textbooks are as follows:

- La Grassa, M., Delitala, M., & Quercioli, F. (2014). *L'italiano all'università 2. Corso di lingua per studenti stranieri B1-B2*. Roma: Edizioni Edilingua.
- Bali, M., & Dei, I. (2021). *Nuovo espresso. Corso di italiano B2*. Firenze: Alma Edizioni.
- Fragai, E., Fratter, I., & Jafrancesco, E. (2023). *UNI.ITALIA. Corso multimediale di lingua italiana per studenti universitari*. Firenze: Le Monnier.
- Soars, L. & Soars, J. (2014). *New Headway. Upper-Intermediate*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
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The study concentrated specifically on the intermediate level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), corresponding to levels B1 and B2. This focus is justified by the observation that at these proficiency levels, textbooks tend to include a greater number of references to cultural figures, well-known personalities, and extralinguistic content. This methodological choice aligns with the intention to analyze a didactic context in which the textbook functions not only as a support for linguistic acquisition but also as a carrier of cultural content, thereby significantly contributing to the construction of learners' representation of the target language and culture.

4. Results

4.1 *L'italiano All'università 2, Corso Di Lingua Per Studenti Stranieri B1-B2 (2014)*

In the textbook *L'italiano all'università 2*, there are 17 notable women featured, distributed across various educational and cultural contexts. However, only two of them are accompanied by even minimal biographical or professional information. In particular, the poet Alda Merini is the only woman to whom a brief biographical profile is dedicated (p. 286), and she is also mentioned as the author of the poem *Alla tua salute, amore mio* (p. 289). Another example of commentary, albeit very brief, concerns the fashion designer Rosita Jelmini, whose professional activity is described in a short note on p. 241.

There are six photographs depicting women, some of whom appear multiple times throughout the volume. Among these, the image of Giuliana Benetton stands out, portrayed alongside her brothers in a context that highlights the family's entrepreneurial role (p. 17). Singer Anna Tatangelo is featured in a photograph on p. 53, while Carmen Consoli appears visually on p. 132 and is also mentioned in two other sections of the textbook (p. 135, 281). Laura Pausini is also shown in a photograph (p. 134), alongside Andrea Bocelli, and her name appears three more times (p. 137, 280, 284), reinforcing her presence in the textbook's cultural landscape. Actress Sophia Loren is shown in a photograph on p. 218, and her name is mentioned on multiple occasions (p. 220, 222, 230, 311), indicating significant textual visibility. Lastly, Stefania Sandrelli appears in a photograph on p. 311, without further elaboration.

Overall, while the female iconographic presence is limited, it is associated with recognizable figures from the Italian cultural, artistic, and entertainment scenes. Their recurring presence in the text suggests a selection based more on familiarity and notoriety than on biographical or professional depth.

As for male representation in the textbook, there are 93 notable men featured. Among the few in-depth profiles are those of Beppe Severgnini (p. 188), a dedicated text on Pellegrino Artusi (p. 101), and brief biographies or focused content on figures such as Andrea Bocelli—with an extended text about his career (p. 279)—Luigi Pirandello (p. 152), Don Lorenzo Milani (p. 264), and Davide Sgardoli (p. 142). Other personalities, including Vinicio Capossela (p. 123), Jovanotti (p. 133, photo on p. 132), Max Gazzè (p. 132), Federico Moccia (p. 145), and Alessandro Baricco (interviewed on p. 285), are given brief mentions in culturally relevant contexts. Also noteworthy is an interview with television host Fiorello (p. 151).

The male iconographic component is also significant, with numerous photographs enhancing the visibility of certain figures. These include Carlo Lucarelli (p. 143), Fiorello (p. 151), and Pirandello (p. 152), as well as a group of iconic Italian cinema personalities captured on p. 218: Roberto Benigni, Marcello Mastroianni, Federico Fellini, and Gabriele Salvatores. Additional photographs include Nanni Moretti (p. 313), Raoul Bova (p. 312), and an image of Will Smith with director Gabriele Muccino (p. 220), signaling an openness to the international sphere.

In addition to the better-known figures, there are 29 lesser-known men from various cultural and societal sectors, and 14 foreign men, including Christian Dior (p. 20), Richard Wagner (p. 128), Clint Eastwood (p. 220), Charles Dickens (p. 279), and Martin Scorsese (p. 222). Though often briefly mentioned, these figures reflect a wide range of cultural references, mainly related to the arts, literature, and cinema.

In summary, the analysis confirms a clear numerical imbalance between male and female representation. Not only are men featured in significantly greater numbers, but they also benefit from more frequent visual representation.

4.2 *Nuovo Espresso. Corso Di Italiano B2 (2021)*



An analysis of the *Nuovo Espresso* textbook reveals a markedly limited female presence, both in quantitative and qualitative terms. A total of 11 women are mentioned throughout the volume, only **two** of whom are of foreign origin. With the sole exception of an interview with Maria Perego (p. 135) celebrated for having created the character Topo Gigio, none of these women are accompanied by biographical profiles or visual representations.

The remaining female figures are referenced briefly and without elaboration. These include Maria Montessori, cited twice (p. 10, 12); actresses Valeria Bruni Tedeschi (p. 68), Anna Magnani, and Clara Calamai (p. 148); and foreign personalities such as American author Terry Tempest Williams (p. 10) and French actress Marion Cotillard (p. 71). Notably, no visual materials—photographs or illustrations—are provided in connection with any of the women mentioned.

In contrast, male representation in the textbook is both significantly more extensive and diversified. A total of 76 male figures are identified, including 18 foreign individuals, many of whom are accompanied by descriptive texts or photographic material. Central figures include Dante Alighieri and Francesco Petrarca (p. 11); Beppe Severgnini, featured in multiple texts and photographs (p. 23, 36); and Umberto Eco, who is represented through both textual and visual content (p. 35, 37).

Additionally, the volume references renowned artists such as Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Bernini, Giotto, and Botticelli (p. 82), as well as historical and political figures like Aldo Moro (p. 98) and Benito Mussolini (p. 123). Brief biographical notes are dedicated to Paolo Sorrentino and Caravaggio (p. 155), while Giuseppe Garibaldi is cited in connection with a historical reference (p. 166). Further male presence is reinforced through the inclusion of the book cover of Andrea Bajani's *La vita non è in ordine alfabetico* (p. 61).

Foreign male figures are particularly well represented, numerically surpassing the entire group of Italian women cited in the textbook. Notable mentions include writers Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Boris Pasternak, and Vladimir Mayakovsky (p. 11); entrepreneur Sean Parker (p. 73); and aphoristic quotes by Francis Bacon and Andy Warhol (p. 93).

Taken together, this quantitative and qualitative imbalance strongly suggests a predominance of male figures in the construction of cultural, artistic, and intellectual models within *Nuovo Espresso*. Women are underrepresented and, when included, are seldom afforded the same depth of treatment or visual presence as their male counterparts. This asymmetry highlights the persistence of gender bias in educational materials, particularly in the selection of cultural references presented to learners.

4.3. Uni.Italia. Corso Multimediale Di Lingua Italiana Per Studenti Universitari (2023)

In the *UNI.ITALIA* textbook, seven prominent female figures are featured, primarily from the fields of culture, literature, and science. Among them are Gae Aulenti (p. 173, 177), Dacia Maraini (p. 195), Melania Mazzucco (p. 195, 202), Elsa Morante (p. 200), and Natalia Ginzburg (p. 209), who are mentioned in different contexts. However, only two women receive more structured and detailed coverage: Graziella Magherini, a renowned psychoanalyst, is the subject of a text discussing her work on Stendhal syndrome (p. 30), and the scientist Rita Levi Montalcini, whose biography appears on p. 181. Montalcini is also mentioned on two additional occasions (p. 190, 192) and depicted in two photographs, highlighting the significance attributed to her scientific role.

In addition to these, there are 36 lesser-known women, many of whom hold academic or professional positions. Notably, the textbook includes interviews with four professors from the University of Padua: Arjuna Tuzzi (p. 68), professor of Statistics; Laura Vanelli (p. 77), professor of Linguistics and Glottology; Maria G. Lo Duca (p. 3), professor of Italian Language; and Fiona C. Dalziel (p. 5), professor of English. Further female contributions include interviews with Silvia Vernetto, a nuclear physics researcher (p. 232); Nadia Fratter, a psychotherapist (p. 102); and Luisella Giulicchi, an aerospace engineer who also appears in a photograph (p. 179). These testimonies help broaden the spectrum of female professional representation, offering a more nuanced and diverse overview—though still quantitatively limited compared to male representation.

As for foreign women, there is only one mention: German researcher Herta Mayer (p. 181), whose contribution is briefly cited.

Overall, the textbook stands out for including various female voices from the fields of research and higher education, but their visibility remains partial, with a clear minority in terms of number, depth of coverage, and visual representation when compared to male figures.

The representation of men in *UNI.ITALIA* is significantly broader and more detailed than that of women. A total of 55 well-known male figures are featured, often accompanied by in-depth texts and rich iconographic content. Noteworthy among these are: Pier Paolo Pasolini, featured in a text about



his trip to India with Alberto Moravia (p. 8); Umberto Eco, mentioned on multiple occasions as an author (p. 11, 17, 30) and briefly cited elsewhere (p. 204, 209); Piero della Francesca, who is the subject of a biographical entry (p. 19); and Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, discussed within a text on Futurism (p. 22). Biographical insights are also provided for Bruno Munari (p. 28), Leonardo Sciascia and his literary work (p. 94), Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, who are featured in a text on the fight against the mafia, accompanied by a photograph of the two together (p. 121), and Giuseppe Garibaldi (p. 124). Italo Calvino is also the subject of an in-depth piece on his narrative work (p. 208), confirming the focus on high-profile intellectual figures.

On a visual level, 24 photographs are dedicated to male figures, further reinforcing their cultural importance within the textbook. In addition to the well-known names, 145 lesser-known men from various professional and cultural fields are mentioned, often briefly, yet their presence points to a rich and extensive male representation.

Lastly, the textbook shows a notable openness to international cultural references: 14 foreign men are mentioned, including Émile Zola and Friedrich Nietzsche (both on p. 23), Stendhal (p. 30), Denis Mack Smith (pp. 117, 124, 129), and Martin Luther King Jr. (p. 122), among others. This aspect is particularly striking when compared to the near-total absence of foreign female figures, further emphasizing the dominance of male models, even in international cultural references.

4.4. New Headway. Upper-Intermediate (2014)

An analysis of the *New Headway. Upper-Intermediate* textbook reveals the presence of 10 female figures, whose roles span the literary, political, social, and entertainment spheres. However, their representation varies significantly in terms of depth, visibility, and contextualization.

Within the literary domain, particular emphasis is placed on Margaret Atwood, whose portrait appears on the cover of one of her books and who is the subject of a dedicated text focusing on her writing style (p. 29). On the same page, the name of Jane Austen is briefly mentioned, without further elaboration. Among the few female figures afforded detailed treatment is Mary Hobson, whose life is explored in a biographical text (p. 106). Donna Tartt is cited as the author of *The Secret History* (p. 127), although no biographical or visual supplement accompanies the mention. In the political and social spheres, the textbook includes a relatively detailed representation of Princess Diana, featured in a journalistic-style puzzle activity supported by multiple photographs (pp. 38–39). Further brief mentions are made of Hillary Clinton and Caroline Kennedy (p. 41), as well as Mother Teresa (p. 123), though none of these figures receive additional contextual development. From the world of music and entertainment, Norah Jones is briefly referenced (p. 123), while Marilyn Monroe is the subject of a more extensive treatment, including a dedicated text offering biographical insights (p. 114). Overall, while the *New Headway* textbook includes a number of prominent women from diverse domains, the depth of representation is uneven. Only a small subset of these figures—such as Margaret Atwood, Princess Diana, Mary Hobson, and Marilyn Monroe—receive substantial textual or visual attention. The remaining individuals are presented through passing mentions, often devoid of biographical context or critical framing. This suggests a limited engagement with female cultural models, and a tendency to prioritize select figures over a more balanced or systematic inclusion of women across units.

In *New Headway. Upper-Intermediate*, male representation is significantly more extensive and articulated than that of female figures, both in terms of quantity and the depth of treatment. The textbook features 41 well-known male figures from a variety of professional fields, including music, literature, cinema, science, sports, and politics. Among those granted more detailed biographical or contextual attention are: Neil Armstrong (p. 40), John F. Kennedy Jr. (p. 41), Jamie Oliver, whose work is discussed and illustrated with two images (pp. 54–55), Steve Jobs (p. 59), and John Travolta, who appears both in the text and in the image (p. 71). In addition to these, several other prominent male figures are mentioned, though without further elaboration. These include: David Beckham (p. 10), Charles Dickens (pp. 18, 29), William Shakespeare (p. 123), Johnny Depp (p. 29), Elvis Presley and John Lennon (p. 38), Frank Sinatra (pp. 108, 114), and Robbie Williams (p. 108), among others.

The textbook also incorporates a number of foreign male figures, some of whom are accompanied by extended texts. For instance, Christopher Columbus and Marco Polo are the subjects of dedicated readings (pp. 16 and 125, respectively). A brief biography of Roman Abramovich is provided, accompanied by a photograph (pp. 74–75). Additionally, there is a text focusing on Michelangelo (p. 123), while other historical or cultural figures are merely named in passing, such as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Karl Marx (p. 129).



Overall, the male presence in the textbook is characterized by both breadth and depth, with several figures receiving visual reinforcement and in-depth narrative framing. This stands in sharp contrast to the more limited and superficial representation of female figures, reinforcing a gendered asymmetry in the construction of cultural, intellectual, and historical references presented to learners.

4.5. *Upstream. Pre-intermediate B1 (2016)*

An examination of the *Upstream. Pre-Intermediate B1* textbook reveals a limited and marginal representation of prominent female figures, both in quantitative and qualitative terms. Only five notable women are referenced throughout the volume, primarily from the entertainment industry. Among them are actresses Holly Marie Combs (p. 104), Alyson Hannigan (p. 108), and Sally Ann Triplett (p. 103), whose names are each mentioned only once and without any contextual or biographical elaboration. Similarly, Victoria Beckham is cited alongside her husband, David Beckham, within a text focusing on the Comic Relief charity event (p. 111), again without individual attention. The sole exception to this pattern is Queen Elizabeth I, who is afforded a more in-depth biographical treatment and visually represented through an illustration (p.28). Her presence constitutes the only instance of detailed female representation in the textbook.

In stark contrast, male representation is significantly more extensive and multifaceted. A total of 27 prominent male figures appear, several of whom are accompanied by textual descriptions and/or visual representations. Within the literary domain, Arthur Conan Doyle (p. 15) is featured with both biographical information and a photograph, while Jonathan Swift (p. 49) is introduced with contextual references to his literary production. Conversely, the names of J.K. Rowling (p. 104) and William Shakespeare (p. 109) are merely mentioned in passing, with no further elaboration.

Regarding the cinematic field, photographs of Elijah Wood and Christopher Lee (p. 6) are included, albeit without naming the actors themselves; instead, only the names of the fictional characters they portray in *The Lord of the Rings* are provided. Several other male actors are cited by name, such as Roald Dahl (p. 87), John Barrowman (p. 103), Russell Crowe (p. 104), Luke Perry (p. 108), and Tom Cruise (p. 110), although these references often lack additional information.

Further male figures include Alexander Brain (p. 120), musician Robbie Williams, footballer David Beckham (p. 111), and film director Edward Zwick (p. 110), all of whom are briefly mentioned. The textbook also incorporates references to foreign male artists and intellectuals, such as Leonardo da Vinci (p. 110), Japanese actor Ken Watanabe (p. 110), and a series of canonical figures from the history of art: Pablo Picasso, Vincent Van Gogh, Salvador Dalí, Edgar Degas, Claude Monet, Georges Braque, Paul Gauguin, Paul Cézanne, René Magritte, and Pierre-Auguste Renoir (p. 124).

This disparity in representation underscores a clear gender imbalance in the construction of cultural and intellectual models within the textbook. Male figures not only outnumber their female counterparts significantly but are also granted a higher degree of narrative depth and visual emphasis. The marginalization of female contributions, particularly in fields beyond entertainment, and the almost exclusive focus on male historical and cultural figures suggest an implicit gender bias in the selection and presentation of role models aimed at language learners.

4.6. *Focus 4 (2016)*

In the textbook *Focus 4*, female representation is extremely limited, both quantitatively and in terms of depth of treatment. Only six female figures are mentioned, with varying levels of textual and visual visibility. In the field of entertainment, we find the English actress Keira Knightley, mentioned in a short passage (p. 82), and the singer Lorde, whose image appears in a photograph (p. 82). A brief biographical note is dedicated to Gillian Lynne, an English dancer and actress. Michelle Obama is briefly mentioned (p. 83) without further elaboration, as is Kate Middleton, mentioned within a family context alongside Prince William and their son George (p. 11). The only foreign female figure from the scientific world is Marie Curie, referenced at p. 18, without visual or biographical support.

By contrast, the representation of male figures in the textbook is considerably more extensive and multifaceted. Numerous male individuals from various domains are referenced, often with accompanying texts, photographs, or informative notes. In the entertainment sector, actors such as Brad Pitt (p. 82–83), Leonardo DiCaprio (p. 94), Robert Pattinson (p. 88), and Daniel Radcliffe (p. 88) are featured. Pattinson and Radcliffe are accompanied by brief texts and photographic representations. In the political domain, references are made to Barack Obama, whose name appears twice (p. 18 and 83), along with a photograph (p. 18), as well as to Winston Churchill (p. 18) and Abraham Lincoln (p. 11). Historical figures include King Harold, William the Conqueror (p. 10), and



Henry VIII (p. 11). In the same context, the British royal family, William, Kate, and George, is also depicted (p. 11). In the literary sphere, there is a brief presentation of writer Bill Bryson and his work (p. 24). Within the scientific and technological field, a text is dedicated to Joe Woodland and Bernard Silver, inventors of the barcode (p. 66). Male representation in sports is limited to two tennis players: Andy Roddick (USA) and Andy Murray (UK), both mentioned on page 10. The textbook also includes numerous notable international male figures, such as Leonardo da Vinci, Mahatma Gandhi, and Albert Einstein (p. 18), Socrates (p. 15), and entrepreneurs Levi Strauss and Jacob Davis, referenced in a text about the invention of jeans (p. 58).

Overall, the analysis reveals a marked gender asymmetry in the textbook, with male figures significantly more prominent in number, visibility, and depth of content. Female figures are marginal, rarely expanded upon, and almost entirely absent from visual representations. Conversely, male figures are presented across a broader range of domains and are more frequently accompanied by biographical or visual content, reflecting an educational model that still lacks balance in terms of gender representation.

5. Conclusion

The comparative analysis of Italian textbooks (*L'italiano all'università 2*, *Nuovo Espresso*, *UNI.ITALIA*) and English ones (*New Headway Upper-Intermediate*, *Upstream Pre-Intermediate B1*, *Focus 4*) highlights some significant differences in the representation of cultural and professional figures, as well as in gender treatment.

The average percentage of female representation stands at around 13–18%, with minimal variations between the textbooks. Not only are women less present, but the depth of coverage (dedicated texts, photographs, biographical context) is almost always more developed for men.

Italian textbooks tend to favor a more articulated and diversified representation of male figures, with attention spanning culture, science, literature, and academic fields. In particular, *UNI.ITALIA* stands out for the inclusion of women from the academic and scientific worlds, featuring testimonies and interviews that broaden female representation beyond traditional artistic domains. However, female presence remains overall limited and less in-depth compared to male representation. Female iconographic representation is contained and almost always associated with figures of great cultural notoriety.

In the English textbooks, female representation is even more restricted and often confined to figures from entertainment, politics, or literature, with little biographical depth and limited visual presence. The female figure, when present, is almost always subordinate to a larger number of men represented across multiple fields, including science, sports, history, and art. Male treatment is therefore not only quantitatively superior but also more varied and detailed, with numerous images and textual elaborations. The representation of foreign figures follows the same pattern, with women being almost entirely absent.

In summary, Italian textbooks, while showing a clear gender imbalance, display a greater tendency to include women in academic and scientific fields, albeit to a limited extent, whereas English textbooks relegate female presence to less contextualized roles.

Both groups of textbooks, however, reproduce a culturally male-dominated narrative, confirming the need for a critical reassessment of educational content to promote a more balanced and inclusive representation.

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