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## Sticky Objects and Places: Entangled Emotions in an English-Medium University Educationscape

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**Keywords:** bilingual education | language and education in multilingual settings | language and identity | language policy/planning | sociolinguistics | الكلمات المفتاحية: المشاعر، التعليم الجامعي باستخدام اللغة الإنجليزية، التعليم العالي، الإمارات العربية المتحدة، المشاهد اللغوية

## ABSTRACT

This paper explores entangled emotions in an Abu Dhabi English-medium university educationscape in relation to sticky objects and sticky places, which are objects/places saturated in affect through familiarity and repetition. Moving away from a lingua-centric approach to linguistic landscape research, this ethnographic study explores Emirati students' emotions not only in relation to language as discourses but also in relation to semiotics, objects, and geopolitical meanings. Students' interpretations of their semiotic and linguistic landscapes (LL) as "intertextual products" connected to emotions, identities, and levels of belonging were gained via virtual bulletin board posts and essays. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis and nexus analysis. Key findings revealed emotions of belonging in familiar and sentimental cultural and linguistic spaces and around sticky objects, comfort in "hidden places" as an escape from emotions of stress and pressure in the English-medium instruction university, and the importance of critical awareness in the educationscape. Based on the findings, the article provides practical suggestions for ways to enhance linguistic and cultural belonging in English-medium educationscapes and recognize emotional entanglements within multilingual university ecosystems.

## الملخص

تستكشف هذه الورقة البحثية المشاعر المتداخلة في بيئة تعليم جامعي تستخدم اللغة الإنجليزية كوسيلة للتعليم في أبوظبي، مع التركيز على أشياء وأماكن مشبعة بالعواطف نتيجة الألفة والتكرار. تسعى الدراسة، من خلال منهج إثنوغرافي، إلى تجاوز النهج التقليدي الذي يركز على المركزية اللغوية في دراسة المشهد اللغوي، لتشمل دراسة مشاعر الطلاب الإماراتيين المرتبطة ليس فقط باللغة كمحادثات، بل أيضاً بالدلالات، والأشياء، والمعاني الجيوسياسية. تم الحصول على تفسيرات الطلاب للمشاهد اللغوية والرمزية كنتائج نصية تداخلية مرتبطة بالعواطف والهويات ومستويات الانتماء من خلال المنشورات على اللوحات الإعلانية الافتراضية والمقالات. تم تحليل البيانات من خلال التحليل الموضوعي وتحليل الروابط. كشفت النتائج الرئيسية عن مشاعر الانتماء في المساحات الثقافية واللغوية المألوفة والعاطفية وحول الأشياء المشبعة بالعواطف، بالإضافة إلى الشعور بالراحة في الأماكن المخفية كمهرب من مشاعر التوتر والضغط في الجامعة التي تستخدم اللغة الإنجليزية كوسيلة للتعليم، وأهمية الوعي النقدي في البيئة التعليمية. استناداً إلى النتائج، يقدم المقال اقتراحات عملية لتعزيز الانتماء اللغوي والثقافي في البيئات التعليمية التي تستخدم اللغة الإنجليزية، والاعتراف بالتشابكات العاطفية داخل الأنظمة الجامعية متعددة اللغات.

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## 1 | Introduction

At the 2024 American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL) conference in Houston, there was a notable focus on the “affective turn” (Ahmed 2014; Pavlenko 2013) or “emotional turn” (Etherington et al. 2020) in language teaching (Cinaglia, Montgomery, and Cross 2024; Hopkyns and Dovchin 2024), English-medium contexts (Hillman et al. 2023; Sah 2023), and larger society. Although, the “affective turn” is not new, as Sara Ahmed (2014, 205) points out in the second edition of her seminal text *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, it has “gathered momentum” as a topic explored in edited books, journals, and monographs. This invigorated focus was reflected in the AAAL 2024 plenary talks as well as many of the colloquiums and individual sessions selected for inclusion on the program.

In Madhukar K. C. and Pramod Sah’s AAAL colloquium entitled “Emotions as entanglements: Unsettling the intersection of emotion, language, race, and identity in language education,” Peter De Costa, as discussant, gave a set of recommendations for much-needed research on emotions and language education. This included paying more attention to emotional entanglements and decolonizing pedagogy as well as how emotions connect with multimodal artifacts and “sticky objects” (Ahmed 2014). Addressing this call, the current study focuses on emotions and levels of belonging in a large government university in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates (UAE). By investigating a context outside commonly researched elite Anglophone university settings, the study aims to “decentre ideas of English from Anglophone orientations” (Baker et al. 2024, 3) and shed light on emotions and belonging in an under-represented and under-researched region. The study gives direct attention to the dual concepts of *sticky places* (Badwan and Hall 2020) and *sticky objects* (Ahmed 2014) in the *educationscape* (Krompák et al. 2022), which is the linguistic and semiotic landscape of an educational setting. Sticky places and sticky objects refer to places and objects of emotion which circulate and have become metaphorically “sticky, or saturated with affect” (Ahmed 2014, 11). Such stickiness, attached to places or objects, connects with repetition and movement, and may represent sites of tension, sites of belonging, or entangled emotions. For spaces of belonging, the related concept of “happy objects” is also relevant, whereby certain places and objects are associated with happiness or expectations of happiness (Ahmed 2014; Miller and Gkonou 2023).

Although emotions research is on the rise in the field of applied linguistics, previous studies have tended to focus mainly on emotions within classroom settings rather than in the broader domain of educationscapes, or whole university ecosystems. Previous studies on teacher emotions have focused, explicitly or implicitly, on pre-service teachers (Nguyen and Dao 2019; Yazan 2018), language teachers (Benesch 2017; Kocabas-Gedik and Ortaçtepe-Hart 2021; Nazari et al. 2023), English-medium instruction (EMI) content teachers (Hopkyns and Gkonou 2023; Sah 2023; Yuan 2023), and language teacher educators (Barkhuizen 2021). Such research often relates to professional identities (Barkhuizen 2021), tension-evoking aspects of teaching such as giving feedback, attendance, high-stakes exams, and plagiarism (Benesch 2017; Hopkyns and Gkonou 2023), and translanguaging in multilingual educational settings (Hopkyns and Dovchin 2024). Fewer studies have focused specifically on the emotions of students

in English-medium universities. Previous studies investigating university students’ emotions have tended to look at the areas of EMI pedagogy, instruction, and language use in classrooms (Hillman 2023; Hopkyns and Gkonou 2023; Yuan et al. 2023). Others have focused on specific emotions experienced by students in EMI universities such as “pride” (Hopkyns 2020; Hillman 2023), “frustration” (Park and Ramirez 2022), “linguistic shame” (Hillman 2022), “anxiety” (Sevinç and Bacus 2017), and “guilt” (Manan et al. 2022).

An area notably missing from the current research base is an investigation into students’ emotions in English-medium universities outside the classroom setting, especially with regard to sticky places and objects in the educationscape. As Canagarajah (2023) points out, educational experiences expand beyond the classroom and knowledge concerns, and it is thus important to recognize that geopolitical learning spaces also embody “affective, social, and cultural” concerns. In this sense, it is necessary to pay attention to emotions not only within classroom settings but also within entire university ecosystems, where language in the linguistic landscapes of educational contexts acts as “discourses in place” (Scollon and Scollon 2003) through which one piece of text may be interpreted in different ways and result in a range of emotions from those who inhabit the area.

While there has been a swell of linguistic landscaping (LL) research in educational spaces in recent years, most has tended to focus on primary schools in European countries such as Estonia (Brown 2012), Austria (Lehner 2022), Switzerland, and Malta (Krompák et al. 2020). Fewer LL studies have taken place in English medium education in multilingual university settings (EMEMUS) (Dafouz, Huettner, and Smit 2016), especially outside Western, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic (WEIRD) contexts. Existing university LL studies have tended to look at context-specific landscapes related to topics, such as psychological health service posters (Huang 2022) and student activism (De Wilde et al. 2022). As EMEMUS vary considerably based on geopolitical, cultural, and historical factors, the UAE, as an under-researched context, is important to explore, especially as EME dominates higher education in the nation. The current study aims to fill a gap in the knowledge base by investigating the entangled emotions of Emirati university students in relation to sticky places and objects within their educationscape.

The article will first provide a brief overview of the sociolinguistic background to English-medium education in UAE universities before discussing the key concepts of linguistic landscapes, nexus analysis, emotions, sticky places, and sticky objects. Emirati students’ perspectives on emotions and sticky places/objects, gained via an ethnographic approach to LL research together with thematic analysis of reflective essays, will then be shared. The article concludes with a discussion of key findings and recommendations for ways in which to better recognize and consider entangled emotions related to university educationscapes.

## 2 | The UAE Educational and Sociolinguistic Context

From the early years surrounding the formation of the UAE in 1971, and especially since the 1990s, multilingualism has

increased apace due to waves of migration connected with oil wealth and fast-moving development, together with globalization. The UAE's demographics are unusual in that 88.5% of the population are foreign residents, making local Emiratis a minority in their own country (Hopkins 2020). Residents originate from almost 200 countries, with the largest group being from the Indian subcontinent (The World Bank 2021). Although Arabic is the official language of the nation, English is the most common lingua franca in many areas of public life, including educational contexts (Piller 2018). In addition to the prominence of English(es) and Arabic(s), Emirati university students attending EMI government universities have varied linguistic repertoires which often also include languages learned later in life such as Korean, Japanese, and Turkish due in part to the popularity of these languages via dramas, music, art, and fashion (Hopkins and Wang 2024).

Although the phenomenon of EMI is on the rise globally (Macaro 2018; Siemund and Leimgruber, 2021), it is particularly widespread and dominant in the context of UAE higher education. There are currently 45 licensed higher education institutions in the UAE, including international branch campuses, private universities, public universities, and three major government institutions (UAE Ministry of Education 2022). Although these institutions vary considerably in composition and character, they run most/all their courses through the medium of English, with only a handful of degree programs being taught through the medium of Arabic (Hopkins 2023a, 2024). While classroom instruction is officially English-medium, university ecosystems in the UAE and other Gulf countries are linguistically diverse, due to faculty members and staff coming from a range of different countries and local students often having varied linguistic repertoires and language backgrounds. Looking beyond EMI in classrooms, there is often also an expectation for the use of standardized English and knowledge production in the linguistic and semiotic landscapes of learning and social spaces in internationalized universities (Jenkins and Mauranen 2019). Such English-dominated expectations jar with the linguistically diverse composition of the stakeholders inhabiting the space.

### 3 | New Directions for Linguistic Landscaping Research

LL studies have expanded in multiple directions since Landry and Bourhis's (1997, 23) original definition of LL which refers to the "visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs." The current study embraces several new directions in LL research identified by Shohamy and Pennycook (2022), which consider geopolitical, semiotic, ethnographic, and pedagogical factors. First, the study moves away from a lingua-centric approach to the LL toward a semiotic perspective on landscape and space with a focus on "broad semiotics" (Shohamy and Pennycook 2022, 32). In this sense, students' holistic university experiences are considered, which include viewing semiotic and linguistic landscapes as objects or "intertextual products" (Choi, Tatar, and Kim 2019) connected to stakeholders' emotions and levels of belonging.

Second, greater attention is given to the role individuals play in constructing "networks of meaning in space" (Krompák, 2022,

149). Here, Lefebvre's (1974) theory of social space is relevant, where the significance of socially constructed spaces as opposed to physical space is stressed. Lefebvre argued that social groups (such as students) actively contribute to producing their own spaces on three levels: *perceived space* which embodies spatial practices; *conceived space* which reflects a verbal representation of space; *lived space* which embodies physical space through non-verbal symbols and signs. In relation to the "spatialization of the LL" (Jaworski and Thurlow 2010), Scollon and Scollon (2003) stress the importance of *nexus analysis* for LL research whereby not only language on signs is important to analyze but also semiotics and social context, which often reveals underlying language ideologies, linguistic hierarchies, and notions of belonging. Nexus analysis goes beyond linguacentrism or "logocentrism" (Canagarajah and Minakova 2022) by applying a tripartite focus on interaction order, discourses in place, and historical body (Hult 2014; Scollon and Scollon 2004). These three elements combine to "mediate a social action" (Hult 2014, 512) such as creating or displaying signage. The interaction order embodies social norms and expectations about language, and space, such as the type of signs, function, and intended viewers. Discourses in place are societal beliefs about languages and speakers of languages which affect language choices on signs. Historical body relates to habits, practices, and values of individuals who view or make signs (Hult 2014; Scollon and Scollon 2004). Thus, nexus analysis allows for a deeper and more holistic picture to be presented.

Third, the current study moves away from the structuralist or descriptive approach where one piece of text has one meaning. In this sense, no space is "pure" (Scollon and Scollon 2004). Rather, the importance of ethnographic approaches is recognized whereby context of the sign, the social, political, and cultural history of the place/institution, intended audience, and reactions of those passing by are important to analyze (Malinowski 2009). Finally, LL research increasingly has a focus on educational possibilities. It is recognized that actively involving students in LL research provides sites for critical awareness of multilingualism and belonging in educational spaces.

### 4 | Entangled Emotions, Sticky Objects, and Sticky Places

Understanding stakeholders' emotions in EMI contexts is important for sustainable education, improved well-being, and increased levels of belonging. This is especially the case in today's era where there is an increased recognition of the legacy of colonialism in terms of language, culture, and epistemologies across multiple domains (Baker et al. 2024; Phyak et al. 2023; Sah and Fang 2024). From a post-structuralist approach to the theorizing of emotions (Benesch 2017, De Costa et al. 2019), emotions are recognized as not being merely internal feelings to be worked through, but rather they are intertwined or entangled with various intersections of identities, such as educational background, language ideologies, and geopolitical factors. Emotional experiences are also entangled with societal and contextual factors such as neoliberalism and top-down language education policies (Sah 2023), which can create competition, (un)belonging, and linguistic (in)security.

The word *emotions* itself comes from the Latin, *emovere*, movement, which indicates that emotions are about attachments or “what connects us to this or that” (Ahmed 2014, 11). As Ahmed (2014) argues, what moves us makes us feel, and these feelings can hold us in place and give us belonging or can push us away from something. Ahmed (2014) stresses that it is objects of emotion which circulate rather than emotions themselves and emotions can move through the circulation of objects. “Objects” can literally refer to artifacts or metaphorically refer to concepts or people who are objectified, and “places” refer to a physical area or space often containing a multitude of objects within them. In turn, such objects and/or places become “sticky, or saturated with affect, as sites of personal and social tension” (Ahmed 2014, 11). In this sense, familiar or comfortable places or objects “stick” to individuals and have appeal, in the same way that other places or objects may alienate individuals or cause emotions of distress, pressure, or shame.

Relatively few previous studies have explored the notion of sticky objects and places in various contexts, both inside and outside educational settings. For example, Badwan and Hall (2020) explored sticky places for international students studying in the United Kingdom. They found that for an Algerian participant, Samiya, the “Curry Mile” on Wilmslow Road, Manchester, was a sticky place due to a multitude of cultural artifacts she encountered there together with the presence of her first language, Arabic. The effect of this sticky place for her was a set of emotions ranging from familiarity to comfort, which stemmed from memories of “histories” and “things” from her home country, first language, and religion of Islam.

In UK and Saudi Arabian higher education, Etherington et al.’s (2020) study investigated 12 language teachers’ perspectives on sticky objects in their workplaces. Here, participants used a journaling app to photograph objects in their daily lives and write a brief explanation about which emotions “stuck” to the objects. Findings revealed common sticky objects to be daily rituals such as a cup of coffee, which often induced emotions of joy, comfort, and stress relief. For a Saudi Arabian teacher, Sara, the Arabic language and shared cultural events were named as sticky objects as they resulted in emotions of belonging and connectedness with her students.

Similarly, Miller and Gkonou’s (2023) study looked at emotions amongst language teachers from Germany, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States. They found that the concept of “caring” was often viewed as a sticky object, which particularly connected with emotions of happiness, making it also a “happy object” (Ahmed 2014). However, this association was viewed as highly normative, and therefore those teachers who did not view caring to be a happy object experienced emotions of guilt or alienation. Such a contrast between genuine emotions and “feeling rules” (Hochschild 1979) or “emotional rules” (Zembylas 2002) led to emotional labor in these cases, where teachers felt they should present expected emotions due to the normative nature of certain happy objects. Ahmed (2014) explains that “happy objects” are often highly normative. For example, if a bride does not experience emotions of joy and happiness on her wedding day, there is a mismatch between real and expected emotions due to the stickiness of the wedding as a happy object

in society. Similarly, in the context of higher education in the UAE, Hopkyns and Gkonou (2023) discussed “EMI as a sticky object” due to its strong association with success and capital. When students experience emotions which clash with EMI as a sticky object, such as linguistic frustration and hopelessness, the result is emotional labor, whereby genuine feelings have to be masked to meet normative expectations. As EME is so prevalent in UAE higher education, the current study is important as it goes beyond looking at emotions in EMI classrooms in this under-researched region. Rather, it explores the connection between university spaces, where students spend a large part of their lives, and their emotions around sticky places and objects with the aim of increased linguistic and cultural understanding, belonging, and wellness.

## 5 | The Study

### 5.1 | Study Objectives and Research Questions

The study is part of a larger research project investigating stakeholders’ interactions with and perspectives on their UAE English-medium university educationscape. This article looks at a small part of the data from the larger research project, which centers on sticky objects and places associated with emotions. A further data set of students’ reflective essays on emotions and the educationscape was added for deeper insights. The current study specifically investigates entangled emotions (Hopkyns and Gkonou 2023; Sah 2023) in relation to sticky objects and places in a UAE university educationscape. Two key research questions are addressed:

RQ1: Which places and objects within an English-medium UAE university educationscape are metaphorically “sticky” for Emirati university students?

RQ2: How are emotions entangled with sticky places and objects within a UAE English medium university?

### 5.2 | Study Setting, Procedure, and Participants

The study was set in a large Abu Dhabi government university, which also has a campus in Dubai. At the time of the study, from March to May 2022, the university was gender segregated, with a female side and a male side, in line with the cultural values of the UAE (Bristol-Rhys 2010). Most of the students at the university had attended state schools where they had EMI for core subjects but Arabic-medium instruction (AMI) for other subjects, with a minority having attended private or international EMI schools. The first language of the students was Arabic, and the second was English, along with other languages they had learned later in life.

The study involved four stages, as summarized in Table 1. First, in March 2022, I collected a corpus of LL data from a “walking ethnography” involving two walks of the Abu Dhabi campus. During these walks, I was “awash in discourse” (Troyer 2023, 90). I took pictures of all the signage and semiotic objects along the walk, from one end of the campus to the other. These areas included learning spaces (library, spaces outside offices,



**TABLE 1** | Participant information.

	Data type	Participants/signs	Date	Age	Course	Years at the university
1	Corpus of signage from the university educationscape	482 photographs (40 selected for the Padlet)	March 2022	N/A	N/A	N/A
2	Padlet comments on LL and “stickiness” of objects and places in the educationscape	28 students (All female)	April 2022	19–26	Language and literature course	2–3
3	Reflective essays on emotions and spaces in the university	46 students (26 female and 20 male)	May 2022	19–24	Writing composition course	2–3

**TABLE 2** | Categorizing signage.

	Categories
1	<b>Language(s) and semiotics:</b> Monolingual, bilingual, multilingual, translanguaging, non-print languages (e.g., Braille), pictures, symbols (e.g., flags)
2	<b>Sign-maker:</b> Top-down signs (created by an official source)/bottom-up signs (created by an unofficial source, such as students or teachers)
3	<b>Function:</b> Controlling signs (controlling behavior), naming signs (labeling buildings, areas, stores, etc.), informing and selling signs (e.g., advertisement in a shop window), commemorating signs (to commemorate places or people such as the late Sheikh Zayed), and care signs (messages of support and care)
4	<b>Place and social context:</b> Area of the university (e.g., library, corridor, social spaces, and canteen), cultural or historical background related to signs.

business center, and study areas) and social spaces (corridors, cafés, the promenade, courtyard, and outside prayer rooms). The timing of the first walk was at 7 a.m., before classes began to take clear pictures of the signage without people in the pictures. The second walk took place 2 days later during the busy lunch hour (12:30–1:30 p.m.). The purpose was to observe the social context around signage and semiotic objects. Field notes, amounting to three A4 pages in a note pad, were taken on how students and faculty interacted with spaces. For example, I took notes on how popular certain spaces were, such as one café over another, and whether signs were effective, such as a sign telling students not to enter a space. The walking ethnography resulted in a corpus of 482 photographs of signs and semiotic objects.

Second, I selected a representative sample of 40 signs and semiotic objects from the corpus of 482 photographs. The 40 selected photographs represented a range of spaces within the university, as well as a range of language(s), semiotics, functions, and top-down (produced by management/institution/government) and bottom-up (made by students/faculty/staff) signs and semiotic objects. I uploaded the 40 pictures onto the virtual bulletin board app, *Padlet*. Third, a description of the research project was shared with a class of female students ( $n = 28$ ) who were taking a language and literacy course and were in their second or third year at the university (see Table 1 for further participant information). Students were asked to share their perspectives on the educationscape images on the Padlet. After students had written comments, follow-up questions were asked on the Padlet to elicit further reflection on certain images. Finally, to gain deeper and additional insights into how emotions relate to sticky

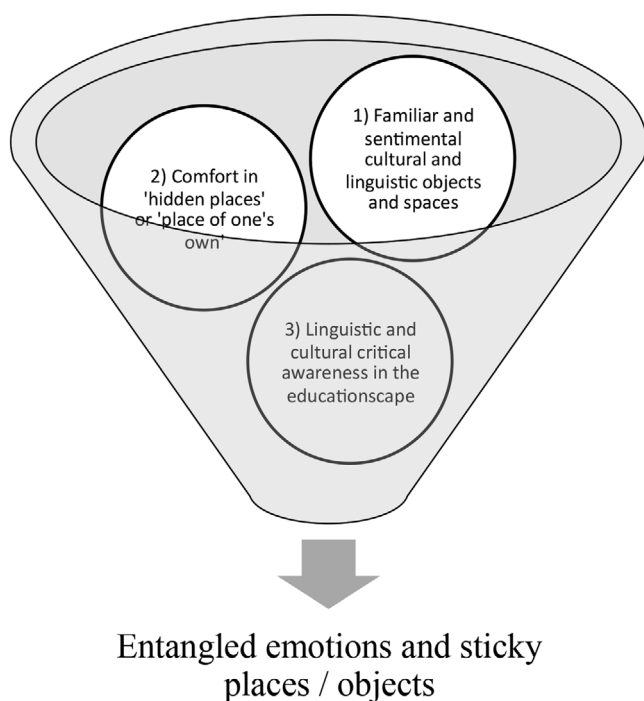
objects and places in the university, and for added validity, a further set of student participants ( $n = 46$  [26 female and 20 male]) who were taking a writing composition course were asked to write reflective essays on their favorite places in the university and related emotions (see Table 1 for further participant information).

In terms of researcher reflexivity, as an Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics at the university at the time of the study, I was very familiar with the context and with EME as a phenomenon. I viewed this positionality as a resource (Sarangi and Candlin 2003), which allowed me to take a critical lens to the analysis of the educationscape. Standard ethical procedures were followed, and students were informed that participation in the study was optional, and pseudonyms would be used.

### 5.3 | Data Analysis

From the larger ethnographic study, signage from the educationscapes ( $n = 482$ ) was categorized according to five criteria, drawing on the work of Ben-Rafael et al. (2006) and Cook (2022), as seen in Table 2. Using thematic data analysis, five key themes were identified from the larger study: (1) The dominance of English; (2) imbalanced bilingualism; (3) bottom-up translanguaging; (4) everyday nationalism; and (5) sticky places/objects.

For the LL data, nexus analysis (Scollon and Scollon 2003) was used to analyze the corpus of signs and semiotic objects, whereby not only content was explored but rather “interaction order,



**FIGURE 1** | Entangled emotions and sticky places/objects in the English-medium educationscape.

discourses in place, and historical body” were also considered (Hult 2014; Scollon and Scollon 2004). First, social norms and expectations about language and space were considered via analyzing “interaction order,” where the appearance or absence of language(s) on signage indicates values attached to language(s). Second, societal beliefs about languages and speakers of languages that affect language choices on signs were considered through looking at “discourses in place.” For example, rather than a descriptive account of languages being given, ideologies in societies were considered, such as the relationship between neoliberalism and the dominance of English in EME educationscapes. Third, as educationscapes do not exist in a vacuum, “historical body” was also part of the analysis by analyzing relevant habits, practices, and values of individuals who view or make signs (Hult 2014). Field notes on actors’ interaction with signage provided additional information on which spaces were “sticky,” as indicated by their popularity and which signs/spaces were effective or provocative.

The essays were analyzed via thematic analysis, which Braun and Clarke (2006, 79) conceptualize as “a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data.” Six stages of coding were used: (1) familiarization with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and labeling themes; and (6) reporting the data. Familiarizing myself with the data involved carefully reading through the essays. I then generated initial codes by highlighting key patterns and grouping similar points together to create themes. To reduce the number of themes, I merged related points for the reporting stage. For example, the initial themes “sentimental cultural objects” and “familiar linguistic objects and spaces” were merged to create Theme 1 (Figure 1).

## 6 | Findings

When analyzing the combined data set (Padlet comments and essays) from a total of 74 students, three key themes related to “stickiness” and emotions emerged (Figure 1).

The three key themes in Figure 1 are explored in the following subsections with images and participant quotes

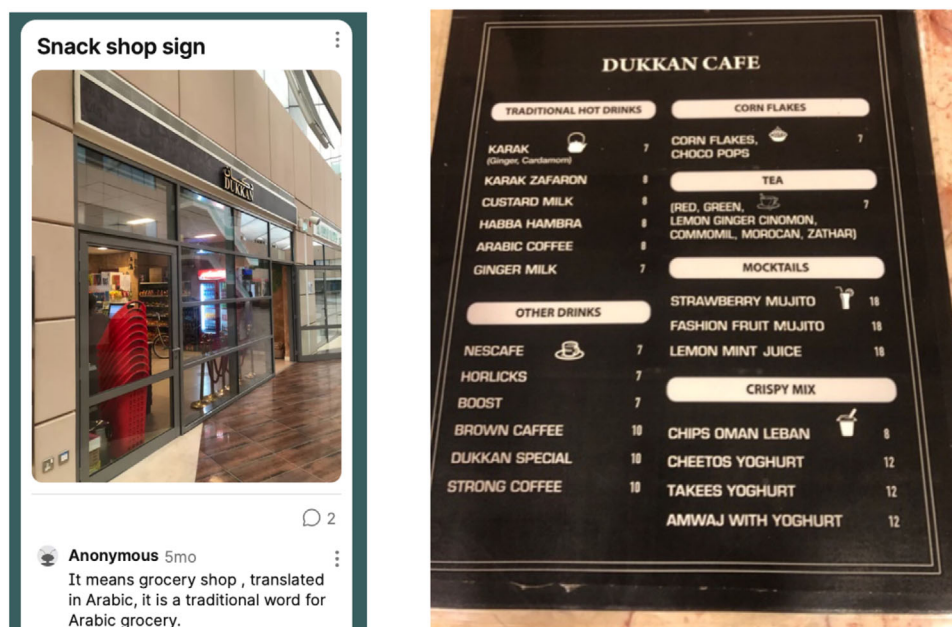
### 6.1 | Familiar and Sentimental Cultural and Linguistic Objects and Spaces

From the Padlet images, certain places and objects in the university were seen as sticky for students and evoked strong emotions. Especially in the university’s promenade, which is an indoor space lined with cafes, nail salons, flower shops, and stationary stores, students commented on both linguistic and cultural belonging related to a snack store named “Dukkan.” While most of the store signs or “selling signs” (Cook 2022) are Western brands such as “Starbucks,” “Il Café Di Roma,” and “Deb’s Café” with English translated into Arabic, an exception to this pattern is “Dukkan Café” (Figure 2) for which the name is transliterated from Arabic into English. Dukkan Café takes its name from the word for “traditional grocery store” in Arabic. While *dukkans* were part of traditional UAE neighborhoods (Freej), the word is not often used these days due in part to changes in infrastructures leading to mall-based social hubs replacing traditional neighborhoods (Al Mutawa 2020). From students’ comments on images of Dukkan Café’s store front and café menu (Figure 2), it represented a “sticky place” within the English-dominated university due to the culturally significant designs on its cups (Figure 3) and its menu with regional comfort food and drinks such as “Oman Chips laban” (spicy crisps made in neighboring Oman mixed with drinking yoghurt), “Karak” (Masala Chai), and “Habba Hambra” (custard and red seeds often served at festivals) (Figure 2).

The disposable cups at Dukkan Café are decorated translingually with a combination of Arabic and English words (Karak, Dukkan [in Arabic script], perfect, amazing) and traditional cultural symbols such as the hennaed hand. Furthermore, the gold-colored handle on the cup is designed to look like a metal burqa (traditional face covering) (Figure 3). A student, Maryam (pseudonym used), commented on the image of the hand on the Dukkan cup, saying “the henna design on the hand is an old-fashioned one and not common these days.” She made a further comment, saying “it’s special to see that henna. It gives me a happy feeling because it’s part of Emirati culture in the university.”

In the essays, male students mentioned a further sticky place, the *Majlis* (traditional Arabian seating area with cushions on the floor), which was associated with emotions of comfort, sentimentality, and conviviality (Extract 1). Figure 4 shows the popularity of the *Majlis* with male students.

Extract 1. One of my favourite places is the Majlis where me and my friends can hangout during the common break. I feel relaxed because it is a friendly place. (Abdullah, essay)



**FIGURE 2** | Dukkan shop and a student's padlet comment. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ijal.12704)]



**FIGURE 3** | Translingual Dukkan coffee cup and metal burqa handle. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ijal.12704)]



**FIGURE 4** | The Majlis as a sticky place. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ijal.12704)]

Both *Dukkan* and the *Majlis* represent sticky places associated with emotions of happiness and comfort, partly connected to the Arabic language and cultural symbolism, evoking familiar practices and aesthetics in an otherwise English-medium, Western-influenced space.

## 6.2 | Comfort in “Hidden Places” or “Place of One’s Own”

A second key theme to emerge from the reflective essays was the value students placed on having their “own space” within the university. From the 46 students who wrote the reflective essays, 38 (83%) named the library as their favorite or one of their favorite places in the university. While some students were drawn to the library due to books and reading, for most students, the library was sticky with affect due to its strong association with peace and quiet or as a type of escape (Figure 5).





**FIGURE 5** | The university library, a favorite university place for most students. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ijal.12704)] [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ijal.12704)]

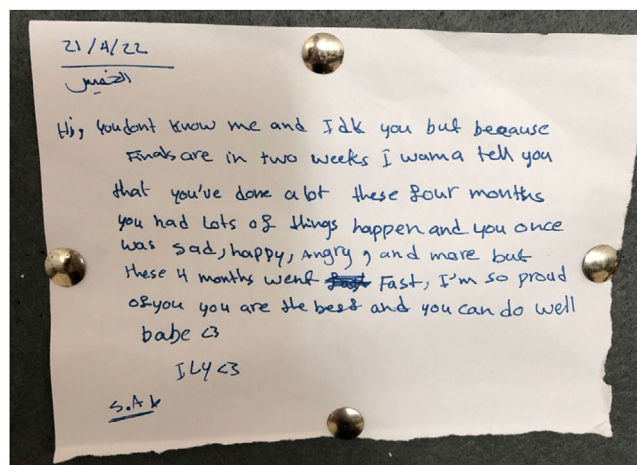
Several students referred to various parts of the library in terms of being a “hidden place,” “secret spot,” “comfort zone,” or being attached to “a sense of privacy and comfort” (Extracts 2–4). Particularly, in the case of Abdulaziz, the library reminded him of a video game he played frequently named “Persona 5” resulting in emotions of comfort and escape from reality (Extract 4).

**Extract 2.** The university is huge and has a lot of hidden places that can be attractive. Nowadays that the number of students is increased it’s hard to find a place to work in peace, so you have to find the hidden places to work. One place I like is the class near the exit door at Gate 2. (Meera, essay)

**Extract 3.** At the university, my social battery gets drained because I get anxious in social situations or crowded spaces. Ideally, there would be lots of special places to retreat when I feel drained or overwhelmed but for now, I’ll settle for my secret spot on the third floor of the library. I like to shut the door behind me and feel relaxed with books and sun shining in. (Fatima, essay)

**Extract 4.** I feel a sense of privacy and comfort when attending a private library room rather than in the library itself. The cubicles in the library remind me of a video game called Persona 5 since in the game you play a character that can go to the library and sit in one of the cubicles and study there. Thus, sometimes while I am sitting in the cubicle in the library, I listen to some Persona 5 soundtracks and imagine myself being in a video game. I get into my comfort zone. (Abdulaziz, essay)

Students discussed aspects of their university experience that led them to want to escape. The most common reason for needing to escape was studying in an English-medium university, and the accompanying pressure to do well. For example, Figure 6 shows a bottom-up handwritten note pinned to a notice board in one of the university corridors on the female side. Here, a student offers emotional and moral support to fellow students by recognizing the wide range of entangled emotions experienced in the space of a semester, including sadness, happiness, anger, and pride.



**FIGURE 6** | Handwritten note of encouragement and solidarity relating to entangled emotions of studying in an English-medium university. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ijal.12704)] [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ijal.12704)]

In response to Figure 6, students commented on the Padlet that the note made them feel cared for, “seen,” and supported. Two students also commented on their levels of stress being amplified by studying through English and the value of emotional solidarity among students. Although not stated directly, these comments connect with discourses in place where neoliberal ideologies and mentalities affect EMI internationalized universities whereby values of competition, efficiency, and productivity are prized, as well as English as linguistic capital.

Similarly, in the essays, Saeed commented on the need to counter the pressure and stress of studying at an EMI university by finding release, which for him was found in the games room (Extract 5). Here, the games room represented a “happy object or place” free from pressure.

**Extract 5.** The games room is a special place for me. The reason I find it special isn’t the games per se; but it’s the fact that it’s a huge ice breaker for students. I have found it is easy to make friends there. Studying in English can be draining sometimes, but when I’m in that space the pressure goes, and I get energetic again. What the area does is that it wakes you up a little, since it makes you move around and get physical. (Saeed, essay)

Overall, hidden spots, which were mainly in the library, were identified as sticky places attached to emotions such as happiness, peace, friendliness, and relaxation, whereas for many students, studying at their EMI university also represented a sticky object (Hopkyns and Gkonou 2023) that was attached to emotions of stress and pressure to succeed. This related to the larger institutional context of their neoliberal university, and indeed neoliberalism in wider society.

### 6.3 | Linguistic and Cultural Critical Awareness in the Educationscape

A third key theme to emerge included emotions attached to linguistic and cultural critical awareness in the educationscape. In the English-dominated educationscape, most signage is





**FIGURE 7** | The right to write (translingually) in the space. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jm.12704)]

bilingual (Arabic and English) or monolingual (English). When commenting on such signs on the Padlet, students pointed out that they would prefer to see more of a balance between English and Arabic. For example, Samia wrote, “There should be both Arabic and English on the sign” in response to a picture of a monolingual English sign outside the student counseling center. Students mentioned emotions of happiness, belonging, and liberation in association with Figure 7, which shows an Emirati student writing a message on a multilingual poster in the promenade. This poster and others were left out on display in the university for months after the annual “National Day” event when they were first made. Some of the languages used in Figure 7 include English, Arabic, and Kurdish with messages such as “Blessings and Gratitude to the UAE.” In a similar way to the stickiness around Dukkan, Arabic and the use of full linguistic repertoires appeared to be sticky with affect in terms of increased levels of belonging and pride in the university space.

In the essays, Lamia and Reem (Extracts 6 and 7) discussed their emotions in relation to the dominance of English in the educationscape, suggesting a better linguistic balance was needed.

**Extract 6.** I believe that the Arabic language is as important as English so it should not be neglected especially in university spaces. (Lamia, essay)

**Extract 7.** In Ras Al Khaima, where I studied, Arabic was the official language. However, it is the opposite of what is taught in Abu Dhabi. English is taught in all subjects and it's all around the university. In my opinion, Arabic should be the main language in all parts of the Emirates. They should focus on it in the future because children are now not fluent in Arabic at all. (Reem, essay)

Overall, there was recognition of the nexus between spaces, emotions, identities, and belonging. A message that “space counts” was voiced by Layla and Sumaya (Extracts 8 and 9).

**Extract 8.** The university plays a crucial role in shaping the future of the students and even seemingly small improvements in spaces can have a deep impact on the student experience. (Layla, essay)

**Extract 9.** University isn't just a place for receiving book-based education but is also a wonderland made up of different elements that affect us as students in different ways. One of the major things that can affect us is the vibes present in different locations. (Sumaya, essay)

In light of the key themes presented above, the following sections will discuss the implications of the findings in relation to existing literature before providing recommendations.

## 7 | Discussion

The findings revealed the interconnectedness between spaces and emotions, with certain places and objects evoking more intense emotions than others. When looking at *Dukkan Café* on the female side of the campus and the *Majlis* on the male side, they both represented sticky places for students due to shared histories, translanguaging, and cultural familiarity. For example, when students talk about the traditional snacks served at Dukkan Café, they express emotions of fondness and belonging, which is also evident via the long queues which regularly form outside the shop/cafe. Local and familiar food items are especially sticky with affect due to the “central role that food plays in the construction of collective identity and group membership” (Elabdali 2024, 59). Stickiness around food and other cultural objects reminds us of Badwan and Hall's (2020) study in which the Wilmslow Road in Manchester was seen as a sticky place for Muslim international students due to their familiarity with linguistic and cultural objects from childhood. In the UAE, there have been many government initiatives which aim to foster “cultural nationalism” via the preservation of cultural traditions from pre-oil-wealth days (Hopkins 2023b). Furthermore, on an international scale, UNESCO created its global “Intangible Cultural Heritage List for safeguarding” in 2003 whereby cultural spaces and practices are recorded on an ongoing basis, with the *majlis* being one such traditional space added in 2015 (Lucas 2024). However, it is not always “traditional” objects or places which automatically equate to increased belonging. As Al Mutawa (2020) points out, for many young Emiratis, so-called “superficial spaces” such as “glitzy malls” can be equally sticky with affect. This reminds us that it is important to gain students' perspectives on sticky places and objects rather than make generalized assumptions.

The key theme of “hidden places” or “a place of one's own” in the current study was also apparent in Alzeer's (2017, 1031) ethnographic study at a government university in Dubai. Alzeer's study found that female Emirati students adopted “cocooning” as a spatial practice, whereby they chose to gather in “hidden spaces under stairwells, within locker areas, and any other available hidden corners that offered seclusion and privacy.” The current study found that practices of “cocooning” or choosing hidden places, such as the library as a sticky place, were prominent with both female and male students. The library is an example of what Oldenburg (1997) calls a “third place” which is different from home (first place) and the workplace/classroom (second place).

Third places such as libraries tend to be “friendly” spaces with “semiotics of conviviality” (Wee and Goh 2020). When describing the desire or need to retreat to a friendly and peaceful third place, the students’ mentioned a “rollercoaster of emotions” (Gkonou et al. 2020) experienced in relation to studying in an English-medium university. These findings relate to the notion of EMI as a sticky object attached to success and capital (Hopkins and Gkonou 2023) or the pressure to succeed. When students do not feel “expected emotions” of accomplishment and success in their university (feeling rules) there may be increased tension in the form of emotional labor as well as emotional entanglement. Such emotional entanglement was also apparent through students’ desire to see more of a linguistic balance between English and Arabic in the English-medium university educationscape.

The importance of students’ showing critical awareness around how to make the university fit their own linguistic and cultural identities, was voiced in relation to “the right to write” in the space or “talk back to the LL” (Shohamy 2019) as “LL-actors” (Troyer 2023) or interactants. The desire to make changes in the LL was seen through the notion of Arabic as a sticky object attached to emotions of belonging and pride. This reminds us of the Saudi Arabian teacher journals in Etherington et al.’s (2020) study where using Arabic in the English-medium context brought teachers and students together via shared linguistic belonging in the space. Finally, a key message to come from the current study is the importance students place on objects and places within their educationscape. As pointed out by students, the university experience is “not just about receiving a book-based education” which solely occurs within classroom walls but rather the wider university ecology and landscape needs to be considered.

## 8 | Conclusion

This article has explored the educationscape of an Abu Dhabi English-medium university through an ethnographic approach to linguistic landscaping and the analysis of essays on sticky places and objects in the university relating to emotions. Based on the findings, two practical suggestions can be made. First, to raise awareness of the connection between emotions and educationscapes through the lens of nexus analysis, it is necessary to embrace current directions in linguistic landscaping research put forward by Shohamy and Pennycook (2022) which include considering interaction order, semiotics, discourses in place, and historical body (Hult 2014; Scollon and Scollon 2004). Furthermore, it is important to use the LL as a pedagogical opportunity in terms of raising critical awareness of multilingualism and belonging in educational spaces and the wider environment (Shohamy 2019; Shohamy and Pennycook 2023). By involving students and other stakeholders in the analysis of their educationscapes, awareness can be raised as to larger underlying issues such as the legacy of colonialism, linguistic hierarchies, and EMI as a sticky object attached to neoliberal pressures to succeed.

Second, the importance of considering the interplay and entanglements of emotions and whole university ecosystems needs to be recognized rather than narrowly focusing on how emotions relate to teaching and learning within classroom walls. Along with the “critical trans era” (Fang et al. 2022) in classrooms, translingual identities can be more actively promoted in uni-

versity spaces via awareness raising and the agentic shaping of spaces by stakeholders, with the purpose of empowering translingual and transcultural identities. Equally, recognition of the stickiness of certain objects and places can help shape the environment for increased belonging. For example, inclusion of more “happy objects/places” and culturally and linguistically responsive objects/places would positively affect the student experience. For sustainable education in today’s post-digital and post-humanist world it is vital to explore stakeholders’ intersecting emotions as they relate to social, linguistic, and political power structures. In this sense, the focus should not only be on students and teachers *doing* well but also *being* well in EMI and language learning contexts (Hillman et al. 2023). In other words, an affective educational environment is an effective one.

To conclude, although the recommendations made above are relevant to a range of contexts, the study itself took place in just one university in the UAE and therefore findings, which are specific to a particular location and time, cannot be generalized. Further research can build upon the current study by investigating how sticky objects and places influence emotions and belonging in a wider range of English-medium educationscapes, especially outside Western, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic (WEIRD) contexts and with regard to stakeholders’ agency, for a more comprehensive picture.

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## Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## Peer Review

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://publons.com/publon/10.1111/ijal.12704>

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