

## Arab Women's Self-Performance on Instagram

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### Abstract

This study investigates self-perception and self-branding on Instagram among young Arab women in the UAE, focusing on how they curate, negotiate and perform their digital identities and whether their digital self-presentation in any way compromises their sense of authenticity. The study is based on 11 interviews with young women in the UAE, between the ages of 20 and 30, in addition to online observation to follow the participants' activities on Instagram. The study demonstrates that while social and digital media platforms may play a role in "empowering" Arab women, women tend to set their boundaries of authenticity shaped according to their audience's expectations and their in-groups. This confirms the role of collectivist culture in the Arab cultural context, where women may feel more scrutinized than men.

**Keywords:** Instagram, Arab women, UAE, Digital Identity, self-presentation.



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## Introduction

Digital communication platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram are now a crucial part of everyday communication, with over %58 of the world's population using them for various purposes, such as connecting with others, sharing information, or creating content for self-promotion (Dixon, 2022). These platforms have changed how people present themselves and engage with others, with self-perception, body image, and self-esteem being common points of comparison (Franchina & Lo Coco, 2018, p. 6; Hogan, 2014, p. 387). However, some users, especially young people, may be vulnerable to the adverse effects of social media, as they may feel compelled to present an idealized version of themselves when comparing themselves to others on the platform.

This study investigates self-perception and self-branding on Instagram among young Arab women in the UAE, where the proliferation of social media is particularly high, with ca. %99 of the population active on social media (GMI, 2021). Instagram is chosen because it has a predominantly female user base (Hurley, 2021b), and it is very popular in the Arab region, such as the UAE, where there are nearly 7 million Instagram users (out of the almost 10 million residents) in the UAE alone, posting a variety of visual material (Willard & Tariq, 2021, pp. 210–211; GMI, 2021). Instagram's stories can also be saved and thus can retain a sense of immediacy (Hurley, 2019, p. 2). Such images and stories can also be highly scripted and staged. This study explores how Arab women in the UAE use Instagram to curate, negotiate and perform their digital identities. The UAE is characterized by its high rate of females in tertiary education, and the UAE government has allocated massive resources to increase women's participation in public and private ventures (Zaid et al., 2021, p. 200). In addition, the focus on women is deliberate because they are expected to comply with a different behavior set than Arab men, whether online or offline. For instance, Hurley (Hurley, 2021, p. 11) argues that Arab societies actively discourage women from revealing their faces and bodies online, which restricts women's modes of self-representation online. Although many Arab women have gained fame as social media influencers (Hurley, 2019, p. 3), their digital self-representations may be detached from their offline reality. On the other hand, a few recent studies (e.g., Zaid et al., 2021) have validated the empowering influence of social media on Arab women, identifying social media as a liberating force.

This study contributes to the emerging literature about the impact of social media on real-world identity formation among women, focusing on women in the UAE. It asks how these women construct their digital identities on Instagram, how they negotiate their digital self-perception versus offline constrictions, and whether their digital self-presentation in any way compromises their sense of authenticity.

The article unfolds as follows: the following section provides an overview of key studies about Arab women's increasing visibility online, followed by a brief discussion of the study's theoretical framework, anchored in Goffman's dramaturgical theory. The subsequent sections present the methods of analysis and the main findings focusing on the concepts of front versus backstage behavior, including how women manage their performance online according to the target audience and whether these self-management techniques are perceived as inauthentic by the participants.

### **Arab women's digital visibility**

The Arab Gulf states, with their high penetration of social media, represent a good case study of how Arab women in conservative societies manage their digital self-presentation. There is an emerging body of literature exploring some aspects of this theme. For instance, Guta & Karolak (2015) investigated how young Saudi women utilize social media to express themselves and negotiate their identities. They argue that the privacy protection feature allowing users to hide their identity provides these women the freedom to negotiate the boundaries imposed by their society. Also, some women only use nicknames or first names or conceal personal details to avoid being recognized. Moreover, Al-Kandari et al. (2017) investigated gender differences in using Instagram, arguing that men and women users utilize Instagram for entertainment, but female users rarely disclose personal information or use private pictures on Instagram. This finding is confirmed in the study by Zaid et al. (2021), which argued that female college students in UAE complied with stereotypical gender signifiers such as style, color, and mannerisms. Alsaggaf (2019) examined the experiences of Saudi women on social media and argued that women's identities were embedded in gendered and tightly controlled networks of multiple audiences (real and imagined). This network of audiences has defined boundaries as a means of control by setting benchmarks for the performance of women's digital identities. A recent study Ben Ali & Moussa (2022) showed that Young Emirati social media influencers construct their identity on Instagram, drawing on two themes: traditional versus global identity, such as using the Hijab to highlight traditional Arabic identity while promoting a sense of cosmopolitan identity through pictures of travel across the world. Emirati users also tend to use social media to

promote a defensive self-presentation based on seeking social approval and acquisitive representation based on an active search for social status (Alzara & Moussa, 2020). Alsaggaf (2015) points out that Arab users idealize the self on social media by disclosing some (undesirable) aspects of their offline identity to create a false impression. According to Alsaggaf (2015), users idealize the self by exaggerating the truth (boosting identity) without exhibiting an entirely false image of themselves by posting edited photos or posts about (unreal) extravagant lifestyles.

The above studies point to Arab women's perception of authenticity on digital platforms as being an important factor in managing what to post online, in contrast to women users in other countries where, for example, photo editing is largely accepted as an impression management technique (Harris & Bardey, 2019, p. 3). However, a few recent studies paint a different picture: for instance, Hurley (2019) argues that female Arab influencers in the Gulf region were perceived as authentic even when they promoted plastic surgery or had unconventional appearances, such as dying their hair blue.

Non-Western female online presence is still a nascent field of research, and there is a need for more studies on how Arab women present and perform themselves on digital platforms (Hurley, 2019; 2021). For example, there is a need to explore women users' perception and use of authenticity, whether it is perceived as a means to gain popularity (Faleatua, 2018) or whether there is a disconnect between authenticity on social media and real life, how women perceive their imagined audience (DeVito et al., 2018; Duffy & Chan, 2018), and how they engage in social comparisons with other users (Latif et al., 2021). This study aims to contribute to this growing literature. It also responds to the call of Zaid et al. (2021) for additional research using qualitative methodology to gauge the UAE citizens' experiences of gendered identities and self-representation.

### Women in the UAE

Women in the GCC states are better educated than ever before, defying the (Western) stereotype of the oppressed Arab woman, fit only to the role of a housewife and mother (Al-Malki et al., 2012). The UAE, in particular, has witnessed a massive expansion in the educational opportunities afforded to women who have also penetrated all sectors of the labor market, from serving as teachers to ministers and even fighter pilots (Ridge, 2014, pp. 69–60). Moreover, the UAE government has provided women unprecedented access to leadership positions (Ridge, 2014, p. 166), or what is called "state feminism" (AlMutawa, 2020, p. 32). State feminism refers to the UAE government's advocacy for women to participate in the labor market, as entrepreneurs, and in governmental positions. Nonetheless, women's

leadership does not rule out traditional women's roles, such as the primary caregivers (AlMutawa, 2020, p. 39). Some scholars (Dhaheri, 2009) warn that women's progress may be fashioned according to a patriarchal image to reflect a progressive and modern nation-state. Thus, if the changes are not initiated at the grassroots level, they may lead to superficial changes (Dhaheri, 2009, p. 271).

The state modernization plans have stirred a debate about what constitutes an authentic Emirati identity. For instance, the state discouraged women's use of burqa or face masks while presenting the burqa as part of the cultural heritage of the UAE (Goto, 2021, p. 86). However, a new modern face mask emerged that only covers the nose while showing large parts of the face. Such a modern face mask, proliferated on Instagram, was met with negative comments as an inauthentic representation of Emirati heritage, which illustrates how the perception of what constitutes an authentic Emirati identity is in flux and constant modification (Goto, 2021).

Moreover, the new generation of Emiratis, who has experienced the cosmopolitan nature of the UAE, studying in Western-styled universities, and being digital-savvy, is constantly shaping and reshaping their subjectivities. This form of bottom-up construction of identity is evident in glitzy shopping malls spread across the whole country, as well as in the digital sphere (Alexander & Mazzucco, 2021). Popular culture in the UAE provides examples of this bottom-up representation, as it tends to reflect a continuous negotiation of gendered identities, such as the meaning of modest fashion and the hijab style suitable for everyday attire (AlMaazmi, 2021).

Finally, recent research about Emirati women tends to challenge the binary dualism of modernity/tradition in interpreting women's rising visibility in all social domains (AlMutawa, 2020, p. 39; James, 2020, p. 24; Ridge, 2014, p. 74). A recent study (James, 2020) argues that Emirati women's quotidian practices demonstrate how women's subjectification is being constructed. For instance, female university students tend to navigate multiple subjective positions molded by state feminism (AlMutawa, 2020) as well as other societal dynamics, including urbanism and cultural norms (James, 2020). In so doing, women configure their space within their families, workplace, and society, giving rise to contradicting subjectivities.

This study zooms in on one quotidian cultural practice, namely posting on Instagram as a space for women users to stage a "negotiated" identity.

### Performing the self

Staging or performing oneself online can be traced using semiotics (Hurley, 2021b, p. 7) to analyze women's self-presentation, exploring the connotative meanings behind the images on Instagram, and interpreting the links between the signs and objects. This study, however, will focus on the women users themselves

while applying Goffman's dramaturgical theory to explain how women users portray themselves and what they seek to communicate in these presentations concerning identity, status, and behavior. Goffman's scholarship is still relevant in the era of digital platforms, which afford a new stage to perform oneself, and thus online identity is relevant for analyzing modern self-presentation (Schulman, 2022, p. 26). Here, Goffman's scholarship can provide the tools to examine staging and performing identities as a process that begins backstage with preparations of the ideal images to post online, through performing oneself on the frontage; and this process is shaped by the audience's instant feedback and judgment. Goffman's approach argues that people only portray a portion of themselves through performances determined by the context of the situation and the audience (Merunková & Šlerk, 2019, p. 251). As such, there is a sense of increasing stigmatization online because "there is more capacity for others to exercise control over the means that people use for self-presentation in online contexts" (Schulman, 2022, p. 36).

Goffman (1959, p. 119) introduced the concepts of 1) frontstage versus backstage behavior and 2) audience segregation. The former concept refers to the view that behavior varies depending on the type of audience, while the latter concept refers to the differentiation of audiences to prevent conflict and ensure conformity with the particular social environment. However, if different situations collide, conflict may occur, thereby compelling individuals to manage these conflicts by maneuvering their self-performance. Another key concept for Goffman is role distance, which refers to detaching and dissociating oneself from their role. While individuals perform different roles which comply with norms and values, they may at times intentionally distance themselves from such roles and norms by performing the opposite of what is expected of them, and they do so to distinguish themselves or attain exclusivity. This means that social interaction imposes various techniques on individuals to shape their performance to control other people's perceptions of this performance. Thus, this idea of impression management during social interactions indicates an individual attempt to depict an "ideal" self by representing a better image of oneself in the presence of others.

Social media have changed how individuals present themselves to others while facilitating selective self-presentation (Manago et al., 2008, p. 454; Robards & Bennet, 2011, p. 309; Walther et al., 2009, pp. 242–243). For instance, (Sukmayadi & Yahya, 2019) interviewed 30 Instagram influencers to examine how they managed their self-impressions online, and they argued that users' internal motivations for using Instagram center around their desire to express their emotions and opinions. The users' external motivation, moreover, centers on the audience's expectations and the platform's popularity. This suggests that digital impression management may reflect the user's desire for self-validation and self-worth (Chambers, 2018, p. 126). Users are also motivated to represent their "ideal" self online, and therefore there may be a disparity between online and offline persona (Harris & Bardey, 2019, p. 9; Stewart & Clayton, 2022, p. 7), manifested, for instance, in manipulating

online photos (Faleatua, 2018, p. 730; Qui et al., 2015, p. 447; Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020). This manipulation of self-presentation, however, may have negative consequences on women users in conservative societies where women may end up reinforcing gender stereotypes instead of subverting them.

This study continues the above debate focusing on Arab women in the UAE, operationalizing Goffman's concepts of front-stage behavior, audience segregation, and role distance.

### Methodology

The study is based on qualitative mixed methods (interviews and observations), which involve collecting data in the participants' settings while using inductive approaches to build themes and interpret meanings arising from the data. For this, the study explores the users' lived experiences to understand how users perform their identities online. It is to be noted that qualitative studies on this topic are relatively scarce, particularly in the UAE context. (Alsaggaf, 2015, p. 55) notes that using observation as a tool for data collection has also been limited in Muslim-majority countries such as the Arab region, especially if women are included as research participants. This study, therefore, will utilize observations as one method to understand the perceptions and lived experiences of Arab women in the UAE with regard to their self-representation on Instagram. In addition, interviews were carried out with a sample of Arab women in the UAE aged between 20 and 30. Sampling criteria included that the participants should have active Instagram accounts, and post comments and photos regularly on these accounts. In terms of sampling, the target was to recruit female users who were willing to share their Instagram profiles and share candid conversations about their accounts. Although the number of potential participants is large, given the proliferation of social media in the UAE, it is not always possible to recruit women users without a referral. This means that a level of trust is necessary to initiate contact, and the first author used her network of contacts to gain access to willing participants. Thus, a personal network was utilized to identify willing participants since the goal was not to generalize but to understand underlying presumptions and behaviors (Marshall, 1996, p. 523; Miller & Bell, L., 2012, p. 63). The snowball sampling method was used, as it works best when trust is needed to initiate contact (Atkinson, R & Flint, J., 2001, p. 2). The participants then included women from diverse demographic backgrounds, including different nationalities, marital and employment statuses, and levels of Instagram usage. The sampling criteria were limited to young women in the UAE aged between 18 and 30 years who were active users of Instagram (consistently posting something on their Instagram account at least twice a week). All participants were residents of UAE whose posts included photos, videos, and comments on multiple spheres of life, including healthy eating, fitness and exercise, politics, religious and inspirational quotes, and fashion, among others.

In total, the study recruited 11 participants, and they all were recruited from the Emirate of Sharjah, known as the cultural city of the UAE. Pseudonyms were used

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to conceal the participants' real names, and participants were all sent a formal letter of consent stating the purpose of the research and their involvement. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants and the size of their followers on Instagram. The youngest participant was 20 and the oldest 27; they have different Arab nationalities and professional backgrounds, as indicated in Table 1. Participants' number of followers varies, ranging from 65 to well over 106,000 followers, which provides an opportunity to explore potential variations based on the number of followers. Three participants were Syrian, three were Emirati, and the remaining five represented various nationalities (Algerian, Kuwaiti, Jordanian, and Palestinian). Only two participants are married, and the remaining are single; in terms of employment, three are unemployed, three are employed, and the remaining five are university students.

**Table 1 – overview of participants**

Identifier	Age	Profession	Nationality	No. of followers	Public or private account
Participant 1	26	Unemployed	Syrian	65	Private
Participant 2	26	Employed	Emirati	360	Private
Participant 3	27	Employed	Syrian	106,000	Public
Participant 4	20	Student	Palestinian	338	Private
Participant 5	28	Unemployed	Emirati	1,853	Public
Participant 6	24	Unemployed	Algerian	324	Public
Participant 7	26	Student	Kuwaiti	191	Private
Participant 8	22	Student	Emirati	1,590	Public
Participant 9	25	Student	Jordanian	390	Private
Participant 10	27	Employed	Yamani	232	Private
Participant 11	24	Student	Syrian	1,082	Public

In addition to interviews, which lasted between 40 and 60 minutes each, online observation was utilized to follow the participants' activities on Instagram and use this knowledge during the interviews. Observations examined how the participants presented themselves online (through comments and images) and interacted with their followers. The semi-structured interviews were used to gain insight into the participants' views, perceptions, and experiences (Pickering, 2008, p. 70; Seale et al., 2007, p. 16). Interviews were conducted in Arabic, the participants' native language and they were transcribed and analyzed manually to identify themes. Given the limited number of participants, the process of data analysis was not cumbersome, as it allowed for several rounds of readings of transcripts before arriving at a set of themes relating to self-presentation, participants' perception of their authenticity



online, and their perception of their audience's expectations.

In summary, the study is limited to active Instagram users aged between 20 and 30 years in UAE, and it is limited to only 11 participants. The findings, therefore, are not generalizable to a larger sample, nor is it representative of the whole UAE. Nonetheless, the study contributes to the nascent literature on Arab women's use of digital platforms, especially in a well-connected society like the UAE. It is also important to note that this study is exploratory, hence the small sample size compared to quantitative studies. However, the sample size is sufficient to provide rich and in-depth information relevant to my research questions. To minimize sampling bias in such an exploratory study, a mix of qualitative methods (namely interviews and observations) was used. This allowed the focus on getting insights relevant to the research questions such as "online identity," "ideal self," and "impression management." In addition, to validate the identified themes, the first author returned to some participants, as needed, to verify the identified themes and probe for further answers. The authors also depended on peer debriefing by discussing the themes and the resultant analysis between them. Throughout the analysis process, we strived to ensure consistency in reviewing the themes and codes. The authors acknowledged that maintaining objectivity while assessing the findings from a phenomenological exploration is a difficult task. Also, the use of raw quotes from the interview transcripts further provided objectivity to the study. Finally, in line with Alsaggaf (2015), we used the constant comparison method to identify patterns across all data.

The following sections provide a succinct discussion of the emerging themes corresponding to Goffman's concepts of frontstage/backstage behavior focusing on the participants seeking validation and approval from their followers, participants' segregation of their audience according to their perception of their followers' expectations, and participants' perception of their authentic self and how they manage self-presentation online.

### Getting validated online

Most participants agreed when asked whether digital platforms like Instagram afforded women a new sense of empowerment. For instance, one participant referred to a woman bodybuilder who used to get criticism for posting images of herself practicing, but the critical comments eventually subsided:

There is the account of the bodybuilder @kikiforcrossfit. I remember when she first started posting about her activities, she got backlash for doing something which was used to be reserved for men only. However, those comments only

lasted for a short while, and now, I feel like Instagram has opened the door for people to post what they like without the need to stick to a certain stereotype (Participant 1, Emirati).

Similarly, another participant said.

The presence of Instagram in our lives gave us the freedom to change the stereotypical idea of women as interested only in cooking [...] There are a variety of profiles that show that women have other interests which may seem untypical, like climbing mountains and other adventures (participant 8, Emirati).

Also, for Participant 5 (Emirati), Instagram and other digital platforms have given Emirati women the opportunity to present an image that breaks the stereotype about women in Gulf societies,

It helped change the stereotypical idea about Emirati mothers, so they are not just housewives raising children and taking care of their husbands. This mold is breaking. Ten years ago, I accompanied my mother for her medical treatment in the USA, and when the doctors saw us, they did not know about the UAE. They thought we were still riding camels and were surprised that we could speak English.

On the other hand, one participant was critical of how Instagram reinforced the stereotype of Arab women as only interested in beauty instead of celebrating women's professional successes. This participant said,

I think Instagram reinforces the stereotype that [Arab] women have to appear in a certain way, as most of their pictures are perfect, with women trying to break away from the Western image of Arab women (Participant 3, Syrian).

The above comments resonate with the postfeminist discourse that insists on women's choice to claim power over their own image in whatever way makes them feel good (Gill, 2003). In this sense, women's visibility becomes a tangible tactic to brand oneself as free through, for instance, using images that highlight certain features, such as wearing hijab versus Western clothing. However, Emirati participants, in particular, stated that they had to abide by the "public taste." For example, Participant 5 (Emirati), with over 1,800 followers, states that she willingly chooses not to add posts or images that do not comply with "public taste,"

I do not put my picture as a courtesy to my family. My parents are conservative, and our family has privacy. So, I do not write my full name, and I always consider three criteria before posting anything. It must be suitable for public taste, so I do not post insults or jokes to everyone because many people know

who I am, and I do not post personal information, my picture, or someone from the family, and I do not talk about political matters.

Another participant (Participant 1, Syrian) who has a far modest number of followers, namely fewer than 100 followers, shares a similar view, but she, unlike Participant 5 (Emirati), defines herself as a “passive user,” saying, “I prefer to watch not participate. I can hide the stuff that I do not want to show to others”.

Moreover, participants felt the need to “manage” their self-presentation online, especially those who kept their accounts mostly private for family and friends, as they felt more pressured to maintain a self-managed persona to avoid embarrassing their family. For instance, Participant 2 (Emirati) confirms that her online persona is quieter than her offline self, given that her Instagram account is private,

My online character is more reserved and quieter, as I am careful with how I use my social media accounts... I would say my online character contradicts my real-life nature. In real life, I am more open, and I share more details. But online, I am much quieter. My posts just show my interests and the places I visit. It just shows the exterior of me as a person. I usually avoid posting too much personal information. I am not comfortable with having details about me posted online for everyone to see.

For these women, it is important not to post daring images or comments but to show a positive image of oneself. As Instagram is a visual platform, participants need to post pictures of their activities but not necessarily close-up photos or selfies, which are usually meant to inflate certain qualities (Livingstone, 2008). In fact, selfies are not essentially a reflection of women's confidence since they are produced with certain cultural codes in mind. For instance, women make selfies that often conform to cultural norms of beauty, decency, and social norms, which may mean a dissonance between the representation of oneself as one wishes versus conforming to social codes (Tiidenberg & Cruz, 2015, pp. 17–19). One example is Participant 5 (Emirati), who avoids posting selfies or images that show her entire body, “I like to show only a part of myself, for example, my hand or part of my clothes. I can also mention where I am but not the detailed location.”

Also, for Participant 10 (Yemini), who has nearly 300 followers, selfies are rather “unprofessional,” or as she put it, “I used to post selfies, but I deleted them because I saw that they were not professional and inappropriate. I see no one posting selfies as regular posts on Instagram, only in the story.” Although her account is private, she still cares about posting positive and enhanced images because,

I think that looking good is very important, and sometimes people's

appreciation of you is based on your good looks, especially on a platform like Instagram, which is based on idealism, whether in outer appearance or in showing off personal successes.

For other participants like Participant 4 (Palestinian), with nearly 340 followers, the choice of which images to post on Instagram is not just about cultural norms but about digital literacy; this is to say, each digital platform has its norms, "I do not post selfies, because I feel that Instagram is not for selfies."

These results somewhat contradict previous studies that argue that young people are more inclined to post selfies (Qui et al., 2015). However, this is mitigated by the fact that participants are digital media-savvy in that they differentiate between the representation tactics on each platform. For instance, (Alzara & Moussa, 2020) argue that Emirati youth tend to post selfies on Snapchat, not Instagram or Facebook, because Snapchat feeds disappear once posted and viewed, which mitigates concerns about having a permanent record of those images.

Thus, participants engage in the process of self-management of their digital self, which may differ from their offline persona or what Goffman terms frontstage versus backstage performance of self. In this study, participants kept an idealized self-image in order to convey a positive message to their followers. The above comments also indicate the users' propensity for self-management. One such self-management technique is to control one's emotions online, which means refraining from posting a photo of oneself crying, for instance, because it may send a negative message, would not meet the audience's expectations, or reconcile with the image of modern Arab women. One example is Participant 4 (Palestinian), who stressed her dismay at women posting images showing their emotional state, "I have a friend who posted about herself coming out of an exam, and she was crying. She can do so in a private account if everyone knows her, but not in a public account." Similarly, Participant 3 (Syrian) states that she would never post an image of herself crying because "social media is only one part of reality, but a bigger part is still invisible."

This means that digital self-presentation is based on highlighting positive rather than negative traits in oneself (Barta & Andalibi, 2021, p. 3). Such positive traits may include presenting oneself as more attractive, happier, and more powerful than in offline settings, which instead reinforces a positivity bias. This is why the above participants rejected showing emotions on Instagram, indicating that this is a rather negative (backstage) behavior, especially if one's account is public and accessible to strangers.

The above extracts also illustrate Goffman's idea of impression management by 1) controlling the images posted on Instagram, and 2) keeping a semi-professional

image, especially in case the Instagram account is made public. However, participants also revealed that their posts are very dependent on the audience's expectations, which can also lead to reproducing normative identities and relations (Banet-Weiser, 2011, p. 14), making the self-branding process not a mere self-presentation but a constructed, tightly managed, and staged performance. This is evident, for instance, in using emojis depending on one's audience. Participant 10 (Yemeni), for one, chooses not to use emojis with male followers, "I rarely use emojis with male followers, and if I do, they will be selected emojis whose meanings cannot be exaggerated. So I only use hearts if I am conversing with girls." Another participant (Participant 3, Syrian) said she would use emojis only with friends.

In contrast, other participants segregate their audience, not only according to their relationship with their audience (friends versus strangers) or gender but also by age. For instance, Participant 4 (Palestinian) states that she would not use emojis with the elderly but only with followers of her age. Likewise, Participant 5 (Emirati), with over 1,800 followers, states that she would not use emojis with the elderly, especially if they were Emiratis, lest she would be misunderstood. Finally, although Participant 6 (Algerian) agrees with not using emojis with older users, she went on to confirm that Instagram is only for "positive and happy" posts adding that sometimes "the HR monitor private accounts, I have a friend who applied for a job but her application was rejected because of something she wrote on Twitter which the company did not approve of."

In summary, women's self-branding on digital platforms is regarded as a postfeminist mode of expressing oneself and gaining attention and validation (Banet-Weiser, 2011, p. 15), but this is shaped according to their audience's expectations which are often based on personal judgment. These expectations can contribute to participants' agency in that they can constrain women's performance online according to cultural norms and what is acceptable for Arab and Muslim women. Thus, audiences have a pivotal role in shaping the participants' self-image as staged on their Instagram accounts. Moreover, participants' digital literacy is also noteworthy as they are fully aware of users' filtering techniques on Instagram, and they even express knowledge of the different tactics used by users according to which platform they post their photos. This means that the audience's expectations may hamper the idea of being "authentic" online.

### Being authentic

Authenticity is a social construct as it may mean different things to different people (AlMutawa, 2019, p. 213). It is a process that individual participants can produce, stage, and perform. Authenticity, therefore, depends on individual

interpretation; for instance, most participants interpret authenticity as a form of self-managing one's image and not necessarily synonymous with unfiltered images. Thus, a user can filter her image but still believe that she has reflected an authentic version of herself. Images on Instagram, however, can be highly staged and doctored to attract more attention, compared, for instance, to Snapchat, where users may post animations or unfiltered images (Grindstaff & Torres Valencia, 2021). On the other hand, authenticity can also refer to one's ownership of one's narrative and self-presentation, even if this image is not of an idyllic self (Pramiyanti et al., 2022). Authenticity, then, can be understood as an idealization of oneself or "fantastical identity performances" (Hurley, 2019, p. 1) or in managing one's emotions, as illustrated in the above examples, where emotion management was praised for maintaining the image of a confident woman. Thus, posting an image of oneself crying is seen as an undesirable act of sharing one's vulnerability with followers and not a reflection of "authentic" behavior.

As active participants in shaping their image on Instagram, the participants engage in the process of self-branding, driven to act as "entrepreneurial producers" of their own image, aligning with the postfeminist narrative of a "can-do" girl (Faleatua, 2018, p. 721). One example is Participant 2 (Emirati), who admits to posting images that do not reflect her true lifestyle,

I feel like people who know me in real life may find the images I post contradict who I am. For example, sometimes I would not eat healthy food but post that I am at the gym, or I would sometimes post a du'a [prayer], which may contradict my religious identity because I don't wear a hijab [veil]... I feel like Instagram is used mainly to show how people live and not who they are, so I don't think it is a way for others to show their authentic selves. Even if some people use it for that purpose, I don't believe it can be true because it's impossible to know how authentic a person is through random pictures here and there.

Participant 10 (Syrian) agrees that being authentic online is rather difficult due to the positivity bias which characterizes social media, calling Instagram "the platform of fakeness,"

I see Instagram as a platform of fakeness, as it forces people to appear in a certain way. Few people manage to stay outside this mold, and very few post spontaneously on Instagram. Often it is the ideal and perfect character that is very visible, whether in beauty, dress or lifestyle. For example, we do not see girls posting pictures wearing the same dress more than once. I think because Instagram imposed this template and everyone follows it, few

people come out of this template, so people will be afraid to show their true colors because of bullying, for example, or because they think they will lose followers' interest. This fakeness, in my opinion, is more than modifying a picture or wearing exaggerated makeup [...] It is about marketing oneself as possessing traits that do not exist or showing a lifestyle that one does not live or only lived for a day, although it may appear to people that this reflects one's normal lifestyle. It is also about posting the opposite of what one feels. For example, one can feel sad but post something expressing that she is happy or post a comment which does not reflect her true personality or a comment about what she aspires to be, not what she really is now [...] But this is not her true self.

Most participants are fully aware of the need to exaggerate one's image as part of self-management and as a condition of presenting a digital self, even if it does not reflect one's actual lifestyle. For instance, Participant 2 (Emirati) acknowledges the culture of "editing" on Instagram in order to be socially accepted.

While I prefer authentic posts, I believe editing images to make them more presentable on social media is what followers would want to see, as it would reflect perfection and become more presentable for social media [use]. This influences women to edit their photos or stick to a certain image, such as having a curvy body with a good complexion and getting trendy clothes that other users wear. I believe this happens because of the need to be socially accepted or, in some way, digitally accepted by other users.

Participant 1 (Syrian) adds that posting unfiltered images and spontaneous posts on Instagram is "mission impossible,"

I think that %99.9 of people edit their photos, wear makeup and apply filters. They try to show the best of their lives. They also want to emphasize certain traits like beauty, success, optimism, and excellence. Being authentic on social media is mission impossible because it includes not using filters too often and showing one's [true] feelings.

The above extracts demonstrate that self-representation can be divided into the actual self, the ideal self, and the possible self (Chayko, 2021, p. 115), with users inclined to edit and filter their images as well as texts on digital platforms in order to appear more positive rather than negative. Also, the above examples show that youth do not only attribute authenticity to unfiltered content (Cover, 2023, p. 154), as authenticity, for most participants, seems to also center on self-management and controlling one's emotions. Authenticity is produced through discourses and narratives that contribute to favoring certain behavior and attitudes over others. It

can also relate to being true to one's beliefs and cultural norms, and a breach of such norms can be seen as inauthentic.

Notably, the participants approve of using filters as a natural requirement to socialize online. For instance, Participant 3 (Syrian), with well over 100,000 followers, confirms that she likes "photos to be beautiful and not random" as she carefully checks every image before posting. She attributes this tendency to the nature of Instagram,

Instagram promotes this culture [of filtering]. For example, we see that all the pictures are modified and perfect, so we have to post altered images too. Instagram has a filter feature, which means if you take a picture of yourself, there is already a filter to choose from, which makes it very easy. Instagram strengthens this feature [of filtering] because if we go back to Facebook, for example, there was no filtering ... But it has become like social pressure, especially if the account is public, and if a girl posts a picture without modification, she may receive negative comments or be exposed to bullying. The better the image is, the more vibrant and professional it is, and the more likely it will receive more attention.

Attracting attention is indeed one important feature even for participants whose follower base is somewhat limited, like Participant 6 (Algerian), who referred to one post that got her 300 likes as an example of a successful post. However, she was also somewhat critical of other women who use filters to comply with "foreign" beauty standards, or as she said, "Some women enlarge their lips or make their noses appear smaller, as they want to imitate Western beauty standards."

Finally, it is notable that some posts of the above participants were in a mix of English and Arabic, and when conducting the interviews, many provided answers in a blend of the two languages without reflecting on the authenticity of expressing themselves in a foreign language. This was their way of highlighting their international outlook and education and a way to manage their performance even during regular offline conversations.

In summary, participants use self-presentation tactics on Instagram to increase attention and attract new followers (Marwick, 2015). The tactics follow the logic of attention economy to increase online visibility, often by emulating elements from celebrity culture which often lead to (re)producing the same offline status hierarchy of popularity in the digital sphere. Authenticity, then, is based on one's interactions with their own experience and behaviors (Barta & Andalibi, 2021, p. 5). It is, above all, a self-reflective experience (Vannini & Franzese, 2008, p. 1621).



## Conclusion

The study investigates how women in the UAE perform their identity through self-presentation on Instagram, how they brand themselves, their authenticity, and how online social comparison affects their identity construction and self-perception. Instagram, and other digital platforms, offer a new cultural space for self-branding due to their capacity for self-performance and interaction with followers. This study shows how the use of Instagram compels women users to present an “ideal” image of the self, and their unique interpretation of authenticity, which may have different connotations in the UAE, ranging from accepting a glitzy and glamorous lifestyle to embracing a mixed ideal of global and local elements (AlMutawa, 2019).

The above analysis also shows that self-branding is a constructed concept shaped according to participants' views of what their audience expects, such as having a polite, professional, and self-managed persona. Here, being professional and well-mannered are the participants' tactics to reflect their idealized selves (Alsaggaf, 2015). Furthermore, online self-presentation among Emirati and other Arab nationals seems heavily influenced by culture, religion, and gender roles. This is particularly true for Emirati users who feel more obliged to comply with cultural norms than other Arab users. On the other hand, limiting the details provided online may also mean less exposure to people who harbor different views, as expressed by Participant 2 (Emirati).

In summary, the digital sphere has granted Arab women the space to interact with other users worldwide and an opportunity to counter stereotypes of Arab and Gulf women. For instance, Emirati women see digital platforms as a space to showcase their progress, thereby countering Western stereotypes about Gulf women (Al-Malki et al., 2012). However, it cannot be concluded that social and digital media platforms play a role in “empowering” Arab women (e.g. Odine, 2013). As this research demonstrates, women tend to set their own boundaries of authenticity shaped according to their audience's expectations and their in-groups (Pramiyanti et al., 2022). This confirms the role of collectivistic culture in the Arab cultural context (Joseph, 2005), as illustrated in the above examples. True, women's narratives on digital platforms reflect a new form of empowerment as they can express themselves and voice their views. However, women's increasing visibility on social media could, conversely, reduce women's power to be themselves, especially if they feel constantly scrutinized and misunderstood (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Thus, although women users on Instagram have the potential to brand and express their identity as their own “project of the self” (Giddens, 1991, p. 9), this project is often constrained by a set of cultural codes and norms. Future studies can also compare

the potential of self-expression across different digital platforms (Waterloo et al., 2018), especially with regard to the expression of intense emotions, to explore how digital platforms afford women a cultural space that is still constrained by what audiences expect.

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## أداء المرأة العربية على موقع إنستغرام

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### مستخلص

**الهدف:** تبحث هذه الدراسة في استخدامات موقع إنستغرام بين الشابات العربيات في الإمارات العربية المتحدة ، مع التركيز على كيفية قيامهن بالتعبير عن هوياتهن الرقمية وما إذا كان هناك تعارض بين هوياتهن الرقمية و هوياتهن الأصلية.

**المنهج:** تستند الدراسة إلى 11 مقابلة مع شابات في الإمارات تتراوح أعمارهن بين 20 و 30 عامًا، فضلاً عن متابعة أنشطة المشاركات على الإنستغرام.

**النتائج:** تخلص الدراسة الى أن منصات التواصل الرقمية مثل إنستغرام قد تلعب دوراً في "تمكين" المرأة العربية ، لكن المستخدمات لهذه المواقع يتفاعلن مع المحتوى وفقاً لتوقعات جمهورهن. وهذا يؤكد دور الثقافة الجماعية في السياق الثقافي العربي حيث قد تشعر المرأة بمزيد من التدقيق على هذه المواقع مقارنة بالرجل.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** إنستغرام، المرأة العربية، الإمارات العربية المتحدة، الهوية الرقمية.