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Year: 2022

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612221078795>

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-217328>

Journal Article

Published Version



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Originally published at:

Storie, Leysan; Marschlich, Sarah (2022). Identity, Social Media and Politics: How Young Emirati Women Make Sense of Female Politicians in the UAE. *International Journal of Press/Politics*, 27(4):789-807.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612221078795>

# Identity, Social Media and Politics: How Young Emirati Women Make Sense of Female Politicians in the UAE

The International Journal of Press/Politics

1–19

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DOI: 10.1177/119401612221078795

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## Abstract

Social media offered new opportunities for politicians to engage with the public. However, little research has explored public perceptions of women politicians and their role in women's empowerment, especially in non-Western contexts. This study used a qualitative methodology to explore how young Emirati women made sense of gender and other identities in their discussions of Emirati women politicians on social media. Drawing from intersectionality theory, the study looked beyond gender, exploring other identities that may play a role in Emirati women's perceptions. The results offered insights into the family and ethnic identity as they interacted with gender. The findings also highlighted the challenges of personalizing messages in a patriarchal society. This study contributes to international political communication research and practice by understanding the complexity of women's sense-making of social media and women politicians in a non-Western context.

## Keywords

social media, women, politicians, UAE, middle east, personalization, intersectionality

## Introduction

While there was consensus in previous studies that political engagement differs between men and women, more recent research has had mixed findings regarding

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the role of gender in citizens' engagement with political content and political leaders (see Vochocova et al. 2016). Vochocova et al. (2016) called for more research to analyze political engagement as a gendered action influenced by an individual's socialization, access, and opportunities, "verified by more detailed empirical data, gathered from different contexts" (p. 1333). Social media provided new opportunities to women politicians to engage with the public and stimulate political participation, especially in places where women have historically not been socially and politically active. This study sought to contribute to research on women's online political engagement by looking at identities beyond gender in a country where women have not traditionally participated in decision-making and public life.

This research focused on the United Arab Emirates (UAE), an interesting context for studying women's political engagement on social media. The role of women in Emirati society is caught between traditional values of a patriarchal culture and national efforts toward gender equality. The UAE government implemented multiple initiatives to ensure that women had equal rights. The country needs women's contributions to society. For many years, industries had to rely on international labor, which still makes up 89% of the UAE population (Central Intelligence Agency 2021). Gender equality is also important for national branding. The UAE has tried to distinguish itself from other Arab countries and to strengthen its competitiveness internationally (Allagui and Najjar 2018). However, the position of women in Emirati society is defined not only by official laws but also by sociocultural beliefs ingrained in Emirati society and by women themselves. Western feminist ideas are seen as foreign for the Emirati patriarchal and tribal society and are often met with resistance by men and women alike (Aloraimi 2011).

Most social media engagement in the UAE has been nonpolitical (e.g., Martin and Schoenbach 2016). However, social media can play a highly politicized role in the UAE (Hurley 2019). The presence of Emirati women politicians on social media created a new context for discussions about women's role in politics and in Emirati society at large. Various identities may play a role in how Emirati women make sense of social reality (e.g., Erogul et al. 2019; Whiteoak et al. 2006). This study explored the perceptions of young Emirati women with the following question:

**RQ:** How do young Emirati women make sense of Emirati women politicians' gender and other identities as communicated through politicians' messages on social media?

## **Literature Review**

### *Women Politicians in Mass media*

For many years, women politicians did not receive the same media coverage as their male counterparts in various parts of the world. In the UK, a study of the 2010

general election found that female politicians received less media attention than men (e.g., Ross et al. 2013). In Spain, news about the first female politicians focused on women's physical appearances and reinforced traditional gender stereotypes (Verge and Pastor 2018). In India, women politicians appeared less on mass media than male politicians and were framed in connection to domestic issues and personal characteristics rather than political contributions (Golder 2012). The trend was the same on Facebook: Indian news media visualized women as secondary to male candidates (Guha 2018). In Liberia, the first female president's role as a mother and grandmother was amplified, while her role as a prominent economist was downplayed (Anderson et al. 2011). Research in Arab countries, although rare, yielded similar results. Women politicians in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia were underrepresented and covered in the news more negatively than men (Ben Salem 2010).

Recent research has suggested that the media coverage of women politicians has improved in some countries (e.g., Hayes and Lawless, 2015). However, stories written about women politicians still tend to focus on their personal traits and characteristics more than articles about male politicians, even though such coverage could be beneficial for women (e.g., Brooks and Hayes, 2019).

Analysis of global media coverage of female members of parliament revealed significant differences between Western and non-Western countries (Joshi et al. 2020). Moreover, women politicians were often treated as a homogenous group, with a limited focus on other identities based on race, ethnicity, sexuality, and family background (Joshi et al. 2020). For example, a white female French presidential nominee, Arlette Laguiller, was described by the French press similarly as her male counterparts (Barnes and Larrivee 2011). However, French newspapers reinforced gender stereotypes when covering two ethnically diverse French women politicians, Rachida Dati and Najat Vallaud-Belkacem (Galy-Badenas and Gray 2020).

### *Women Politicians and Social media*

Social media provided new opportunities for women to bypass media gatekeepers and make their own decisions regarding the frequency and content of messages (see Spierings and Jacobs, 2016). Social media also provided the freedom to communicate about a variety of issues strategically, choosing whether and when to emphasize their gender identity (Kim 2012). In the U.S., female politicians were found to communicate more frequently on Twitter than male politicians (Evans et al. 2014). In Israel, women politicians generated significantly more user engagement than male politicians (Yarchi and Samuel-Azran 2018). In Sweden, women politicians focused on building a close relationship with citizens, inviting feedback on policy ideas (Åström and Karlsson 2016).

In terms of content, studies in the U.S. showed that male politicians communicated more on nonpolitical matters (i.e., their personal lives) than female politicians, who primarily focused on policy issues (e.g., Evans et al. 2014; McGregor et al. 2017). In France, women politicians also avoided private posts (i.e., about family), although they continued to post personal messages, such as photos of their weekend activities

(Frame and Brachotte 2015). Personalization of images posted by politicians played a role in how posts were shared and how much attention they received, although the findings were mixed. A study of Norwegian politicians showed that their personal posts (i.e., politicians doing ordinary things, such as skiing) received the most likes and comments (Larsson 2019). However, a similar study conducted in Singapore showed that images of a politician's public engagements more positively affected people's evaluation of his or her character than private photos (Jung et al. 2017). Gender could play a role in how personalization is perceived. In Finland, a country known for its gender-egalitarian culture, male politicians were found to benefit from professional self-personalization more than women (Lindholm et al. 2021)

In addition to providing new opportunities for women politicians, social media also served as a platform for violent messages and harassment. Messages about women politicians on blogs and social media attracted more hostility than on traditional mass media (e.g., Conroy et al. 2015). In different parts of the world, women politicians have experienced economic, physical, sexual, and cultural attacks (see Krook and Sanin, 2020). Often, violence against women politicians is cultural, when traditional beliefs and norms are used to objectify women and to justify mistreatment (Krook and Sanin 2020). For example, in Ethiopian women, politicians are discussed on Facebook as "outlaws" and a threat to religion and culture (Kassa and Sarikakis 2019).

Furthermore, a study conducted in the U.S. and Canada found that not all women were subject to online violence: Only women who significantly advanced in their political career and achieved a high status were likely to attract uncivil messages (Rheault et al. 2019). Other studies have suggested that various social identities, such as race, ethnicity, religion, and economic status, could play a role (e.g., Dhrodia, 2017; Sobieraj, 2020). In the Arab world, family background is important. In Lebanon, women politicians faced family opposition and experienced violence in the form of boycotts, ostracism from family, divorce and murder threats (O'Connell and Ramshaw 2018). The term "intersectional discrimination" was previously used to describe discrimination based on identities other than gender (Dhrodia 2017).

This study was informed by intersectionality, a concept and an analytical framework to address the gap in early feminist scholarship, which was criticized for approaching women as a homogenous group and paying little attention to race and class among women's other identities (see Golombisky, 2015). Developed by Crenshaw (1991), intersectionality acknowledged the unique experiences of women from diverse backgrounds, highlighting women's multifaceted identities. Intersectionality moved away from privileging one aspect (e.g., gender) over another (e.g., race), treating women's experiences as a result of an interplay of two or more identities at a given time in a given sociopolitical context.

Intersectionality has been examined on three levels: structural (legal and social rules that disadvantage women), political (use of race and other women's identities for political goals), and representational (Crenshaw 1991). This study focused on *representational* intersectionality, which refers to communication about women. Intersectionality theory has been used in political communication research to explore the mass media coverage of women politicians. For example, a study of women politicians in

British politics found a significant difference between the coverage of women of color and of white women politicians (Ward 2017). However, there is little understanding not only of coverage but also of how messages are interpreted by diverse publics (Hancock 2007). In digital media studies, research has suggested that social media provides better opportunities for representational intersectionality of black women in the UK than traditional media, prompting women to use social media to see women like themselves and to connect to each other (Sobande 2017). This study sought to contribute to this line of research by focusing on young women's perceptions and exploring how young Emirati women perceived politicians' intersecting identities online.

## **Contextual Background: United Arab Emirates**

The UAE is a federation of seven emirates. The emirates' rulers comprise the Federal Supreme Council, which represents the national governing body, and vote for the positions of president and vice-president every five years (Petersen 2020). There are no political parties in the UAE. The UAE Parliament, called the Federal National Council (FNC), has an advisory role and is comprised of 40 members. Initially, all members of the FNC were appointed by the rulers of each emirate. Since 2006, in an effort to modernize the government, some members have been elected by the electoral college (UAE Ministry of State for Federal National Council Affaires n.d.), with the majority of members of the electoral college being women (Petersen 2020). After the 2019 election, 7 out of 40 FNC members were women, although the UAE president called for women to take 50 percent of seats (National Elections Committee 2019). Despite many advances toward gender equality and modernization, human rights organizations raised concerns related to freedom of expression and women's rights in the UAE. Since 2011, the UAE government has arrested a number of Emiratis accused of harming national unity by advocating for political reform (Human Rights Watch 2019). In addition, the UAE's legal system was previously criticized for failing to protect women from domestic violence and for unequal marriage rights (Human Rights Watch 2019).

### ***Social media in the UAE***

The UAE has a high degree of internet penetration. According to the 2019 survey (Dennis et al. 2019), 99% percent of the population used the internet in 2019. Smartphones and social media are very common: All UAE nationals read news on their smartphones. The most common sources of news are family and friends (95%), followed by the internet in general (93%) and messaging apps such as WhatsApp (93%), social media platforms (91%), and TV (90%). The least preferred source of news is newspapers (67%). The most popular social media platforms among young internet users in the UAE in 2019 were Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter (Dennis et al. 2019). Younger people were found to use social media to read news on current affairs more than older populations (Statista n.d.).

UAE is considered to have strict social media regulations. The cybercrime law issued in 2012 (UAE Ministry of Justice 2012) prohibited various online activities, including (1) mocking or criticizing government officials, religion, or posting information that may negatively portray another person or entity; (2) posting photographs of other individuals without their consent; (3) disclosure of information that belongs to others; (4) posting information that may expose a person to public animosity; and (5) posting about activities that are not in line with Emirati morals, i.e., un-Islamic, blasphemous, and calling for sinful activities. As a result of social media regulations, self-censorship is common and has increased in recent years (Freedom House 2020).

Despite these strict regulations, Emirati men and women are active social media users, particularly youth, in both the English and Arabic languages (Breslow and Allagui 2012). Emirati women were found to be confident users of Twitter and preferred it to Facebook due to privacy concerns (Strong and Hareb 2012). Twitter allowed young Emirati women to be anonymous and to engage with anyone online without posting personal photos, which was common on Facebook. The popularity of Instagram could be explained by various visual affordances—photos, hashtags, captions, videos—that could be posted live or prepared in advance. Both Snapchat and Instagram Stories became particularly popular among Emiratis due to the limited lifetime of posts—the so-called ephemerality of content that gave young people a sense of authenticity (see Hurley 2019.)

### *Women in UAE Society*

UAE culture is traditional yet heavily influenced by the fast development that took place after the discovery of oil. Traditionally, families are the center of social life (Breslow and Allagui 2012). A family is a social institution of significant importance, with each member contributing in various ways to sustain it and improve its position in the community (Barakat 2004). Emirati culture is traditionally patriarchal, and women were historically kept out of public life for a long time until recent government initiatives to engage women in public life (Barragan et al. 2018). In 2012, it became mandatory for organizations to include women on their boards of directors.

Most women's empowerment initiatives were imposed by the government, not as a grassroots effort. Despite increased legal opportunities and support, social constraints remained. For example, it is traditionally uncommon for Emirati women to work alongside men, and cross-gender interactions (outside of families) are still seen by many as socially unacceptable (Abdallah 2015). What a woman can or cannot do largely depends on the attitudes of the family's male members (e.g., Abdallah, 2015; Barragan et al. 2018). Additionally, it is socially unacceptable for Emirati women to travel alone, and women must be accompanied by a male family member, although there are no legal restraints (e.g., Erogul et al. 2019).

Although women in the Gulf are often portrayed as oppressed, they do not necessarily subscribe to that view (Hurley 2019). Previous research misrepresented Arab women, who were often viewed through the prism of Islam and Islamic values (see Moghadam, 2008; Samier, 2015). Muslim women were presented as "religious

creatures” shaped by Islamic values without individual identities (Sonbol 2006). However, Islamic beliefs grant women the right to education and to full participation in society (Aloraimi 2011). The sources of patriarchal practices in Arab countries tend to be political and cultural rather than religious. At the same time, it is difficult to separate Emirati family values, Arab culture, and Islam, as they are closely intertwined (Williams et al. 2013).

## Method

The qualitative approach was most appropriate for this study due to the focus on sense-making and the sociocultural context. Data collection and analysis were informed by social constructivism, approaching verbal interactions as a way to construct social reality and make meaning of the world (see Woods, 1992). A qualitative approach allowed us to consider the context of the study. The context was previously defined as “structural conditions that shape the nature of situations, circumstances, or problems to which individuals respond by means of action/interaction/emotions” (Corbin and Strauss 2008: 87). In this study, sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts were important to consider in data collection and analysis.

Data was collected using the focus group method. Focus groups are a “form of qualitative interviewing that uses a researcher-led group discussion to generate data” (Given 2012: 353). The focus group method enables the exploration of individual and collective lived experiences; it is also used to “generate and legitimize collective testimonies” about daily activities, feelings, and dreams (Liamputtong 2011: 128). The structure of qualitative focus groups allows us to have culturally sensitive interventions, to collect data from hard-to-reach populations, and, thus, has been used before with Emirati women (Winslow et al. 2002). Historically, group interactions were common for women to discuss relevant issues and even become involved in politics (Liamputtong 2011: 129), making the focus group method especially relevant and suitable for this study.

A total of 32 women participated in five focus groups. Each group had between 5 and 7 participants in addition to the facilitator. Participants were young Emirati females enrolled in an undergraduate university in the UAE. Studying in the university has become common for Emirati women: it is estimated that 77 percent of female Emirati high school graduates enroll in a university program (UAE Gender Balance Council, n.d.). The age of the participants ranged between 18 and 26 years old. One of the strategies to collect data using focus groups is to find participants who share commonalities related to the topic, with some variability to allow for an in-depth discussion about issues (Given 2012; Krueger 1994). All women in this study had Emirati citizenship; however, some had one parent from a different nationality (i.e., Egypt, Iraq, Yemen). Participants came from different families/tribes: the families of some participants belonged to one of the oldest Emirati tribes and had “wasta” (connections), while others said that they did not belong to families from which women could be appointed to prominent positions. Due to sensitivity to topics related to ethnicity, religion, and social class, participants were not asked specific questions about their



backgrounds. However, the discussions reflected participants' various ethnic and family backgrounds, allowing for critical engagement between the young women. To secure participants' right to confidentiality, pseudonyms rather than real names were used to report the results of the study.

Participants were recruited by making announcements in classes in the university and inviting women to participate. Both prior to and at the beginning of the focus group, the facilitator requested the consent of the participants, having explained participants' rights, including confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the freedom to withdraw at any time with no repercussions. Focus groups were facilitated by a non-Arab female researcher who had basic knowledge of the Arabic language and who worked at the same university, which provided some trust between participants and the researcher. Focus groups followed a protocol that started with an ice-breaking activity to encourage sharing and trust between participants. Then, the facilitator guided discussions with questions about participants' use of social media generally as well as their opinions about female Emirati politicians specifically.

Before asking specific questions about female Emirati politicians, participants were given five minutes to scroll through the Twitter and Instagram accounts of two well-known female ministers—Noura Al Kaabi (Instagram@nak), Minister of Culture and Knowledge Development, and Shamma Al Mazrui (Instagram@shamma), Minister of State for Youth Affairs. The two women were chosen for this study due to their popularity; both ministers had the largest following on Instagram among female ministers (Shamma Al Mazrui, 325 K, and Noura Al Kaabi, 138 K followers) at the time of the study and a large following on Twitter. In addition, Shamma Al Mazrui was 22 years old at the time of her appointment in 2016, making her the youngest minister in the UAE and in the world. Her young age was relevant to the study to explore whether and how age may play a role.

The social media accounts of both women featured only professional activities directly related to their work, showing them as active participants and speakers at government meetings and public events. For example, one of Noura Al Kaabi's posts featured her with other officials at the digital museum in Abu Dhabi, with a caption "The Zayed-Gandhi digital museum at @manaratalsaadiyat till the 29th of March." Shamma Al Mazrui had similar posts on Instagram and Twitter, both featuring photos of her Ministry's initiatives and the events she attended. For example, posts featured activities around the fasting month of Ramadan and an initiative to engage expats in learning about Ramadan together with Emiratis. Because most of the social media posts were photos and/or short texts, five minutes were considered enough for the participants to familiarize themselves with politicians' messages.

Focus group questions focused on women's understandings and perceptions of female politicians' posts. For example, one question asked, "How would you describe the women in the posts?" Other questions focused on the identities of women politicians, for example, "Imagine this story would talk about a foreign woman working in the UAE government. Would this make a difference for you?" The average length of focus groups was 36 min, with the shortest being 22 min and the longest lasting 48 min. All focus groups were transcribed and analyzed using NVivo software.

Data analysis was conducted in three steps, as described by Corbin and Strauss (2008). First, open codes were assigned to ideas in the transcripts. Then, axial codes were used to organize and group open codes. Last, selective codes were developed based on axial codes to answer the research question. Throughout the analysis, researchers examined how participants spoke about their own identities, how they described women politicians' identities, and how gender was related to other identities.

## Results

Participants in the focus groups were heavy users of social media. All except one participant used social media and talked about spending several hours daily on social media. All except one participant used Snapchat and Instagram daily. Other common platforms were Twitter and the messaging app WhatsApp. The most common uses of social media were to read news about UAE, to follow fashion, for entertainment, and for gossip. All participants knew of at least one female politician in the UAE, some remembered learning about them through mass media, especially around the elections time, and some remembered learning about them from social media. Many participants did not follow Shamma Al Mazrui or Noura Al Kaabi on social media at the time the focus groups were conducted; thus, discussions of the content posted by the female politicians were based on what participants saw during the focus groups.

### *The Changing and Conflicting Perceptions on Gender*

Focus groups discussions about gender varied. On the one hand, women spoke positively about the changing position of women, the opportunities provided by the government, and the changing attitudes toward women in UAE society. The change was often discussed in relation to government policies. For example, one participant recalled the government goal of women occupying half of the government positions. Participants said that women should be equally represented in the government. Previously, Emirati women "did not have a position, they could not say anything, but currently, they have a position...they can say their opinions." Attitudes about women's education, one of the major stimuli for public and professional engagement with society, were also changing: the participants said that Emiratis were "more open" to change.

On the other hand, "old" beliefs about women in public life were still prevalent. One participant said that "families are opening up about education but getting married young, being a mother - all these pressures are still very much there." Participants acknowledged that there were still many people, including members in some of the participants' families, who viewed women solely as housewives, "responsible for children, for husbands, for family" but participants believed that "it's wrong."

Nevertheless, few participants themselves expressed concern about the rapid changes taking place in Emirati culture. For example, one participant was cautious about social media affecting cultural traditions. She said, "I know my sister's kids.

It's very hard to sustain this culture anymore. Social media, iPad – they influence them. We want to keep this ... culture. We want to keep it." In another discussion, participants agreed that women should not be promoted to some positions that required travel, which "might be hard for some women", because women have kids, may need annual leave, and organizations "want to avoid that at all costs... but it's fine, it's not like they are limiting women."

### *Family Power and Family Identity*

All focus groups discussed Emirati women in relation to their families. Women politicians were discussed as coming from families that supported them, although none of the Instagram photos on politicians' profiles showed their families. Participants said that Emirati women did not all have the same opportunities, and a lot depended on the families they came from. Some of the participants said that they could see themselves in political positions, while others said that they did not. In the following interaction, participants attributed women politicians' positions to their belonging to certain families:

- Shurooq: I think sometimes it's frustrating because we know that the government put them there, they are not elected... They don't come from society; they don't go in a vertical manner... They are chosen.
- Facilitator: And you find it frustrating?
- Shurooq: Yes, it's like how can we be someone like that, can I in the future be in that position also? I can't.

Participants said that some professional fields were dominated by certain families. A person outside the family name "cannot get very high." People were likely to "focus on the family name, like the family name is all that matters." Participants in one focus group discussed career access tied to family identity, saying that "a friend or a family member can ... give you a position."

Family and ethnic identity intersected in a way that could disadvantage women. Although ethnicity did not emerge in discussions about women politicians, most likely because women politicians did not come from ethnically diverse backgrounds, when women discussed their own experiences, they spoke about the challenges of coming from ethnically mixed parents. Women from diverse families where a mother was from a different background (e.g., Egypt, Iraq, U.S.) felt stereotyped. Labeled a "hybrid" and a daughter of [mothers' nationality], Emirati women from diverse backgrounds felt they were singled out as being "not fully local." One participant said that "sometimes it affects you. So even me, it affects me. Your family is not pure local. So what? This concept, this stereotype, is still here."

A special role in the family was reserved for male family members. Women's actions reflected on the father's image, and if a woman did something controversial or something that could attract criticism, it would be reflected negatively on the image of her father or another male in her family. In one focus group, participants

said that if a woman did something culturally controversial, people would discuss the actions in relation to her male relatives, saying, “oh, that’s Khaled’s sister, or that’s Mohamed’s daughter... [which] spoke to their reputation more than it spoke to [women’s].” Thus, fathers and husbands typically had the power to make decisions about women’s profession. Some participants had much support from their father and had more freedom to choose their careers, while others said they were denied the freedom of choosing certain professions.

### *Female and Male Politicians on Social media*

Looking at female politicians’ posts on social media, participants described them as “influential,” “powerful,” “progressive,” “intelligent,” “educated,” “confident,” and being good public speakers. Seeing Noura Al Kaabi was “empowering” and “motivating.” However, here again, there were conflicting opinions about women politicians on social media. Women politicians were often perceived as inspiring tokens who symbolized change and empowerment but who did not reflect reality. One participant said that it was good to see inspiring posts from women, but “it’s bad if we don’t see it in reality.”

Participants also talked about the lack of personality in women’s social media posts. For example, one participant discussed the social media posts of Noura Al Kaabi, saying, “we are not sure if the [posts] present her real personality,” and another answered, “Yeah, like we just see what she posts, what she says in her speeches... but in real life, is she that person?” Participants described women politicians’ lives as boring, focusing on presenting more than on doing things. One participant said that working in the government sector was boring because “you will end up as a minister, or presenter at an event or something.” Many participants said that they lacked seeing women politicians’ everyday lives. For example:

- Fatima: And you have to be on call 24/7, I feel like you don’t have your own time.
- Amna: Maybe she can... she is always, I feel like, in the office.
- Shamma: Maybe not, we think this way, but...
- Fatima: Maybe she has her personal [life.]
- Facilitator: I guess you see these posts and we think this is what they do 24/7.
- Fatima: But maybe not. But she does not share.
- Amna: Like, for example, does she go to the beach?

However, other participants did not want to see posts about women politicians’ personal lives. First, there was a perceived danger associated with too much exposure. One participant said, “We don’t have to know more about her personal life... we don’t need to know more about her. People would follow her unnecessarily.” Another responded, “Yeah, it’s better, because there are many enemies... who can threaten her maybe.” Second, some participants questioned whether it was “acceptable for someone in government” to post personal information on a public account and suggested that the

public accounts are “for work” and “she can open another [account] for her personal [information].” In one of the focus groups, participants elaborated on the social media messages from Emirati female politicians:

- Dhabia: I wish I saw more of the personalities to be honest. But they are non-existent. Well their personalities are very strong... Their personalities are amazing. [But] they are nonexistent on social media. Because on social media you can tell it’s highly produced and done by someone else. It is nice, it is inspirational, it is by the book. But it is not... If I were to connect to Noura Al Kaabi, the most time I have ever felt connected with her was when I watched an interview of her talking about her real struggles, about her personality, her experiences...
- Amal: She is on interviews. That means it’s not that close [to you].
- Dhabia: ... I am saying on social media accounts.
- Facilitator: And the posts are mostly of events as you noticed.
- Dhabia: There is not much of *them* [politicians], their essence, which is what social media is.... But here [on social media] it is more like, no, you have to follow the rules. To not make anyone mad, you know.

Social media behavior was viewed through the prism of the family—what women could and could not post (i.e., their own images, choice of clothes, etc.) depended largely “on the family name, not just culture.” This was evident in discussions of women politicians, who were perceived as supported by their families.

Participants compared women politicians, who they felt they did not truly know, to men politicians, who communicated personal information. They described men’s social media posting as real and interesting, showing day-to-day activities and their families. For example, one participant said she followed a male politician, who “does not use Snapchat only for the [government] stuff, he always likes to shoot [photos of] his kids.” A common example was Sheikh Hamdan (@faz3), the crown prince of Dubai, who primarily posted about his adventures, mixing personal posts with posts about politically related news. The young women talked about Sheikh Hamdan, saying, “we can see his personality.” Here, the women did not discuss whether it was acceptable for male politicians to post such information, so the expectations for male and female politicians differed.

## **Discussion**

The current paper explored how women made sense of gender and other identities in their discussions of Emirati political power and women politicians on social media. The results highlighted the role of family, especially fathers, in women’s sense-making about gender and women’s expectations for female and male politicians online. The following discussion elaborates on the role of family identity in UAE women politicians’ representations and female politicians’ engagement on social media.

## *Family Identity and Expectations*

Young Emirati women's sense-making of women politicians and their own societal role was influenced by two parallel processes in Emirati society. On the one hand, Emirati women were inspired and reassured about their increasing societal role, driven by the UAE government. Seeing women politicians on social media made young women feel proud, although politicians' role was symbolic and the posts themselves were not perceived as interesting by all. On the other hand, women had to comply with family expectations. Some families appeared open to change, aligned with government initiatives, and other families tried to maintain traditional views on women's role in Emirati society. Some participants themselves spoke with reservations about women on social media, suggesting that women politicians should not be fully seen, for example, in private photos.

Family, especially fathers, was the most dominant topic of discussion in all focus groups. There was an agreement among all participants that the ultimate power over women's choices is reserved for the fathers. They approved or disapproved of their daughters' decisions about career and personal life and generally decided what was appropriate for a woman to do. Thus, women politicians were also seen through the prism of being allowed to be in that role and the activities associated with it. In addition, the family name played a role in how women perceived women politicians and themselves. Emirati women politicians came from known Emirati families, and their last names communicated those identities. As a result, some women did not identify with the women politicians, saying that they would never have the opportunity to be in that role. Here, again, women politicians were seen as having been appointed, chosen based on their family background, rather than for their expertise in their respective fields.

The results also suggested an interplay between family identity and ethnicity. Participants did not discuss women politicians' ethnic backgrounds, most likely because politicians did not come from ethnically mixed families, i.e., when one parent was from a non-Emirati background. However, some participants spoke about themselves as being disadvantaged due to mixed family backgrounds. Interestingly, religious identity did not emerge in any of the focus groups. As previously stated, one of the reasons could be that Islam and Emirati culture are intertwined, and it is difficult to separate cultural and religious values. Thus, when participants spoke about Emirati values, they could also be speaking about religious values.

## *Women Politicians on Social media*

Personalization of social media content appeared to be an important aspect of how women talked about political figures. In line with previous research in other parts of the world (e.g., Evans et al. 2014; Frame and Brachotte, 2015), Emirati women politicians avoided private posts (i.e., images of their families). Moreover, Emirati women politicians did not post about anything personal (i.e., activities outside of work), avoiding any exposure to their life outside of their professional life. Thus,

posts were limited to politically related activities. This limited exposure of women politicians received mixed reactions. Some women did not want to see personal posts, while others did. This finding is not surprising in view of the other results suggesting dual processes of change and tradition among young Emiratis. However, it offers interesting implications for the literature on personalization.

Personalization has been researched in terms of its impact on political engagement, and the findings have been mixed. Private posts appeared to be more beneficial to politicians in some countries than in others (Jung et al. 2017; Larsson 2019). The results in this study suggest that traditional beliefs intersect with gender and may influence the impact of personalization. Social norms about women's participation in public life may determine whether personal and private messages are beneficial to women politicians. Age may also play a role: younger audiences may be interested in posts that they relate to, whereas older audiences may be interested in political information.

In the context of the UAE, personalization and other nonpolitical content for women politicians may not be a choice. Considering the role of family expectations, as well as strict social media rules, women politicians may be limited in terms of the information they put out on social media. Male politicians have more freedom than women and benefit from sharing personal information on social media. In a country where women do not have a history of participation in public life, social media can bridge the gap by allowing young women to engage in new issues in an informal and personal way. In this study, women politicians' content, limited to professional activities, was perceived as boring by some. Structural limitations imposed upon Emirati women politicians could be a disadvantage and could limit the impact of their social media activity on the perceptions of other young women about politics.

To summarize, although Emirati women may appear as a homogenous group, the results suggest otherwise. Indeed, Emirati women in politics are a symbol of women's changing roles. However, women politicians are seen through the existing structures of power in Emirati society as being permitted by their families and fathers to hold their positions. Their social media posts were not attractive to young women, as the content lacked agency and personality. Women politicians were not seen only through the prism of gender. Although women politicians were perceived as breaking stereotypical roles in this study, they were not seen as representing all Emirati women. The family background could potentially help women identify with women politicians and politics at large or, on the opposite, turn women away.

## **Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

The study had several limitations. First, the sample consisted of young females from Abu Dhabi, the richest emirate, pursuing an undergraduate degree in a Western-style university. The results might be different if the study included participants from diverse backgrounds in terms of age, education and financial status. Second, little data were gathered about participants' self-identification related to religion, ethnicity, race, family background, and social class.

Considering that women still rarely participate in public life, such questions could be sensitive, especially in a focus group setting. Therefore, the questions in the focus group were broad, and discussions related to family and culture were largely led by participants themselves. Future research can attempt to explore the roles of religion and class by conducting quantitative studies that provide anonymity. Third, data were gathered by a non-Emirati researcher with limited knowledge of the Arabic language. Although efforts were made to create a safe and relaxed environment, some cultural and linguistic nuance might have been lost. A female Emirati researcher might have been more sensitive to references to cultural and traditional symbols, possibly providing more subtlety and depth to the results. Last, the results might have been affected by issues of social desirability and avoidance of criticism of political leaders in the UAE.

To conclude, this paper attempted an explorative investigation of women's political engagement in a country where women traditionally stayed out of public life. The study offers insights into the political engagement processes beyond voting, in a non-Western context, focusing on women's perceptions. The findings revealed that the intertwined identities of Emirati women, especially family identity, played an important role in their perceptions of Emirati women's roles. The study results highlighted the complexity of personalization of social media messages for women politicians in a patriarchal society. More research is needed in other cultural contexts to examine the role of traditional beliefs and cultural values in women's engagement with politics and the potential role of social media.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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