

Chapter 7

Entrepreneurship and Social Media Influencers in an Islamic Context



Khyati Shetty Datta , Olivia Adkins , and Jason R. Fitzsimmons 

Abstract Social media has provided significant opportunities for individuals to pursue entrepreneurial endeavors. One phenomenon, in particular, has been the rise of social media influencers as a driving force in the entrepreneurial landscape. In this chapter we investigate the social media influencers in an Islamic context, exploring how institutional factors influence their behavior in such contexts.

Keywords Influencers · Islamic · Institutions · Middle East · Women entrepreneurs

7.1 Introduction

Entrepreneurship is widely regarded as an important driver of economic growth with governments around the world encouraging entrepreneurial activities through various programs and incentives. Moreover, the rise of social media has allowed many individuals to pursue self-employment through the many opportunities and low-cost entry into entrepreneurship. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram have enabled many users to create considerable value through enabling enterprising individuals to contribute their ideas, share information, and influence the opinions of their followers. As a consequence, social media influencers have become a considerable force driving public opinion through

K. S. Datta
Curtin University, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

O. Adkins
University of Birmingham, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

J. R. Fitzsimmons (✉)
School of Business, Manipal University, Dubai, United Arab Emirates
e-mail: jason.fitzsimmons@manipaldubai.com

their vast networks of followers. This has created significant opportunities for public relations and advertising firms. Marketers, in particular, have recognized this and have been actively integrating social media influencers into their mainstream marketing activities to reach potential customers.

The phenomena of social media influencers have also enabled many individuals, particularly women, to engage in entrepreneurial activities. Women, in particular, dominate the social media influencer community with women accounting for around 77% of the total number of influencers across the domains of food, travel, fashion, leisure, and entertainment (Gesenhues, 2019). For the most part, though, social media influencers have not traditionally been regarded as entrepreneurs, since their activities have largely been informally organized and seen as more of hobby activity. However, this view has been changing as many governments have recognized the considerable influence that social media influencers have, with many seeing the need to regulate influencers and encourage them to register their activities. The government of the United Arab Emirates, for example, has recently passed laws requiring social media influencers to obtain a social media license as well as obtain a trade license (Euronews, 2019). This has effectively legitimized social media influencers as business owners and entrepreneurs.

Also, the increasing number of women becoming social media influencers has created several issues, particularly in Islamic societies where women have traditionally been discouraged from entering the workforce or to actively voice their opinions. This has created a dilemma for many social media influencers in these regions. In this chapter, we explore these issues by drawing on institutional theory (North, 1990) and investigate the extent to which a sample of United Arab Emirates social media influencers see themselves as entrepreneurs and how regulatory, social, and cultural forces impact their social media activities.

7.2 Entrepreneurship in the United Arab Emirates

Encouraging entrepreneurial activity is important for sustaining economic growth. Dana and Dana (2005), for instance, point out that various governments around the world have been encouraging entrepreneurship since recognizing the social and economic value of entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurs are crucial to the future development of economies particularly those in emerging economies like the United Arab Emirates (UAE) where they play a key role in increasing market orientation and economic foundation.

Religion is perhaps one of the most important aspects of life in the UAE. It is, therefore, crucial to consider it when thinking about entrepreneurship. A strong correlation has been found between religion and entrepreneurship (Adas, 2006; Dana, 2009). In an Islamic context, entrepreneurship has an important place as Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was a business leader himself. Consequently, Islamic culture encourages and promotes entrepreneurial values provided it is done following the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) who was

known as “Al-Amin” (the honest, in Arabic) (Gümüşay, 2015). Entrepreneurship is seen as an integral part of the Islamic culture, with Islamic teachings promoting trade and commercial activities, illustrated, for example, by verse 4:33 of the Holy Quran Surah An-Nisa (The Women) “O believers, consume not your goods between you in vanity, except there be trading, by your agreeing together” (Ghoul, 2015).

Entrepreneurship from an Islamic perspective is based on three pillars. The first of these is based on the classic definition of entrepreneurship and is the pursuit of opportunities to make a profit. The second pillar is ethical and socioeconomic. Islam, being itself guided by a set of norms, values, and recommendations, entrepreneurship from an Islamic perspective is as well. The last but not least pillar is religio-spiritual and links people to God intending to please Allah (Gümüşay, 2015).

Since the Muslim population covers a large percentage of the world’s total population, this growth has strengthened Islam as a religion and put Islamic teachings in various sectors, including entrepreneurship. Muslim entrepreneurs may choose to incorporate Islamic principles in their business, and this can be reflected in the corporate culture and procedure while running their businesses (Anggadwita, Ramadani, Alamanda, Ratten, & Hashani, 2017).

Based on the Quran, Islam supports free trade, with profit seen as legitimate provided it is consistent with Islamic ethics and does not seek to exploit others (Ludwig, 2001; Yousef, 2000). The singular pursuit of profit is discouraged as the main motivation of entrepreneurship in Islamic contexts. The Sharia promotes products and services that are beneficial to society and cautions against engaging in enterprises involved with alcohol, pornography, gambling and speculation, violence, riba, and other prohibited activities, unless necessary (Ghoul, 2015). Even if a government is compliant with the Sharia law, entrepreneurs are accountable to God and are expected to remain truthful through their business dealings, which is viewed as executing Islamic law.

In the UAE, perceptions of entrepreneurship have developed over the past few decades. A survey conducted in 2011 found that only around 6.3% of the adult population had aspirations to start a business (Van Horne, Huang, & Al Awad, 2011). The perception that students have about entrepreneurship and innovation is also highly influenced by their university education. It is also argued that one will tend to have more positive perceptions and values related to entrepreneurship if their families or friends have been involved in business activities (Saji & Nair, 2018). This situation has changed over time in line with the introduction of the National Agenda 2021, which aims to see the United Arab Emirates among the world’s best in entrepreneurship. According to the director general of the Department of Economic Development in Dubai, more than 34,000 entrepreneurs have benefited from the new venture start-up advisory and development services of Dubai SME, and over 6000 Emirati enterprises were formed from their assistance (Sadaqat, 2019). The Hamdan Innovation Incubator of Dubai SME was launched by the Mohammed bin Rashid establishment to work with Emirati entrepreneurs and has helped 571 projects take off.

Entrepreneurship involves utilizing skills to bring innovation to established firms or toward the development of new firms. Whether one puts into practice new ideas

or simply modify the existing one to better suit the circumstances, innovation is in the heart of entrepreneurship (Jamali, 2014). Entrepreneurship in the world and especially in the Middle East has also been highly influenced by the trend toward digitalization. In 2016, for example, it was reported that 2500 new jobs were created and \$1.5 billion generated for every 10 successful new enterprises (Alkasmi, El Hamamsy, Khoury, & Syed, 2016). However, despite the immense economic potential (projected to reach a GDP of \$3.4 trillion in 2020), the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has only realized 8.4% of its digital potential (Benni, Elmasry, Parel, & Moore, 2016). Aware of the potential of entrepreneurship, the Dubai Chamber of Commerce and Industry mentors, trains, and advises UAE nationals to develop their natural entrepreneurship ability. The program is called Tejar Dubai. As per the general coordinator of Tejar Dubai, it is a full program that was founded around three pillars: assess, assist, and attain. The program, therefore, has a mission to create young Emirati entrepreneurs and ensure the sustainability of the UAE economy. Women are largely included in the program, which counts 70% of female participants. For instance, a woman launched a venture called Potential Nursery as a result of participation in the program. The program also helped launch projects like Gravity Gym and Garden Depot, both financed by banks thanks to the influence of Tejar Dubai (ArabianBusiness.com, 2015).

The MENA region is also experiencing a youth bulge offering considerable entrepreneurial potential with the largest proportion of youths to adults in the region's history, with 60% of the population under the age 30 and 30% between the age 15 and 29 (Alkasmi et al., 2016). Therefore, it is not a surprise that the region is one of the most digitally connected in the world with an average of 94% of the population owning a smartphone and 88% of the population being connected daily (Alkasmi et al., 2016). Given these, entrepreneurship in the MENA region is highly influenced by social media, and digital entrepreneurship offers considerable opportunities for entrepreneurship in the region. A few examples illustrate the growth of local digital entrepreneurship. In the sector of e-commerce, the United Arab Emirates leads with entrepreneurial solutions such as dubizzle in Dubai which is the perfect example of pure-play marketplace (a platform to sell and buy goods); Namshi, a full-fledged e-retailer (which provides digital storefronts, payment facilities, and delivery solutions); and Amazon's [Souq.com](#), which is a hybrid model (offering both e-retail offerings and marketplace). Another Dubai-based company, Fetchr, uses smartphone GPS technology to accurately locate users for package delivery. As e-commerce is an important industry in the region, this type of innovative solutions will prosper from complementary effects.

Aside from digital entrepreneurship, social media is perceived as a factor that can help to promote entrepreneurship in the United Arab Emirates. Social media can help businesses build trusted and valued relationships by sharing assessments, surveys, news, etc. (Metcalf, Minouni, & Murfin, 2011). However, Samuel and Sarprasatha (2015) argue that many entrepreneurs have not fully appreciated the immense benefits that social media can have in their business; hence, they do not optimally use it.

7.3 Social Media in the United Arab Emirates

7.3.1 Social Media Usage

The technology landscape of the world has drastically changed over the last few decades. The rise of social media has resulted in important changes in how individuals and businesses communicate with each other and share information. Social media as defined by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) is “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content.” Social media helps foster old relations and create new ones, at an individual level and global one, and therefore has become a vital part of our daily life (Hatab, 2016). Indeed, social media usage is one of the most popular online activities.

Statista (2019) records an estimate of 2.65 billion people using social media worldwide in 2018, with a projected increase to almost 3.1 billion in 2021. The most widely used social media platforms are social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram which are popular communication tools among adolescents and young adults with usage growing at tremendous rates (Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008).

In the UAE, the digital landscape has been reshaped with the use of social media among youths and businesses with the UAE growing into one of the most digital-friendly countries in the Middle East. According to the latest statistics on social media usage, 99.06% of the UAE population remain active on social media with social media usage recording a 1.5% increase from the previous year (Global Media Insights, 2019). The most popular social media platforms in the UAE continue to be Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram with Instagram being the most popular platform among younger users.

Social media has significant potential for business owners and entrepreneurs across the UAE as a marketing tool and a method of increasing sales. Social media makes it possible for individuals to create, share, and exchange information and consequently has become an important advertising channel and communication tool for brands to shape their presence online. According to a January 2019 survey of marketers worldwide, increased exposure and traffic were two of the leading benefits of using social media for marketing purposes, followed by lead generation (Statista, 2019). Additionally, social media is a source of news for youth, as findings by ASDA’A Burson-Marsteller revealed that young Arabs look first to social media for news updates (Radcliffe & Bruni, 2018). Given the connectedness of individuals in the UAE, local businesses have begun to leverage sites such as Facebook and Instagram as a web portal for retail activities (Samuel & Sarprasatha, 2015). Social media has impacted multiple organizational phenomena and processes through various implications from organizing to the dissemination of information (Leonardi & Vaast, 2016).

7.3.2 *Social Media and Entrepreneurship*

As discussed in the previous section, social media has been transforming the digital landscape, allowing entrepreneurs to utilize social media platforms to manage their business activities including marketing and customer relationship management (Alalwan, Rana, Dwivedi, & Algharabat, 2017; Misirlis & Vlachopoulou, 2018). The rise of social media has impacted on how entrepreneurs carry out day-to-day activities. Social media has provided entrepreneurs with better opportunities to connect with individuals, overcoming common challenges such as reaching out for expert advice. Social media also drives innovation and co-creation through networks where entrepreneurs can establish relationships with other entrepreneurs.

Social media has allowed entrepreneurs to enhance marketing efforts with the ability to promote and advertise their products and services on various platforms, using to their advantage the cost-effectiveness of this proposition compared to traditional marketing and other marketing processes (Olanrewaju, Hossain, Whiteside, & Mercieca, 2020). Marketing on social media is more visible with business to customer organizations where activities such as customer relationship management, brand management, and advertising are a key focus. These activities not only drive their sales by improving visibility but also play a role in improving customer relationships through endorsements, promotions, and business activities with responses of customer likes, shares, and comments. The rise of social media influencers discussed in the next section also provides an insight into the powerful means used by brands to reach out to customers through social media campaigns.

The ease and reachability of social media also play a huge role in the way entrepreneurs search for and access information. Social media has changed how they seek, search, and gather information (Olanrewaju, Hossain, Whiteside, & Mercieca, 2020). Various social media affordances enable this process (Smith, Smith, & Shaw, 2017). Entrepreneurs often lack funds for activities such as hiring experts in their areas to assist with their business needs. It is seen that social media provides entrepreneurs with the confidence to search for and gather information as it is easily available on the platforms. Information regarding competitors, how to run business, and more is easily accessible through social media. There is an exchange of tacit and non-tacit knowledge (Wang, Mack, & Maciejewski, 2017) whereby entrepreneurs can follow users on platforms, therefore fulfilling the information needs of entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs often seek advice on social media platforms from altruistic information providers (Kuhn, Galloway, & Collins-Williams, 2016; Quinton & Wilson, 2016). Entrepreneurs make use of the different platforms to not only market their product or search for information but also create, enlarge, and strengthen networks (Ahmad, Ahmad, & Abu Bakar, 2018; Fischer & Reuber, 2011; Quinton & Wilson, 2016).

Entrepreneurship is no longer restricted by geographical location, thanks to social media, which has opened the doors to networking and interacting with people from all over the globe with similar or diverse socioeconomic and demographic statuses (Fischer & Reuber, 2011; Wang et al., 2017). Through social media,

entrepreneurs can develop strong and weak ties, by creating strategic or emergent networks that can add value depending on the transactional offer from the entrepreneurs (Olanrewaju, Hossain, Whiteside, & Mercieca, 2020).

Moreover, entrepreneurs can use the data gathered from social media to drive innovation for their business. On Instagram, for example, users can use insights to find how their customers react to products and service offerings. Another emerging area has been the role of social media in raising capital which is often described as one of the hindering factors for entrepreneurs. Social media can play crucial roles in entrepreneur crowdfunding. With the use of audio-visuals and crowdfunding videos, entrepreneurs can raise funds through the various platforms available on the Internet (Song & van Boeschoten, 2015). Metrics such as the number of friends or followers and social capital accrued are also factors that drive crowdfunding. Social media, therefore, provides a platform that eases communication, social capital, marketing, and other activities entrepreneurs need to be successful.

7.3.3 The Rise of Instagram Influencers

The rise of social networks has brought a new generation of influencers. Even though social networks are rather new, influencers are not. For years, brands have been using celebrities and leaders to promote their products. Recently, brands have started to accept the rise of social media, and influencers now serve as the connection between a brand and its consumers. As opposed to celebrities, influencers use their personal lives to connect with their audience and can provide a sense of relatability (Nouri, 2018). Where traditional marketing focuses on targeting mass audiences, influencers have a niche that until now has been unreachable, making this phenomenon successful. Social media influencers in this sense are more than opinion leaders.

This growth of social media influencers has led to the establishment of a new type of agency who provide services to identify the right influencers and offer various tools to create interesting content and reach their target groups. Social media influencers are usually divided into bloggers, vloggers, celebrities, and influencers. Bloggers are usually website owners who create content for their blogs and often share their thoughts and passions via social media. Vloggers are mostly present on social media sites such as YouTube and use audio-visual content to connect with their audiences. Celebrities are often actors, singers, and others who are followed for being widely known. Finally, Instagrammers are influencers who have been able to attract audiences through photo sharing and stories on the Instagram social media platform (Kadekova & Holienčinová, 2018).

7.4 Methodology

The sample for the study consisted of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with six female social media influencers in the United Arab Emirates. Interviews with the influencers were carried out in 2019. A range of open-ended questions was asked about their social media activities as well as their views on how institutional factors related to regulatory, values and norms, and cultural issues impact on their social media activities.

7.5 Institutional Contexts in the UAE

7.5.1 *Regulatory Framework*

The regulatory framework represents the models of individual and organization behavior denoted by policies, rules, sanctions laws, and regulations that affect individual behavior in society (Stenholm, Acs, & Wuebker, 2013). North (1990) likens the regulatory framework to the written rules of a sport. Some rules including the ones formulated by external agents (league officials, referees) and the ones accepted and enforced by the players themselves. Several lines of evidence support the influence of these rules on the legitimacy and acceptance of entrepreneurship (Webb, Kistruck, Ireland, & Ketchen Jr, 2010). These laws and framework can have an impact on entrepreneurial ventures as it can create opportunities, support or constrain formation of new business, influence the extent to which women entrepreneurs can grow and develop, diminish or trigger risks for entrepreneurs, affect the types of ventures women can engage in, or constraint the access of financial resources (Amine & Staub, 2009; Ellis, Blackden, Cutura, MacCulloch, & Seebens, 2007; Naser, Rashid Mohammed, & Nuseibeh, 2009). While some of these policies and regulations may have the same effect on male and female entrepreneurs, others have gendered effects like labor market laws, family policies that specify childcare provisions, work permits, and residency regulations (Bianco, Lombe, & Bolis, 2017; Langevang, Gough, Yankson, Owusu, & Osei, 2015; Welter & Smallbone, 2010).

The open constitutional framework for work opportunities in the UAE believes that women are entitled to fulfill active roles in society, and the vision was promulgated from UAE's founding father Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan who believed that "Women have the right to work everywhere." Under the constitution, women are assured the same legal status, claims to titles, access to education, and similar rights to practice professions as men. As a result, the UAE Business Women Council was formed in 2002 and is regarded as a very important business organization in the UAE (ElGurg, 2005). The Abu Dhabi Business Women Group (ADBW) and Dubai Business Women Council (DBWC) strive to provide assistance to women in the entrepreneurial space, and The National Investor TNI, a UAE Blue Chip Fund,

announced the launch of its new TNI Dana Women Fund and the FORSA fund that have been created to cater toward women wishing to invest amounts over USD273,000, and ENMAA, a boutique bank catering to both small and large investors in the MENA region (Gallant, Weeks, & Niethammer, 2007).

In spite of the abundant support provided by the UAE government authorities, the legal framework of the country makes it challenging for budding female influencers to establish a foothold in the country. In 2019, the National Media Council announced new regulations for social media influencers to require a trade license and an e-media license for carrying out all online activities (print, video, audio, and electronically published activities) for commercial purposes (Al-Balushi, 2018). The regulation also requires influencers to mark sponsored content with clear borders between paid-for-promotion and other content. The new guidelines also mandated the post to include hashtags (e.g., #advertisement, #paid:ad, #sponsored) and not to include too many other hashtags which made it confusing to the reader. While these regulations were put in place to systematize the social media industry in the UAE, these rules may act to deter people from entering into the influencer marketing business as monetizing from these ventures can get challenging. As expressed by one of the established Emirati influencers:

Being a social media influencer is a long term game as far as online monetization goes. To most people, it takes a year or two to start making money. When I started I didn't see a penny in my bank account for more than a year. With the current licensing requirements, the industry may no longer look lucrative to budding influencers.

Additionally, there are very stringent cybercrime laws that govern photography, privacy and confidentiality, and cultural sensitivities. For instance, it is an offense to take and post someone else's picture without their consent. This could potentially curb the creative freedom of style bloggers who feature other people on their platforms. The penal code in the UAE makes it an offense to make defamatory statements against another person or their company. This makes it binding for influencers to exercise caution while writing a negative review against a company or service provider. It is also illegal to post content that is considered inconsistent with public morals which could include un-Islamic and lewd content or anything that mocks leaders of the nation or hurts national unity (Grant, 2017). These regulations asphyxiate the space to voice out and the creative freedom of influencers which is one of the main intrinsic motivations to venture into this career. Commenting on the cybercrime laws, an influencer commented:

As influencers, our freedom of speech and activity should be bounded by personal responsibility. I completely join the call of these rules but there is a lack of awareness of these laws. Because I very often catch myself questioning if my content would be appropriate as per the regulations.

7.5.2 Normative Framework

Normative systems typically include the values and norms that further establish the underlying assumptions and ground rules that people conform to (Scott, 2008). However, these are informal and intangible and establish the “rules of the game” and further determine the acceptance and social desirability of entrepreneurship as a legitimate career option (Busenitz, Gomez, & Spencer, 2000). While some cultures are socially acceptable of entrepreneurial careers of women, others make it daunting by looking down upon women pursuing it (Baumol, Litan, & Schramm, 2009; De Soto, 2000; Luthans, Stajkovic, & Ibrayeva, 2000; Mueller & Thomas, 2001). This, in turn, affects entrepreneurial intentions and affects the planned behavior of starting an entrepreneurial activity (Krueger, Reilly, & Carsrud, 2000).

Past studies have confirmed that respect, legitimacy, and admiration are important factors for entrepreneurial participation by women (Baughn, Chua, & Neupert, 2006). The traditional Arab environment attaches less reverence for professions that require women to mix with men. Any jobs that require women being exposed to large audiences are not acceptable by families and, as a result, are typically discouraged. Being an influencer requires one to build and engage with a large audience over time to stand out eventually to start making money. The challenge of keeping up with expected norms of society will require Emirati influencers to exclude male followers from their targeted audience, thereby narrowing their audience base.

Furthermore, the UAE society is strongly influenced by religion and tradition, and the level of women’s involvement in the workforce has been determined by the strong patriarchal culture (Naser, Nuseibeh, & Al-Hussaini, 2012) and traditional Islamic standards (Javadian & Singh, 2012). Some conservative sections of society still look down upon women entrepreneurs on social media and often describe them as aggressive and bold (Marlow, 2002). These stereotypes are not considered desirable to describe women in traditional Arab societies which in turn discourages women (Bird & Brush, 2002; Langowitz & Minniti, 2007; Marlow & Patton, 2005) from entering into social media platforms. Some women also face active dissuasion from the male family members (Baud & Mahgoub, 1999), as social media is seen as a platform that objectifies women and is associated with latent sexism. Thus, the lack of normative support, which refers to the extent to which there is acceptance of women venturing into self-employment in social media given their traditional roles (Holmén, Min, & Saarelainen, 2011; Preiss & McCrohan, 2006) and the general tendency of female entrepreneurs being more conscious to their threats to legitimacy and validation, diminishes their keenness to enter into this line of self-employment (Kourilsky & Walstad, 1998). One influencer reinforced this point by saying:

As influencers, we are often scrutinized by the public eye. And some of our followers feel entitled to comment just not on the area of work but also our personal lives, especially about how we express our religion. We are often accused by haters for drifting away from religion. This can get exhausting at times.

Aspiring female entrepreneurs are also frozen by the fear of negative social attitude (Woldie & Adersua, 2004) as the traditional Arab society still emphasizes the

primary role of women in household and family responsibilities. As Goffee and Scase (1985) suggest, female entrepreneurs in the Arab world differ from male entrepreneurs in the sense that they tend to view their business as one aspect of a wider system that includes family, friends, and community. In this respect, there is a tendency for Emirati female entrepreneurs to manage their business activities in ways that do not interfere or cause an unnecessary conflict with the interests of their family (Carter & Cannon, 1992). However, as an influencer, being an expert in a domain requires one to build a following or a cult around them and cater to the needs of the base who follow them. This makes it vital for them to spend extraordinary time and effort with their platforms functioning on a 24/7 basis, engaging with audiences at all hours and delivering a constant stream of notifications. As aptly put by one of the influencers:

I know of people who think of influencers as people who only post pictures and look pretty. Very few know that there is a lot of time and effort that goes into building your audience, constantly engaging with them and building a standalone brand for yourself. You may work from home, but when you have family responsibilities to tend to, your work takes a back-seat. There have been days when I don't compose a single post as I let other parts of my personal life takeover.

Yet another Emirati influencer raised her concern stating:

As an influencer, I work from home and don't have set job timings. Thus I constantly stressing if I am dedicating enough time to my daughters or if I am overdoing it. Even though I am at home, I am not sure if they feel like I am there for them as I am constantly connected to my laptop. There are so many times I have considered going back to my 9 to 3 pm job with the government.

However, this deep-rooted culture makes it extremely challenging for UAE women entrepreneurs to devote time to these entrepreneurial ventures, especially due to the familial and societal demands placed on them (Preiss & McCrohan, 2006). Adding to this, given the volatile nature of this social media industry and the presence of very stiff competition, there is a very high perceived risk associated with the profession. And given the relatively small and well-knit characteristic of the Emirati community (Haan, 2003), there is increased fear among Emirati women for the loss of credibility as the news of failure quickly permeates in society.

Thus most Emirati women shun the options of starting an entrepreneurial venture on social media and instead opt for public sector jobs which are known for their more comfortable working hours, stability in pay, and generally less demanding work regimes (Erogul & McCrohan, 2008).

7.5.3 Cognitive Framework

The cognitive pillar summarized by Scott (1995) is “the shared conceptions that constitute the nature of social reality and the frames through which meaning is made.” This pillar is important to entrepreneurship as it curates how societies accept

and ascribe value to certain careers and also creates a cultural milieu (Bosma, Acs, Autio, Coduras, & Levie, 2009). This plays a crucial role in curating the social meaning that individuals attach to careers like social media influencing and determines the extent of risks, fears, and rewards associated with it (Amine & Staub, 2009; Baughn et al., 2006), which also establishes the desirability and perceived feasibility of starting a business (Welter & Smallbone, 2010). Several lines of evidence from past studies support the high correlation between perceptions of feasibility on intentions of entrepreneurship (Rasheed, 2004). Thus, if an individual perceives an action as infeasible, there is a less likelihood of the individual to pursue such an action. In the words of an Emirati influencer:

Getting into social media full time is a risky option. It is extremely competitive and there are shoots, deadlines, and brand guidelines. Very few of us stand out and if you fail to do so, brands will decide to go to other people in the industry who are more than willing to do it for free.

Drawing from prior research, several studies have sought to examine the importance of entrepreneurial networks, the presence of strong female role models, and the availability of entrepreneurial education in determining the propensity to act in relation to entrepreneurial acceptance (Davis & Shaver, 2012). Like most ventures, social media is an industry where networking is considered an essential skill for success (McGregor & Tweed, 2000; St-Cyr & Gagnon, 2004). It is not only about what you know but who you know. You need an audience to grow your audience, but developing one is a process. The GEM 2004 report on female entrepreneurs additionally supported those female entrepreneurs who connected with other entrepreneurs, and role models in the same line of business are more likely to venture into the same line of business themselves (Minniti, Arenius, & Langowitz, 2005). While there are some networking platforms for influencers within the UAE, like the Arab Social Media Influencers Summit, most of these platforms are tapped by expatriates rather than their Emirati counterparts (Haan, 2004). The reason for this slow engagement might be attributed to the preconceived norms of gender separation. This leads to women drawing on their networks limited to immediate family and friends. This dependence on a narrow network, absence of access to male industry contacts, and lack of opportunities to practice networking skills may rouse low self-confidence and act as an impediment to female Emirati influencers.

Cognitive institutions are largely built from the culture of the society. Countries may differ in terms of the value placed on various streams of entrepreneurship that people pursue (Bruton, Fried, & Manigart, 2005). The UAE society has a modern outlook but is still strongly influenced by local traditions, norms, and religion. Perceptions of entrepreneurial roles as a social media influencer may be devalued in a country, not because of gender discrimination but the stream of work itself may not be respected and held in high regard. Consistent with this, various studies have examined the national difference in the social acceptability of various entrepreneurial careers (Luthans et al., 2000; Mueller & Thomas, 2001). The deep-seated cultural norms curated by role models, family, friends, and society as a whole act as a moderating variable between the individual and his/her self-efficacy to get involved

in entrepreneurial activity (Krueger et al., 2000). Consequently, these norms which prevail at a macrolevel are internalized by women which in turn trickle to the cultural cognitive pillar and in turn influence their conceptions of appropriate actions at a microlevel. The following two quotes offer a good illustration of this internalization process:

As a fashion blogger and influencer, I have to post pictures. It gets challenging sometimes to take pictures that do not expose my face and not accentuate my body too much. I am constantly striving to make the photos look stylish, cheek and at the same time maintain my modesty as it is of utmost importance in my society. Personally, for me, everything must follow Islamic guidelines.

Another influencer reinforced this point when she said:

Like other countries, we are not legally required to take permission from the men in the family to pursue a career. But our career choices need validation and acceptance from the male member of the family. It is less legal and more cultural.

Furthermore, an access and control over finances (Jamali, 2009; Minniti, 2009) play an important role in shaping the perception of women entrepreneurs about the suitability of the environment they are going to venture into (Zhao, Seibert, & Hills, 2005). However, not getting paid or not getting paid on time is the most frustrating part for social media influencers in the UAE, where the average lead time for payments by most agencies is a minimum of 60 days. Adding to this is the gender pay gap in the industry where female influencers are earning 23% less than their male counterparts (Klear Influencer Marketing Report, 2019). As a result, Langowitz and Minniti (2007: 356) found that “women tend to perceive themselves and such business environment in a less favorable light.” As expressed by one Emirati micro-influencer:

As a micro-influencer, you do not have a steady flow of income. My earnings are very unstable, for instance during Ramadan time the market slows. Thus you cannot think of being an influencer as a full-time job. For most of us, it's a side gig. It cannot be more than making some extra bucks on the side.

7.6 Discussion

Building on institutional theory, this paper endeavors to document how female social media influencers in the Emirates navigate the complex institutional environment in the UAE and how the interplay of these factors shape and mold the expressions of these women in the UAE. Examining the influencing factors through the institutional theory lens, by conceptualizing the institutional pillars impacting female entrepreneurship, has been highlighted in previous studies (Welter, 2005; Yeung, 2002).

The findings regarding female Emirati influencers highlight the high degree of institutional uncertainty, incongruity, and inconsistency between the different pillars. In the regulatory domain, the dominance of the news laws and regulations on

obtaining new licenses makes the process of entering into this business complex, expensive, and cumbersome. While the objective of the new framework is to protect the privacy of individuals and to produce balanced and responsible media content, it is leaving a chilling effect on a burgeoning industry. The increased difficulty and the very high barrier to entry may hollow out the roster of emerging female influencers in the region. While the larger, more established influencers are happy with this law as it wipes out the competition, the regulatory framework in the UAE will discount the vast swathes of micro-influencers. Adding to this, the very high scrutiny of the kinds of content posted limits the entrepreneurial intentions to enter the industry. Regarding the normative pillar, in spite of the encouragement given to female entrepreneurs by the UAE government for women entrepreneurs, the social media industry as an entrepreneurial career for women is slow to gain acceptance, acknowledgment, and inclusivity. Plus, the role of the importance of gender segregation and the lack of networking opportunities with the male stakeholders in the industry limit their potential to expand. In the cognitive domain, the role of the cognitive patriarchal norms is salient and is often internalized by women to the point of reducing motivation and their potential for self-fulfillment and actualization through entrepreneurship (Rehan, Block, & Fisch, 2019).

While the government of UAE is completely in support of women entrepreneurship and has set up many institutions such as Mohammed bin Rashid Establishment for Young Business Leader and Khalifa Fund to finance upcoming entrepreneurs, the social media entrepreneurs are still not a formalized industry and lack a level of support. And as evidenced by previous studies, female entrepreneurs in unregulated industries face several challenges that have no one single remedy (Pardo-del-Val & Ribeiro-Soriano, 2007). Several recommendations can be suggested to tackle these challenges. The female influencers interviewed in the study provided several useful insights that should be corroborated by future research. Though the UAE is making strides in empowering women through government initiatives, there is still a deep underlying concern of acceptance of social media as a respected profession for women, coupled with a lack of support from their environment and fear of failure. There is a change needed at the society level.

One of the limiting factors stated by the influencers was local and cultural norms prevalent in society. Most women did not desire a far-reaching change in the social and religious customs as they held very high reverence for the existing traditions; however, they hoped that a modern interpretation of careers in the field of social media will gain them respect and mark their presence in the field. There is a need to establish a formal institutional framework for social media entrepreneurs in collaboration with other women entrepreneur associations in the UAE. There should also be training and workshops set for influencers to sharpen their skills in digital marketing, content creation, and SEO. Rolling out such programs will help sharpen their knowledge and gain confidence in venturing into this line of business. Success stories of popular Emirati female influencers should be publicized. This will gain better acceptance and help break stereotypes and help women battle their cognitive inner hurdles.

7.7 Conclusions

Social media has witnessed a significant rise in usage in the Middle East, and social media influencers are at the center of the spotlight. The Emirati women influencers are taking over the mainstream with fearless ideas, overcoming hurdles, and growing into a power to be reckoned with. However, there is a dire need to provide constant support and guidance and empower these women in their efforts to overcome regulatory, normative, and cognitive hurdles.

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