The Impact of Gender Balance Campaigns in the UAE

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Abstract

This study aims to examine how Gender Balance Council (GBC) campaigns impact gender equality in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The study uses State Feminism Theory to evaluate the effects of these campaigns. To collect data, four focus groups were conducted with young Emiratis from different cities, where they were asked about their thoughts on the GBC campaigns and how they have influenced their understanding of gender equality. The findings of this study provide a fresh perspective on state feminism and gender equality, revealing that state feminism has been a vital first step toward women's empowerment in the Gulf region. However, it is suggested that state policies should engage with various societal groups in shaping state initiatives through participatory communication for further advancing women's societal standing and countering negative perceptions of women's roles.

Keywords: Gender Balance Council, Gender Empowerment, Gulf Society, UAE, Women.

أثر حملات التوازن بين الجنسين في دولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة

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ملخص

يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة تأثير حملات مجلس التوازن بين الجنسين على المساواة بين الجنسين في دولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة. استخدمت الدراسة نظرية نسوية الدولة لتقييم آثار هذه الحملات. ولجمع البيانات، تم إجراء أربع مجموعات تركيز مع شباب إماراتيين من مدن مختلفة، حيث سئلوا عن أفكارهم حول حملات مجلس التوازن بين الجنسين وكيف أثرت على فهمهم للمساواة بين الجنسين؟

وتقدم نتائج هذه الدراسة منظوراً جديداً وتكشف أن نسوية الدولة كانت خطوة أولى حيوية نحو تمكين المرأة في منطقة الخليج. ومع ذلك، تقترح أن تشارك سياسات الدولة مع مختلف الفئات المجتمعية في تشكيل مبادرات الدولة من خلال التواصل التشاركي لزيادة النهوض بمكانة المرأة المجتمعية ومواجهة التصورات السلبية لأدوار المرأة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تمكين المرأة، الإمارات العربية المتحدة، المرأة، المجتمع الخليجي، مجلس التوازن بين الجنسين.

Introduction:

This study explores the impact of state campaigns on advancing gender equality in the United Arab Emirates. Through an exploration of the audience's evaluation of selected state campaigns developed by the Gender Balance Council (GBC) in the UAE, the study highlights views on the progress made thus far and the remaining challenges. The main motivation of this study is the lack of research on the use of state and public relations campaigns to spread awareness of gender imbalance in the UAE. Gender inequality remains a key issue in the UAE, especially in the workplace. Women are under-represented in many sectors of the economy, although the government has taken serious steps to address this issue, including setting up GBC in 2015 to raise awareness about the significance of gender equality to the prosperity of the nation.

Thus, the main objective of this study is to explore the impact of the GCB's campaigns in spreading awareness for gender balance in the UAE. The study asks how effective these campaigns have been in promoting gender balance in the UAE, what the challenges facing such campaigns are, and how they can be enhanced in the future.

Theoretically, the research is grounded in Media Effects Theory integrating Feminist Theory, particularly State Feminism, as a theoretical lens to evaluate the effects of the GBC's campaigns. Methodologically, the study is qualitative and based on four focus groups with young Emiratis aging between 24 and 37, residing in Dubai, Sharjah, Fujairah, and Ajman. The study contributes to the emerging literature on state feminism and gender equality in the Arab region, and its findings inform future studies in this field.

In the following sections, we briefly introduce the current state of gender equality policies in the UAE. We then review past studies on the topic before we discuss the potential use of State Feminism as a framework for this study. We then introduce the methods used in this study before presenting the main findings and discussing the implications and suggestions for future studies.

Background of the study:

The UAE government has acknowledged that women's input is as valuable as men's in its modern economy. Therefore, the Vision 2030 initiative in Abu Dhabi strives to elevate women's involvement in the workforce (Low, 2012; Claussen & Carpenter, 2020). The UAE has made

strides in achieving gender equality, with the GBC set up in 2015, spearheading government initiatives and public relations efforts to promote it. As a result, an increasing number of women are pursuing higher education, entering the workforce, and taking part in decision-making at both the community and national levels (Abdulkadir & Müller, 2020; gbc.gov.ae, 2022; Fleisher & Mahaffy, 2017).

Nonetheless, cultural and social barriers still hinder women from achieving their full potential, and women face under-representation in leadership positions. This is when public relations strategies can help address gender imbalance by shaping public perceptions and attitudes toward the challenges women face and the initiatives to address those challenges, such as the UAE's GBC that promotes gender equality through PR strategies. Its efforts are said to increase women's participation in the workforce and leadership positions in various sectors (Abdulkadir & Müller, 2020; Brown & Joseph, 2019). Despite these positive efforts, there are still challenges to achieve gender equality in the UAE. One of the main challenges is the persistence of traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Women are still expected to prioritize their family responsibilities over their careers, and there is often pressure on women to conform to traditional gender roles. In addition, the legal framework in the UAE can be a barrier to women's empowerment. For example, laws around marriage, divorce, and child custody (Lovari & Valentini, 2020) can limit women's autonomy and economic opportunities. Moreover, the representation of gender in school textbooks in the UAE arguably reflects a bias towards males, with an indication of the secondary status of women. It is recommended, therefore, to revise gender representation in educational materials to ensure equal representation of both genders (Al-Qatawneh & Al Rawashdeh, 2019).

It is here that awareness campaigns can help promote gender equality by increasing awareness, changing attitudes, and advocating for change (Cowan & Telhaj, 2017), as in the area of the gender pay gap estimated to pay in the region of 20-30%, or limited job opportunities, particularly in leadership positions.

Literature review:

In the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, women are generally breaking down Western stereotypes by achieving higher education levels than ever before. In the UAE, in particular, women have made a mark in every sector of the workforce (Al-Malki et al., 2012; Ridge, 2014). Emirati

women have achieved great success in various occupations due to increased education and modernization. The term "women leadership" has become popular in public discourse, but interviews with Emirati women leaders in the cultural sector reveal challenges in navigating state feminist discourse and traditional gender roles (Prager, 2020). It is also argued that Emirati women face a paradox: While the government promotes their education and leadership, strict cultural norms dictate women's public visibility. Families, for instance, may fear their reputations may be tarnished, leading to scrutiny of women's appearance and behavior, and any deviation from the norm can lead to gossip and criticism. This means that the government's version of state feminism may not be enough to empower Emirati women, as some traditional views of women being only mothers and wives are still perpetuated (Prager, 2020).

Arabic literature also highlights the use of social media to raise awareness about gender issues; for instance, social media have been used to promote breast cancer awareness and improve health outcomes, especially in the GCC nations which have a high rate of social media usage, particularly among young people. However, there is still a need for culturally appropriate and targeted awareness campaigns in GCC countries, given the language and cultural barriers that exist (Mansour et al., 2018). Moreover, Mahmoud (2022) explores how Egyptian women perceive the persuasive techniques used in advertisements for the "Breast Cancer Early Detection" initiative, and Ahmad (2021) compares the effectiveness of media campaigns on health awareness between rural and urban women in several Egyptian governorates showing that media campaigns have a significant impact on women's health awareness, regardless of their location. Finally, Abdullah (2017) investigated the correlation between media students' exposure to Saudi charity campaigns on satellite channels and their inclination toward volunteer work. The study revealed that most participants watched these campaigns occasionally, with the primary reasons being to raise awareness and encourage them to assist others. However, some participants were disinterested due to problems with timing, trust, objectives, insufficient information, and unappealing presentation methods.

All in all, the UAE and other Gulf states may push for women's empowerment, including calling for nurturing more entrepreneurs, because this goal can benefit the state socially and economically: socially, it relieves the state of the competing social forces pushing for more female engagement in the market. Economically, opening the market for women's participation relieves the state from economic and political pressures to

create jobs for women graduates (Ennis, 2019). The literature also highlights the importance of using diverse communication strategies and channels to promote women's equality and the favorable state policies regarding gender equality, or what is coined "state feminism," which have been instrumental in advancing women's rights in the Gulf region.

Theoretical framework – media effects of public campaigns:

The present study explores contemporary media effects theories and their implications for raising awareness about gender parity in the UAE. Current perspectives on media effects challenge the conventional notion of passive audiences (Hartmann, 2020; Livingstone, 2021) and underscore the role of audience agency in interpreting media content, especially with the advent of social and digital media platforms, prompting scholars to develop innovative frameworks (Livingstone, 2019). In our modern era of digital media, individuals possess the authority to select the content they engage with, which can significantly shape their beliefs and perspectives. Thus, possessing media literacy and critical consumption skills is crucial for effectively navigating the intricacies of the media environment. Current research emphasizes the pivotal role of audiences, the impact of algorithms, and the importance of media literacy in shaping the effects of media (Pariser, 2011). This is why this study focuses on the GBC's campaigns on Instagram, one of the most used digital platforms in the UAE.

Gender equality campaigns in the Middle East face unique challenges because of cultural norms and traditional gender roles. To advance gender equality, it is crucial to tailor messages that resonate with local audiences and involve men as allies. Advocacy efforts can drive policy changes. Despite the challenges, campaigns are making progress by leveraging different media channels, empowering women's voices, and engaging diverse stakeholders. In North Africa, for instance, Moghadam (2020) highlights the role of feminist activism in transitioning between public gender regimes. In the GCC states, women's activism movements, like those in North Africa, are absent. However, the GCC states have made strides in achieving gender parity in education and the labor market.

The government of the UAE, for instance, endeavors to enhance women's participation in leadership positions by implementing the so-called "state feminism" (AlMutawa, 2020) or initiatives led by the government advocating women's rights and equality instead of depending on NGOs or activists to promote such principles. State feminism adds another layer to

literature about feminist theories, which oscillates between "Islamic feminism" and "Secularist feminism." The former concept encompasses only those in Muslim-majority countries like the Arab region, referring to those who support women's rights while maintaining a strong personal connection to Islam. On the other hand, "Secularist feminism" refers to those who identify as less religious but still support women's rights without calling for the separation of religion and politics (Glas & Alexander, 2020).

The result is that the new generation of Emiratis are cosmopolitan, digital-savvy, and with access to study in Western universities. Even those who do not study abroad still have the opportunity to continuously negotiate gendered identities, as in the use of modest fashion and hijab style, which is evident in shopping malls and public spaces (Alexander & Mazzucco, 2021). For instance, debate on Emirati identity has been sparked by state modernization plans where women were encouraged to adopt a more flexible veil rather than the traditional burqa (Goto, 2021). Moreover, recent research challenges the binary gender views when interpreting Emirati women's increased visibility in society, arguing that women in the UAE may navigate multiple subjectivities shaped by state feminism, leading to conflicting subjectivities within their families and workplaces (AlMutawa, 2020; James, 2020).

Despite this effort, conventional gender roles such as caregiving remain prevalent. Experts warn that unless fundamental changes occur at the grassroots level, advancements may only be superficial, with some scholars cautioning that women's progress may reflect a patriarchal image, leading only to superficial changes (Al Dhaheri, 2009). Also, other challenges prevail; for instance, women's education ratio needs to improve in rural areas, primarily due to prevalent cultural norms that restrict women to the home and family sphere. Moreover, the dominant gender biases and preconceptions form another obstacle in the UAE, which calls for more campaigns to raise awareness about the significant gains of gender equality initiatives (Aloraimi, 2011; Marmenouta & Liriob, 2014). Finally, despite the government's efforts to raise the number of women in the government, the current representation of women in the Federal National Council is still under 50%, which is the government's proclaimed target. In general, cultural obstacles like the traditional role of women as homemakers limit their ability to succeed in careers as society still favors men over women (Bollinger & Gittleman, 2018; Claussen & Carpenter, 2020;).

This is why the UAE government launched the GBC in 2015 and numerous PR campaigns to raise awareness about women's equality. To conduct a comprehensive evaluation, it will be necessary to interview various stakeholders, including those who designed the campaigns. However, this paper's objective is more limited, and it aims to evaluate the effectiveness of the campaigns based on the audience's perception of them (outtakes).

Methodology:

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to explore the role of campaigns in promoting gender balance[*]. This method was chosen to allow for a nuanced understanding of participants' perspectives and experiences. It relies on four focus group (FG) discussions to capture diverse perspectives and promote interaction among participants. A focus group is a group discussion used to get detailed information on a specific topic or issue. In this study, up to six people per focus group were chosen based on relevance and ability to contribute, and the conversation was recorded for later analysis. These discussions encouraged participants to share opinions and build upon each other's ideas. Open-ended questions were used to explore participants' thoughts and experiences.

A purposive sample of participants was selected to ensure relevant data was collected. The participants were recruited via referral, given the sensitivity of the topic under discussion, which requires trust to allow for candid conversations (Atkinson & Flint, 2001), and they were recruited via the first author's personal and professional networks. In total, four FGs were conducted with a total of 23 participants. There were two male-only groups, one mixed-gender group, and one female-only group. Participants were primarily Emirati citizens (20 participants), and the remaining (three) were long-term residents. They all come from Sharjah, Ajman, and Fujairah. The reason for recruiting two male-only groups was to probe some answers regarding men's views about gender equality campaigns. Table 1 provides an overview of each FG:

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[*] Link to the images/posters used in the campaigns:
https://www.instagram.com/uaegbc/reels/

Table (1) Overview of FG participants

FG 1				
Participant ID	Age	Occupation	Gender	Nationality
P1	33	Employee	Male	UAE
P2	37	Employee	Male	UAE
P3	28	Employee	Male	India
P4	26	Employee	Male	UAE
P5	30	Employee	Male	UAE
P6	32	Employee	Male	UAE
FG 2				
P7	25	Employee	Male	UAE
P8	33	Employee	Male	UAE
P9	31	Employee	Male	UAE
P10	27	Employee	Male	India
P11	25	Employee	Male	UAE
P12	30	Employee	Male	UAE
FG 3				
P13	29	Student	Male	UAE
P14	35	Student	Male	UAE
P15	26	Student	Female	UAE
P16	26	Student	Female	UAE
P17	30	Student	Female	UAE
FG 4				
P18	28	Student	Female	UAE
P19	26	Student	Female	Iraq
P20	33	Student	Female	UAE
P21	36	Student	Female	UAE
P22	30	Student	Female	UAE
P23	32	Student	Female	UAE

Initially, the goal was to select participants already acquainted with GBC's campaigns. Unfortunately, this plan was not feasible as several

potential participants admitted to not being familiar with them. The first author, who moderated the sessions, then opted for an alternative approach, which involved presenting still images and videos of the campaigns, available on Instagram, for the first 20 minutes of the session before proceeding with the formal discussions. In total, each FG lasted between 90 to 120 minutes.

The FG guide included the following themes:

- The participants' view and general assessment of the GBC's PR campaigns promoting gender balance
- Their familiarization with similar campaigns (even outside the UAE)
- Their view of the most effective platforms or channels for such campaigns to reach a wider audience and promote gender balance
- Their view on the diversity of such campaigns.

Finally, the study was conducted only after securing the approval of the Ethics Committee in the authors' institution. This includes approving the guide, the informed consent form, participant information sheet and assuring the Committee of keeping participants' identities confidential by not using real names.

Participants confirmed that they only became aware of the GBC's campaigns after being shown images and videos, which highlights the need for more participatory communication to promote gender equality in the Arab region. Thus, state feminism in the UAE emphasizes women's contributions to the nation rather than their own liberation, which may reinforce patriarchal structures.

Findings: Views on gender equality campaigns:

When probed to define what gender equality campaigns were about, a few (male) participants could not provide a coherent answer. Instead, they mentioned "women's stuff" (P1) or referred to "education or driving" (P2) as the core principles behind the campaign.

A couple of participants also tried to access Google to search for examples of gender equality campaigns and their purpose, but the moderator had to stop them and move to another question that they could engage with.

What is noteworthy is how participants cited foreign campaigns that aimed to raise awareness about gender equality, but they did not mention any local campaigns. For instance, none of the participants said that they

had seen the GBC's campaigns before, but when they were asked to cite some known campaigns, many of them mentioned Western ones such as Dove's Real Beauty, #Metoo, LikeAGirl, HeForShe, and LeanIn campaigns.

It is also worth mentioning that a few participants referred to foreign gender equality campaigns as a part of hidden political agendas:

P10: These campaigns are the most politicized […] and are supported by governments.

P10: I am familiar with many [foreign] campaigns but do not know their benefit for the UAE. They could be incitement campaigns.

This politicization can be because, in contrast to other Arab societies, the UAE women used to contribute to the economic system before the discovery of oil, as it was a system based on family production units where men and women shared roles based on their natural capacities (Aloraimi, 2011). This is why concepts like 'secular or secularist' feminism and gender are interpreted, in modern times, as aiming at inciting Arab women against men in a state like the UAE, where women (and men) are provided for what they need (Aloraimi, 2011).

Moreover, one participant referred to the *HeForShe* campaign as being based on the biased selection of Emma Watson, who hardly represents average women:

P22: There was a stereotype in choosing Emma Watson. I mean, they chose a famous and beautiful person whose life is almost so comfortable to deliver such a big message.

This is an interesting comment as it points to the need for average women to lead such campaigns. This is why, when probed about the reason why foreign campaigns like *Dove*'s were successful, several participants (male and female) referred to "authenticity" as the core message behind this campaign, for which it was successful:

P1: The *Dove* campaign was successful because it focused on real beauty [standards]

P17: The reason for the success of the *Real Beauty* campaign is that it used women of different bodies, age groups, the old and young, and even [different] social and cultural backgrounds. I mean that was real.

For several participants, however, the GBC's campaigns were unknown to them before, but when they were told that the GBC was present at

Expo2020 with a pavilion about women in the UAE, they assumed that the campaigns must have been successful because Expo2020 itself was a success:

P2: The events in the women's wing [in Expo2020] must have caused a media sensation.

P3: I used to go to Expo2020 to eat and see the dome of Al Wasl, but it was successful as a whole

P4: I see the Expo succeeded, but I was not curious to visit the women's pavilion, to be frank

P5: I see the success of the Expo as economic and media more than it is a public relations campaign

P6: I think in general that Expo2020 must have represented women appropriately.

P21: The women's wing was successful, as there was a big line to enter the pavilion; it's a nice idea.

P18: It had a lot of publicity because it was sponsored by Cartier, which made us want to visit it, but I liked the sustainability pavilion more. In general, Expo2020 was successful, and I expect that its message has been delivered.

In summary, each participant in the study confirmed that they had only become acquainted with the GBC's campaigns after the first author presented them with the GBC's images and videos. In contrast, they were aware of the women's pavilion in Expo 2020, which indicates partial success in highlighting the UAE women's advances internationally.

It is also interesting to note the reference to "authenticity" in the above quotes. Authenticity is a subjective concept that can vary among individuals. It involves creating and presenting oneself in a way that aligns with personal interpretation (AlMutawa, 2019). Authenticity can also mean owning one's narrative and self-presentation, even if it strays from an idealized self or managing emotions (Hurley, 2019). Although participants were not asked further questions to elaborate on the "authenticity" of the GBC's images, due to the limited scope of this study, this theme certainly warrants further investigation.

Stereotyped view:

When asked about the elements of successful gender equality campaigns in the UAE, many male participants reflected on the role of media in misrepresenting women. They believe that the media's incorrect representation of women in the region is causing women in the UAE to blindly follow negative role models of women (Arab or foreign), especially social media celebrities.

> P3: From my opinion and experience, the biggest challenge for women is [their representation in] soap operas, and that is why they are not taken seriously at work.

> P1: I see some sisters doing themselves injustice through their actions and their clothes, which means blind imitation in wearing makeup and hair, I am sure that no one takes them seriously as a result.

> P7: [you see] a woman going to work or university as if she were going to a wedding [in full makeup], and then she wants [people] to believe that she is [seriously] working or studying. She must change from inside so that people believe that she is equal to men.

> P10: I notice that women are sometimes blamed for harassment based on their clothing or gestures. But it is unclear what motivates men to harass women. Some suggest that wearing makeup or certain gestures may invite harassment, but who decides that these actions are the cause? As a young man, I understand the complexities of this issue, especially in our Arab society.

> P18: In my opinion, the media is responsible for these stereotypes.

It is also worth mentioning that one female participant agreed with the stereotyped image that women tend to imitate celebrities, regardless of cultural differences between their lifestyles.

> P21: We watch commercials and then begin to copy the makeup looks exactly as shown. We then spread the images throughout society, often highlighting negative aspects, and then we blame the media for this behavior.

Such a negative attitude was also reflected in one male participant's comment about his former female boss, although another male participant had a differing opinion on women in leadership positions. The first participant recounted the unpleasant experience of working under a former female manager, who applied a strict policy with regard to delays for work,

while the other praised his current female manager for her understanding and support towards employees with family commitments:

> P6: I used to have a female manager who considered any delay for work as catastrophic, but my current male manager sees delays as acceptable excuses.

> P5: On the contrary, my director is understanding and lenient towards me, especially when I mention that my daughter is tired or needs attention at home. I have noticed that there is a difference in the way male and female employees are treated by the management.

This confirms that negative attitudes may still prevail, at least partially, despite the massive gains by women in the UAE during the past few decades. It is also noteworthy that most participants were young, under the age of 37, but many still held stereotypical views of women, in contrast to previous research (e.g., Mostafa, 2005), which showed differences between younger and older generations.

In the UAE, men tend to hold the dominant role in marriage and family, reflecting a strongly patriarchal society. Recent studies have provided evidence of differences in attitudes towards gender equality. This also means that societal views have not caught up, and women may not be promoted to decision-making posts at the same rate (Dashti & Mesbah, 2016). That is why the hurdles to women's empowerment seem to be cultural and psychological rather than organizational. Indeed, as Al-Lamky (2007) argues, there is a need to showcase the challenges faced by women in Gulf societies. While progress has been made with women appointed to senior public positions, cultural and structural barriers still exist. Therefore, policymakers should address the deeply held beliefs and mental frameworks to achieve meaningful inclusiveness for women.

Possible solutions:

When asked about possible solutions to make such gender empowerment campaigns successful in the UAE, participants agreed on three solutions: first, they agreed that opinion makers such as tribe leaders, in addition to social media influencers, can play a significant role in influencing future campaigns:

P2: Try to gain the support of public opinion through [approaching] distinguished individuals in society, such as influencers in social media and tribal leaders.

P7: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, and TikTok are platforms that [are attractive], so the message gets across faster [on these platforms].

P8: If possible, there should be a GBC [chapter] in every ministry, entity, school, and university in the state to represent [diverse] opinions and spread awareness and knowledge.

P13: [we need] campaigns that challenge stereotypical and traditional images of women and present women's achievements in male-dominated fields and [combat] traditional perceptions.

P16: The strongest impact will be on platforms that have video content because they are more effective in delivering the message.

Indeed, improving media content and creating new educational platforms is crucial for education's role in social development and civil society growth in the Gulf Arab region. Gulf Arab women can positively affect their role and image within the media and successfully challenge cultural resistance to greater female empowerment. One scholar (Maestri, 2017, p. 104) suggests that the media can offer new job opportunities and dedicated spaces for women educators, promoting creativity, innovation, intercultural dialogue, and coordination between education and media as essential for positive outcomes. Among the authorities in the GCC region, there is a growing awareness of the importance of expanding cultural opportunities for women, especially the younger generation. This is particularly relevant in light of the increasing unemployment rates among Gulf Arab women and their untapped potential in the media industry (Maestri, 2017, p.106).

Second, one female participant suggested that women should be targeted in such campaigns in order to ensure that women support each other, as well:

P15: I believe that, at times, women can be each other's rivals instead of being supportive. This kind of competitiveness can have a negative impact on motivation and progress. I strongly feel that we need to work on changing society's perception of women while also working on ourselves from within, and then we can convince men that we deserve equal treatment.

Third, several participants also highlighted the importance of engaging diverse social groups to ensure widespread support for gender empowerment campaigns.

P15: Involving people in campaigns means that the target group will be part of the campaign. I mean, if we want to fight stereotypes, we involve advertising companies that portray women stereotypically, and we organize workshops or lectures on [this issue].

P22: Public relations campaigns can actively engage several members of the community in open dialogues on gender balance, including developing and promoting awareness.

This indicates a need for more participatory communication as a transformative process of dialogue that enables individuals and groups to realize their potential and engage in their own welfare. The core of participatory communication, then, is the shared meanings and interpretations generated through negotiation, and this shared understanding is critical for making policies, sharing knowledge, and community participation (Walker, 2007).

Discussion :

The above findings highlight important contributions to existing, albeit limited, research on public campaigns for promoting gender equality in the Arab region, focusing on the UAE. Firstly, the study contributes to the media effects theory, showing the need to actively engage with audiences and encourage audience participation by utilizing social media platforms to create interactive campaigns. This includes encouraging user-generated content and testimonials to showcase diverse perspectives, as well as working closely with media outlets to ensure coverage of the social change issue. This tendency to engage audiences has been promoted in the literature on participatory media effects stemming from the audience's active role in creating, sharing, and consuming media content. This dynamicity fosters a more interactive relationship between media producers and consumers and

has paved the way for emerging media effects that reflect the audience's growing involvement in shaping the message. Notably, these effects center around social media and the creation of communities based on shared interests.

Secondly, the study also points to the risk of sending conflicting societal messages. The UAE's state feminism emphasized women's contributions to the nation, not their own liberation per se, which reinforced patriarchal structures in private spheres (Al-Mutawa, 2020). This form of state feminism is acutely needed in some states, like the Arab region, to accelerate women's equality measures, but it has its limitations due to societal resistance to change in gender roles. This was evident in the above quotes, showing the participants', especially male participants, views of women's roles as the caregivers in the family and, thereby, as the ones who should reconcile their roles inside and outside their homes. It is true that such attitudes may have shifted recently (e.g., AlMutawa, 2020), but they are not enough to warrant a notable change in attitudes toward women's participation in the public sphere.

Moreover, Emirati women's position is shaped by both official laws and sociocultural beliefs (Aloraimi, 2011). Emirati men and women used to share roles based on their natural capacities in a family-based production system well before the discovery of oil, and that is why concepts like *feminism* and *gender* are seen potentially divisive now (Aloraimi, 2011). The result is that many Emirati women encounter obstacles in their professional pursuits due to societal expectations, in addition to the fact that family decisions and lack of support from their husbands can hinder their ambitions. Furthermore, they are often expected to prioritize family and household duties, even when they are not the primary caregivers (Marmenouta & Liriob, 2014). Another obstacle to women's success in the workplace is the behavior of other women; although this topic is hardly explored in academic studies (see O'Sullivan, 2015) or in official reports, it may be a widespread problem, as indicated in the aforementioned findings.

Conclusion:

The above study has some limitations. Chief among them is the small sample of focus groups and the emphasis on selected campaigns of GBC on Instagram as a case study. Future research can delve into this topic by examining campaigns across platforms, legacy versus new media, and by triangulating data using various research methods, both quantitative and qualitative.

Despite these limitations, the study sheds light on the limited impact of the GBC campaigns among the local population if judged only by the participants' limited knowledge of these campaigns. However, it is worth noting that the participants were aware of the women's pavilion in Expo 2020, which indicates the positive impact of the government's efforts towards promoting gender equality on a global scale. This could potentially enhance the nation's reputation and image as part of the nation's branding (Allagui & Al-Najjar, 2018). For further nation-building, however, there is still room for improvement in engaging all societal groups in future gender equality campaigns through participatory communication as an essential element for public participation and as a multidimensional process covering a wide range of functions such as information, public relations, and community voice.

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