

Empowering Voices: Emirati Women and the Practice of Digital Diplomacy

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Abstract:

This study investigates how Emirati female diplomats employ social media platforms for their professional practices. This study employed Media Determinism Theory to analyze eight Emirati women diplomats' interviews through Braun and Clarke's (2017) six-step thematic analysis of in-depth interviews. The findings indicate that digital media serve as essential tools for women to create strategic self-representations, which enable them to amplify their roles, participate in policy discourse, and build empowerment. The research offers practical recommendations for policy development, enhancing digital training, and protective strategies to strengthen women's participation in diplomacy. It also calls for further research on the intersection of new technologies, with implications for both the Gulf region and international diplomatic contexts.

Keywords: Digital Media; Women Empowerment; Digital Diplomacy; Emirati Women, UAE

1. Introduction

Digital media has led to significant changes, including diplomacy, where communication has been extended to the masses, and workflow procedures are altered in foreign ministries. Studies have outlined the post-pandemic transition to hybrid diplomacy when virtual and face-to-face interactions are not considered the only available alternatives (Bjola & Manor, 2022). Similar research, Digital Nativity, in Foreign Affairs ministries covers the use of digital platforms and their appraisal of the strategic potential by diplomats through generational and conceptual differences (Manor, 2022). Collectively, these views place digital tools neither as supplements but as part of the new structural background of how states conduct foreign policy and public diplomacy.

In the Gulf region, specifically, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), digital diplomacy has increasingly become a clearly outlined element of foreign policy practice. The adoption of e-diplomacy in the UAE, including the complex issues associated with its use, is reported in one of the state case studies in the International Journal of Communication (Antwi-Boateng & Al Mazrouei, 2021). At a localized level, the study of digital cultural diplomacy also attends to the capacity of online spaces to initiate the projection of identity, facilitate cross-cultural communication, and formulate new security and reputational concerns, which is an analytical

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perspective particularly apt for the branding of modernity and inclusivity in the UAE (Kyriakidis et al., 2024).

An emerging amount of peer-reviewed scholarship links those changes with gender. Social media has the potential to increase the reach of women into public life and influence the attitudes toward women's leadership among the audiences in the non-Western setting (Storie & Marschlich, 2022). Meanwhile, research, such as journalism and politics, demonstrates that women are disproportionately exposed to vitriolic responses, including harassment and coordinated efforts to attack, and this online hostility can suppress engagement and limit the online gains in equal enjoyment of their rights (Zviyita et al., 2024). In the case of the UAE, more general social change literature observes the changing gender values among Emirati women, which also provides a valuable cultural background regarding how digital diplomacy resonates with the rule and representational expectations (Alteneiji, 2023).

In the existing body of scholarship on digital diplomacy, much of the work reflects on Western experiences, rather than on the experiences of women diplomats in the Gulf, mostly the Emirati women. Not many studies examine both the empowering potential and the threats of the digital platforms under this specific socio-cultural and political context.

This study aims to define and explore how digital media moderates the empowerment of Emirati women in international diplomacy, examining the opportunities these media present and the barriers women face in participating professionally in digital media. Based on this perspective, this research focuses on understanding the role of digital media in empowering Emirati women working in diplomacy.

The analysis is based on Media Determinism Theory, which presents digital platforms as tools of transformation that could redefine power relations and provide access to communication, and that can examine existing structural inequalities and power relations dominated by gender.

A qualitative research design was used, focusing on quality rather than quantitative data. A purposive sampling was used to collect data from eight Emirati female diplomats through in-depth semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was done to establish the frequency of patterns and views.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Evolution of Digital Diplomacy

Digital diplomacy represents a clear break in the history of diplomacy since it includes the transition of closed state-to-state communication towards hybrid communication patterns that blend face-to-face and online communication. All over the world, the use of social media, real-time interaction, and multi-platform extenders as the essential components of foreign policy is becoming widespread (Mazumdar, 2024). The evolutionary model of change identified by Archetti (2012) portrays change as both structural and cultural within the framework, where digital tools alter the pace of diplomatic work, reach, and control over messages. However, technology adoption unfortunately tends to outpace strategic coherence,

and indeed, in a London-based interview with diplomats, many embassy websites and social channel operations are done in silo with little direction on policy unity.

Comparative research also proves that, despite the fact that the digital turn has decreased the obstacles to access and made it possible to interact directly with the citizens (Hofmann & Pawlak, 2023), the quality of such interactions also differs. Cha et al. (2024) show that online diplomacy is limited in its transformative potential because many foreign embassies in Korea adhere insufficiently to the principles of dialogic communication that would lead to developing a truly reciprocal relationship. In the meantime, India's digital diplomacy path is another example of how continuous investment in digital identity might yield benefits in reputation, visibility, and influence (Natarajan, 2024).

In the case of the UAE, these international dynamics equate to careful statecraft. Antwi-Boateng and Al Mazrouei (2021) observe that the country strategically uses digital channels as part of its public diplomacy, aiming to control the perception and present the country as modern or engaging in efforts to neutralize negative narratives. Nevertheless, these writings are primarily focused on branding on a national level, which creates a desire to comprehend how the exact mechanisms can be applied to the situation of individual diplomats, especially women, dealing with the demands of both international and local communities.

2.2 Digital Diplomacy in the Gulf and the UAE

Digital diplomacy in the Gulf Cooperation Council region (GCC) is connected with soft power policies that include elements of nation branding, cultural promotion, and orientation of the economy. The UAE is an example of such integration since it uses digital platforms to showcase its heritage and innovation, signaling to the rest of the world the progressive changes it has brought (Antwi-Boateng & Al Mazrouei, 2021).

A common focus in the regional literature can be seen on the utilization of digital space in cross-cultural collaboration and global partnership development (Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, 2024). Nevertheless, research by Cha et al. (2024) is relevant to this case: the active presence of official channels is maintained by the UAE, but not all actors in the field implement interactive and audience-centered communication strategies in their work. This implies a probable gap between the objectives of state-level digital diplomacy and the actual practices of particular diplomats in the field.

In the example of Al-Attiya (2024), comparing the use of Twitter by the foreign ministries of GCC during the 2017 blockade, digital diplomacy acquired the status of a first-line method of communicating in crises. Official tweets enhanced diplomatic status and controlled international perception in Gulf states as they explored new strategies to contain the recent unprecedented tension in the region. The points that can be drawn by such dynamics point not only to the focus on the centrality of digital frameworks in GCC diplomacy, but also to the reactivity of such structures to rapidly developing geopolitical events, a situation that strains pressures on individual diplomats and specifically women to act under an enhanced level of visibility and scrutiny within the digital spheres. These platforms give women in UAE diplomacy visibility and risk (Mazumdar, 2024). However, little research today relates the

national branding role of digital diplomacy to the personal branding of women diplomats, which is the relationship that this study aims to examine.

2.3 Women's Representation and Participation in Diplomacy

According to global data, the gap in the proportions of women and men serving in the ambassadorial positions remains high, as it constitutes merely one in every five posts (Thabit, 2024). Although the figure provides evidence that the promotion of women in the field is progressively greater than in the past decades, it shows that men still dominate women in diplomatic leadership. According to Lecler and Goltrant (2025), this imbalance is caused by institutional arrangements unfavorable to women's career advancement, e.g., the assignment of lucrative jobs and the use of informal and male-based networks when making postings. These results echo the findings of previous studies, which indicated that women have limited opportunities to access the highest diplomatic positions, mainly because it depends on sponsorship by senior officials (Lecler & Goltrant, 2025). However, such study findings do not reflect those of Nordic nations, where a formal mentorship system and clear promotion guidelines have minimized the dearth of gender inequality (UN Women, 2023).

Other studies suggest that the lack of women in diplomacy is due to the underestimation of such profession-related competencies, including consensus-building and cultural mediation (UNCTAD, 2020). The authorities of diplomatic institutions devalue them despite growing significance in modern diplomacy (Aggestam & Towns, 2019). Other objections that point to undervaluation are the few females within the senior offices due to interrupted careers, the few postings, and the unequal access to workers in security-sensitive jobs (Tickner, 1992). This distinction highlights a conceptual gap in the literature regarding whether gender inequality in diplomacy is a fundamental issue of skill recognition or a structural issue within the career. Also, there is a need for a new focus on Arab women in the Gulf, whose cultural norms interact with state-led gender changes, unlike in other areas of the world.

In the UAE, the number of women has increased in terms of representation, and this is per the Gender Balance Strategy that integrates parity aims in governance systems (Alhammedi & Tohami, 2021). Storie and Marschlich (2022) reveal that the concept of young Emirati women aspiring to be in political and diplomatic positions is becoming commonplace as society slowly accepts it as a viable possibility. However, much power comes from structural barriers. According to Bahraini studies and cross-GCC research, promoting women's authority and achieving a high educational level may be ways to break the structural barriers (Woelandhary et al., 2024). However, traditional attitudes to women are prevalent in diplomatic environments. The gap exists in the lack of connection between the patterns of this representation and digital participation. There is limited discussion about the influence of digital space on women's advancement and power in diplomacy.

2.4 Gender, Media, and Online Empowerment

Online spaces also offer women diplomats means of self-presentation, networking, and successful policy promotion. This is considered by feminist media scholarship as a political opportunity to challenge conventional gender orders, giving women the opportunity to

circumvent gatekeepers and create legitimacy in the public arena (Amiri & Ghourdou, 2024). In the case of Emirati women, Storie and Marschlich (2022) demonstrate that social media enables them to strengthen their political identity and credibility and shape the narratives that would have an impact both domestically and internationally.

The culturally sensitive model of empowerment developed by Samier and ElKaleh (2021) is especially applicable to the UAE. According to Samier and ElKaleh (2021), empowerment needs to be compatible with the religious, social, and institutional norms to become sustainable. Osman and Rafique (2023) also illustrate the potential of social media as a tool to change the prevailing societal views on women's leadership even in a conservative environment. However, such achievements are volatile when not supported institutionally. Current literature confirms the promise of online arenas. However, it provides little insight into Emirati female diplomats' tactics to fulfil their professional goals without undermining cultural legitimacy.

2.5 Institutional and Strategic Approaches to Empowerment

Digital diplomacy's empowerment must be marked by institutional protection and personal will. Lecler and Goltrant (2025) demand the implementation of gender-sensitive career plans, mentoring, and flexible assignment models. In contrast, Antwi-Boateng and Al Mazrouei (2021) insist on implementing cybersecurity systems to provide digital engagement safety.

The culturally-based empowerment framework proposed by Samier and ElKaleh (2021) indicates that the strategies of a given institution, aimed at achieving empowerment, should not clash with norms of the specified location; otherwise, it is likely to be met with backlash. Amiri and Ghourdou (2024) demonstrate how online networks may enable women leaders to develop transnational support systems.

Although these suggestions have been made, there is still a gap in the research conducted in the Gulf context of converting policies into everyday practice by women diplomats on the Internet. This paper fills this gap by examining the perception of Emirati women and their use of institutional support to achieve the maximum range of empowerment, along with reducing digital risks.

While the literature underscores the transformative yet uneven potential of digital diplomacy, the UAE demonstrates how these changes affect gender dynamics and state-driven empowerment initiatives. The Emirates use digital diplomacy as a tool to build soft power and national image, while Emirati female diplomats face challenges to establish their credibility and gain cultural acceptance in this digital environment. The state supports its gender balance initiatives and digital nation-branding efforts, but research indicates that women diplomats face challenges when using these resources to build authority and protect themselves from risks in online spaces. The UAE demonstrates the dual nature of digital diplomacy through its ability to boost female diplomats' exposure and power, but also creates cultural limitations, public examination, and institutional challenges that current research has not fully addressed. The dual

nature of Emirati women's digital practices requires investigation because they extend state branding efforts while enabling personal political influence.

3. Theoretical Framework

Digital diplomacy is a multidisciplinary phenomenon that can be approached from different theoretical perspectives, such as social constructivism and the public sphere theory. Social constructivism greatly helps analyze the way identities and interests of international actors are socially constructed during the interaction process (Liloia, 2022). On the contrary, public sphere theory by Jürgen Habermas is a conceptual framework where citizens can freely hold discussions and debates about public affairs, thus shaping the people's opinion and subjecting authority to its scrutiny (Bjola & Manor, 2022). Although such theories can help to understand identity formation and the process of discussion, they are not the most relevant to understanding how gender, power, and technology intersect in the Emirati context. In the present research, the Feminist Theory of communication and Media Determinism were chosen as the most adequate models as they collectively analyze the changing communicative power relations through the technologies (Forsler, 2024). The role of gender power in terms of how it is negotiated through political and social structures and how the power of gender is negotiated (Tickner, 1992).

3.1 Media Determinism Theory (MDT)

Media determinism refers to a school of thought that envisions communication technologies as dynamic agents that determine social relations, political behaviour, and cultural norms, as well as other roles to play besides being mere neutral channels (Mazumdar, 2024). It is not simply what is said, but also how diplomacy is practised. The ability of the diplomatic roles to be conducted instantly and interactively by potentially anyone means that digital media is well-established and impacts practices (Archetti, 2012). Therefore, MDT presents the platforms discussed in this work as framing the modalities of the presence, visibility, and influence of the Emirati women diplomats in international interaction.

The coding of interview data was informed by this theory, focusing on how platform mechanics, such as multimedia formats, algorithmic amplification, and comment threading, influenced the tactics used by those interviewed. It also examined how such features interacted with or were antithetical to institutional procedures, signifying the media technologies' influence on the diplomatic practice.

4. Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews to study the perceptions and usage of digital media by the Emirati women diplomats in their professional practice. The approach allows a subtle interpretation of the overall patterns and specifics of experiences and attitudes of the sample participants, which is essential to attain the complexity of the impact of digital platforms on diplomatic careers (Nwabuko, 2024). Unlike quantitative approaches, qualitative ones do not rely on numerical measurement and statistical analysis to determine the significance of the results. However, they allow exploring the lived realities in-depth and the meanings participants attach to their actions.

Eight Emirati women who actively participated in Emirati diplomatic service, digital strategy, and media operations helped in this work by acting as respondents. This purposive sampling criterion identified people who: (1) actively worked in diplomacy, (2) regularly used digital tools in their activities, and (3) participated in the public arena in the discussion or initiative on women's empowerment. The range of experience, seniority, and public prominence was noted to create a picture of digital engagement in the UAE's diplomatic realm, as reflected in this selection.

Although the depth-oriented trait of the qualitative research and the fact that the study addresses a relatively small elite professional group had an impact, the sample size of eight was deemed sufficient. Since the targeted population is of high expertise, and the depth of the stories presented is considerable, saturation was achieved without any significant number of interviews being carried out beyond the selected number, as no new themes appeared to emerge with further interviews (Guest et al., 2006).

The respondents were selected from five emirates, including diplomatic communication offices of the federal government, the UAE national news agency (WAM), and permanent missions abroad. All interviewing summaries are described in Table 1 below.

Table 1: List of participants

Participant Code	Experience/Region
P1	Ambassador-level leadership
P2	Senior-level (New York, 2022–2024)
P3	Senior diplomat, Asia region
P4	Attaché-level, multilateral experience
P5	Mid-career, Sub-Saharan diplomacy
P6	Cultural diplomacy
P7	Deputy ambassador, bilateral focus
P8	Official at the Permanent Mission to the UN

Source: Compiled by the author

4.1 Data Collection

The primary data were collected from 10 September to 20 December 2024 by interviewing Emirati female diplomats and communication officers. This approach was chosen as the method that is flexible enough to ask questions aimed at exploring certain aspects and provides a possibility to talk about experiences in personal words (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Interviews were conducted in Arabic, as this language enabled participants to express themselves freely in their native tongue. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes.

Informed consent of all the participants was obtained, and all the interviews were audiotaped. The study secured ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board before data collection. All the participants were provided with a document that included information about the purpose of the research, methods, and their rights. They were informed that they could withdraw at any point without any punishment. Transcripts and reporting used pseudonyms and participant codes to maintain confidentiality and preserve individuals' anonymity, especially as some of the high-profile roles were occupied.

4.2 Data Analysis

Analyses of data were performed according to the six-phase analysis guideline by Braun and Clarke (2006), which includes (1) familiarization with data, (2) initial code generation, (3) theme search, (4) theme review, (5) theme definition, and (6) report production. Two independent researchers were responsible for manually coding transcripts to boost information reliability. A miscongruence of coding was observed and solved through continuous discussion and fact-finding from online sources to ensure the credibility of the final data utilized. This procedure guaranteed reliability coupled with rigor. The identified patterns based on the thematic analysis revealed that using digital platforms in diplomatic work may vary among Emirati women diplomats. The methods also showed the respondents' tactics to deal with institutional demands and how they manage online risks.

5. Findings

5.1 Emirati Women Diplomats Challenging Power via Digital Media

The key finding of the interview analysis and digital content analysis was that Emirati women diplomats strategically leveraged social media to challenge traditional power dynamics in diplomacy. P1 noted,

"Digital diplomacy provides a platform for women to highlight their role and contributions. It also allows them to communicate directly with the public and present their perspectives. This visibility helps break stereotypes and inspire new generations of women to engage in diplomacy."

The viewpoint of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1989; Venkatesh & Davis, 2000) exemplifies the perceived usefulness and ease of use driving the adoption of digital tools in professional settings. Simultaneously, this scenario calls to mind the accounts of Feminist Theory (Butler, 1990; Hooks, 2000), where physical space is a product of the digital world, where new gender identities may be performed, and where existing hierarchies can be destabilized. These diplomats also challenge the patriarchal tradition built over time in the diplomatic institutions by presenting their work and opinions without the help of the male gatekeepers (Tickner, 1992).

One such illustrative case was the deployment of international online movements, like #MeToo, in which the participants sought to discuss women's rights to education, reproductive rights, and freedom from gender-based violence via Twitter and Instagram. P1 noted that digital diplomacy has the potential to give much attention to the issues of women and allow liaising with international movements. It can be echoed by MDT since the features of these media, such

as instant publishing, reach through networks, and visualization of narratives, reshape the structure of diplomatic communication by smoothing hierarchies and linking Emirati women to global movements directly rather than through other actors (McLuhan, 1964).

Participating in these campaigns through the organization and participation was more than just amplifying current arguments on gender equality; it also created a discourse to accommodate Emirati views on gender equality. It is an example of one important meeting between the two theoretical perspectives. The Image of Visibility, formulated by the MDT, describes how the medium's features are mediated to introduce visibility. In that manner, this paper goes beyond the current literature by illustrating how Emirati female diplomats combine international advocacy and national representation, thus redefining the image of the UAE internationally and the gender norms in that country in terms of its diplomatic team.

Twitter was even among the most actively employed services that allowed Emirati women diplomats to avoid the official concept of diplomatic gatekeeping and play an active role in public discussion. As noted by P4 "Now, we no longer need a press conference or wait for permission to tell the public our stories". This means that the diplomatic engagement is democratized because they can now say their own thing to citizens, civil society, and journalists without having to wait for official occasions. This straight talk is in line with MDT since the nature of the instant posting on the platform and short-format reveals fewer institutional checks to enable women to establish agendas and drive narratives without necessarily having to resort to formal diplomatic channels.

Participants noted how such spaces have been utilized to bring in gender equity in policy, and P4 also confirmed that, "*by providing equal visibility and voice to women in the public sphere, digital diplomacy contributes to gender equality.*" In this case, the Feminist Theory would be beneficial in describing the ways in which this visibility would break the female monopoly of authoritative diplomatic discourse (Tickner, 1992). This value could be observed in the fact that the #WomenInDiplomacy campaign, co-led by participants, promotes the inclusion of women in foreign service and reshapes the definition of diplomatic excellence to incorporate gender diversity.

On Instagram, women diplomats got more personalized in terms of their approach to public diplomacy. As the fifth responder said, she prefers using digital platforms to promote initiatives on peace, gender equality, and development, which she stated give a lot of importance to voicing the women. This demonstrates the performative of Feminist Theory under which the identity and professional power are publicly manufactured (Butler, 1990). As described by Elshantaly and Moussa (2022), the visual format of Instagram allows telling a story and establishing relationships subtly and thus allows women to share policy-related messages in a way that feels natural (visceral), as opposed to diplomatic formal.

The finding complements the available literature by demonstrating how Emirati women integrate the features of various platforms to meet various needs: Twitter is used to engage in political advocacy and quick commenting activities, whereas Instagram is the platform of choice to build narratives and soft diplomacy. These approaches promote feminist equality

rhetoric and curate an improved perception of the UAE as a progressive player in the international political scenario.

The process of tagging, professional hashtags, and cross-media campaigns gives the Emirati female diplomats the power to establish their place in a male-dominated environment. P2 explained, *"We try to make women more visible by telling our personal stories and linking with global campaigns for equality"*. P2 outlined a three-pronged strategy: (1) the visibility rhetoric to attract attention to the fact that women exist in the field of diplomacy, (2) humanizing stories to emphasize their experiences, and (3) the cooperation with global gender equality movements to reach out beyond national borders. This reflects the push of Feminist Theory to force a re-appropriation of narratives, in which those on the sidelines re-take control of how they are spoken about, as opposed to allowing mainstream cultural formulae to do it on their behalf (Hooks, 2000).

The participants demonstrated how these strategies were deployed not only in pursuit of gender interests but also to further larger diplomatic interests. As P5 mentioned, *"As we can raise awareness of humanitarian aid initiatives, engage in online policy-making activities, or boost bilateral partnerships, digital technologies allow communicating and establishing relationships promptly."* The ability to interact on a transnational scale immediately in a Media Determinism world view tasks both the speed of diplomacy and its comprehensiveness (McLuhan, 1964).

Storytelling not only acquired the status of a soft-power tool but also served as a way of discrediting the established measures of diplomatic legitimacy, which have always been tied to the age and institutional prerogative. It also facilitates networking without geographical limits, as noted by P3. That is vital since it enables female diplomats to connect with mentors, allies, and partners worldwide. This is in addition to the observation that the digital spaces are the metaphorical and practical grounds of gendered power negotiation, enabling Emirati women to position themselves as dependable bodies in global policy dialogues.

The observation of this claim contributes to the literature, which demonstrates the interrelated form of diplomacy through visibility and advocacy. Although previous research discussed the application of digital activism by women in civil society settings, this study indicates that the same tactics are being implemented within statecraft, i.e., reformulating the idea of diplomacy as more interactive and less gender-exclusive.

5.2 Challenges and Opportunities in Digital Diplomacy for Emirati Women

Digital platforms have played a significant role in networking and collaboration within women's diplomatic circles, promoting the creation of communities. P3 added, *"It also affords non-geographical networking and thus enables female diplomats to identify the mentors, allies, and partners overseas."* It confirms the very idea of MDT, according to which the medium creates new relational options, in the given case, breaking the geographical and institutional isolation that hindered women's functioning in diplomacy in advance.

The participants pointed to the contribution of such resources as Twitter and LinkedIn to forming professional support networks where exchange of experiences and resources could occur, as well as the provision of moral support. Because of those spaces, some conversations could be held regarding managing gender-based bias, addressing unfair treatment, and moving towards roles within leadership. P3 also clarified that *"the UAE has been playing an active role in empowering female diplomats by giving them structured training courses and mentorships, as well as positions of leadership."* A Feminist Theory perspective of this translates to institutional support that involves women in reinforcing their agency in promoting digital empowerment, alongside in-the-field professional development career routes.

Therefore, digital communities were hybrid spaces, a combination of peer networks and advocacy working groups, where women could rally together to respond to structural inequalities. Notably, these societies provided a kind of solidarity that went beyond national identity. Therefore, it enabled Emirati diplomats to identify with the global women's movements and pursue the UAE's foreign policy goals.

The finding contributes to the literature by explaining that digital empowerment in diplomacy is not just an issue of appearance or messaging, but rather it entails building relational capital. The harmonization of online networking with state-sponsored training programs enables Emirati women diplomats to develop a sustainable pattern of gender-inclusive diplomatic leadership, thereby bridging the gap between symbolic representation and feasible career promotion.

Public awareness of gender equality in diplomacy has been raised, and policy development has been affected as Emirati women in diplomacy have strategically used Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram as part of their diplomatic practice. P4 affirmed that digital diplomacy will help facilitate gender equality through the equal presence and power of women in the arena of discourse. This represents the Feminist Theory idea of claiming the voice in that the involvement of women disturbs the existing pattern of male-dominated discourses and establishes new orientations in the arena of public politics.

Other leaders, such as P5, have used the platform to claim that they are the leaders in multilateral operations, and that has come out to be a visual disturbance to the masculine association with diplomacy. P5 argued, *"Digital diplomacy empowers women to take charge of the discourse in a way they desire. It enables access to audiences not subjected to gatekeeping, which is robust in regions where women are presently underrepresented."* According to the point of view within MDT, this act of direct access destabilizes the traditional hierarchies by eliminating the intermediaries in distributing the messages.

The deployment of individual postings on official UAE social media accounts also placed gender advocacy in the diplomatic branding of the state. P4 stated, *"I will only write what brings value, whether reporting about UAE humanitarian work or knowledge gained during diplomatic experiences."* This strategic content funding shows a certain understanding of digital diplomacy as individual and institutional means of action, supporting the hybridity of national image-construction and gender representation. The original contribution of this

finding is in its demonstration of ways the Emirati female diplomats engage in the dual capacity of representing the state and advocating for gender issues with the help of digital platforms to align these missions rather than oppose them as competing priorities.

Although online platforms have expanded engagement opportunities, they also increase women diplomats' scrutiny. P3 observed that the remarks the audiences express toward the performers are not limited to the professional side of performance, but also the performers' appearance, tone, or dressing, which is rarely extended to the male counterparts. This shows that the Feminist Theory criticizes gendered double standards when the credibility of women is discredited based on personal rather than professional judgment.

This kind of vigilance may discourage women from fully participating in the online community, resulting in self-censorship and a lack of a voice in international debates. P5 states that this pressure also applies to content choices: *"when commentary and criticism towards women's posts is more commentary and criticism, there is a risk of stigmatization that informs what women choose to post."* Using an MDT outlook, although the medium's freedom becomes a form of empowerment, it increases the gendered exposure to surveillance, exposing the visibility paradox.

Despite these obstacles, the participants identified promise in capacity-building, which was targeted. The P1 recommended, *"Women diplomats must work to some extent to establish electronic correspondence, and they are welcome to contribute."* It was deemed that gender-sensitive training in digital diplomacy would be necessary to level the field. This training can focus on both technical competence and online harassment issues.

The result contributes by pointing out that empowerment through digital media depends on addressing its risks. As an Emirati female diplomat, the way forward will involve trust-based and defense provisions into official diplomatic education so that the progress achieved towards visibility cannot be lost. Instead, it should benefit everyone (Alhawsawi & Jawhar, 2023).

6. Discussion

The research results match the theoretical framework of Feminist Theory and Media Determinism. The Emirati female diplomats use digital tools to gain visibility and advocate for change while they work to balance their traditional background with modern progress, according to feminist theory about gendered power dynamics in political and communicative systems. The existing gender norms, which create harassment and self-censorship and patriarchal backlash, prove that feminist empowerment depends on cultural and institutional environments. The interviews demonstrate that technological features, including algorithmic amplification, interactive networking, and multimedia formats, actively influence the level of visibility and risk exposure and influence that diplomats experience. The combination of feminist theory with media determinism explains how Emirati women diplomats use digital platforms for empowerment, yet face restrictions through these same platforms, which create both opportunities and challenges for their online presence.

The literature gathered in this work perfectly coincides with the views and experiences shared during the interviews, especially in opportunities and empowerment. Multiple scholars, including Antwi-Boateng and Al Mazrouei (2021), agree that digital diplomacy developed the possibilities of non-state actors and enabled the UAE to be seen internationally as a state of the modern and advanced world. The literature also supports this by stating that women's digital diplomacy enhances international relations with traditional diplomacy. The same reflection is made in the literature, where interviewee observations reflect how digitalization has opened space for women to subvert patriarchal culture. At the same time, Storie and Marschlich (2022) present the role of women diplomats online in challenging gender bias, reclaiming their roles, and pursuing feminist foreign policies, which are also perceptions reflected by the participants regarding empowerment and inclusivity.

The sources also affirm that UAE digital diplomacy balances life in the present with cultural identity. This point was reiterated by interviewees who emphasized tradition and progress. Some sources, such as Antwi-Boateng and Alhashmi (2022), argued that authentic cultural representation on the web creates a sense of legitimacy. Furthermore, Goby (2024) and Charles (2024) point out that online presence allows women to break through traditional boundaries and establish trust and power, which are echoed in the interview narratives as well. The statements offered by the participants on the planning, cooperation, and supportive influences of partners and friends using digital tools can be supported by multiple works, including Liloia (2022), who emphasized the importance of digital platforms in real-time cooperation, mentorship, and advocacy of gender equality.

The literature also agrees that online presence helps promote women's leadership, consistent with the views of the interviewees. Thabit (2024) highlighted that even in conservative cultures, women still obtain legitimacy in their power through digital representation. The cultural authenticity fits the description, since it reflects what the interviewee said about the power of tradition (Alotaibi, 2021). Thus, scholars, including Antwi-Boateng and Alhashmi (2022), verify that online authenticity can reframe the discourse in the public and disrupt the stereotypes.

Finally, the interviews referred to the challenges, including patriarchal backlash or online harassment, which is supported by literature. Antwi-Boateng and Alhashmi (2022) warn of the dangers and opportunities in social media. These advantages of advocacy and networking discussed by the participants are resonated in Alotaibi (2021) and Samier and ElKaleh (2021), who state that Emirati women, via their online activism, encourage equality in their local and international environments. In general, the convergence between the literature and the interview results implies that digital diplomacy is a potent instrument among Emirati women diplomats since it increases visibility, cooperation, feminist campaigns, and equal proportions between corporality and world implications in the face of structural challenges.

6.1 Contradiction and Consensus with the Literature

According to Anderson (2022), females assuming a diplomatic role online receive a lot of personal and abusive comments about their looks or understanding of gender rules. In

support, Kyriakidis (2024) mentioned that digital media gives women visibility that not only presents new ways to empower themselves, but also ways that adversely affect them. Therefore, digital tools have the potential to widen gender differences and toxic relationships. Nevertheless, contrary to a large body of literature exploring the prevalence of online harassment, there is the assumption that the visibility of women online draws attention and harassment to them.

However, many Emirati women diplomats struggle to acquire visibility online, especially when they do not post personal information. Algorithmic reasons contributed significantly because posts that gathered higher responses, irrespective of their content, received higher visibility (Dehal, 2024). Such algorithms provide a structural downfall to women who have maintained purely professional content. This questions the concept of media structure theory, which supposes gender as a fundamental advantage towards ensuring digital prominence.

However, this weakness has led Emirati women to learn new social media usage. They place content about responsibilities on Twitter, while visuals, storytelling, etc., are left for Instagram. This tactic helps in producing a gentler, accessible image of diplomacy. This bilateral strategy is based on the tenet of the same theory, the Social Identity Theory, where each person is calculative in presenting varying aspects of their identity to various audiences. In addition to public-facing tweets, respondents noted that they also used applications like WhatsApp and Telegram to create encrypted messaging broadcasts, which participants termed the digital backchannels. These groups enabled the sharing of draft statements, experimentation with hashtags, and the exchange of ideas on coping with online harassment. Such a practice complements the theme of feminist theory, which focuses on safe spaces that marginalized groups enjoy, granting an opportunity to remain free of the gendered policing that is prevalent on display platforms.

Finally, our study suggests that digital media can serve as both a tool for empowerment and a source of vulnerability for Emirati women diplomats. In addition to enabling an enactment of agency and challenge of gendered hierarchies, the capacity to influence discourse, its use is frozen in gatekeeping by institutions, reinforced by cultural imperatives, and facilitated by digital violence. These results align with the idea that considers structural inequalities and power dynamics based on gender and the Media Determinism perspective on digital platforms as a revolution of power and the possibility of communication access.

7. Conclusion

Overall, this study demonstrates that digital media in diplomatic practice in the UAE can be described as both disruptive and a contested territory, or one that can be used to strengthen the agency of women and extend their reach, but one still limited by the existing gender conventions and infrastructural conditions. The future impact of women representing the UAE in diplomacy on digital platforms will rely on evolving strategies, drawing on

institutional backing, and balancing cultural originality and multicultural interactions, thereby continuing to reconstruct the practice and prospects of diplomacy in the 21st century.

The main contribution of our study is to demonstrate that, based on in-depth qualitative research, Emirati women diplomats gravitate towards the digital media to give themselves more power, gain visibility, and take part in the discourse of diplomacy in arenas traditionally dominated by men, at the same time that they operate within a structural, cultural, and technological framework. Based on Feminist Theory and Media Determinism, it shows that digital media allows women to take agency, subvert traditional expectations of their roles, and redefine viewers of other countries to international norms of gender and diplomacy. Considering voices and lived experiences previously underrepresented in literature, this study contributes to the field of feminist communication science in extending it to the underrepresented Gulf region that had few previous in-depth context-specific studies that provide a unique, contextually specific understanding of how Emirati women negotiate the world of global technology on the one hand and the expectancies and traditions of the national culture on the other hand.

The four essential themes in the thematic analysis of eight qualitative interviews are enhanced visibility and voice, digital self-branding, institutional ambivalence, and online risks. Collectively, these results reflect a conflict between power and liberation: digital technologies can help the women diplomats to form their own identities and those of their countries more openly, to make true stories, and to reach out to others spread around the world, yet also cause them to pass gendered risks, to be subject to review and examination, and to confront institutional restrictions. The paper illustrates that visibility does not automatically apply to the gender or diplomacy roles; in fact, it requires algorithmic favour, content strategy, and a desire to confront the public scrutiny and, in some cases, scrutiny. Such translations can be added to the larger academic discourse of this study on gender and digital diplomacy because they show that empowerment and vulnerability are not mutually exclusive but rather interbased in the day-to-day lives of Emirati women diplomats.

The results raise some practical recommendations to be adopted by the UAE's diplomatic policy and practice. To begin with, it is necessary to institutionalize specific training programmes in digital media, targeted at women diplomats that would not only educate them about strategies when using platforms but also discuss content and content optimization without sacrificing authenticity and algorithmic bias. Second, reporting initiatives, access to courts, and cross-sector response of the diplomatic bodies and platform operators should increase the protection against online harassment. Third, institutionalize mentorship programs, which assign young female diplomats to more experienced practitioners to establish confidence, learn digital strategies, and create cultures of representation, where their stories are representative of the cultures they represent but also globally relevant. Fourth, promote strategic deployment of digital backchannels and closed peer networks that enable teamwork, disclosure of confidential information, and planning of advocacy initiatives without putting people at risk with unneeded publicity. Finally, formal recognition of the outcomes of digital

diplomacy activities within the performance appraisals would legitimize and reward the contributions of women in this field.

8. Limitations and future research

Although this study contributes significantly to understanding how Emirati women diplomats deploy digital media as their means of empowerment and representation, several limitations are worth considering. However, qualitative depth was emphasized instead of breadth, and saturation was attained after eight interviews. First, the project was based on a small purposive sample of eight participants. Although the strategy provided depth in the topic and allowed the researcher to explore the area thoroughly, the sample likely does not represent the broadest scope of experiences that fall under all UAE missions or diplomatic cadres.

Second, translation of the language used in the transcription and analysis process, Arabic to English, could have contributed to some drift of meaning, even though there was an attempt to maintain the authenticity and the context. Moreover, the study focused on social media as a digital diplomacy platform, which could have overlooked other potential digital interactions, such as closed groups, official websites, or internal systems for staying connected. Participant self-disclosure, particularly in response to sensitive issues such as challenges or negative experiences, might have also been negatively affected by the sensitivity of the diplomatic profession, either because of confidentiality issues or by institutional demands.

Lastly, the fast-changing dynamics of the digital media environment pose a problem of capturing long-term trends. The results are specific to a certain timeframe (2023-2024), and further studies are required to grasp how the digital diplomacy of Emirati women can evolve to address current global, regional, and technological changes.

The future development of this study can be carried out in several ways. Long-term studies that followed the development of digital strategies of Emirati women diplomats would provide insight into whether the current approach needs to be modified to last longer or whether sustainability is not that crucial to visibility, influence, and policy engagement. Cross-national comparisons will also highlight similarities and differences in digital diplomacy practices among women in other Gulf states and the Global South. To better understand cultural mediation in online relationships, exploring the audience aspect of digital diplomacy further, and questioning how domestic and international publics assimilate, interpret, and reciprocate to content produced by women diplomats, will provide additional insight into the subject. Lastly, a deeper consideration of the formal determination of digital diplomacy on national foreign policy may help explain the influence of institutional support and policy alignment on the viability and effectiveness of female online participation.

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