Algerian Communication Journal
Volume : 28/ N° : 01 (2026) P 66-83

ISSN:1111-536X EISSN:2676-1793

Media Intervention: People of Determination as Social Media Influencers

Maha Ibrahim Ali AlAli* University of Sharjah, UAE U19200621@sharjah.ac.ae	**Jairo Alfonso Lugo-Ocando** University of Sharjah, UAE jlugoocando@sharjah.ae.ae

Submitted: 10/12/2025 Accepted: 05/02/2026

Abstract: Conceptual agendas of inclusion have been largely untested in academic studies that examine the topic of disability representation on social media in the Gulf, although little empirical evidence has been given on how disability is operationalized by content creators as a mediating agent between the content and the social environment, as well as how this content is received by non-disabled audiences in a culturally bounded policy context as exemplified by the United Arab Emirates (UAE). With the help of the theoretical framework of information and communication sciences, the given study conceptualizes the work of disabled influencers as the digital mediators based on the discursive positioning, platform affordances, and reception of the audience. The data were produced through the qualitative design of semi-structured interviews with nine influencers in the UAE with disabilities and three groups of nineteen non-disabled followers that made it possible to examine: (1) influencer practices as a deliberate production of content, and not just a circulation of content; (2) how viewers received disability narratives and (3) how perceived institutional conditions contributed to the production of visibility and inclusion. The results showed that using personal narrative, didactic content (e.g., communication of accessibility by means of sign language-related content), and share of everyday experiences, influencers strategically employ these tactics to rebrand disability instead of stigma and what influencers can do with it. No differences in the ratings of message "effectiveness" among non-disabled followers were found, but the perceived efficacy would be greater with improved language accessibility and everyday-life contextualization. Respondents also related the positive results of inclusive communication with the institutional framework of the UAE, which was viewed as more facilitating valuable visibility and engagement of people. The paper brings a reception-based explanation of inclusive digital impact in the UAE through defining how platformed narrative, perceived trustworthiness, and institutional validity interrelate to influence the manner in which disability is represented and included.

Keywords: disability; people of determination, digital mediation, social influence, reception, inclusive communication.

* Corresponding author

Algerian Communication Journal
Volume : 28/ N° : 01 (2026) P 66-83

ISSN:1111-536X EISSN:2676-1793

1. Introduction

People with disabilities often experience various challenges that are usually related to their disability. Nonetheless, those challenges can mainly be blamed on the reluctance by those without disabilities and governments to provide them with the level of support necessary to cope with their impairments (Ikhile et al., 2024). Persons with disabilities in the UAE face stigmatization and are misconceived for their ability to make positive contributions to society (Morgan, 2023). Furthermore, their opportunities for social inclusion are limited since they experience many unwelcoming social settings that lack physical accessibility resources such as suitable parking, guidance boards, and accessible halls, among others (Al Gharaibeh & Al Remaih, 2022; Al-Hendawi et al., 2022). To address some of these challenges, disabled social media influencers in the UAE have resorted to raising awareness through education campaigns on social media platforms (Olimat & Antwi-Boateng, 2024). However, the problem is that very few disabled social media stars are actively working towards these goals. Hence, the issue at hand impedes the ability to ascertain with reasonable reliability whether such influencers' efforts to promote collective actions called upon to address these challenges do indeed bear fruit.

The motivation for this paper is the readily available data that can be used to solve the problem. Its purpose is to examine the experiences of disabled social media influencers in the UAE while assessing how the perceptions of people without disabilities and the nation's government are shaped by their digital content. By achieving that purpose, there has been a better understanding of the progress the UAE has made in addressing the challenges faced by people of determination.

The current study is significant because it has revealed positive impacts, characterized by a change in attitude and increased inclusivity, in addressing the common issues facing disabled individuals in the UAE. Additionally, the study has revealed whether the social media content of disabled influencers in the country effectively changes the perceptions of non-disabled individuals regarding the treatment and support needs of people of determination. Accordingly, the current study is significant because it justifies the need for more people of determination to become social media influencers, thereby increasing the impact of their messages in the UAE.

Research Problem

Although there has always been wider investment by people in inclusion declarations, the issue of disability is mediated by competing digital discourses that may arguably reproduce the stigmatization or may normalize the involvement. In information and communication sciences, the question of the existence of disability content on the internet is not whether disability is mediated digitally in the form of affordances (platform), discursive (discourse) strategies, and visibility (logics of visibility). In the UAE, the question is also concerned with a discursive institutionalization of disability that conditions the term as a signifier of dignity, rights, and as a policy-infused concept, runs the expectations of how disability is expected to be represented through the population.
Based on this, the current research can absorb a communication-focussed gap: how disabled influencers based in the UAE are strategic to generate inclusive discourse and how non-disabled followers perceive the effectiveness of messages and their implications on inclusion and social treatment.

Algerian Communication Journal
Volume : 28/ N° : 01 (2026) P 66-83

ISSN:1111-536X EISSN:2676-1793

Research Questions

The following research questions have been answered by the data analyzed for the current study.

RQ1: How do UAE-based influencers with disabilities produce disability-related content (themes, narrative strategies, and positioning) to mediate inclusion and rights in digital space?

RQ2: How do participants perceive the UAE's institutional framework (policies, programs, and public discourse) as enabling or constraining disabled influencers' visibility and participation?

RQ3: How do non-disabled followers evaluate message effectiveness in terms of attention, comprehension, emotional resonance, and perceived attitudinal impact toward inclusion?

RQ4: How does exposure to these messages shape followers' normative expectations about respectful treatment, equality, and opportunity for people with disabilities?

Research Objectives

The following research objectives have also been achieved by answering the above research questions.

1. Revealing how the UAE's disabled social media influencers change the attitudes of their audiences and promote their inclusivity towards addressing their disability challenges through their digital content.
2. Determining the effectiveness of the UAE government in supporting the digital activities of disabled social media influencers in the country.
3. Determining how non-disabled individuals perceive the social media messages of people of determination based on their effectiveness in attracting their attention towards their challenges.
4. Revealing how the social media messages of people with disabilities influence the opinion of non-disabled individuals on how they should appropriately treat and perceive those with disabilities.

1. Literature Review

The literature review is restructured into six analytical axes to critically compare the previous findings, outline the areas of consistency, and inconsistency, and determine the extent to which the Western scholarly framework can be applied to the Emirati media setting.

1.1 Social Media as a Tool for Inclusion and Advocacy

Existing research indicates that the media can have an important function as a social tool to integrate and give presence to people with determination in the wider society (Bitman, 2023). These studies have also underlined how people of determination utilize multimedia platforms powered by artificial intelligence (AI) to secure societal inclusion and presence. Research on people of determination as social media influencers and the content they produce is scarce, particularly compared with scholarly work on non-disabled individuals (Baumgartner et al., 2023). Ultimately, the need to investigate whether people with determination can achieve professional success as social media influencers at the same level as non-disabled people. Primarily as individuals with determination are actively engaged with and use social media

Algerian Communication Journal
Volume : 28/ N° : 01 (2026) P 66-83
ISSN:1111-536X EISSN:2676-1793

networks not only as communication platforms but also for activism and social inclusion. People of determination significantly rely on the media as a social tool that enables them to connect with those who are not disabled (Baumgartner et al., 2023). Using a sample of 300 physically disabled individuals in Egypt, Shaaban and Galal (2024) conducted a quantitative survey to examine how social media empowers them. These authors found that social media does empower them by serving as a platform for communicating their needs. These findings point to the potential of these tools to foster social inclusion when leveraged for information and resource access. In this vein, Kaur and Saukko (2022) ethnographic research with 11 disabled students addressed the function of digital media for enhancing their social relationships. Their results are consistent with those of Shaaban and Galal (2024), the authors of this book also found that social media became a good tool for people of determination to communicate. Based on their findings, Kaur and Saukko (2022) also suggested that individuals with disabilities can motivate social media audiences to share their stories, which can break down stereotypes and lead to the creation of policies more favorable to their welfare. They claim that audiences can accept disabled individuals into the community by refraining from negative stereotypes, excluding them, and paying attention to policies protecting their well-being.

1.2 Platform Use and Advocacy Networks

Just as non-disabled individuals do, people of determination communicate in society through multimedia platforms using AI (Baumgartner et al., 2023). Social media networks arguably account for the largest share of platforms given their efficiency and high usage among diverse ethnic communities and races (Shaaban & Galal, 2024). Gelfgren et al. (2022) conducted a qualitative study to investigate the perceptions of 54 representatives from various organizations advocating for the rights of people with disabilities in Sweden regarding their use of social media. Gelfgren et al. (2022) found that these social media platforms are useful communication tools that increase awareness of the aims of advocacy programs for individuals with disabilities. That finding is a fact because social media networks overcome geographic and physical limitations that can make it harder for those programs to reach people. Baumgartner et al. (2023) also conducted a qualitative study with 40 people with disabilities in Switzerland and Luxembourg. Baumgartner et al. (2023) aimed to measure the barriers and benefits of social media use. Their messages on social media sites mobilize support for their advocacy programs, a finding that resonates with the perspective of Gelfgren et al. (2022). Therefore, by utilizing these networks as primary multimedia platforms for communication with society, people of determination can easily share their needs and challenge systems that hinder their inclusion.

Emam et al. (2021) undertook a qualitative content analysis of 80 news reports on its use by UAE citizens with various physical disabilities. The authors agreed that many use social media networks, estimating that at least 90% have access to platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Bani-Rshaid et al. (2023) conducted a quantitative descriptive study involving 200 students from various universities in the UAE to assess the impact of their social media usage on both their academic and social lives. They agreed with Emam et al. (2021) that many individuals with disabilities in the UAE use these networks, indicating that at least 98% of them are students who rely on social media to enhance their academic and social lives. Additionally, these authors suggest that many young people of determination in the UAE use social media more than older people.

Algerian Communication Journal
Volume : 28/ N° : 01 (2026) P 66-83
ISSN:1111-536X EISSN:2676-1793

1.3 Content Themes and Activist Communication

The content and themes of the messages shared on social media by disabled individuals can differ from those without disabilities, mainly due to the disparities in their social and economic challenges. Bitman (2023) conducted a qualitative research study among 41 people with disabilities in Israel to explore how they use social media as an activism tool. Bitman (2023) found that participants primarily use social media to articulate the challenges associated with being disabled and how they have managed them throughout their lives, according to the study's findings. These results highlight that social media can be essential in promoting social empathy and compassion towards people of determination by allowing society to acknowledge the difficulties that they face due to their disabilities. Johansson et al. (2021) conducted a survey of 771 individuals with disabilities in Sweden to examine their use of technological devices, including the internet, smartphones, computers, and tablets. Their work indicates that individuals primarily use these devices to access various social media networks, where they request financial and non-financial support rather than revealing their struggles and coping strategies, thus contrasting with Bitman's (2023) opinion. Consequently, people of determination primarily use social media to seek a consistent commitment to fulfilling their needs, thereby improving their well-being and quality of life.

1.4 Disabled Influencers and Advocacy Performance

Since many disabled individuals have successfully advocated against their discrimination and shifted social perceptions towards their inclusion using social media networks (Struck-Peregończyk & Leonowicz-Bukała, 2023), their performance as influencers can be at par with people without impairments. To explore the ability of 10 Polish individuals with disabilities to present themselves on the social media platform, Struck-Peregończyk and Leonowicz-Bukała (2023) undertook qualitative content analysis of the Instagram feeds and messages from followers of these individuals. Like any other social group, people with disabilities are vocal about protecting their rights, the researchers said. Indicating they are powerful as social media influencers who are challenging the general notion about adherence to laws and policies that protect their rights.

In this regard, McBee-Black et al. (2024) conducted a qualitative study with 43 disabled Americans to examine their roles as users, influencers, and advocates of adaptive apparel on Instagram. McBee-Black et al. (2024) disagreed with Struck-Peregończyk and Leonowicz-Bukała (2024), noting that the performance of people with impairments as social media influencers primarily depends on the nature of their disabilities. From their results, McBee-Black et al. (2024) concluded that those with less to moderately severe disabilities advocate for both the protection of their rights and visibility within society more than those with very severe impairments. Accordingly, suggesting that people of determination are highly influential in their social media advocacy efforts, provided their impairments are less severe or moderate.

1.5 Motivations, Discrimination, and UAE-Specific Evidence

Due to differences in the motives of social media influencers of determination and other non-disabled influencers, it is likely that their content also differs. That contrast was confirmed by Morgan (2023), who conducted a qualitative study involving 109 people of determination in the UAE to assess their experiences with the barriers they face towards accessing education and employment opportunities. Morgan (2023) found that the social media content of those individuals mainly relates to their high level of discrimination in social settings such as schools and workplaces. Those findings suggest that it differs from the content of non-disabled influencers, who mainly promote products and services rather than actively highlighting

Algerian Communication Journal
Volume : 28/ N° : 01 (2026) P 66-83
ISSN:1111-536X EISSN:2676-1793

particular social challenges, including discrimination. In this context, McAuley et al. (2023) conducted a quantitative study involving 150 individuals with people of determination in the UAE to investigate how others' attitudes are hindering change in the nation's workforce. McAuley et al. (2023) found that discrimination toward disabled people persists in many workplaces in the country. Accordingly, this finding explains why, as social media influencers, people of determination are more focused on highlighting discrimination than on promoting products and services than non-disabled trendsetters.

Disabled individuals can also be effective in presenting themselves as social media influencers to a reasonable extent, given the challenges they face in society. This is despite the fact that their opinions and suggestions are occasionally ignored by social, economic, and political decision-makers (Kaur & Saukko, 2022). Klucarova (2024) systematically reviewed six experimental studies examining how consumers evaluate products promoted on social media by disabled influencers. She found that influencers with disabilities were perceived as more honest than those without because they had previously highlighted specific challenges they faced, which proved true. In that regard, as social media influencers at a reasonable level, people of determination can still create an impact similar to that of non-disabled professionals, due to the social trust they have earned.

2. Research Gap

There are two major gaps that can be traced in the existing literature. The systematically stated nature or extent of disability as represented in the samples of the majority of the studies make it hard to assess the extent to which impairment nature influences the influencer practice, the extent of the audience response, and the commercial or advocacy results. Since communication mechanisms, the dynamics of visibility, and platform affordances can differ significantly among the motor, sensory, or cognitive impairment, this absence restricts the explanatory ability and cross-comparability of the existing data. Additionally, there is a paucity of studies that directly compare the trustworthiness, engagement, long-term in the industry, and professional acclaim of people of determination versus the non-disabled creators within influencer economies, which leaves the gaps regarding the reasons why (non-disabled) influencers remain on top of the brand partnership, algorithmic visibility, hierarchies. Further, the extant scholarship is largely Westernized in focus, and comparatively little of the theoretically sound, reception-based research has been done so far within the context of Gulf societies and policy setting including the UAE where institutional discourses of inclusion and culture-specific norms might both affect the manner of content production and audience interpretation, in their specific way.

2.1 Operational Definitions

Table 1. List of Operational Definitions

Construct	Working Definition	Empirical Indicators in Data
Influencer activity	Intentional public content production and positioning aimed at shaping audience perceptions and promoting disability-related narratives	Stated communicative goals, content themes, posting strategies, advocacy positioning, self-identification as influencer
Engagement	Interactive practices through which influencers connect with followers and stimulate participation	Mentions of comments, direct messages, Q&A sessions, participation prompts, follower reactions

Algerian Communication Journal
Volume : 28/ N° : 01 (2026) P 66-83

ISSN:1111-536X EISSN:2676-1793

Communication effectiveness	Audience evaluations of influencer messages across attention, comprehension, emotional resonance, and perceived attitudinal impact	Focus-group accounts coded along the four dimensions during thematic analysis
Digital participation	Participation in campaigns, collaborations, and networked advocacy activities mediated through platforms	References to initiatives, partnerships, institutional events, public campaigns

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A qualitative research design was used as the blueprint to guide the process of understanding the reasons behind people of determination as social media influencers. It was found to help generate rich, detailed insights into their role in promoting inclusivity and protecting disability rights through their online presence (Muzari et al., 2022). This design mandated the adoption of data-collection practices to capture the subjective perspectives and lived experiences of the study's subjects. For that reason, phenomenological research was chosen as the qualitative research design, which considers participants' experiences with a phenomenon and their feelings about it (Muzari et al., 2022). For the current study, people with disabilities as social media influencers were considered as the phenomenon of interest. A qualitative research design can reveal non-quantifiable aspects, such as participants' beliefs and attitudes, and generate new hypotheses (Muzari et al., 2022). Accordingly, the rationale for its choice was to provide a more complex and thorough understanding of the role of people of determination as social media influencers and of how they are perceived by those who are not disabled.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

One group in the current study consisted of disabled social media influencers residing in the UAE. The second group of participants were non-disabled individuals who followed disabled social media influencers. 9 people of determination and 19 non-disabled individuals were sampled and participated in the current research study. Although all participants were Arabic speakers, they provided their responses in English during data collection. Additionally, a qualitative content analysis of 11 Instagram accounts of disabled social media influencers in the UAE was undertaken and has been shown in the Appendix section below. Lastly, they were randomly sampled via social media platforms and contacted via those platforms or by phone.

3.3 Data Collection Procedures

Data from people of disabilities were collected through semi-structured interviews, while data from non-disabled individuals were collected through focus groups. Several steps were undertaken to collect the necessary qualitative data to answer the research questions, following the random sampling of participants. The first step was to ask each person of determination about the communication medium they found most appropriate for providing their responses on the topic of interest. Since their disabilities resulted in challenges such as deafness and immobility, all of them could only offer their reactions via social media platforms. The second step was to send each of the developed semi-structured questions to them via their preferred communication medium and have them write down their responses. The third step in the data collection process was to contact each person without disabilities sampled by phone to inform them of the study's scope, aim, and significance. Afterward, they were permitted to select dates and places for the focus groups to obtain the necessary data. Three focus groups were conducted, with 5 participants in the first, 8 in the second, and 6 in the third. Responses from focus groups were recorded before being transcribed into written form using transcription

software. By providing each participant with sufficient time to respond, we were able to collect accurate and relevant data to answer the research questions stated in Chapter 1 above.
Besides demographic features and platform activity, the participants were also profiled based on the type of disability and communication needs related to the disability (e.g., deafness that necessitates written or captioned communication, mobility issues affecting the offline engagement, etc.), the genre of dominant content programs (advocacy, education-oriented, narrative of daily lives, product promotion, and organizational communication, etc.), approximation of follower-base size cohorts (micro-influencers and mid-tier influencers), and the prevalent language of posts and interactions. This profiling was done in order to explain potential difference in communication practice in relation to characteristics related to impairment and to enhance the analytical accuracy of cross-case comparisons.

3.4 Justification of Platform Choice: Instagram

Instagram was chosen as it represents a rather pervasive setting influencer presence within the UAE and bears a strong orientation to the visual narratives in the form of Reels, Stories, and live streams, which contribute to self-presentation through narratives and spread identity-guided content. Its inherent accessibility features such as the use of captions and alternate-text among others also make it a topical location to investigate the practice of inclusive communication where disability discourses get mediated by audio-visual means. Moreover, Instagram has high penetration rates in the UAE, and it can provide a relevant environment to study the dynamics of influencer reception and follower in terms of advocacy-based practices concerning sustainable digital marketing in a highly competitive environment.

3.5 Data Analysis Techniques

The qualitative data analysis technique used for the collected data from the two groups of participants was thematic content analysis. The first step in implementing that data analysis technique was to familiarize oneself with the transcribed responses from the two participant groups. The second step was assigning codes as short descriptive labels that elaborate on the specific ideas presented in those responses. The third step involved generating themes from those codes to understand the underlying meanings of their experiences and perspectives on the phenomenon of interest. Finally, those themes were reviewed and reported clearly to develop insights related to the research questions.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Three ethical principles of research were adhered to during data collection and analysis. One aspect was informed consent, achieved through voluntary participation by all sampled participants, without coercion or the expectation of monetary compensation. The other concern was the confidentiality of their responses, which required assuring participants that their original transcriptions would not be shared with third parties or included in the current article. Apart from ensuring the confidentiality of responses, the anonymity of participants was also upheld as an ethical principle of research during the study. In that regard, participants were assured that only their initials, not their full names, would be used in discussing their responses.

3.7 Methodological Limitations

There are two limitations associated with the methodology of the current study. First, an insufficient number of people of determination were sampled and participated in the study, mainly because many in the UAE do not have an active social media presence or influence. Due to that limitation, it is impossible to generalize their opinions on the interview questions

Algerian Communication Journal
Volume : 28/ N° : 01 (2026) P 66-83
ISSN:1111-536X EISSN:2676-1793

to the broader population of disabled individuals in the country. Second, the level of experience of the non-disabled participants on the topic of interest is unknown, as their common characteristic is being social media followers of people of determination in the UAE. Therefore, their responses to the focus group questions might differ from those of a different sample who may be more knowledgeable on the topic of interest.

4. Findings

People of determination who participated in the current study had diverse disabilities and were affiliated with various disability organizations in the UAE. Additionally, they opted for an interview through various social media networks. Therefore, the nature of disability, affiliated disability association, and platform used for interviewing the sampled disabled individuals are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. The nature of disability, affiliated disability association and platform used for interviewing the sampled people of determination

Participants' Initials	Nature of Disability	Affiliated Disability Association	Platform Used for Interviewing
K.A.M	Mobility impairment	Al Thiqha club for the disabled	WhatsApp
D.U.W	Hearing impairment	UAE deaf association	Instagram
B.v.c	Hearing impairment	UAE deaf association	Instagram
M.H.A.H	Visual impairment	Emirates association for the visually impaired	Instagram
M.R.A.G	Visual impairment	Emirates association for the visually impaired.	WhatsApp
S.F	Visual impairment	Emirates association for the visually impaired	Instagram
M.A.H	Mobility impairment	Ministry of Education for People of Determination	WhatsApp
S.A.H	Mobility impairment	Zayed Higher Organization for People of Determination	WhatsApp and Instagram
H.H.A.H	Mobility impairment	Zayed Higher Organization for People of Determination	Instagram

The influencer sample composition provides structured variability in impairment types, namely, mobility (n = 4), visual impairments (n = 3), and hearing impairments (n = 2) with an analytic value of discussing the impact of disability type on communication practices, platforms, and positioning of the influencer. The belonging to several national disability associations demonstrates that participants can act in terms of institutional advocacy networks which can help to gain the visibility, credibility and reach towards the audience hence an essential layer of context in the understanding of the digital practices themselves. Instagram domination of the interview tool (n = 6) and the supportive use of WhatsApp (n = 3) support an adaptive methodology decision by the need to accessibility, not platform neutrality, and proves the adherence of the research objectives to the principles of inclusive research. Meanwhile, the given distribution implies that the visual orientation of platforms is central to

Algerian Communication Journal
Volume : 28/ N° : 01 (2026) P 66-83
ISSN:1111-536X EISSN:2676-1793

the development of influencer ecologies in the UAE context, and the results of the study on discursive approaches and the perception of the audience cannot be discussed outside of the framework of affordances of image and video-based communication spaces.

Table 3. The emerging themes from the interview responses of the sampled people of determination

	Emerging Themes from Their Interview Responses				
Participants' Initials.	Do you use your digital platform to conduct educational campaigns to raise people's knowledge and comprehension of issues about people with disabilities?	What part do you think you play in promoting inclusivity and disability rights with your online presence?	In what ways does your digital material affect your audience's attitudes and promote inclusivity about disability?	How can you encourage community and participation among your followers in the UAE's digital space?	From your perspective, how are the rules and legislation in the UAE now supporting the digital activities of influencers with disabilities?
K.A.M	Responsibility of organizations with established guidelines.	None	Raising awareness.	Sharing useful sites, following those sites and leaving positive comments.	Inclusion and equal treatment of disabled individuals.
D.U.W	None	None	Dedicated programs like sign language communication.	Participating in and sharing events for disabled people.	Support for events for disabled individuals.
B.v.c	None	Offering access to diverse digital content	Dedicated programs like sign language communication.	Participating in events for the disabled people.	Provision of full access to digital content.
M.H.A.H	None	None	None	Presentation of issues.	Inclusion in the presentation of issues
M.R.A.G	Raising awareness in society.	Sharing success stories	Presenting inspirational and influential content.	Creating an interactive digital community.	Inclusion and equal treatment of disabled individuals.
S.F	Raising awareness on issues.	Encouraging other people of determination.	Raising awareness.	Asking questions	Inclusion and equal treatment of disabled individuals.
M.A.H	Raising awareness in schools	Promoting rights of disabled individuals	Positive engagement with various issues	Creating attractive and motivational contents	Mandates employment, education and care for disabled individuals.
S.A.H	Spreading awareness and acceptance	Empowerment of disabled individuals	None	Sharing of experience	Provision of safety and respectful space for people of determination.

Algerian Communication Journal
Volume : 28/ N° : 01 (2026) P 66-83

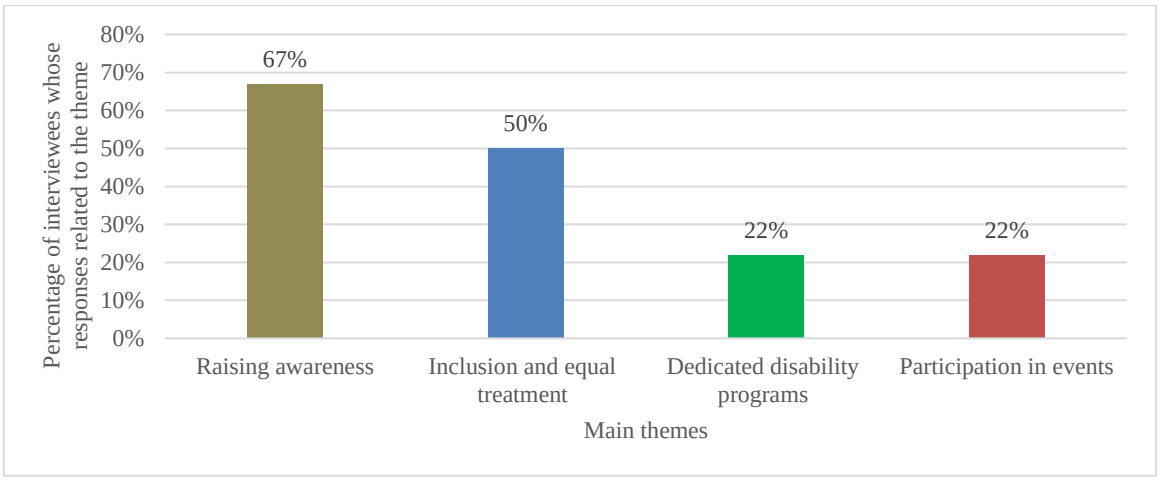
ISSN:1111-536X EISSN:2676-1793

H.H.A.H	Raising awareness through inspirational stories and addressing topics	Sharing real stories to change perceptions	Raising awareness through ingenuity.	Sharing stories	Provision of equal opportunities for expression.

The thematic distribution among the responses of influencers in Table 3 suggests that awareness-raising and narratives advocacy have a high convergence in terms of communicative strategies, especially when it comes to rebuilding the perceptions of the people and the need to be more inclusive. The majority of the participants highlighted informational or inspirational content (such as telling success stories, stigma reduction, presenting the issue of disability and others) as their core tools of affecting audiences, meaning that influencer activity here is less commercialized in terms of branding and rather socialized in terms of mediation and rightful discourse. Educational campaigns were seen to be poorly developed and some of its actors shifted the blame onto institutions and instead of positioning themselves as chief initiators of the campaigns, they sought to delegate it to the organizational level as opposed to individual creators.

The practices of engagement were also influenced by the participatory logics where the influencers promoted interaction by sharing experiences, asking questions, promoting events, and sharing supportive digital space that built the community through dialogic, as opposed to broadcast communications. Reported responses to the question about audience impact were found to revolve largely around attitudinal change and awareness in response as opposed to change in behavior, suggesting that the perceived communication effectiveness is conceptualized in symbolic and normative ways. Lastly, the views regarding UAE law and policy systems were extremely favorable, and respondents emphasized the concepts of inclusion, equal treatment, access, and institutional support, which places the regulatory environment as a legitimizing context in which influencer activity occurs and can potentially raise their visibility and sustainability in platform economies.

Chart 1. The percentage of participants whose interview responses related to the main identified themes



Algerian Communication Journal
Volume : 28/ N° : 01 (2026) P 66-83

ISSN:1111-536X EISSN:2676-1793

Chart 1 shows that there is a resounding precedence of the themes raised by influencers as raising awareness becomes the most common communicative goal (67%), inclusion and being treated equally is less common (50%), and less common are dedicated disability programs and attending events (22 each). This distribution indicates that much of the influencer practice in UAE is more focused on symbolic and discursive advocacy schemes like changing perceptions and making disability a normal thing than a systematic structuring of formal campaigns or institutional projects. The primacy of awareness-raising supports the decision of influencers as daily facilitators of inclusivity via telling by the innovative use of stories and by appearance, but the relatively lesser significance of organized programs and event attendance suggests that massive mobilization might continue to be limited by organizational reliance, resources or platform logics.

The lack of congruity between the attitudinal goal and the action-oriented activity is indicative of a difference between soft influence, which is concerned with the perception change and moral framing, and institutionally based advocacy which seems less well developed among single creators. This trend in favor of a point that disabled influencers in the UAE are primarily active in a reception-oriented economy of persuasion where the efficacy is evaluated by recognition and acceptance instead of actual mobilization of politics or organizations and emphasizes how institutional frameworks contribute to formulating the extent and sustainability of digital advocacy.

Table 4. The Relevant Focus Group Questions That the Participants' Responded to and The Emerging Themes in Their Responses

Relevant Focus Groups Questions	Emerging Themes in the Participants' Responses
1. How do you think the social media messages of disabled people are enhancing your understanding of the challenges that they face?	Raising awareness, sharing personal stories, changing individual opinions on their disabilities, improved understanding of disabled individuals' challenges, inability to notice challenges of disabled individuals, need for equality and inclusion.
2. In what ways do you perceive the social media messages of disabled influencer or people of determination as effective in attracting the attention of different persons?	Strong connection with followers, presented in simple languages, targets different audiences on social media, use of humor and inspiring stories and creative videos, catches attention of audience, real and confident.
3. Do you think people of determination are actively posting on social media platforms?	Dependent on the social media network, dependent on the type of content.
4. How would you advise people of determinations influencers to improve the effectiveness of their social media messages?	Posting questions, creating more inclusive content, maintain positivity, speaking up about their challenges, revealing the support system around them, use of multiple languages, find new ways to expand impact and reach, inclusion of more daily experiences.
5. How do you think the clarity of the social media messages of people with disabilities	Clear messages that are easy to understand, heartfelt messages, use of simple and meaningful

Algerian Communication Journal
Volume : 28/ N° : 01 (2026) P 66-83
ISSN:1111-536X EISSN:2676-1793

is influencing their relatability to individuals without disability like yourself?	language, Real and honest messages, use of motivational and visual language, conveyance of relatable emotions.
6. In what ways do the social media messages of people of determination resonate with your opinion on how they should be treated?	Perceiving them as strong, talented and creative, equal and respectful treatment, provision of opportunities to people of determination.

According to focus group answers in Table 4, the audiences that are not disabled perceive the message of disabled influencers in terms of creating awareness and emotional processes, with personal stories serving as one of the primary instruments of understanding and breaking stereotypes. Nevertheless, the mention of unmet challenges and prevailing demands of equality imply that visibility is not a complete solution to revising perceptual differences.

The effectiveness of the messages was largely claimed to be based on discursive characteristics of the simplicity of language, authenticity, humor, creativity, and visual storytelling, more than is the case with the posting frequency, which emphasizes the significance of communicative strategy in reaching the attention of various audiences. The respondents proposed to be more interactive, communicate using more than one language, and involve common life experiences to make them reach larger audiences and be inclusive.

Clarity and relatability have been closely connected to each other since heartfelt and visually rich messages were attributed to trust and identification by the audience. Lastly, normative expectation was observed to be righted by exposure to influencer content, with participants stressing on the importance of respecting people equally, appreciating talent and providing an opportunity to people of determination, as an essential aspect of how reception processes reshape inclusive social attitudes.

5. Discussion

5.1 RQ1: How do UAE-based influencers with disabilities produce disability-related content (themes, narrative strategies, and positioning) to mediate inclusion and rights in digital space?

The people of determination interviewed for this paper responded with various themes on how their digital content shapes audience attitudes and promotes inclusivity in addressing disability-related challenges. One central theme that was evident in that response is the promotion of the rights of disabled individuals. Trevisan and Farinosi (2024) argued that when people of disabilities share stories about their challenges on social media platforms, their audiences develop empathy for them. As a result, they become more aware of the need to promote their rights to reduce the negative consequences of their disability-related challenges. According to Shaaban and Galal (2024), inclusivity in promoting their rights also occurs due to the concerted efforts of most of their audience, who develop empathy for them because of their challenges. Nonetheless, to achieve the goal of promoting the protection of their rights by non-disabled individuals, people of determination must ensure that their audiences are positively engaged with the various issues presented in their digital content (Wolbring et al., 2024). In that regard, raising awareness through sharing genuine stories was another major theme identified from the responses of people of determination. This approach signifies that their audiences can engage positively with their challenges, as the stories are real and not fabricated.

Algerian Communication Journal
Volume : 28/ N° : 01 (2026) P 66-83

ISSN:1111-536X EISSN:2676-1793

From Table 4 above, a common theme is that the social media messages of disabled individuals enhance the understanding of their challenges by people without disabilities, primarily by raising awareness. Accordingly, the digital content shared by people of determination in the UAE on social media highlights their challenges and their efforts to address them for those without determination. Nonetheless, Södergren and Vallström (2023) noted that some people with disabilities ensure that their social media content is not only inspirational but also influential, thereby raising awareness of their challenges and efforts. The inspirational and influential nature of this content is characterized by sharing success stories of how they have addressed those challenges in the past, thereby improving understanding of the resources necessary to continue addressing them in the future (Södergren & Vallström, 2023). In this respect, the digital content posted by people with disabilities in the UAE on social media can shape public attitudes towards people with disabilities, thereby encouraging inclusivity. It highlights the struggles of those in need and ongoing efforts to both inspire and spur support for their rights.

5.2 RQ2: How do participants perceive the UAE's institutional framework (policies, programs, and public discourse) as enabling or constraining disabled influencers' visibility and participation?

From Table 3 above, it is evident that the UAE government's support for the digital activities of social media influencers among people of determination has primarily taken the form of rules and legislation. Finkelstein and Gross (2025) established that those rules and legislations have been essential in promoting inclusion and equal treatment of disabled individuals in social settings. From chart 1 above, many people of determination, including social media influencers in the UAE, recognize the high level of inclusion and equal treatment they receive in society. Perhaps it's because some of them recognized disability programs, such as sign language communication, designed specifically to enhance their understanding of various social issues and decisions that might affect their lives. Furthermore, chart 1 shows that some of the people of determination interviewed are actively participating in events. Therefore, the interview responses indicated that this active level of participation could be attributed to the high level of inclusion and equal treatment resulting from the implementation of rules and legislation governing their affairs.

The high level of inclusion and equal treatment of people of determination, enabled by government rules and legislation, has also led to support for their digital activities in two additional ways. One of those ways is feeling they have a safe and respectful space, allowing them to share their experiences on social media platforms. Since they feel included and treated equally, they are aware that they cannot be criticized and berated by their audiences, a finding revealed by a qualitative content analysis of 11 Instagram accounts of disabled influencers in the UAE. This could be one of the reasons why many people of determination focus on spreading awareness and acceptance via social media platforms, as established by Bonilla-del-Río et al. (2022). It could be due to the high level of inclusivity and equal treatment that they receive, which gives them a voice. That means they are seen as people with needs that society should address, and that people should not be discriminated against. The results of the interviews can be used to conclude that government intervention, through laws and regulations, has been successful in promoting the digital activities of disabled SMIs in the United Arab Emirates. Accordingly, those rules and legislation have promoted their inclusion and equal treatment and opportunities, safe and respectful spaces for expression and participation in events, and access to dedicated disability programs.

Algerian Communication Journal
Volume : 28/ N° : 01 (2026) P 66-83

ISSN:1111-536X EISSN:2676-1793

5.3 RQ3: How do non-disabled followers evaluate message effectiveness in terms of attention, comprehension, emotional resonance, and perceived attitudinal impact toward inclusion?

The responses of the focus group participants revealed that non-disabled individuals in the UAE perceive the social messages conveyed by people of determination as somewhat effective in capturing their attention. A significant theme from those responses is that disabled social media influencers are honest and confident in conveying their messages, which increases the interest of their non-disabled followers in understanding the strategies they use to overcome their disability challenges. This is because some of the facts that most non-disabled individuals are unable to notice the challenges of people with disabilities, as confirmed by Carmel et al. (2025). Furthermore, the focus group participants' opinion that disabled social media influencers are real and confident supports the statements of people of determination, who focus on sharing genuine stories to capture their audience's attention. Nonetheless, the focus group participants suggested that their attention towards the social media messages shared by people of determination could be further enhanced in various ways. Some of those ways include sharing those messages in both Arabic and English, accompanied by additional digital content about their daily experiences with their disabilities. By considering these methods while sharing their social media messages, disabled social media influencers can expand the impact and reach of those messages, indicating that they are perceived as effective in capturing the attention of non-disabled individuals to a significant extent.

Table 4 above reveals that the attention of non-disabled individuals in the UAE to the challenges faced by people of determination could be further improved through various strategies. Some of the methods identified by Saran et al. (2023) include posting questions on social media and highlighting the support system around them, such as family members and disability organizations. Despite the necessity of implementing these strategies, many non-disabled individuals in the UAE view the social media messages from people of determination as effective because they enhance their connection with them. Additionally, these messages are shared in straightforward languages: Arabic and English. Some participants in the focus group also mentioned that they genuinely enjoyed these messages, found them amusing and inspiring, and that the creative videos that accompanied them were also enjoyable. As a result, they consider them successful in capturing their attention because they are visually appealing, authentic, audience-centered, narrative-driven, and engaging.

5.4 RQ4: How does exposure to these messages shape followers' normative expectations about respectful treatment, equality, and opportunity for people with disabilities?

In the UAE, messages from disabled influencers on social media should be understandable and able to promote non-disabled groups' opinions on appropriate treatment and perceptions, and to develop their views on the various challenges they face. Indeed, according to participant data in Table 4 above, disabled social media influencers in the UAE use motivational and visual language to convey their messages through relatable emotions such as relief, excitement, and gratitude. Wolbring et al. (2024) showed that emotional expressions used by disabled influencers through social media messages are perceived as heartfelt by their audiences and demonstrate why they deserve to be treated and perceived appropriately. Table 4 also shows that the social media messages of disabled influencers enhance their audiences' understanding of their challenges by providing a glimpse into the nature of those challenges, depending on the disability. Bitman (2023) found that if non-disabled people understand the challenges that are attributed to disabilities, many of them are willing to act to promote equality and inclusion

of disabled individuals. Therefore, the views of non-disabled audiences in the UAE about appropriate treatment and perceptions of disabled individuals are influenced by their understanding of the challenges disabled individuals face, thereby enhancing their willingness to promote equality and inclusion in society.

The focus group participants revealed that their social media messages influence how they treat them, as shown in Table 4 above. Furthermore, the responses of the focus group participants indicated their awareness of the importance of providing social and economic opportunities to people of determination. As Topping et al. (2023) argued, providing opportunities to disabled individuals can increase their access to financial and non-financial resources, further enhancing their ability to overcome challenges. The fact that disabled social media influencers are honest about their challenges on social media networks and how they address them reveals why people without disabilities should strive to understand these challenges and support them. For that reason, the social media messages of people with disabilities in the UAE influence the opinions of those without disabilities on how to treat them by justifying why they sincerely require respectful treatment and equality and inclusion access to social and economic opportunities.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of the research study was to examine the experiences of people of determination as social media influencers in the UAE and how their digital content shapes perceptions by people without disabilities and the nation's government. That research purpose was achieved by implementing a qualitative research design as a blueprint for collecting and analyzing the required data. Phenomenological research, including 9 disabled social media influencers and 19 people without disabilities, was conducted to answer the current study's research questions. The people of determination social media influencers were interviewed via WhatsApp and Instagram. At the same time, non-disabled participants responded to a series of focus group questions about the research topic. Informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality of participants were adhered to as ethical research principles throughout data collection and analysis. Following a thematic content analysis of the collected data, it has been revealed that the digital content of identified social media influencers in the UAE raises awareness of their challenges and inspires non-disabled individuals to continue supporting them. It has also been confirmed that the government’s rules and statutory provisions in the UAE ensure inclusive and equal treatment of people of determination, thereby increasing their involvement in events and access to purpose-built disability programs. The qualitative data collected also demonstrates that social media statements from people of determination are visually compelling, audience-focused, story-driven, and engaging, making them effective at attracting the attention of those without disabilities. And, finally, those messages sincerely justify why people of determination deserve to be treated with respect and to have access to social and economic opportunities based on their challenges.

The research on the topic and phenomenon of interest discussed in this paper can be continued in two ways. First, a comparative study will be necessary to examine the differences and similarities in the effectiveness of various social media networks in raising awareness of the challenges faced by people of determination in the UAE. Second, a longitudinal study will be necessary to determine how the social media messages of influencers with determination in the UAE change over time, depending on the social and economic issues that they experience. By conducting those studies, we can determine the extent to which social media effectively communicates the challenges experienced by people with disabilities in the UAE.

7. Bibliography List

Journal articles:

Al Gharaibeh, F., & Al Remaih, S. (2022). Disability as an inspiration: Rich experiences of women with disabilities in the UAE. *Information Sciences Letters, 11*(5), 1727–1732. http://dx.doi.org/10.18576/isl/110529

Al-Hendawi, M., Thoma, C. A., Habeeb, H., & Khair, M. S. (2022). Emerging Themes on Factors Influencing Career and Employment Decisions: Voices of Individuals with Disabilities from Four Gulf Countries. *Social Sciences*, *11*(8), 1-16. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11080371

Bani-Rshaid, A. M., Hussein, N. Y., Ababneh, R. M., & Khasawneh, M. A. S. (2023). The impact of using social media on the academic and social levels of students with disabilities at university level. *Journal of Namibian Studies: History Politics Culture*, *34*, 3422-3433. https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1390-3765?lang=ar

Baumgartner, A., Rohrbach, T., & Schönhagen, P. (2023). 'If the phone were broken, I'd be screwed': Media use of people with disabilities in the digital era. *Disability & Society*, *38*(1), 73–97. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2021.1916884

Bitman, N. (2023). 'Which part of my group do I represent?': Disability activism and social media users with concealable communicative disabilities. *Information, Communication & Society*, *26*(3), 619–636. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1963463

Bonilla-del-Río, M., Castillo-Abdul, B., García-Ruiz, R., & Rodríguez-Martín, A. (2022). Influencers with intellectual disability in digital society: An opportunity to advance in social inclusion. *Media and communication*, *10*(1), 222-234. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v10i1.4763

Carmel, J. M., Chapman, S., & Wright, P. (2025). Disability justice: The challenges of inclusion in everyday life. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 1-14. https://doi.org/10.1080/1034912X.2025.2456288

Emam, S., Bouri, S., Soliman, N., Fahim, B., & Alhamami, H. (2020). Representation of people with special needs in UAE newspapers: Gulf news and Khaleej Times as a case study. *KIU Interdisciplinary Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, *1*(3), 90–104. https://kijhus.kiu.ac.ug/assets/articles/1607428951_representation-of-people-with-special-needs-in-uae-newspapers-gulf-news-and-khaleej-times-as-a-case-study.pdf

Finkelstein, A., & Gross, T. (2025). Insights of people with disabilities regarding barriers to equality and inclusion. *Disability & Society*, *40*(3), 773-794. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2024.2304243

Ikhile, I. A., Mavhandu-Mudzusi, A. H., & Sinegugu, N. (2024). Addressing unique challenges and crafting inclusive policies for Queer living with disabilities. *African Journal of Disability (Online)*, *13*, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.4102/ajod.v13i0.1418

Johansson, S., Gulliksen, J., & Gustavsson, C. (2021). Disability digital divide: The use of the internet, smartphones, computers and tablets among people with disabilities in Sweden. *Universal Access in the Information Society*, *20*(1), 105–120. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10209-020-00714-x

Kaur, H., & Saukko, P. (2022). Social access: Role of digital media in social relations of young people with disabilities. *New Media & Society*, *24*(2), 420–436. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211063177

Klucarova, S. (2024). Everything they touch turns to gold: Disabled social media influencers and perceptions of product luxury. *Journal of Business Research*, *182*, 1-16. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2024.114794

McAuley, A., Bester, M., Bolton, L., & Warren, M. A. (2023). Are Attitudes Towards People with Disability Preventing Positive Change in the UAE Workforce? *Middle East Journal of Positive Psychology*, *9*, 58-78. https://www.middleeastjournalofpositivepsychology.org/index.php/mejpp/article/download/120/157

McBee-Black, K., Zhao, L., & Srinivas, S. (2024). Promoting adaptive apparel on instagram: The role of people with disabilities as users, influencers, and advocates. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 0887302X241284808. https://doi.org/10.1177/0887302X241284808

Morgan, C. (2023). The experiences of disabled people in the United Arab Emirates: Barriers to participation in higher education and employment. *Disability & Society*, *38*(3), 421–444. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2021.1930520

Muzari, T., Shava, G. N., & Shonhiwa, S. (2022). Qualitative research paradigm, a key research design for educational researchers, processes and procedures: A theoretical overview. *Indiana Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, *3*(1), 14–20. https://indianapublications.com/articles/IJHSS_3(1)_14-20_61f38990115064.95135470.pdf

Olimat, M., & Antwi-Boateng, O. (2024). The Constitutional and Policy-Oriented Framework of Rights, Services, and Integration of People of Determination in the United Arab Emirates. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, *26*(6), 1-24. https://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3322&context=jiws

Saran, A., Hunt, X., White, H., & Kuper, H. (2023). Effectiveness of interventions for improving social inclusion outcomes for people with disabilities in low-and middle-income countries: A systematic review. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, *19*(1), 1-29. https://doi.org/10.1002/cl2.1316

Shaaban, R. E. S., & Galal, S. E. (2024). How social media empowers physical disabled influencers for inclusive communities in Egypt: A quantitative survey on users' perspectives. *Journal of Media and Interdisciplinary Studies*, *3*(8), 29–74. https://jmis.journals.ekb.eg/article_366981_2372b807b9a5d8d8f770805e26e68e6c.pdf

Södergren, J., & Vallström, N. (2023). Disability in influencer marketing: A complex model of disability representation. *Journal of Marketing Management*, *39*(11–12), 1012–1042. https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2022.2144418

Struck-Peregończyk, M., & Leonowicz-Bukała, I. (2023). Changing the narrative: Self-representations of disabled people in social media. *Przegląd Socjologii Jakościowej*, *19*(3), 62–79. https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8069.19.3.04

Trevisan, F., & Farinosi, M. (2024). Disabled influencers on Instagram: Exploring digital celebrity and marginalised identities. *Celebrity Studies*, *15*(2), 209-230. https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2024.2341599

Topping, M., Douglas, J., & Winkler, D. (2023). "Let the people you're supporting be how you learn": A grounded theory study on quality support from the perspective of disability support workers. *Disability and Rehabilitation*, *45*(25), 4259-4271. https://doi.org/10.1080/09638288.2022.2148300

Wolbring, G., Nasir, L., & Mahr, D. (2024). Academic coverage of online activism of disabled people: A scoping review. *Societies*, *14*(11), 215. https://doi.org/10.3390/soc14110215