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Digital Soft Power and the UAE: Influencers, Public Diplomacy, and Strategic Communication ^[1]

The rise of influencer culture has fundamentally transformed public diplomacy. States are no longer reliant solely on embassies, official media, or government spokespersons to shape international perceptions. Increasingly, digital creators from travel vloggers and entrepreneurs to business commentators and long-term expatriate residents play an important role in how countries are understood abroad. Influencer diplomacy has become an increasingly important but underappreciated instrument of the UAE's soft power, economic diplomacy, and crisis resilience. Understanding how it functions is essential to understanding the evolution of Gulf public diplomacy in the digital age.

Few countries illustrate this transformation more clearly than the United Arab Emirates, particularly Dubai. Here, influencer diplomacy operates at the intersection of tourism promotion, nation branding, commercial marketing, and strategic communication. Alongside state-led campaigns, mega-events, and iconic infrastructure, millions of social media posts have helped project an image of the UAE as modern, globally connected, technologically ambitious, and culturally diverse. In doing so, influencers frequently serve as informal digital ambassadors , reinforcing national branding through everyday storytelling rather than overt political messaging.

Nonetheless, this growing influence remains contested. Critics argue that influencer culture promotes a carefully curated image of the UAE that obscures social and political realities, while supporters contend that it reflects the genuine experiences of residents, entrepreneurs, and visitors. The resulting debate extends well beyond tourism or social media, raising broader questions about authenticity, regulation, commercialization, and the increasingly blurred boundaries between digital influence, public diplomacy, and geopolitics.

Influencer Diplomacy as Networked Public Diplomacy

Traditionally, public diplomacy referred to how governments communicate with foreign publics to shape perceptions and advance national interests. Today, these functions are increasingly decentralized. Influencer diplomacy represents a form of networked public diplomacy in which state narratives, commercial interests, platform algorithms, and personal storytelling intersect. Its influence depends not only on the messages creators produce, but also on how those messages circulate through trusted peer networks and digital platforms.

In the UAE, influencer diplomacy functions less through explicit political messaging than through the normalization of everyday life. Dubai-based creators showcase public safety, modern infrastructure, entrepreneurship, multiculturalism, tourism, technological innovation, and the convenience of daily living. Rather than promoting official policies, they project an image of the UAE as stable, globally connected, and future-oriented through personal

experiences and visual storytelling. These cumulative representations shape how international audiences, particularly those who have never visited the country, understand the UAE.

Importantly, not every content creator is engaged in influencer diplomacy. Most operate primarily as commercial entrepreneurs, travel bloggers, or lifestyle influencers. Yet even apolitical content can contribute to public diplomacy by reinforcing perceptions of stability, opportunity, and quality of life. This illustrates why influencer diplomacy in the UAE is largely diffuse rather than centrally directed, emerging through networks of digital visibility as much as through formal state initiatives.

Dubai as a Digital Soft Power Hub

Dubai's emergence as a global influencer hub is closely tied to its broader ambition to position itself as a global city. World-class infrastructure, international connectivity, a favorable business environment, and a thriving tourism and events sector have made the emirate an attractive base for digital creators. This visibility serves an economic  as well as a reputational purpose. Perceptions of safety, accessibility, innovation, and opportunity directly influence tourism, investment, aviation, and consumer confidence, making influencer-generated content an increasingly important component of Dubai's broader soft-power strategy.

Government institutions have recognized the strategic value of digital creators. Entities such as Visit Dubai and the Dubai Department of Economy and Tourism increasingly collaborate with influencers through access-based partnerships, offering privileged experiences at cultural landmarks, major sporting events, international exhibitions, and global conferences. Rather than relying solely on conventional advertising, this approach encourages creators to produce experience-driven content that appears authentic while reinforcing Dubai's international brand.

The UAE's Diverse Influencer Ecosystem

The UAE's influencer ecosystem is considerably more diverse than the luxury-focused image often associated with Dubai. While lifestyle and travel creators remain highly visible, they operate alongside business entrepreneurs, technology commentators, cultural storytellers, and long-term expatriate residents whose content collectively projects the UAE as globally connected, economically dynamic, multicultural, and future-oriented. Rather than relying on overt political messaging, these creators shape perceptions through everyday experiences of work, education, entrepreneurship, public safety, family life, and technological innovation.

Long-term expatriates occupy a particularly influential position within this ecosystem. By documenting daily life, including healthcare, education, public services, and raising families, they often carry greater credibility than highly commercialized influencers because their content appears grounded in lived experience rather than destination marketing. The UAE's long-term residency initiatives, including the Golden Visa, have further strengthened this dynamic by encouraging many creators to establish more permanent personal and professional ties to the country.

Platform architecture also shapes influencer diplomacy. Instagram and TikTok remain central to tourism and lifestyle branding, YouTube enables more detailed storytelling, LinkedIn reinforces the UAE's reputation as a business and innovation hub, while X has become a key arena for real-time political debate and crisis communication. Influencer diplomacy is therefore

not a single practice but a platform-dependent ecosystem in which different creators engage different audiences.

Importantly, most creators are not formal instruments of state public diplomacy. Some collaborate with tourism authorities or commercial partners, while many operate independently with little institutional involvement. The UAE's influencer ecosystem is therefore best understood as a hybrid model in which public diplomacy, commercial branding, entrepreneurship, and organic digital storytelling increasingly overlap without being centrally directed.

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The UAE has also moved beyond promotional campaigns toward institutionalizing the creator economy. The Beautiful Destinations Academy, launched in Dubai in 2024, trains creators in storytelling, digital production, and destination branding, while the government-backed New Media Academy (NMA) has expanded this approach through professional education in digital communication and responsible content creation. Its partnership with the Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy (AGDA) reflects a broader recognition that digital influence, strategic communication, and public diplomacy are becoming increasingly interconnected. Together, these initiatives demonstrate that the UAE increasingly views digital creators not simply as marketers, but as participants in a wider ecosystem of economic diplomacy, nation branding, and international engagement.

Representative Models of Influencer Diplomacy

The UAE's influencer ecosystem is best understood through the diverse roles played by prominent digital personalities, each of whom reaches audiences that traditional public diplomacy often struggles to engage. Rather than representing a single communication strategy, they illustrate how cultural storytelling, entrepreneurship, and geopolitical commentary together expand the UAE's international visibility.

Perhaps the best-known example is Khalid Al Ameri, whose bilingual storytelling has become synonymous with a modern, culturally confident, and globally connected Emirati identity. Rather than promoting the UAE through overt patriotism, Al Ameri's influence derives from relatable narratives about family, hospitality, humour, religion, and everyday life. His collaborations with organizations such as UNHCR further extend his role beyond tourism promotion into humanitarian and cultural diplomacy. In this sense, he functions as what might be described as a "soft-power entrepreneur," translating national values into stories that resonate with international audiences without appearing overtly political.

A more transnational model is represented by Nuseir Yassin (Nas Daily). By relocating his media operations to Dubai following the Abraham Accords, Nas Daily illustrates how the UAE has positioned itself not only as a destination for creators but also as a regional hub for the global creator economy. Through ventures such as Nas Academy and Nas Company, his

work extends beyond content creation into creator education and digital entrepreneurship. At the same time, the political controversies surrounding his support for regional normalization demonstrate that influencer diplomacy often operates at the intersection of soft power, geopolitics, entrepreneurship, and identity politics, where creators themselves become actors in wider diplomatic debates.

A third model is represented by geopolitical commentators such as Amjad Taha. Unlike lifestyle or travel influencers, Taha engages directly with regional security, foreign policy, the Abraham Accords, Iran, and counter-extremism. His work illustrates how influencer diplomacy increasingly overlaps with strategic communication and digital political advocacy, demonstrating that influential online voices can shape perceptions of the UAE far beyond tourism and cultural branding.

Taken together, these examples demonstrate that influencer diplomacy in the UAE is neither monolithic nor centrally orchestrated. Instead, it encompasses complementary forms of cultural diplomacy, entrepreneurial innovation, humanitarian engagement, and geopolitical communication that collectively broaden the country's international visibility and soft-power reach.

Regulating the Creator Economy

A common misconception is that influencer activity in the UAE operates in an unregulated digital environment. In reality, the UAE has progressively formalized the creator economy through media legislation, licensing requirements, and advertising regulations administered by the UAE Media Council. Professional creators engaged in promotional activity increasingly operate under a framework that combines business licensing with media-specific authorization, including the Advertiser Permit introduced as part of the country's evolving media regulations.

The objective, according to UAE authorities, is to enhance professionalism, transparency, accountability, and consumer protection within a rapidly expanding digital economy. Commercial creators are expected to comply with advertising disclosure requirements, privacy protections, cybercrime legislation, and broader content standards relating to public morality and national security. This reflects a broader feature of the UAE governance model, which combines digital innovation with formal regulatory oversight.

Critics argue that these measures provide the state with significant leverage over monetized creators, particularly when licensing, residency incentives such as the Golden Visa, and commercial activity become closely interconnected. However, the broader trend is not unique to the UAE. Governments across different political systems increasingly regulate influencers because digital platforms now shape consumer behavior, political discourse, crisis communication, and public opinion. The German government's move to revoke the refugee status of a Somali influencer accused of inciting violence from abroad illustrates how influencer regulation is increasingly linked not only to advertising standards but also to national security, public order, and transnational conflict.

Rather than representing an exceptional Gulf model, the UAE's regulatory approach reflects a wider international recognition that digital influence has become an increasingly consequential domain of public policy. At the same time, most influencers in the UAE continue to operate primarily as commercial entrepreneurs or lifestyle creators with little or no direct involvement

in government messaging or formal public diplomacy.

Authenticity and Influencer Diplomacy in Times of Crisis

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing influencer diplomacy is credibility. Critics frequently argue that influencers portraying Dubai or the UAE positively are financially motivated, indirectly pressured, or participating in carefully curated branding campaigns. These criticisms intensified during the recent Iran-related security crisis, when some commentators accused Dubai-based creators of attempting to preserve the country's image despite missile and drone attacks.

Such skepticism reflects broader concerns surrounding the global creator economy, where questions of advertising disclosure, commercial incentives, and authenticity increasingly shape audience trust. Yet dismissing all favorable portrayals as "paid propaganda" risks oversimplification. Many creators have lived in the UAE for years and document experiences they regard as genuine. Assuming that positive narratives are inherently manipulated while negative accounts are automatically authentic creates an asymmetry that narrows rather than enriches public debate.

The regional conflict also demonstrated how influencer diplomacy changes during periods of crisis. Rather than functioning solely as lifestyle creators, many influencers became informal crisis communicators, documenting airport operations, public spaces, traffic conditions, and everyday routines in real time. Posts depicting cafés, shopping malls, beaches, and family life were interpreted by some as evidence of continuity and resilience, while critics dismissed similar content as "astroturfing" or manufactured reassurance. Whether coordinated or entirely organic, these competing interpretations illustrate that influencer diplomacy becomes part of the broader information environment during periods of geopolitical uncertainty.
