CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLE

Social Media and the Politics of Ironic Belonging in Dubai

Sonali Pahwa 🆔

Department of Theatre Arts & Dance, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, USA
Email: pahwa007@umn.edu

Abstract

Social media content creation is hugely popular with second-generation Arab immigrants to the UAE who lack a path to naturalized citizenship, particularly as a space to perform their belonging in the nation. This essay analyzes the work of two Arabophone content creators on Instagram and YouTube who use comedy to perform as quintessential "Dubai kids." While they align with the state mission of presenting the UAE positively on social media, these creators produce ironic content that makes visible practices of belonging by second-generation youth who distance themselves from inherited politics of national and gender identity. The affective communities that form around these satirical content creators offer a model of belonging in which binaries of citizen and noncitizen can be elided, staging performances of immigrant identity uniquely local to the UAE.

Keywords: social media; immigrant identity; Gulf states; Dubai

In February 2021, the United Arab Emirates launched its Hope space probe to Mars and Dubai-based Iraqi athlete Zainab Al-Eqabi posted about the event to her 1.7 million Instagram followers (Fig. 1). Smiling in a white tracksuit and black turban, she held up a handmade sign that read "Best of luck, Hope mission!" in Arabic, beneath icons of a red planet, cartoon spaceship, and emoji-style yellow hands raised in thanks. Zainab tagged the UAE's "national brand" account (@nationbranduae) in her post, its logo a stylized depiction of national flag colors with "The Emirates" inscribed in both Arabic and English.[1] Like many other second-generation UAE residents raised as children of immigrants, Zainab performs digital acts of patriotic allegiance at moments of national significance. Social media influencers across nationalities post respectful mourning language on their accounts when a member of the royal family died, for instance, following a national tradition of filial affection for the Emir as father of the nation.[2]

As social media use becomes ubiquitous in the UAE, national symbols online have expanded beyond royals to include content creators aligned with the national brand mission of making the UAE attractive to potential immigrants and investors. The most famous of

---

[1] Zainab Al-Eqabi (@zainab.aleqabi), "Stay tuned for the 9th of February at 7 pm UAE timing... that's when the Hope Probe tries to enter the Mars Orbit !!!" Instagram. February 6, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CK8w_w6BzsA/.

[2] A recent example is the public mourning of Dubai royal Hamdan Bin Rashid Al Maktoum on Instagram in March 2021, under the hashtag #حمدان_بن_راشد_آل_مكتوم. For older examples, see Ahmed Kanna, "Flexible Citizenship in Dubai: Neoliberal Subjectivity in the Emerging "City-Corporation," *Cultural Anthropology* 2, no. 1 (2010): 129.

Figure 1. Zainab Al-Eqabi, Stay tuned for the 9th of February at 7 pm UAE timing.. that's when the Hope Probe Orbit !!! https://www.instagram.com/p/CK8w_w6BzsA/.

these is Khalid Al Ameri, who performed on YouTube and Instagram with his wife, Salama Mohamed. The modern couple with two young children collaborated with the Humanagement marketing agency to make everyday life videos in English for followers numbering over two million.[3] Khalid and Salama played cosmopolitan middle-class Emiratis who welcome foreigners to their country, countering urban legends that "locals" are insular and traditional. In a typical video from November 2020, the friendly couple dressed in white *kandoura* and black *abaya* posted "Arabs Try Filipino Food" on YouTube, voicing a Tagalog greeting as they enter a modest restaurant with their camera crew. Khalid and Salama's comic banter and warm style elicited enthusiastic affection from fans of different nationalities. On this particular video, most comments came from accounts with Filipino names and thanked Khalid and Salama for appreciating their national cuisine. The top-rated comment said, "If only all of the housemaids employer's [sic] are like Salama and Khalid life would be easier and happier would love to stay and work for long time with this awesome local emirati couple..☺☺☺."[4] As social media icons, Khalid and Salama elicited affection in more everyday speech registers than royals.

The UAE's social media national brand project advertises the nation as "a melting pot for cultures, a meeting point for ideas and ambitions, and a destination to live and work in."[5]

---

[3] According to news reports, Khalid and Salama divorced in 2024. "UAE: Influencer Salama Mohamed addresses her divorce from Khalid Al Ameri." *Khaleej Times*, 8 July 2024. https://www.khaleejtimes.com/entertainment/his-happiness-impacts-my-happiness-uae-influencer-salama-mohamed-on-split-with-khalid-al-ameri.

[4] MamiPoki Toink's comment is beneath the YouTube video "Arabs Try Filipino Food!" Khalid Al Ameri (@KhalidAlAmeri), "Arabs try Filipino food!" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cdxrpiwTxTA, (Video currently private).

[5] UAE Nation Brand, "About," https://www.nationbrand.ae/en/about (accessed 19 December 2024).

Figure 2. Mohanad Al Hattab (@mohanadalhattab), Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/mohanadalhattab/ (accessed 19 December 2024).

Content creators fluent in Arabic and English, such as Khalid Al Ameri, have proven effective brand ambassadors for the nation in social media campaigns.[6] Such influencers do more than promote the nation to outsiders, however. They also generate affection for the UAE among residents. The surplus value of content creators' labor spills over the feedback loop of communicative capitalism, where their followings are mined to channel loyalty toward corporate brands.[7] In the UAE, where social media marketing is especially big business, the affective labor of some content creators wins them personal iconic status, even when they are working for corporate and national brands. Social media icons like Khalid and Salama invited statements of loyalty in ways that echoed the monarchy's patriarchal model. As Sara Ahmed has shown, the happy family is a powerful object for orienting desire, and the couple's fame offers an example of how family happiness recasts "social norms as social goods."[8] Their warm relations with UAE residents of different nationalities, such as their live-in nanny and restaurateurs around town, model a happy multicultural nation. Orienting immigrants around a shared set of social media objects that bring happiness is a technology of engendering belonging, in the absence of paths to naturalized citizenship.

While Emirati content creators work along the unequal affective binary of citizen host/ grateful guest, long-term UAE residents create social media content reflecting more complicated identities. Those in the paradoxical position of being second-generation immigrants stage belonging in the UAE through their own ironic modes of happiness. This is particularly true of Arabic speakers, who dominate the media industry even as they share with the South Asian majority the predicament of being "impossible citizens," who can only belong to the nation so long as they work there.[9] The UAE's media production capacity has been built by "[g]enerations of migrants, especially in TV and press industries across the Gulf, [who] worked and thrived economically without being able to push any of their narratives."[10] By contrast, social media content creators can and do tell immigrant stories. Many of their Instagram profiles feature a pin on Dubai and a flag icon for their home country, and their storytelling demonstrates attachments to both places (Fig. 2).

---

[6] Khalid Al Ameri (@khalidalameri), "The UAE's Forgotten City," Facebook, 20 December 2017. https://www.facebook.com/khalidalameri/videos/the-uaes-forgotten-city/505400446506006/.

[7] On communicative capitalism and the mining of social media engagement to build value for brands and corporations, see Wendy H. K. Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016); Jodi Dean, *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive* (New York: Polity, 2010).

[8] Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 2.

[9] Neha Vora, *Impossible Citizens: Dubai's Indian Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

[10] Mona Kareem, "From Rap to Trap: The Khaliji Migrant Finds his Aesthetic," *Arabian Humanities*, no. 14 (2020): 9.

This article focuses on two second-generation content creators who specialize in comedy, Hadeel Marei and Mohanad Al Hattab. As cosmopolitan "Dubai kids," they use code-switching skills to act as intermediaries between national cultures and dialects of Arabic eliciting the affection of millions of fans. Their satirical stories of life in the UAE address an extended family of social media followers, forming an alternative to the heteronormative happy family. In their prolific video performances, crews of friends and their lives offer everyday objects of affection and models of belonging. Oriented at young Arabic speakers, Hadeel and Mohanad's comedy also satirizes gender roles that embody family and national values, subtly interrogating the use of biological family to structure belonging. Through content analysis of select examples of their social media satire and audience engagement, I argue that Hadeel and Mohanad's performances of happiness through friendship generate alternative intimacies for second-generation UAE residents, allowing them to enact affective belonging to each other and the nation.

Egyptian Hadeel is a Dubai-based comedian with 1.2 million followers on Instagram, in addition to YouTube and TikTok followings. As a plus-size woman, she stands out from the slew of slender models hired by influencer marketing agencies in Dubai to perform the luxury lifestyle for which the city is widely known. As Hadeel told the journalist who profiled her for the cover of *Vogue Arabia*, "There is a certain mold that holds women – our jokes are expected to be about our age, looks, shape, or being ultra-fem. I'm steering away from that reductive concept, and defying the cultural norms that tell me to be more docile and calm."[11] In 2022, Hadeel was crowned Top Female Creator by the Dubai-based MENA content creator awards. She has turned her outsider qualities into a persona that followers adore: a happy object without a husband or model-size figure.

How did social media comedy enable her to do this? In a TikTok video published soon after the magazine story, Hadeel demonstrated how she won her followers' affection and support. In the video, she wears a worried expression as text bubbles pop up around her saying (in Egyptian Arabic) "You're never going to succeed with that weight," "you don't look photogenic," and "you're going to remain a failure." Then, Hadeel closes her eyes as the meme music builds to a crescendo around the lyrics "I cry, I pray, mon dieu...I'm crucified. Crucified like my savior...that's right." She laughs along with the singer, pointing to the *Vogue* cover in the background (Fig. 3). Her textual commentary then says, "*Vogue*, the world's most famous beauty and fashion magazine, reaches out to me." Against the backdrop of her image with jewelry and heavy makeup, she leans in and mouths the lyric "that's right."[12] The TikTok mashup of Hadeel's criticized appearance at home and glamorous transformation traces a thumbnail narrative of how gender norms have shifted across generations, with the plus-sized comedian becoming a *Vogue* cover girl. Followers applauded Hadeel's iconoclastic performance, which garnered 172,900 likes and 2,329 comments. The top comments said things such as "Queen!" "Go girl!" and "I'm so proud of you!" in English. Hadeel's bilingual following, likely of her elite class and young generation, sees her as a self-made hero who has triumphed over circumstances. Her comedy skills heighten the affective feedback, endorsing her as an object of collective happiness.

Mohanad al Hattab is another comedian recognized at the 2022 MENA content creator awards, taking gold for "entertainer vibes."[13] A Syrian man adept at various gender embodiments, Mohanad satirizes inherited gender roles in videos that range from full drag (clothing, wigs, and makeup) to comedy in casual dress. In a June 2022 Instagram video titled

---

[11] Michaela Somerville, "Why Egyptian Creator Hadeel Marei is Poised to Be the Next-Generation Queen of Comedy," *Vogue Arabia*, 8 July 2021, https://en.vogue.me/beauty/egyptian-comedian-hadeel-marei/.

[12] Hadeel Marei (@hadeelmarei) No Title, TikTok August 21, 2021. https://www.tiktok.com/@hadeelmarei/video/6998778233118264578?is_copy_url=0&is_from_webapp=v1&item_id=6998778233118264578&lang=en

[13] Content Creator Awards MENA: Celebrating the Region's Top Talents. Brandripplr, October 2023. https://menacreatorsawards.com/.

Figure 3. Hadeel Marei,, No Title. https://www.tiktok.com/@hadeelmarei/video/6998778233118264578.

"Tutorialsss," he mimicked an etiquette show host's instructions on how women should look graceful when they bend down to pick up an item from the floor (Fig. 4). Mohanad lip-synched this woman's words in his video, styling his black t-shirt and baggy shorts with a fluffy red-and-blonde wig and assuming unruly poses while wagging his finger to the etiquette expert's admonition "*ghalat!*" (wrong!). As he used his male-presenting body to poke fun at the rules of posture and gesture that Arab women are expected to follow, the video elicited thousands of laughter emojis and likes, mostly from accounts with women's profile pictures. According to the most liked comment, from @aminahussein5, "Seriously, we should all bend down the first way" (*Bgad lazm kolna nnzl the first nzla* 🧏‍♀️☺️).[14] Much like Hadeel, Mohanad wins fans' affection through iconoclastic gender performances that make for good comedy and infectious laughter.

Hadeel and Mohanad's satirical comedy invites viewers on Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok to connect around their shared ridicule of the gender norms enforced by their families. The community of those who laugh together online is detached from spaces of respect for national leaders and parental authority figures, making it safe to share in the satire of content creators who stage respectful etiquette as excessive. The satire is aided by techniques of drag performance, which dissect the performance conventions that discipline and stabilize gender.[15] Bimbola Akinbola argues that drag comedy on social media, in particular, can be a mode of staging disbelonging, "a strategy and viewpoint that centers anti-respectability as a critical tool in the cultivation of alternative belongings for

---

[14] Mohanad Al Hattab (@mohanadalhattab), "Tutorialsss." Instagram, 27 June 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/CfTreVpBuXH/.

[15] Judith Butler, "Critically Queer," *GLQ* no. 1 (1993): 25.

Figure 4. Mohanad Al Hattab, "Tutorialsss," https://www.instagram.com/p/CfTreVpBuXH/.

marginalized diasporic subjects."[16] A particular icon of such comedy in the UAE, as in Nigeria and India, is the "digital drag aunty" who theatricalizes how gender conventions are enforced through admonitions, gossip, and clothing standards.[17] The postcolonial drag aunty in a sari or gele affirms a link to cultural history and also parodies the excessive weight it carries. Akinbola argues that such drag artists "practice disbelonging by embracing the personal and cultural importance of their African aunties, while explicitly rejecting the forms of gendered surveillance, discipline, and shame that shape their day to day lives."[18] Borrowing the concept of disbelonging, I ask how Hadeel and Mohanad's satirical performances resonate beyond the space of comedy to form models of authentic happiness that acknowledge their cultural inheritance while stretching its disciplinary limits.

These content creators also disavow the upbeat, glossy visual repertoires of UAE social media developed by the nation's extensive marketing infrastructure. As second-generation Dubayyans, Hadeel and Mohanad distinguish their social media style from that of a myriad of tourists who post about Dubai online, as well as new immigrants who represent the UAE as a happy place. "Dubai has always attracted the young, the fresh, the educated, and it really holds as the land of opportunity for them," advertising executive Zeena explained to me. "So when they're here, they're more able to share their experience with their families abroad by documenting it on social media."[19] Unlike newcomers, Hadeel and Mohanad post

[16] Bimbola Akinbola, "#AfricanAunties: Performing Diasporic Digital Belongings on TikTok," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (2022): 3.

[17] Arti Sandhu, "India's Digital Drag Aunties: Breaking New Ground Wearing Familiar Fashions," *Dress* 45, no. 1 (2019): 55–73.

[18] Akinbola, "#AfricanAunties," 2

[19] Author interview with Zeena Kurdi, 17 February 2021, Dubai.

not for their biological families (who live in the UAE) but for social media followers savvier about the place. Hadeel and Mohanad's digital performances thus satirize both the social discipline imposed by families and immigrant representations of the UAE as a utopia of luxury and freedom. Hadeel and Mohanad's own modes of happiness owe more to everyday experiences and small pleasures.

Laure Assaf writes that second-generation youth raised in Abu Dhabi claim belonging to the city through everyday experiences at the local level, bypassing the fraught question of nationality. Such youth socialize in interstitial and marginal spaces that acquire affective value as "sites where the youth *practice belonging.*"[20] Social media platforms are also spaces for practicing belonging, though they have far greater visibility.[21] Hadeel and Mohanad's performances on these platforms use them as interstitial sites of affective community. Enjoying satire together becomes a shared practice of belonging, as second-generation youth talk about the UAE not as a "land of opportunity" but one of everyday experiences of fun and fulfillment. Such experiences arise when youth get a reprieve from norms of belonging for immigrants, whose presence in the nation is tied to employment contracts, typically designed for a male-headed nuclear family.[22] Content creators raised in the UAE often occupy the interstices of immigration status – such as women who stay on their parents' visa until marrying – and capitalize on that period of security. Others, such as Mohanad, find jobs that sponsor their visas while using social media as a space of continuous attachment to their long-term home. The interstices of social media have served as a valued space for second-generation residents to act as children of the UAE, regardless of official nationality. As the nation's public and private sectors work together to boost social media marketing, such second-generation residents are rising to unprecedented levels of visibility. In this context, Hadeel and Mohanad's performances of local knowledge model affective attachment without citizenship and promise greater visibility for second-generation identity politics.

Authenticity and Irony in Girlfriend Comedy

Content creators from different Arab nations have built careers in UAE social media, where advertising agencies maintain a diverse list of in-house influencers to market to segmented audiences both within and outside the UAE.[23] The nation's top-ranked influencers on Instagram are two Arab women, Iraqi-American Noor Naim (Noor Stars) and Lebanese Karen Wazen, who built their followings in very different ways. Naim made her name as a YouTuber who performed popular challenges and funny skits with her sister, while Wazen is a luxury lifestyle influencer whose posts alternate between images of herself modeling fashion and images of her with her husband and photogenic children. Both women fit into the category of "lifestyle influencers who regularly share their daily routine, so that whenever they endorse a brand it comes out as organic as possible."[24] Following the globally familiar career trajectory of the influencer, these women first worked to build an authentic style, then leveraged their followers' admiration and trust to charge high fees for product

[20] Laure Assaf, "Abu Dhabi is My Sweet Home: Arab Youth, Interstitial Spaces, and the Building of a Cosmopolitan Locality," *City* 24, no. 5-6 (2020): 833.

[21] Susana Galán, "Cautious Enactments: Interstitial Spaces of Gender Politics in Saudi Arabia," in *Freedom Without Permission: Bodies and Spaces in the Arab Revolutions*, ed. Frances Hasso & Zakia Salime (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016): 173.

[22] Amelie Le Renard, *Western Privilege: Work, Intimacy, and Postcolonial Hierarchies in Dubai* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021), 101.

[23] The current roster of influencers represented by the agency can be found at http://humanagement.me/social-media/.

[24] Interview with Zeena Kurdi.

Figure 5. Hadeel Marei repurposes an image from a fashion shoot for her personal Instagram, Hadeel Marei, "بعد الصورة دي طلعت اجري على التكيف", https://www.instagram.com/p/CeMYWrdrW57/.

endorsement. As top influencers in the UAE, where per capita income is high, such influencers often advertise luxury experiences – such as high-end restaurants and hotels – and dress expensively. Their girl-next-door authenticity is gradually replaced by an image of a savvy and fashionable consumer who can guide others in their purchases.

While Hadeel performs this role when needed, for sponsored advertising, she typically plays against the type of polished Dubai influencer. Hadeel is a frequent model/brand ambassador for the Aerie clothing company, for instance, twirling and smiling in expensively casual clothes that represent the brand's slogan "Let the REAL you shine."[25] Her personal Instagram reframes these performances for comedy. In a post from May 2022, Hadeel stands on a sandy beach with the turquoise sea in the background, wearing lipstick and an oversized white linen shirt while giving the camera a model smile. Her caption comments satirically on the summer photo shoot: "After this picture, I went running for the air-conditioner" (Fig. 5).[26] Hadeel's personal social media account pokes fun at her model persona, winking at those who know how blazingly hot Dubai beaches are in May. Her comedy voice frames the influencer performance as a form of gender drag and orients followers to her authentic self, highlighted by the measured use of glamour as contrast. Hadeel's satire finds its affective charge in the gap between professional and personal roles. "What am I doing with my life?" says the voice-over in an Instagram video where she applies makeup with a worried expression. "When will my paycheck come? Where does all my money go? I should marry someone rich. I don't drink enough water."[27] Her comic performance stages the woes of a single woman striving against the odds, slyly equating the injunction to drink enough water with the received wisdom of marrying a rich man.

---

[25] Hadeel Marei and Aerie MENA (@hadeelmarei and @aeriemena), "Every outfit comes with a specific mood! What is your mood for today?" Instagram, 29 December 2022. https://www.instagram.com/p/CmwUs_9Ber9/.

[26] Hadeel Marei (@hadeelmarei), "بعد الصورة دي طلعت اجري على التكيف," Instagram, 30 May 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/CeMYWrdrW57/.

[27] Hadeel Marei (@hadeelmarei), "الأفكار اللي تجول في خاطري" Instagram, 24 January 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/CKbe3tTnYGY/.

The authentic self goes deeper than the image of a woman without makeup. Hadeel is also unmarried, in her twenties, and appears to live alone, thus staging disbelonging from the roles of wife, sister, or daughter centered by so many content creators. Yet she is neither alone nor isolated: her content creator friends comprise a community of single women online. Hadeel's early social media was filled with paired videos with her best friend and fellow content creator Maha Jaafar, whom Hadeel met in dental school. Now, Hadeel regularly makes Instagram videos with other young women influencers, singing along to Egyptian pop songs in the car, fighting over the check at a restaurant, or impatiently grabbing a slice of pizza that a friend was taking too long to photograph.[28] Co-producing videos is an economic strategy for content creators, who grow their followings through cross-posting, but these women use the word *shilla* (group of young friends) to frame their friendship as authentic.

Single women are just as capable as a male *shilla* of spending money and having fun, and seem to be independent of the social and economic constraints of family. This mode of authenticity is performed through the unabashed enjoyment of food and uninhibited car dances, indexing a relative freedom from gender norms applicable to married Arab women. Performing the single woman's life in this exuberant way certainly serves the influencer economy's quest to promote everyday consumerism. The friend group also generates a space of affective relation, where young Arab women appear as both irreverent and loyal to each other, forming a space of belonging founded in their disbelonging from shared cultural norms and forms.

An eleven-minute video with "your favorite trio" on Hadeel's YouTube channel expanded on the theme of women's friendship, narrating the trio's adventures in Dubai. Below the author line, a disclaimer noted that this was a promotion for a yacht rental company, yet there was no sign of the company's name or logo in the video.[29] It appeared as organic content by Hadeel and her creator friends Maha Jaafar and Amy Roko. The video title, *Li Yawm Kamil Garrabna Siyaqat Yakht* (For a Full Day We Tried Steering a Yacht), hinted at the comedy of errors contained within. The Egyptian word for trio (*thulāthī*) evoked the famous all-male comedy trio Thulathi Adwa' al-Masrah (Theater Lights Trio) of Egyptian television in the 1960s and 1970s. Upon convening in someone's home, the three women declared their intention to engage in similar youthful shenanigans, with Hadeel asserting that they would learn to steer a yacht and "become sea captains." After watching a YouTube video on how to steer a yacht and conducting a mock graduation ceremony for the two new "sea captains," Maha and Amy, the three went to the posh Dubai Marina to board a yacht. The city was their home and playground.

The yacht segment of the video switched gears to a scene more conventional to Dubai than Egyptian cinema. Since the yacht already had a captain – a South Asian man – the girlfriend trio attempted the part of leisured ladies. Maha asked someone to take a picture of her "like one of those British people who pose on yachts in Dubai," nodding when Amy asked, "The ones who sunbathe?" In her long-sleeved t-shirt and casual pants, Maha's embodiment of a bikini-clad British tourist was satirical. The friends then moved on to more culturally familiar modes of enjoying a boat ride. Hadeel tossed her cap and said "Look, people. I don't want to be a captain or learn to steer. I want to have fun!" Along came some Egyptian pop music, to which the three danced in their seats before belting the theme from *Titanic* on the boat's prow. The free-spirited young women made the

---

[28] Hadeel Marei (@hadeelmarei), "واللي بياكلها ف الآخر اللي بيسوقمنشنو الشلة" Instagram, January 16, 2022. https://www.instagram.com/p/CYylyhAB6dN/; Renee Farah (reneeff) and Hadeel Marei (@hadeelmarei), "والله كل مرة منسوي", نفس شي ومنفضح حالنا بالمطعم" Instagram, November 27, 2022 https://www.instagram.com/p/CldmxQ7g4JQ/; Renee Farah (@reneeff) and Hadeel Marei (@hadeelmarei), "نشن شخص بحب التصوير," Instagram, 23 August 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/ChmN_VVBst5/.

[29] Hadeel Marei (@hadeelmarei), "لمدة يوم كامل جربنا سياقة يخت | مع إيمي روكو و مها جعفر," YouTube, 2 March 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yt2MY43Qxwk.

yacht ride their own, performing authentic friendship by disavowing the roles of glamorous Dubai ladies or conventional Instagram influencers. Indeed, the scene of friends dancing and joking on a boat might have taken place on the Nile, in Cairo or Khartoum. The performance of disbelonging from Dubai yacht protocol for leisured ladies and masculine cinematic adventure alike produced an authentic performance of three young women having fun, in Arabic.

Viewers chimed in with comments that marked the video's affective resonance. "The amount of happiness in this clip is off the charts!" wrote top commenter Abu Jaafar. "I really love this trioooooo!" commented Shahad AlSaeed. "You all reminded me of the [Egyptian] film *Captain of the Seas* with Mohamed Heneidy," noted Nada Mohamed. The laughter emojis, applause for the "beautiful trio," and comments on how each group of friends had these three types showed that viewers perceived the video as authentic content by and about girlfriends rather than an advertisement for yachts. The women's friendship modeled a recognizable kind of belonging both to each other and the city. They reimagined Dubai's reputation for forbidding glamour and Western social norms and made it seem closer to other Arab cities, using their local knowledge to perform practices of belonging.

The happiness viewers perceived in the video, as expressed in the comments, could be interpreted in various ways. One is that they saw luxuries like yacht rides as being widely available in Dubai, a happy place for middle-class Arab immigrants of all genders and ages. Viewers may also have seen the friends and their friendship as happy objects, having fun regardless of their economic and marital status. The mix of ironic and pleasurable laughter in the video's narrative left these interpretive possibilities open. As for the objects of audience affection, the social media girlfriends from different national backgrounds – Egyptian Hadeel, Iraqi-Sudani Maha, Saudi Amy – formed a crew that represented Dubai as a cosmopolitan and distinctly Arab city where immigrants could feel at home. That this feeling came from the trio's sense of fun and friendship offered an appealing alternative to images of high-end consumerism. The young women performed effortless belonging in the high-rent city and disavowed its glitzy self-image, lending authenticity to the happiness of wealth. Their adventures thus offered an affective orientation to Dubai as a fun place, not just a land of economic opportunity, and an optimistic take on the reality of immigrant precarity.

Through her satire of feminine glamour and Dubai glitz, Hadeel performs an authentic persona with immense appeal to social media audiences. The strategy of showing the "real" self and its unvarnished feelings is familiar in social media marketing, where brands seek to build trust by hiring influencers perceived as truthful. This strategy has particular resonance in the UAE, due to the evident gap between highly polished media images and the less utopian realities of immigrant life in the country. Hadeel's disavowal of the role of docile daughter (satirized in her *Vogue* TikTok) and glamorous influencer has a specific cultural significance in this context. Her ironic happiness with young single life in Dubai stages an attachment to the city made possible through detachment from its image as a site for economic immigration and luxury lifestyles. As neither a good Egyptian girl nor a Dubai fashionista, Hadeel's interstitial identity strikes a chord with a great many followers, including a substantial number whose profiles indicate that they are second-generation residents of the UAE.

Hadeel's disavowal of gender norms is key to her uniquely ironic brand of happiness. Like the digital drag aunties of postcolonial social media, she performs normative femininity affectionately but critically, slipping out of gender role to offer wry commentary in a more authentic voice. Unlike digital drag aunties, however, Hadeel performs in an everyday register, with a friend group that turns the life of the single woman into a social comedy. She is iconoclastic as well as socially integrated. Hadeel's use of Arabic and evocation of Egyptian comedy tropes also grounds her iconoclasm in a culturally specific context. Practicing belonging in this creatively hybrid way appears easier on social media than in formal institutions, since more capacious genres of identity performance are available. Hadeel's performances show what it would mean to fashion cultural belonging across Egypt

and the UAE while disbelonging from structures of familial discipline and legal citizenship. The affective space of her comedy offers a locus of attachment for Arabic-speaking audiences that is geographically situated in the UAE, but more crucially embodied by the content creator whose personal story models authentic identity. Second-generation and other interstitial identities are particularly apt to materialize through embodiments in the mode of satire and drag.

Performing Trans-Arab Belonging Through Drag

The dance of identity in which second-generation content creators engage involves taking distance from assigned nationalities and their associated gender roles. Mohanad Al Hattab's comedy videos on Instagram offer examples of both kinds of disbelonging, as the UAE-raised Syrian man performs connection to different national identities through drag. He has said in interviews that his performances are inspired by relatives, but Mohanad's drag characters come from across the Arab world. They include: an Emirati woman Hessa, Egyptian woman Samiha, and Lebanese man Kaghim, the latter two of which remained active during my research in 2021–22. Mohanad's roleplay across a spectrum of Arab nationalities present in the UAE frames his embodiment as cosmopolitan in a way unique to that nation. His drag also performs the ambivalent identification associated with satire of the aunty, "who simultaneously embarrasses and delights."[30] Performing trans-Arab belonging through drag brings with it an opportunity to stage disbelonging from selected aspects of inherited identity by making them the focus of satire. Mohanad follows in the footsteps of other digital drag aunties in using drag for both cultural and gender critique. He extends this critique further to embody a continuum of Arab identities in place of either/or binaries of national belonging.

Mohanad's Instagram videos address an audience raised on Snapchat, where face filters that add hair, accessories, or colors are layered visibly on the performer's body, enabling playful gender performance without bodily modifications such as plastic surgery or makeup. While the live drag genre that relies on body modification has been more controversial in the nightclubs of Arab capitals, Mohanad has not received attacks for his drag, to my knowledge. Indeed, his mainstream popularity indicates that many audiences read his drag as a satire of national types rather than gender binaries. Yet, I hope to show that his hybridization of national mimicry and gender drag carves out space for alternative gender performance within the familiar genre of national caricature. Social media affordances help to situate his national mimicry and drag within everyday streams of online content, enabling Mohanad to integrate the drag roles with his quotidian self.

On Instagram, Mohanad uses his compact body and regular features as the basis for flamboyant characters whose embodiments contain elements of national caricature. He plays two of these in the first episode of his satirical Instagram podcast, titled *How Deep is Your Talk* – namely Lebanese hipster Kaghim and Egyptian bourgeoise aunty Samiha.[31] In his role as the interviewer Kaghim, Mohanad "wears" a manbun, trendy glasses, and neck tattoo, all painted on with Instagram filters. His mix of Lebanese Arabic terms such as *'an jadd* (really) and *hayk* (like that), with a heavy dose of English spoken in a Beirut drawl, give his character the metrosexual style associated with elite men from that city. In the alternating screen, Mohanad plays Samiha with a strong Egyptian accent in Arabic. Her fluffy white wrap, straightened hair, and lipstick give her a sophisticated image that belies her earthy tongue. The interview begins with Kaghim asking the opening question "How deep are you?"

---

[30] Sandhu, *India's Digital Drag Aunties*, 56.
[31] Mohanad Al Hattab (@mohanadalhattab), "Kaghims podcast has arrived ladies and gents." Instagram, 26 May 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/CeBVPc2AcgT/.

Figure 6 Mohanad Al Hattab (@mohanadalhattab) performs as Samiha on vacation in Washington, DC, "Samoo7a maska el lincoln memorials," https://www.instagram.com/p/CeHKKgCr1Yz/.

to which Samiha responds with the crude Egyptian word "*fashkh*" (like crazy). Among other things, the podcast satirizes UAE media in which Arabs are called upon to perform national roles. Viewer @mformenna commented that this is "AB talks mohanad's version," referring to Emirati Anas Bukhash's online talk show. Putting two of his best-loved characters in dialogue allows Mohanad to show off his skill mimicking dialects and body language while satirizing the banality of media interviews. As Instagram filters aid his shifts between gendered national roles, Mohanad shows that his own linguistic and bodily repertoire has been shaped by his upbringing in the UAE and its diverse Arab populations. In this context, he is able to perform any nationality, though forcing himself into a national type appears as theatrical as drag.

Both stereotypical gender roles and the discipline of nationality appear as comically old-fashioned in Samiha, Mohanad's most popular character. He uses an Instagram wig and skin filter to erase his facial hair when performing this character, along with hackneyed gestures and language. During his travels to Washington DC, he satirized a cliché of vacation photography by having Samiha close her fingers to grasp the top of the Washington Memorial, only to end up comically far away from it. The caption on the Instagram image, "Samoo7a maska el Lincoln memorials," underscored her lack of cosmopolitan knowledge (Fig. 6).[32] The UAE-raised Syrian is the child of such women, in cultural terms, though he laughs affectionately at them. Samiha's Egyptian Arabic peppered with English and stylized femininity make her a classic drag aunty, who appears "familiar and respectable, much like

---

[32] Mohanad Al Hattab (@mohanadalhattab), "Samoo7a maska el lincoln memorials." Instagram, 28 May 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/CeHKKgCr1Yz/.

the housewife she is attempting to impersonate."[33] Mohanad's drag embodiment of this role stages the comic tension of his belonging to such women and disbelonging from their exaggerated performance of gender.

Drag comedy has a long history of being used to satirize femininity in Arab cinema, but the online audience turns such satire into something more affectionate and affirmative.[34] Instagram followers welcome each of Mohanad's videos with thousands of likes and hundreds of appreciative comments applauding Samiha as a cultural icon and member of their online family. "Come on and visit us in New York, Samoohaaaa!☺️🕺" writes user @jasmine_ismaeil (in Arabic), followed by "😂😂😂😂 lol Samou7a come to NYC for meet and greet" from @na1la_saa. The drag aunty is an object of shared affection through which her Arabic-speaking social media fans can claim belonging to their home cultures with critical distance, alongside a cultural connection to each other. Samiha is all the more familiar because she appears on followers' social media feeds amid posts by their relatives and friends, as a satirical figure whom they can engage with jokingly.

In some skits, this femme character blends more subtly with Mohanad's everyday persona, such as in a video with Hadeel Marei and Maha Al Jaafar posted to Instagram on 29 April 2022. In the video, the two women are grousing about their bosses over dainty cups of Turkish coffee when Mohanad joins them in shorts and red-and-blonde wig, adding his own absurd complaint in Samiha's voice – that she found it hard to be taken seriously at work as someone so pretty. The girlfriends correct Mohanad/Samiha bluntly, and Hadeel offers a small mirror so she can take an honest look at herself.[35] The young women playfully resolve a generational conflict with their elder, but also embrace their friend's alternative gender performance in this scene. Mohanad's drag aunty persona brings femme gestures into his everyday embodiment. National drag precedes and validates gender drag in this trans-Arab friend group, where crossing national binaries is a clear sign of the cosmopolitan sophistication with which iconoclastic gender performance is associated.

Three days after this video, Mohanad posted an Eid family portrait on Instagram. Posing in a denim jacket with his parents and sisters in their upscale home, Mohanad presented as conventionally masculine.[36] The heteronormative man from a Syrian family and the gender-bending performer who posts on Instagram with his sister-friends each belongs in the UAE in a different way. As the son of immigrants, Mohanad knows the codes of respectful masculinity and performs these, even if they earn him no rights in the country where he grew up. His social media family of second-generation peers perform belonging more irreverently and just as precariously. Proper gender performance and marital status do not give them paths to belonging in the UAE, while cultural satire and drag paradoxically enable embodiments of trans-Arab identity that do belong here. Satirists such as Mohanad mediate between places and dialects through different kinds of national drag, turning immigrant code-switching skills into cosmopolitan cultural repertoires. His choice to perform belonging as a trans-Arab, gender-fluid man demonstrates how inadequate family-based policies are in accounting for children of immigrants born and raised in the UAE. And his remarkable success as a comedian shows that many others identify with and applaud his interstitial identity.

---

[33] Sandhu, *India's Digital Drag Aunties*, 68.

[34] Ahmed al-Dahabi, "Our Top 10 Drag Characters in Egyptian History!" *El-Shai.com*, 18 January 2021, https://www.el-shai.com/our-top-10-drag-characters-in-egyptian-history/.

[35] Mohanad Al Hattab (@mohanadalhattab), "Life is toughhh. @hadeelmarei@maha1aj" Instagram, 29 April 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/Cc8UqjAglHf/.

[36] Mohanad Al Hattab (@mohanadalhattab), "Happy Eid everyoneeee aboooos konnnnn aluf uuu," Instagram, 2 May 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/CdDQtbzMRs1/.

#ABtalks Special on Comedians - الكوميديون

Figure 7. Mohanad, Hadeel, and Mohamed Tarek interviewed by Anas Bukhash, "#ABtalks Special on Comedians, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9amq7lhR6Q4." -الكوميديون.

The publicity that Mohanad's Instagram comedy eventually gained, after winning the Best Entertainer award in May 2022, is a sign of emerging recognition for his brand of identity performance. He thanked fans "for still caring and watching after all this time," noting that he had been making videos for ten years already.[37] The influencer marketing industry slowly caught up with his brand of satire. Mohanad was also interviewed in mainstream media sources such as *Esquire Middle East* and Anas Bukhash's YouTube talk show #ABTalks (alongside Hadeel Marei and another comedian, Fig. 7).[38] Mohanad presents as heteronormative in these interviews, switching between Syrian Arabic and fluent, American-accented English. Only his Instagram remains a space for trans-Arab drag, gender bending, and quirky comedy. Despite the careful separation between his drag personas and his professional self, Mohanad's drag does more than symbolize multicultural life in the UAE. Indeed, it enables everyday gender fluidity, while laughter at the aunty figure in Mohanad's network frames enforcers of gender discipline as comically old-fashioned. Performing disbelonging from the un-cosmopolitan Arab aunty ends up staging difference from her heteronormativity as well. As Sarah Banet-Weiser discovered about social media in the US, the "politics, practices, and identities that are not easily or even possibly branded represent what might be called the surplus value that emerges from contemporary brand cultures."[39] The surplus value of Mohanad's brand of cosmopolitanism is its gender critique. On a larger scale, recent investment in the influencer industry around Brand Dubai has produced a surplus social media sphere in which iconoclastic performance and

---

[37] Mohanad Al Hattab (@mohanadalhattab), "Ya lahwy. I won. Ezayyy???" Instagram, 18 May 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/CdtfD6ugQUg/.

[38] Anas Bukhash (@anasbukhash), "#ABtalks Special on Comedians, الكوميديون ", YouTube, 12 June 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=amq7I. hR6Q4

[39] Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 217.

cultural satire question the concepts of nationality by which immigration to the UAE is regulated.

Rethinking Happiness as a Technology of Citizenship

Hadeel, Mohanad, and other single content creators present a fresh version of the "Dubai dream" to Arabic-speaking audiences familiar with the city's reputation as a place to emigrate with family. While family influencers circulate images of happiness and attract economic immigrants to the UAE, single, second-generation UAE resident content creators highlight another aspect of Dubai's image as a liberal Arab haven. In their visual content, the city appears primarily as a place of affective happiness and, only secondarily, as one of economic opportunity. Conventionally, stories of happy immigrants combine these two kinds of happiness as "what allows subjects to embrace futurity, to leave the past behind them."[40] Hadeel and Mohanad represent a second-generation experience in which past and future are less cleanly divided, since they remain attached to both their place of residence and countries of citizenship. Their struggles for legal belonging in the country where they grew up do not appear in their social media content or media interviews, likely because the UAE government discourages political commentary by noncitizens. Instead, they use social media affect as a technology of citizenship against the grain – demonstrating that they are happy in the UAE to show they belong regardless of economic or marital status.

Mohanad and Hadeel's performances of happiness align with a content creator culture that promotes personal authenticity, presenting Dubai as approachable rather than forbiddingly glamorous. Their stories of everyday fun and friendship address Arabic-speaking audiences, both within and beyond the UAE, who are more interested in accessible lifestyles than the luxuries promoted by more traditional influencers in this wealthy nation. In this respect, Mohanad and Hadeel resemble US content creators who perform authenticity via practices to which middle-class audiences can relate.[41] At the local level, Mohanad and Hadeel scale the happiness of UAE life as something relatable to Arab singles without the Western passports privileged by the job market.[42] It is local knowhow and community that brings the happiness they enact and share.

Performing in Arabic affords another kind of authenticity to Hadeel and Mohanad, setting them apart from content creators who use English to address UAE expatriates, including Emiratis Khalid and Salama, Lebanese Karen Wazen, and the Syrian Anazala family. Hadeel and Mohanad produce cosmopolitan content in Arabic, using a range of dialects, in-jokes, and mashed-up memes that require knowledge of different local languages and cultural repertoires. Sulafa Zidani notes that such mashups are a signature of a young Arab generation, describing them as acts of cultural agency and community building that replace North-South relations with cultural flows within the Arab world.[43] Dubai becomes a metonym for the UAE and its cosmopolitanism in Hadeel and Mohanad's Arabic content, as well as a source of cultural production that circulates regionally.

Satirical comedy offers a special twist on the performance of happiness as a trope of authentic belonging for immigrants. Hadeel and Mohanad are among several creators in their twenties who mashup images of the happy Dubai lifestyle with genres of iconoclastic satire popular in the broader Arab world. They stage trans-Arab generational belonging through

---

[40] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 137.

[41] Brooke Erin Duffy, *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender and Aspirational Labor in the Social Media Economy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 111.

[42] See, for example, Le Renard, *Western Privilege.*

[43] Sulafa Zidani, "Not Arabi or Ajnabi: Arab Youth and Reorienting Humor," *International Journal of Communication* 14 (2020): 3209.

satirical disbelonging from older norms of national and gender identity. Cosmopolitan satire in Arabic not only grounds them in regional comedy, but also demonstrates their familiarity with varieties of Arab immigrant life in the UAE. Audience responses show that Hadeel and Mohanad's followers recognize the figures and relationships they stage, and align with their stance of ironic affection for and selective disavowal of cultural norms. Although a comedy audience is an affective public, formed by emotional attunement rather than shared ideology, it is worth considering the social consequences of Arabic-language satire as a growing social media genre in the UAE.[44]

The remarkable success of second-generation online comedians shows that their iconoclastic style has a large market within and beyond the UAE. As they satirize conventions of nationality and proper gender embodiment, they perform an alternative vision of community to those of nation and family. Hadeel and Mohanad's respective social media brands have won them loyal followings by staging happiness in the modes of fun and friendship. They perform their entitlement to belong in the UAE through performances of lasting community. The biopolitics of affective attachment via performance on social media raise intriguing questions about the future of belonging in the UAE. How does social media prefigure a future where second-generation residents can claim belonging without the constraints of gender, marital status, and national origin? How do they show how belonging could be defined affectively rather than legally? Content creators such as Hadeel and Mohanad embody these possibilities experimentally in the relatively open digital domain. They act as children of the UAE through affectionate satire, tracing a community of identity-in-difference that elides the binary of citizen/noncitizen.

Social media platforms offer an unexpectedly generative space for staging interstitial identities without a formal territory, even if such platforms were built to capitalize on the performative and affective labor of users. Everyday practices of belonging turn into highly visible performances on platforms supported by corporations seeking to profit from the attention economy. The intermittent temporality of engagement with Hadeel and Mohanad's satire and its location within a corporate entertainment economy certainly limit its critical reach, but these gender iconoclasts are transforming the social media image of the happy Dubai resident, nonetheless.

---

[44] Zizi Papacharissi, *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 22.

Cite this article: Sonali Pahwa, "Social Media and the Politics of Ironic Belonging in Dubai," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (2024) **56**, 569–584. https://doi.org/10.1017/S002074382400076X