

## **Emirati women illustrators on Instagram: An exploratory study**

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### **Abstract:**

Instagram has become a popular social media platform for visual expression: many Emirati youth are drawn to the platform because it is one of the most widespread social networks, allowing them to share information, pictures and personal stories. This research study will analyze a collection of illustrations posted on Instagram by a selected group of female Emirati artists by relating these posts to their social context. It employs a qualitative approach involving personal interviews to identify points of view related to the existing visual material created by these 'avant-garde' illustrators. The results show that a new trend of illustration stemming from Japanese animé and manga is emerging among young female Emirati artists whose Instagram posts constitute a subtle commentary about local traditions while revealing cultural inhibitions. The study also reveals how these illustrators' artwork impacts their followers and how these, conversely, contribute to shape the artists' work. The illustrators discuss the challenges they face and offer reflections on how best to grow their practice to reach a wider audience.

**Keywords:** Social Media, Instagram, Illustration, Emirati Women, Culture, Animé, Manga.

### **Introduction**

With more than 500 million daily users registered at the start of 2020, Instagram is among the most popular means of self-expression and communication globally used to date (Omnicores Agency, 2020). Many youth are drawn to this platform as it is one of the most attractive social networks among teenagers and young adults, allowing them to share information, personal stories and much more (Al-Kandari, Al-Sumait & Hunaiyyan 2017; Bumsu, 2016; Pesut, 2018; Wetta, 2016).

In the United Arab Emirates, out of the 9.89 million residents registered in 2020 (Worldometer, 2020), 6.68 million users are active on Instagram (Global Media Insight, 2020). A great amount of visual material posted by young amateur creators, especially

females, is in the form of digital drawings. These Instagrammers are keen to exhibit their drawing skills and reinforce their affiliation to the trends they follow. Interestingly, a visible trend within these illustrators is a visual style mimicking Japanese anim  and manga iconography (Dawson, 2017; Chowdhury, 2016; The National UAE, 2011).

Within this trend, a group of professional Emirati illustrators stands out because they have started to create an individual yet subtle visual discourse which blends regional characteristics and traditions with modern values, revamping existing conventions (Perret, 2017). Since the style of these illustrations is largely influenced by Japanese pop culture, both visually and conceptually, this suggests that the growing popularity of Japanese visual culture in the United Arab Emirates has contributed to the emergence of these young artists (Dawson, 2017; The National UAE, 2011). Iwabuchi (2002) ascribed the success of Japanese animation to the removal of local features, which has enabled the product to hybridize and become globally accessible (Iwabuchi cited in Allen, 2004). On the other hand, these Emirati illustrators seek to localize their product; often, the main character is an avatar of the illustrator, and other characters and props may be drawn from people and objects existing in the illustrator's life. The visual narratives, which most of the time evolve around the Emirati lifestyle and culture, are often humorous depictions of situations involving peers or family altercations, revealing truths that are not often openly discussed in the UAE (Dawson, 2017).

These emerging artists are not only distinguishable for their content and individual artistic style but also because they seem to take their profession very seriously: like many other Emirati female entrepreneurs, they are commercially active in producing and selling their own merchandise online and in public commercial settings (Shuhail Koshy &, 2017; Itani, Baalbaki & Sidani, 2011). To date, however, there has been no academic research carried out on the emergence of upcoming Emirati illustrators on Instagram; therefore, this study aims to introduce and explore this new illustrative trend in UAE.

### **History of Japanese anim  in UAE**

Since its birth, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has been shaped by rapid global commercialization that has impacted on people's lifestyles and led them to the cultural hybridization of some of their habits (Al-Khazraji, 2009). One example of globalization is the arrival of the motion picture industry which has become one of the most popular forms of entertainment for young generations of Middle Eastern Arabs in the last 50 years. The motion picture industry has contributed to the spreading of American and Japanese cartoons (anim ) and graphic novels (manga) among Arab youth (Elhersh, 2018).

As they became aware of an increasing interest in anim  and Western cartoons in the Middle East, Western companies started investing in young Arab consumers and established regional subsidiaries like Nickelodeon Arabia, MBC Arabia, Spacetoon and Disney Channel Middle East in the late 1990s (Sayfo, 2012). The task of government-run channels was to fill the slots dedicated to children with cheap, quickly produced content. As animated cartoons were regarded as a medium for juveniles, minimal effort was invested in

establishing local animation studios. Foreign programs attracted more viewers than local productions (Sayfo, 2012), and Japanese animation was highly favored for children's broadcasts as it required little censorship and accorded well with the country's strict moral codes and traditions. Likewise, Japanese anim  was admired by most Arab audiences because of their storylines, values and characters (Sayfo, 2017).

Many generations of Arab children grew up watching foreign animation (Sayfo, 2012; Shuhail & Koshy, 2017) which was dubbed in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and aired by the Middle East Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) and Spacetoon (Qasim & Yahiaoui, 2019). Japanese animation was strongly represented by cartoons such as *Captain Majid*, *Dragon Ball*, *Grendizer*, *Kimba the White Lion*, *Naruto* and *Sandy Bell*, which aired decades ago in the UAE. Channels such as Dubai TV, MBC 3, Sama Dubai, Sharjah TV and Spacetoon were and still are the main hubs for dubbed anim  (Sharif, 2016).

### **Rise and characterization of manga and anim  otaku in UAE**

The broadcasting of Japanese cartoons in the UAE contributed to the growth of the Emirati 'otaku', a fandom trend that spread globally in the late 1970s and 1980s (Brienza, 2016; Chen, 2004; Grant, 2017; Newitz, 1994) after anim  cartoons were first made available in the West in the 1960s (Chandler-Olcott, 2014). 'Otaku' is a Japanese term used to describe people with an obsessive interest or a hobby practiced at an extreme level (Newitz, 1994; Tsutsui, 2008). Azuma explains the 'otaku' phenomenon is a development of Japanese society, which quickly grew out of rurality – prior to world wars I and II – and jumped straight into postmodernism. With their behavioural consumption patterns, their loss of the belief for greater social standard, their conscious detachment from reality and a need to construct alternative values, otaku are a perfect example of a postmodern societal Japan, very detached from its rural past (Azuma, 2001).

The United Arab Emirates share a similar historical development: from a rural society the country jumped into a rapid modernization; it could be therefore assumed that Emirati otaku display similar societal patterns. However, even if Emirati see an affiliation to Japan because both cultures are subject to collectivistic tendencies and promote ideologies such as a strong household, often perceived as the basic unit of social organization (Al-Kandari, Al-Sumait & Al-Hunaiyyan, 2017; Nakane, 1970, cited in Kuwayama, 2001), Emirati otaku seem to have still rooted their strong societal and cultural standards and pursue their geeky fantasies mostly as a hobby (Kumar, 2017). In other words, while it is common for Emirati youths to follow anim  and manga trends, the 'transgression' factor is lessened by their sense of duty and commitment towards their family. It is therefore uncommon to see people wholly committing to being an otaku, especially at an entrepreneurial level.

### **Ongoing activities and developments of manga and anim  otaku in UAE**

Emirati fans have hugely contributed to the rise of anim  and manga popularity within the Gulf region. One of the first otaku events was the establishment of the Abu Dhabi anim 

Club (ADAC) in 2004, which was responsible for organizing animé events, previews, cosplays and competitions (Dawson, 2017). Then, in 2007, a group of animé fans created the Dubai Anime Club (DAC), an online community that has expanded to 12,000 followers in 2017 (Dawson, 2017); consequently, the 1<sup>st</sup> Anime Expo was launched in Dubai in 2016 (Al Bustani, 2016). Parallel events are the ANI:ME festival, held first in Abu Dhabi's Yas Island in 2016 which welcomed some of the world's most influential illustrators and producers of manga and animé as guests of honor (Dubai PR Network, 2016); The Middle East Game Con, and The Middle East Film & Comic Con which take place yearly, in Abu Dhabi and Dubai respectively (Abu Dhabi World, 2018; King, 2019). In recent years, aficionados' shops have opened in the region, selling fashion items, manga books, collectables and other gadgets related to Japanese and American pop culture (Baseel, 2015; Gillett, 2019). Moreover, in 2016 the UAE Board on Books for Young People organized a five-day workshop that taught emerging Emirati artists to draw manga (UAEBBY, n.d.).

It is important to mention that animé otaku not only 'consume' a product, but often contribute to the creation and dissemination of sub-products (Bryce et.al., 2010; Storey, 1996, cited in Chandler-Olcott, 2014) by translating manga, fan dubbing and producing their own artwork (Yamamura, 2014). The designs of some of these creative otaku seem to be forming a new trend in the region.

### **Emirati otaku illustrators on Instagram**

According to Dawson, a local press reporter, a group of Emirati animé -inspired illustrators has managed to localize their work and contribute to the creation of a subculture in the UAE. Artists under the names of @emmyart @asamiart, @Emara, @danao1846, and @shamamanga are considered pioneer illustrators who have inspired and paved the way for many others (Dawson, 2017). Their art is displayed on Instagram which is one of the best platforms for upcoming artists, illustrators and graphic designers to promote their work (Humphrey, 2016). Instagram is a valuable platform to display work, track current trends and take inspiration from fellow creators. It also enables users to find an audience and to engage with them as they grow and expand their reach (Patricia, 2018).

While these talented otaku produce visual art featuring newly-generated characters that stem from animé and manga, they also create new narratives, appropriating the imported media forms to suit their own purposes (Newitz, 1994). This supports Gruber's suggestion that icons belonging to specific cultures are reinserted and rearticulated in new geographical and social contexts as a result of the circulation of images in the media (Gruber, 2013).

There is a significant gap in the exploration of the visual content of Emirati-created sub-product stemming from Japanese animé and manga culture and how this product is received by their followers. Hence, this study aimed to identify the work of those Emirati illustrators whose art stem from Japanese pop culture and has mutated into an iconography that incorporates Emirati-centric attributes and narratives. Secondly, it analyzed the

reception of these illustrators' artwork among their community of followers on Instagram and, finally, it identified challenges Emirati illustrators currently face.

Since this is an exploratory research study, the findings are intended to contribute to a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural dynamics within the region, and to support further investigation in related areas.

## **Methodology**

The researchers opted to conduct a qualitative approach to data collection based on the selection of the work of 25 Emirati illustrators – out of which only 14 were deemed suitable – followed by an interview with each subject. This method was preferred in order to gather a body of conceptual and theoretical information based on the meanings that experiences hold for the interviewees (DiCiccio-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). However, since no sampling frame was accessible, fifteen illustrators were contacted through their Instagram account, whereas ten more were approached at Comic Con Dubai on 5 March 2020. The study was limited to females because, while viewing the artwork on Instagram, it was noted that (a) there are more female illustrators than males and (b) their content was somehow more personal and bolder than the males'. The illustrators were selected according to two criteria: the number of followers of each one of them (1000 and above) and their illustrative style, which either resembled Japanese graphic novels or comic illustrations.

All the participants were sent a digital invitation to their Instagram account to take part in the study. However, from the Instagram batch, only few replied; subsequently two, who initially agreed, dropped out before the actual study begun, leaving the number of participants from the Instagram batch to only two. The selection worked differently with the batch recruited from ComiCon 2020: out of ten individuals who were approached, half agreed to participate to the study. Since the number of participants was not as expected, a snowball sample approach was conducted: the interviewed participants were able to refer the researchers to other influencer illustrators whom they knew. The final number of consenting participants consisted of 14 Emirati female illustrators.

## **Instrumentation**

Prior to the interview, participants were asked to share their Instagram page along with demographic information related to their nationality, age, qualifications, years spent following animé and manga and years spent as illustrators. Permission was granted to share their details on the condition that their names were kept confidential. Therefore, the researchers used numbers to identify them. Table 1 includes some basic information about the respondents.

	Variables	Nº of Participants
1. Nationality	Emirati	14
2. Age	18–25	8
	26–33	5
	34–40	1
	<b>Total</b>	<b>14</b>
3. Education	Bachelor's degree	13
	Master's degree	1
	<b>Total</b>	<b>14</b>
4. Nº of years spent following animé and manga	1–6 years	2
	7–15 years	7
	16–25 years	5
	<b>Total</b>	<b>14</b>
5. Nº of years spent illustrating	1–4	2
	5–10	5
	11–15	7
	<b>Total</b>	<b>14</b>
6. Instagram accounts	@buuuuuzu	@bloom.sara
	@Sally.alhashmi	@shaikoh
	@cloudy.pencil	@suamya_alamoodi
	@Mendheroacademy	@asamiart
	@sh3sh3_92	@callmemariaam
	@mnawrah	@i_maryah
	@noisyant	@fynrir

An open-ended questionnaire was sent to the participants to familiarize them with the content of the research. The questionnaire contained the following main questions:

- What appeals to illustrators about Japanese animé and manga art?
- Why and how do Emirati illustrators combine foreign models with local attributes?
- What appeals to illustrators about using Instagram as a medium for their artwork?
- What types of fans follow and support Emirati illustrators?
- What are the followers' reaction to the posted artwork?
- What is the illustrator's overall message in relation to her artwork?
- What are the constraints and restrictions faced by Emirati illustrators?

In the original questionnaire file, however, each primary question was followed by secondary questions, which helped the interviewee clarify the scope of the questionnaire.<sup>1</sup>

A semi-structured interviewing format was followed, which allowed more opportunity to explore perceptions and gain a better understanding of the participants' points of view (DiCiccio-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Interviews were equally distributed between the two researchers and carried out by phone. All the questions were asked to participants in the same order and the interviews took between 45 and 60 minutes each,

leaving the interviewee the opportunity to elucidate examples and reveal their apprehensions (Arnon & Reichel, 2014).

Answers were recorded, transcribed and tabulated. The Table was divided in columns, each containing questions on the top, and the participants' answers right below, distributed across fourteen rows. The summarized results were discussed in the paragraphs below.

## **Findings**

### ***Emirati Instagram illustrators and their followers***

Before revealing information about the artworks and their visual connection to manga and animé artistic styles, we thought it relevant to briefly introduce the community of illustrators and their followers.

All Emirati Instagram illustrators are young entrepreneurs, whose age vary between 18 and 40 years of age. They all hold a bachelor's degree: seven have or are specializing in art-related subjects and the remaining half studied media, science and literature. Most started following manga and animé trends in their teens; most are self-trained artists who learned drawing by tracing magazines, watching You Tube videos and copying manga. The years spent as animé and manga fans range between 1 to 25, and those spent illustrating vary between 1 to 15. As illustrators, most know each other virtually – as they follow each other's accounts on Instagram – and in person, from gatherings such as Comic On, Game Con, Abu Dhabi Book Fair and other events where they exhibit and promote their products. Some have admitted to know each other from University, or a social media platform, hence creating a localized online community. Two of the illustrators are also part of illustrative non-profit associations, *Kada* and *Mend Hero Academy*, where they help organize and promote events, give workshops and train other illustrators. Five of them are still at University, whereas the remaining are employed, and they dedicate their spare time to their artistic production, hoping to one day become full-time illustrator entrepreneurs.

According to the Instagram statistics reported by the interviewees, their community of followers is mostly constituted by people from the Gulf. Emirati are the highest in number, second comes the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, with the United State of America in third position, followed by Qatar, Bahrain, Morocco, Kuwait, Egypt and finally India. Most of the followers are female (about 75 per cent) and range from 14 to 35 years of age. Previous studies asserted that Instagram contributes to the formation of niche affinity groups and online social circles, where the influencer functions as a role model for their followers (Belanche, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020; Neal, 2017). Reciprocally, respondent illustrators elucidated that their relationship with their followers was very strong: many relied on their fans' feedback to improve their own artwork, to keep up their productions and advancement and to gain as many 'likes' as possible.



### ***The appeal of Japanese animé & manga***

Almost all participants admitted to being exposed to Japanese animé since their childhood, mostly through the cartoon channel Spacetoon, which mainly broadcasts dubbed animé. According to the participants, exposure to animé was the stepping-stone as well as the most immediate exemplar for learning to draw. Japanese characters appealed to young illustrators for several reasons – the first being the idealized way in which the characters are drawn. Two participants mentioned that they could learn how to illustrate body proportions from these semi-realistic characters, and three designed their characters to be beautiful and cute and, at the same time, they wanted them to look ‘Emirati’ (as depicted in **Figure 1**).

This attraction to idealized beauty reflects the remarks of other researchers such as Tomos (2013) and Chen (2004) on manga and animé facial features: as a mixture of Western facial and Asian traits, they have conventionally come to represent a standard of beauty often used in the animation canon (Tomos, 2013) and mimicked by otaku across the globe (Chen, 2004). Azuma calls these recurrent characteristics that make designs very appealing *Moe-elements*<sup>2</sup> (Azuma, 2001). Some of these features are, for example, the use of uniforms, colored hair, the odd physical proportions where eyes and head are bigger than the rest of the body, animal ears and tails, among others. **Figure 1** is a perfect example on how some of these cute elements have been incorporated in Sh3sh3\_92’s post.

Many participants also agreed that another appealing factor of animé and manga was their complex plot, and that, as creators, they had the opportunity to develop their own characters and stories. Two illustrators in particular have developed a digital manga series with their own characters, which they regularly announce on Instagram, and another two create narratives around altercations that are typical in Emirati families.



Figure 1: Instagram post taken from @sh3sh3\_92, posted on June 5, 2019

### ***Combining animé and manga expressionism with Kaleejia attributes***

When asked whether their style of illustration bore characteristics of the Emirati culture, nine out of the 14 young women were aware that fellow Emirati otaku illustrators often reproduce animé and manga without adding *domestic* characteristics to their artforms; for



this reason, they tried to fill the gap by infusing their artwork, characters and storylines with traits that are typically *Khaleejia*, or ‘from the Gulf’. Visually, local attributes refer mostly to the traditional dress code: the black, full body cover *abaya* dress for women, complemented with a dark headscarf called *shaila*, which is loosely wrapped around the head, and the white *dishdasha* or *kandoora* for men, complemented with the *ghitra* headdress, which promotes the image of Arab and Bedouin heritage and tradition (AlMutawa, 2016). Elderly women often wear *burqa*, a golden cover that rests on their nose and lips (Echeverri and Sleiman, n.d). Furthermore, women tend to wear loose and colorful dresses with beedy ornaments at the neck and wrists, which are visible only when they are indoors, as they would otherwise covered themselves with the abaya. With regards to local items and living spaces, Emirati often live in spacious houses (*Sha’bi*) designed to accommodate many family members (Elsheshtawy, 2019), which they fill with vast carpets and low mattresses on which they rest. In their homes, coffee, dates and sweets are items which are never absent, as it is a custom to share those with guests (Echeverri and Sleiman, n.d.). **Figure 2** depicts a quiet indoor scene with family gathered around to play a board game; it then develops in the discovery that the main character – Maryah – had her make-up items ruined by one of her siblings, at which point she becomes furious as her eyes turn into small fires. This post not only reveals a typical Emirati house, but it also illustrates a recurrent feature of family life: a squabble among siblings.



Figure 2: Instagram post taken from @i\_maryah, posted on April 18, 2020

It was however observed that the illustrators’ posts not only incorporate traditional attributes, but also show interactions of characters in modern settings: shopping in malls, Driving or racing on highways, ladies spending time at saloons, binge-TV watching or binge-eating with friends (**Figure 3**) are common activities depicted in these posts.



Figure 3: Instagram post taken from @asamiart, posted on 5 October 2019

In these Emirati-centric stories, the characters are often depicted with manga and animé expressionism, such as popping veins, reddening of the face, or big eyes if the character represented is angry or happy, as is visible in both **Figure 2** and **3**. Sweat drops to show embarrassment or a nose bleeds to show perversity while different shapes of eyes may carry emotional, aesthetic and moral meanings. These facial expressions were previously identified to be Japanese manga traits in studies by Tomos (2013) and Bryce et al. (2010).

The majority of the artists considered that by localizing their illustrations they were promoting their culture, values and traditions to their followers. Hence, adding local characteristics, such as Emirati products, dresses and settings in their artwork was a distinctive feature of their practice. Moreover, the immense support of followers encouraged them to continue producing localized illustrations.

### ***Reception of illustrators' posts on Instagram***

To detect the impact that these illustrations had on their followers, the interviewed illustrators were asked to give examples of artwork that was highly acclaimed or unpopular with their followers. Acclaimed depictions featured characters eating junk food or going shopping and couples talking while driving or binge-watching TV, common behaviors among young Emiratis that were also apparent in Ahmed's study (2019). Other popular posts featured men in uniform; this echoed the research conducted by Bush et al. (2016) which showed that Gulf countries often display iconography that reinforces the authority of the state. Therefore, men in uniform who have served their country by holding military or civil service positions are often held in high regard in the UAE. Other themes displayed romanticized images of couples (**Figure 4**) and the dynamics of a typical Emirati family, as the examples previously shown in **Figures 2** and **3**.



Figure 4: Instagram post taken from @Noisyant, posted on 29 September 2016

The physical proximity and display of feelings between Emirati couples and altercations among family members reveal sentiments that would never be displayed publicly but are, nevertheless, familiar among locals.

Another popular element was the use of text in some of the posts. Participant 3 explained that Arabic is used for insider jokes for locals, asserting that, if jokes were translated, they would not be understood.

There were, however, posts which were criticized because they were considered not to be in alignment with the local culture and values. For instance, illustrations with characters not respecting the dress code or the display of too much intimacy between males and females (mostly in posts of participants 2 and 14). Posts that received such criticism were usually removed by most of the artists. Two illustrators explained that symbols are often misinterpreted although it is not their intention to create controversy. For example, a picture of a man with purple lips 'as part of artistic contribution' (participant 6) was posted and then removed because of adverse comments. In another example, two female characters were shown in an intimate position. According to the illustrator (participant 8), the women were videogame-inspired characters who had collapsed after a fight; however, the picture was misinterpreted (**Figure 5**).

Participant 9, who loves drawing males rather than females, explained that her first posts were highly criticized because of the prevalence of male characters over female, even more when two males were represented in proximity; however, her followers learned to accept her art, since she did not remove her posts. Participant 7 complained about her followers' attitude when she posted a picture representing a pregnant woman; she explained that other artists depict the same theme without having issues but when she posts something different from her normal themes, her fans disapprove of her work. Eventually she deleted the post.



Figure 5: Instagram post taken from @bloom.sara, posted on 24 May 2018

Another illustration that received comment was that of a woman holding a cup of coffee and smoking a cigarette as in **Figure 6**. The illustrator stated she purposely wanted to represent a woman smoking ‘because they do, but people choose not to see that’ (participant 1).

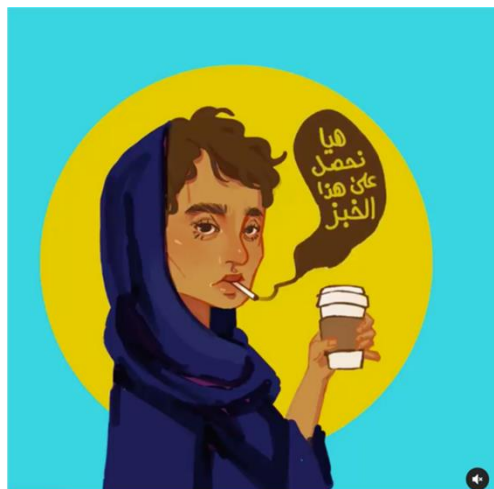


Fig.6: Instagram post taken from @buuuuuzu posted on 7 March 2019

According to some researchers, social media in Muslim countries are often subject to government norms and regulations (Al-Kandari, Al-Sumait & Hunaiyyan, 2017; Alrimawi, 2014; Sayfo, 2012). All respondents were well aware of these norms; however, some confessed that such rules limit their self-expression or representation of reality. Six interviewees recalled attempting to represent something factual. However, when their audience expressed their disapproval, either through likes or comments on Instagram, they took this as a clue that their idea was unacceptable or had been misinterpreted; consequently, they either deleted or changed the post accordingly.

### ***Illustrators' purpose and promotion of their artwork***

When asked to elucidate the messages within their artwork, responses varied. While most affirmed that their primary goal was to convey a positive message that could create a bond between them and their followers, the objective of some was to represent the reality and norms of their society by means of humor or fantasy. Others revealed that their narratives reflected their personal experiences and the issues with which many young adults have to deal, such as self-identity, depression, freedom of expression, women's rights, independence and love. Through their characters, they attempted to show how to overcome difficulties with messages of hope for the fans who could relate directly to these characters and their stories. Three interviewees whose art strongly reflected the local culture, were aware that the image of Emiratis was often stereotyped and declared that their purpose was to change the global perception of them through Instagram, by subverting the stereotypical images of women and showing locals as emancipated and hardworking individuals. Overall, most illustrators admitted that their artistic production was directly linked to the engagement with their fans: the more support and advice they received, the more they were inspired to create new artwork. Furthermore, most illustrators were convinced that promoting their culture was a great tactic; as participant 6 said, 'People are hungry for something that is relatable to them... When we do something local, it goes viral'. A smaller minority, however, insisted that their artworks were creations drawn from their imagination and were very much for their own personal artistic and creative satisfaction.

With regards to the promotion of artwork through social media, all participants involved in this research operated on Instagram. Almost all respondents preferred Instagram to Facebook, Pinterest, Snapchat or Twitter as they felt that Instagram allowed them to showcase their artwork, reach a lot of followers at national and international levels and, at the same time, interact with them. Through Instagram, illustrators could craft a socially engaging gallery of their artwork, create stories, share inspirations and disclose snippets of their creative process without using words. Respondents also revealed that hashtags played an important role in reaching the target audience and helped them approach other illustrators while allowing them to maintain privacy by hiding their real identity behind an avatar. All the participants admitted to having created professional Instagram accounts to connect to like-minded individuals, to sell their artworks, to collect commissions and to exchange information about art-related events.

### ***Challenges involved in working as an illustrator***

Participants experienced different challenges in becoming freelance illustrators, all at different levels. Starting from their closest circle, four recalled how this practice was seen negatively within the traditional family setting. They confessed that some of their friends and cousins, especially females, faced severe restrictions from their parents on illustrations. Interviewee 3 admitted that, even if she was able to illustrate and post her material on



Instagram, she was not allowed to attend physical events. Only one participant expressed gratitude towards her family, saying that she was supported since the beginning of her endeavor. Others affirmed that only through persistence, and after seeing some results, did their family accept their decision to become an illustrator. Similar challenges came from their community, which refers to their extended family and family's friends. For instance, the illustrators revealed that older generations did not see or understand this new art form and tended to label it as *inferior* or *irrelevant*. One interviewee stated that 'old people make young generations feel ashamed for what they do' (participant 11). Despite some rare disharmonies with their followers, illustrators admitted that most of the support came from them, and young people in general.

Respondents also highlighted the lack of opportunities and a stable income; their statement echoed research by Dawood (2018) which highlighted the issues faced by freelancers. Furthermore, two denounced the general ignorance with regard to the price of artworks (participants 9 and 11); in fact, clients continually offered lower fees for commissions, and many buyers made offers that were not proportionate to the amount of work put into the designs.

Most illustrators affirmed that governmental and private bodies provided little funding and opportunities; therefore, they used their own finances to self-promote and self-print editions of their work, selling this online or at international fairs. Two participants (11 and 14) stated that since 2018, artists have had to pay to get their artwork published. Others regarded Comic Con as an expensive and unsupportive business environment (participants 1 and 10). However, five respondents stated that opportunities were starting to slowly emerge and believed that, if more youth truly applied themselves to art as a profession, it would lead to more opportunities within the field of illustration.

Regarding how they could improve the general practice and diffusion of this art form, half of the participants claimed to be in need of more opportunities within art exhibitions, publishing houses, laboratories or gatherings. The other half agreed that success in the illustration field was a matter of networking, skill improvement and resilience. Additionally, according to them, the acceptance and understanding of this art form within a wider societal range would be a great step ahead for their community of modern illustrators.

## **Discussion**

The study concerned itself with three main objectives: first, to prove the existence and show samples of an emerging illustrative style among Instagram-based Emirati artists that stems from Japanese animation style; second, to gather the illustrators' purpose and their followers' reception of their artwork; third, to gain the illustrators' testimony of their experience in the field, along with their yearnings and suggestions.

Analyzing the posts of this niche art promoted by Emirati Instagram illustrators corroborates the existence of a new emerging illustrative style that ultimately stems from Japanese influences. It revealed how Spacetoon and other channels were the sites on which

young Emiratis embraced Japanese culture at a very early age given these were deemed socially acceptable by their parents and elders, and how these cartoons affected and contributed to their artistic skills.

As was evident in this study, Emirati illustrators employed Japanese iconography as a springboard to their own creations. The fact that animé and manga were the only available examples for young illustrators has significant implications revealing how the absence of alternative visual models has channelled their artistic production in one direction, bringing forth limited illustrative styles. However, the adaptation of Japanese designs in the expression of UAE cultural experience is intriguing. For example, Emirati characters are enhanced by Japanese comic-strip expressionism including popping veins, sweat drops, and changes to the shape of their eyes and bodies. They are also seen in specific Emirati settings and situations including interacting in shopping malls, driving, eating together, punning and in family. Furthermore, there are displays of sentiment between husband and wife, other family members and feelings of admiration for leaders. This visual material contributes to the depiction of some aspects of the Emirati culture, their emotions and their social spheres.

With regards to the illustrators' followers and their feedback on the illustrators' artwork, it seemed that this niche of fans was quite able to influence the illustrators' direction. Further to this, it seemed that the illustrators' audiences do not favour changes in the style or content of their influencers, as in the case of illustrator 7. Finally, those concerned with dress codes and visual appropriateness were mostly Emirati and Saudi followers.

Reciprocally, with regards to how illustrators responded to their followers' comments, three tendencies were noticed. On the one hand, there were a group of content-aware Instagrammers who adhered to cultural rules and followers' advice and who were ready to take down criticized posts. On the other hand, a group more willing to upload posts which not always were in line with local norms. Those illustrators repeatedly found themselves challenged by their fans, and, at times, ended up modifying their posts, as in the case of participants 2, 6, 7 and 14. Finally a smaller group (participants 1, 8 and 9) defied their audience not only by representing what is usually not tolerated by their culture, but also by refusing to remove the post.

This finding leads to two consequent observations: the first supports the conclusion of other researchers that self-censoring is often implemented in Middle Eastern countries (Mostyn, cited in Mattsson, 2010), and the second denotes a strong connection between this group of Instagrammer illustrators and their audience. According to researchers, this tendency is quite common when Instagram influencers are categorised as 'micro' (between 20 to 10 thousand followers) and 'nano' (between 1 to 10 thousand followers) (Wiekli, 2020), as in the case of our illustrators. As reported by Bolat and Gilani, it is quite usual for the topics and content posted by small influencers to be determined by what the online audience wants to see, often affecting the creativity and spontaneity of the influencer. (Bolat and Gilani, 2018).



Focusing on the illustrators' perception of their own art and the message carried within it, two tendencies were also observed. On one hand, a smaller group used art to create a parallel dimension, where characters and narratives function as metaphors for universal values. Researchers such as Chen and Newitz explained that youngsters often consume manga to escape their own reality (Chen, 2004); by becoming otaku, they embrace a new culture, which they look up to in place of their own (Newitz, 1994). This is reflected by those illustrators whose art displays characters that are either purely fantastic or manga-inspired, and where local elements are kept to a minimum. In **Figure 7** the only *Khaleeja* elements include the bracelets around the ankles and wrist of the character and the henna design on her feet.



Fig.7: Instagram post taken from @sumaia\_alamoodi, posted on October 3, 2018

On the other hand, a second group saw art as a tool to discuss, advocate and bring elements of Emirati society to light. Not only did they recreate Emirati-related stories, but they gave local traits to their characters, such as darker skin tones, the common makeup style for women and the distinctive local dress code for both genders. In other words, they have attributed a unique look to their characters which greatly differs from anim  style (see **Figures 8 and 9**). This group of women, both for their commitment to their personalized illustrative style, seem to reflect a generation of empowered individuals, who use art as a medium to discuss their surroundings.

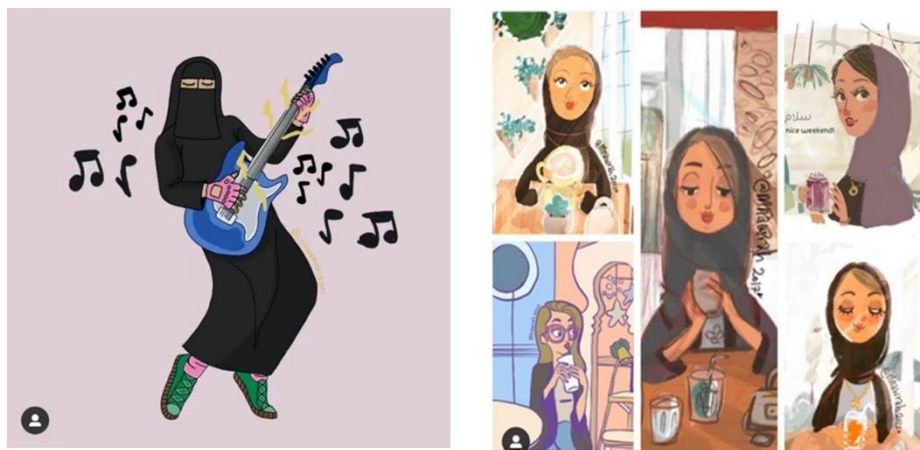


Figure 8 (on the left): Instagram post taken from @mnawrah posted on 12 November 2019

Figure 9 (on the right): Instagram post taken from @callmemariaam posted on 11 June 2019

With regards to the interviewees' propositions on how to overcome challenges in the field of illustration, it is important to recall that Emirati illustrators have so far relied on Instagram to reach an audience, to promote and sell their products and to become 'insta-famous'. Technology has helped them to get established, to grow and expand artistically and commercially – opportunities that the government and other institutions have not fully managed to provide. Therefore, these young Emiratis want to see the growth of their artistic community, along with more non-profit institutions, art-related events and specialized study programs implemented in the future, as well as attractive job opportunities. Support from the older generation would greatly contribute to the empowerment of their art form.

However, a few observations can be raised in relation to the various functions of Instagram as well as societal challenges within this study. First, Instagram, as a user-controlled medium, remains one of the platforms where state control is limited in the UAE (Al-Kandari, Al-Sumait & Hunaiyyan, 2017), especially in relation to visual imagery (Mattsson, 2010). For this reason, it is conceivable that Emirati illustrators choose this platform to express their authentic ideas and designs given that it is possible to put images on Instagram that would not be displayed in publications such as newspapers or magazines.

As a result, Instagram as a business tool has become a surrogate for what other institutions could do to promote artworks although it does limit the illustrator to only one medium. Furthermore, while Instagram enables illustrators to reach different audiences, it tends to congregate a particular age group, leaving older generations who are less familiar with this platform out of the picture. Another issue is that while Instagram as a platform clearly enables a relationship to form between the illustrators and their aficionados, this may not always be a good thing. If followers are able to shape the direction of the artist, dictating what is acceptable and what is not this may limit the authenticity of the artists' work and self-expression, perhaps restraining the originality of this upcoming trend.

As to the challenges these Emirati face as illustrators, a huge gap was apparent between the younger and the older generation in terms of understanding young people's ambitions, their values and artistic interests. Within the UAE, patriarchy is still operational with older male family leaders disciplining the family according to their rules (Alhmoudi, 2018) with Emirati females often subject to greater social restrictions than males (Barza & Von Suchodoletz, 2017, Mattsson, 2010). As Al-Kandari, Al-Sumait & Al-Hunaiyyan (2017) have argued, Arab females enjoy using social media because the 'internet creates an illusion of place which fulfills the public sphere' (Mattsson, 2010, p.125). Social media thus gives 'females a chance to freely express themselves more openly than to an offline setting, where they might be subjugated by the authoritative voice of family members' (Al-Kandari, Al-Sumait & Hunaiyyan, 2017, p.2). Although the interviewed illustrators had hardly any issues with their family in relation to their work and practices, some of their work was not shared with all their family members, especially if the content carried messages and visuals which are not in line with the local traditions and beliefs. In these instances, they preferred to share content with their peers rather than discussing these issues with members of the older generation. This situation draws a parallel with Azuma's picture of postmodern Japan, where the old generation differs greatly in values and customs from the youth, who have embraced new values, ideas and *modus operandi* (Azuma, 2001).

### **Looking to the future**

With the rapid growth of locally based creative industries, more opportunities are slowly emerging for Emirati creative minds. However, in order to move forward and create a bigger impact, young illustrators have to overcome some of the challenges they are facing within their own families and followers. Firstly, it is paramount for them to open a clear dialogue with their family members in terms of their ambitions and aspirations, sharing their achievements as modern artists; only in this way would prejudices and incongruity slowly dissipate. Secondly, these artists should come out of their virtual social sphere and blend with different age-range individuals: even if Instagram and other social media are revolutionizing communication and e-commerce across the globe, they are limited in terms of its reach. Indeed, the older generation may embrace young people's art, if it is presented to them in a more traditional way.

Finally, it is paramount that illustrators keep doing what they do, without too many inhibitions and restrictions. Growth in a sector is determined by the demand for a specific product; if the product does not develop and expand, there will be no demand for it (Smith, 2012). In other words, if these illustrators keep up with their artistic productions and their community keep expanding, their work will eventually become more popular and more business opportunities will arise.

This study, through the analysis of visual material and the information gathered from its participants, revealed the existence of a group of young Emirati women illustrators who are at the forefront of a cultural and social change. Even if their style still 'borrows' from a different culture, the content of their work is making an impact on their community of

followers, slowly breaking old paradigms and laying down new tendencies for a more emancipated and empowered generation. Furthermore, women's empowerment through visual language and the dissemination of new values through art and media, are all implicated in the ways in which social media are being adopted in the UAE.

The aim of this research study was to make a contribution to disclosing the early formation of localized styles of illustration in the UAE, which is similar to phenomena occurring in neighboring countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar among others (Betz-Bornstein, 2018; Nadeem, 2013; Passions, 2015). It is a promising topic for further research, not only because of the scarcity of research in the field of local illustration, but also because of the ways in which it may shed light on the socio-cultural and economic development of the UAE and other Gulf countries.

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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> **RQ1)-** What appeals to illustrators about Japanese anime and manga art?

1. When and how did you get exposed to Japanese Anime?
2. When and what inspired you to start drawing?
3. What type of art movement, style, topic/artist inspired and still inspires you?

**RQ2)-** Why do Emirati illustrators combine foreign models with local attributes?

1. How do you get ideas for your illustrations?
2. Do you combine Anime versus local Culture? If yes, why?

**RQ3)-** What appeals to illustrators about using Instagram as a medium for their artwork?

1. From which regions are your followers from? Can you share some demographics?

**RQ4)-** What is the illustrator's overall message in relation to her artwork?

1. Each work or art carries a message: what is your ultimate message, and to whom is it directed?
2. Do you think your illustration brings a positive impact on the followers?
3. Can you explain one post that is connected to a positive experience and one related to a less pleasing experience, in terms of followers' reception?
4. Do you observe your fans' feedback?

**RQ5)-** What are the cultural constraints and restrictions faced by Emirati illustrators?

1. What are the biggest challenges for an illustrator in UAE?
2. Any suggestions you would like to give to improve or encourage this art form among the youth?

<sup>2</sup> Moe: the feelings of affection towards a fictional character. Retrieved from:

<https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/%E8%90%8C%E3%81%88>.