The Challenges and Opportunities Faced by Egyptian Female Social Media Influencers While Owning and Advertising their Brand

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Abstract:

With the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, social media became a vital retail platform and a novel marketing tool. In recent years, businesses opted to collaborate with social media influencers (SMIs), who became a crucial component of their marketing mix and endorsed their brands. There has been an increase in female SMIs who launched their brands to generate a new stream of income. Coupled with the challenges in owning a brand, comes opportunities. Hence, for this study eighteen structured in-depth interviews conducted with Egyptian SMIs gained insight into the challenges, and opportunities of owning and advertising brands. According to the interviewees, the challenges that female SMIs faced are judgment, intrusion, criticism, receiving abusive comments, not taken seriously, fear of failure, self-presentation concerns, content creation and time management challenges as well as, financial worries. On the other hand, there are an array of opportunities namely exposure, visibility, income, benefits, independence, gaining confidence, and professional advancement. Furthermore, the study revealed ways SMIs overcame the challenges and the challenges that turned into opportunities.

Keywords: Social media; brands; advertising; influencers and challenges.

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The Challenges and Opportunities Faced by Egyptian Female Social Media Influencers While Owning and Advertising their Brand

الفرص والتحديات التي تواجه السيدات المؤثرات المصريات عبر شبكات التواصل الاجتماعي عند امتلاكهن لعلاماتهن التجارية والإعلان عنها

ملخص الدراسة:

مع اندلاع جائحة الكورونا تحولت شبكات التواصل الاجتماعي إلى منصات بيع تجزئة حيوية، وإحدى أدوات التسويق المستحدثة. وفي السنوات الأخيرة، اختارت الشركات التجارية أن تتعاون مع المؤثرين عبر شبكات التواصل الاجتماعي حتى صار هؤلاء عنصرا جوهريا في أساليب التسويق المتعددة التي تدعم العلامات التجارية. ولقد ظهر مؤخرا تزايد في عدد السيدات المؤثرات عبر شبكات التواصل الاجتماعي ممن أطلقن علامات تجارية خاصة بهن لإيجاد مصدر جديد للدخل. وتقترن التحديات التي تكتنف امتلاك علامة تجارية بفرص؛ ومن هنا جاء هذا البحث الذي عمد إلى إجراء ثمان عشرة مقابلة منظمة متعمقة مع سيدات مصريات مؤثرات في شبكات التواصل الاجتماعي للحصول إلى فهم أعمق للتحديات والفرص التي تواجهها أولئك السيدات المؤثرات عبر شبكات التواصل الاجتماعي عند محاولتهن امتلاك علاماتهن التجارية والإعلان عنها. وحسب ما أوردته النساء اللاتي أجريت معهن المقابلات تبين أن التحديات التي تواجههن تتمثل في: إصدار أحكام عليهن، والتطفل، والانتقاد، والتعرض لتعليقات مسيئة، والاستخفاف بهن، والخوف من الفشل، والخوف من التعبير عن ذات، والقلق حيال إعداد المحتوى، ومشكلة إدارة الوقت، إضافة إلى المخاوف المالية. ومن ناحية أخرى، اتضح أن امتلاك علامة تجارية تنطوي على فرص منها الشهرة، والدخول في دائرة الضوء، وزيادة الدخل والمنافع، والاستقلال، واكتساب الثقة، والتقدم المهني. علاوة على ذلك كشفت الدراسة عن الأساليب التي اتبعتها السيدات المؤثرات عبر شبكات التواصل الاجتماعي لتجاوز التحديات، وتطرقت الدارسة إلى التحديات التي تحولت إلى فرص.

الكلمات المفتاحية: شبكات التواصل الاجتماعي، العلامات التجارية، الإعلان، المؤثرون والمؤثرات في شبكات التواصل الاجتماعي، التحديات.

The Challenges and Opportunities Faced by Egyptian Female Social Media Influencers While Owning and Advertising their Brand

Introduction

The invention of social media and the emergence of digitisation drastically changed the global mass media landscape (Johnson & Sandström, 2022). Social media users rose globally during the Covid-19 pandemic as people tried to find ways to stay connected (Ezzat, 2022). In 2019, there were 3.48 billion active social media users, and 4.2 billion in 2021 globally (Kemp, 2019; Kemp, 2021). In 2023, approximately 4.9 billion individuals globally used different social media platforms, forecasted to rise to 5.85 billion users in 2027 (Wong, 2023). These numbers illustrate how social media has become an imperative part of people's lives. There are soaring numbers of social media users across various parts of the world, and for the Arab world the usage is similar across all platforms (Ezzat, 2022). In 2023, DataReportal home page listed Egypt's social media users as being 46.25 million (Kemp, 2023). In 2009, the number of Arab Facebook users boomed after the introduction of an Arabic interface (Gunter & Elareshi, 2016).

Social media users utilise more than one platform, up to six to seven platforms monthly demonstrating the importance of a cross-channel marketing approach on social media (Wong, 2023). Companies often incorporate social media advertising into their promotion plans to boost visibility (Matin et al., 2022). Furthermore, social media influencer (SMI) marketing is an expanding phenomenon that is becoming an essential part of a company's marketing mix, as marketers are looking for new ways to preserve their share of the market (Dewangan et al., 2022). Recently, companies have employed Social Media Influencers (SMIs) like YouTubers, bloggers, vloggers, and Instagrammers who have millions of followers (Reinikainen et al., 2020). Moreover, Generation Z born after 1997 are the most responsive towards influencer marketing and the core target market for brand collaborations with influencers (Chan-Olmsted & Kim, 2022). SMI marketing is an effective way of linking brands with their target market, gaining consumers, and increasing sales (Geyser, 2024; Młodkowska, 2019).

Research on SMIs commenced in 2016, and several of the research papers conducted were in 2019 and 2020, emphasising the acknowledgment of influencer marketing (Dewangan, et al., 2022). This study adds to previous research on SMIs, examining the challenges and opportunities faced by female SMIs as they own and advertise their brands.

Statement of the Problem

Female SMIs work with brands to advertise their products for money and gifts. While working with brands, influencers gain copious skills that they use when they launch their own products or services. Sometimes they sell these brands online or offline depending on the influencers line of business. In tandem, with these businesses comes challenges from competition, financial risks, content creation, self-presentation, insufficient entrepreneurship skills, and discrimination. Influencers must overcome these challenges to pursue their businesses.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because:

- It highlights an unexplored area of SMI advertising and adds to existing research.

- Influencer marketing has become a crucial part of a business's marketing mix.

- It contributes to enriching research on women's gender studies.

- There is a lack of studies on influencers owned brands.

- To the best of the researcher's knowledge, there is no studies conducted on the challenges and opportunities faced by Egyptian female SMIs as they own and advertise their brand online.

The Challenges and Opportunities Faced by Egyptian Female Social Media Influencers While Owning and Advertising their Brand

Purpose of the Study

This study aims:

- To identify the challenges female SMIs face when owning and advertising their online brand.
- To examine how female SMIs overcome any challenges when owning and advertising their online brand.
- To uncover the opportunities female SMIs face when owning and advertising their online brand.
- To identify the challenges faced by female SMIs that turned into opportunities.

Definition of Terms

For a better understanding of this study, the following terms are described in the context of this study.

Terms	Definitions
Social media	A type of mass media communication via the internet for social interaction for users to share ideas, information and other content like videos (Encyclopædia Britannica).
Social media followers	A follower on social media chooses to view messages and pictures of other people's social media accounts (Collins online dictionary | definitions, thesaurus and translations).
Brands	It is a name that has a logo, colours and words associated with it (Encyclopædia Britannica).
Advertising	The procedure and practice used to persuade the public to respond in a specific way towards what is advertised, mainly to get customers to buy the promoted goods that are for sale (Encyclopædia Britannica).
Challenges	It is something that is problematic, which needs great determination and effort (Collins online dictionary | definitions, thesaurus and translations).
Opportunities	It is a state in which it is feasible for people do something that they want to do (Collins online dictionary | definitions, thesaurus and translations).
Keywords	Are important words found in information like in a internet search (Collins online dictionary | definitions, thesaurus and translations).
Coding	It is a qualitative data analysis technique in which parts of the information are allocated in a label that permits the researcher to categorise content (LibGuides: Qualitative Data Analysis: Coding).
Themes	It is a subject or idea that pervades a piece of writing (Collins online dictionary | definitions, thesaurus and translations).

Literature Review

Social Media Influencers (SMIs) Marketing

Companies use social media to communicate with their consumers through platforms like Facebook and Instagram, while customers use social media to communicate with each other (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Gillin (2007) book The New Influencers: A Marketer's Guide to the New Social Media, stated "Conventional marketing wisdom has long held that a dissatisfied customer tells ten people. But that is out of date. In the new age of social media, he or she has the tools to tell ten million" (p. 4).

Marketers noticed the power of SMIs since they play a crucial role in building bonds with their customers (Chopra et al., 2021). This paper uses the definition by Freberg et al. (2011) who described SMIs as "a new type of independent third-party endorser who shapes audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media" (p. 90). SMIs are "self-made micro-celebrities" or "everyday people" who upload hashtags, words, videos, or images on social media (Evans et al., 2017, p. 139; Chopra et al., 2021 p. 78; Al-Kaisi & Zaki, 2022).

The popular influencer social media marketing channels are TikTok, launched in 2016, used by 56% of brands, followed by Instagram launched in 2010, used by 51% of brands, Facebook launched in 2004, used by 42% of brands and, YouTube launched in 2005, used by 38% of brands (Geyser, 2024; Dhingra & Mudgal, 2019).

Organisations turned to influencer marketing, an example is Amazon who developed a sub-category of the Amazon Associates Program especially for SMIs in 2017 (Al-Kaisi & Zaki, 2022). While it is crucial for organisations to wisely choose the suitable influencer to promote their brands, it is equally important for influencers to execute campaigns that look authentic to viewers to ensure that the followers trust the content presented (Belanche et al., 2021). According to a Forbes article social media helps followers feel attached to influencers. Besides influencers endorsement is more indirect when compared to conventional advertising (Taylor, 2020).

The Challenges and Opportunities Faced by Egyptian Female Social Media Influencers While Owning and Advertising their Brand

As companies turned to SMIs in marketing, they abandoned conventional marketing methods like using celebrities. Companies embraced the new upsurge of influencer marketing since SMIs are a trustworthy source of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) (Dewangan et al., 2022). A study by De Veirman et al. (2017) stated that influencer marketing is a highly trustworthy eWOM more than sponsored posts. Additionally, influencers can measure their success based on certain criteria like the number of shared posts, follower numbers, or the amount of daily blog hits (Freberg et al., 2011).

According to a study by Durmuş Şenyapar (2024), there are various kinds of influencers, identified as: Mega influencers have millions of followers, and Macro influencers have between a 100,000 and a million followers. Micro influencers have between 1,000 and 100,000 followers, and Nano influencers have between 1,000 and 10,000 followers. Whereas Blog influencers concentrate on creating content for their blogs, Vlogging influencers concentrate on creating videos for their video blogs (vlogs), and Gaming influencers concentrate on video games.

In recent years there has been a rise of virtual influencers, non-humans who have a vast follower base (Vrontis et al., 2021). An example of a computer-generated influencer is Lu do Magalu, who is the most followed non-human influencer. In 2022, she had six million Instagram followers, 14.6 million Facebook followers, more than 2.6 million YouTube subscribers, and over 1.3 million Twitter and TikTok followers. The second in line is a virtual model, Lil Miquela who promoted international brands like Calvin Klein, Dior, and Prada. Miquela has 3.6 million followers on TikTok, three million followers on Instagram, and more than 31,000 followers on Twitter (Molenaar, 2022).

A study by the analytics company Annalect and Twitter found that 40% of customers stated that they bought an online product after viewing an influencer use it on Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram (Swant, 2016). In addition, Instagram adds a blue tick next to the influencers name to verify that the influencer is credible. The tick symbol adds to influencers exclusiveness and indicates to the followers that this is the

real influencer social media account (Tewatia & Majumdar, 2022). Moreover, influencer marketing is a lucrative business, in the Influencer Marketing Benchmark Report (2023) influencer marketing globally in 2022 had a market size of approximately $16.4 billion (Geyser, 2024). The market size of influencer marketing peaked to a record $24 billion in 2024, triple the market size of 2019 (Dencheva, 2024).

According to the DataReportal's Digital 2023 Global Overview Report, users of social media in several countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) market are prone to follow influencers on social media more than the global mean (Radcliffe et al., 2023). Additionally, there are studies on the Arab influencers and eWOM in buying intentions, like a study by Alnasor et al. (2016) who stated that organisations social media advertising content affects buying decisions. Another study by Al-Dahrawy (2019, as cited in Radwan et al., 2021) on Arab youth's attitudes concerning social media marketing found a positive correlation between opinions towards influencers and buying intentions.

After examining profiles of 50,000 influencers in 2022, the 2023 Influencer Marketing Report conducted by Collabstr stated that 77% of SMIs are females and 23% are males. The largest gap between genders is mostly on Instagram, where only 21% are male influencers and 79% are female influencers. On TikTok, 24% are male influencers and 76% are female influencers. The smallest gender gap is on YouTube, where 31% are male influencers and 69% are female influencers.

Similarly in the Middle East, Arab female SMIs are dominating social media landscapes. Such names are Zainab Al-Eqabi, an Iraqi pharmacist living in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Al-Eqabi has 1.5 million followers on Instagram, 616,000 subscribers on YouTube, and 5,000 followers on Twitter. Taim Al-Falasi also from the UAE was amongst the Forbes top 10 Arab female SMIs who boasts 3.1 million followers on Instagram, 590,000 subscribers on YouTube, and 109,000 followers on Twitter (Al-Kaisi & Zaki, 2022).

Arab Female Influencers-Owned Brands

Influencers launched their own brands ranging from makeup, fast-food and clothes since the likes of Huda Kattan and Kylie Jenner motivated them. Influencers owned brands are more likely to be appealing to their followers and sold via social media platforms rather than in offline stores (Magrizos et al., 2021). SMIs communicate with spectators to construct a sizeable base of fans for themselves (Ezzat, 2020).

Examples of Arab SMIs who have their own brand is Huda Kattan who owns Huda Beauty. The launch of her brand was after Kattan created makeup tutorials videos in 2010, which reached over 33.8 million followers. Instagram played a pivotal role in reaching consumers and high sales figures for the Huda Beauty makeup brand. It was Kattan's credibility that encourages consumers to buy her products (Eyada & Fouda, 2020). Also, Kattan earns up to $18,000 per Instagram post (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). Sephora collaborated with Kattan to launch a co-developed line that became a best seller in Sephora's retail stores in the UAE (Backaler, 2018).

Another Arabic SMI is Lebanese Karen Wazen, recognised for her lifestyle and fashion blog on Instagram which she started in 2015, with the username @karenwazen. She soon became a popular influencer in the beauty and fashion industry and worked with luxury brands like Louis Vuitton, Chanel, Givenchy, and Dior (Souissi, 2023). In 2018, Wazen launched an eyewear brand and has over seven million Instagram followers ("Karen Wazen (7.1 million followers)", 2022). In addition, Lebanese Lana El-Sahely is a fashion blogger who launched an online shop and collaborates with designers based in Lebanon and Dubai (Yasser, 2018).

Egyptian born sisters Hadia and Layla Ghaleb, launched their Instagram pages separately in 2012. Hadia biography states that she is a founder and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) whereas Layla includes dance, artist, and choreographer in her biography (Ezzat, 2022). Hadia launched Ghaleb Production House (GPH) in 2014, and in 2016 a second office opened in Dubai. In 2022, Hadia launched a modest swimwear brand and made millions of dollars of profit (Shkier, 2022).

Another Egyptian social media influencer is Farah Nofal, a content creator, a yoga, and fitness instructor who communicates information about wellbeing with her followers (Younis, 2024).

In 2012, Taim Al Falasi, one of the most popular UAE influencers launched Yolomagazine, a digital magazine and her own radio show called 'On air with Taim' in 2013, that she changed later to the 'Taim show.' She then launched a YouTube channel and became the Etisalat brand ambassador. Currently, Al Falasi owns eight restaurants in UAE and invests in real estate (Kumar, 2021). Similarly, two Kuwaiti Instagram personalities, Dalal Aldoub and Ascia Al Faraj each have 1.9 million followers on their accounts and produce their own product lines (Ahmad, 2016). Al-Faraj owns two varied brands, Seoul Kool, a Korean cosmetic brand and Desert Baby for toddler and baby products (New Balance signs US-Kuwaiti influencer Ascia Al-Faraj as brand ambassador 2021).

The Challenges and Opportunities Female Social Media Influencers Face Who Own Their Own Brand

Since an influencer is a personal brand so when an organisation's brand collaborates with an influencer, it can be challenging as two brands with different values and identities come together (Backaler, 2018). Correspondingly, influencers collaborate with brands so they may find difficulty in balancing their brand and other brands they represent (Lappo, 2024). Furthermore, competition is another challenge where they may encounter losing consumers due to other competitors' choices (Fong et al., 2020).

Regular posting of content on social media is fundamental in keeping up with competition and maintaining high engagement with followers. Hence, content creation is another difficulty influencers face since it is tiring, time-consuming and needs technical experience. Additionally, influencers can find difficulty managing their time while struggling balancing their personal and work life. People scrutinise everything influencers do whether virtually or in real life therefore, they are continuously trying to create a flawless idealistic image for themselves.

At the same time, having a business needs a great deal of planning, organisation and legalities which could be challenging (Lappo, 2024).

The 2019 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report mentioned the challenges females face launching their own online businesses which includes insufficient entrepreneurship skills and restricted networking (Aboutaleb, 2020). Additionally, other challenges faced by female entrepreneurs are the lack of capital which plays a vital role in running any new business, and the financial risks that goes with producing a brand (Ughetto et al. 2019; Schwarz, 2021).

Other challenges documented in the 2022 Racial and Gender Inequalities Influencer Report after studying 2,000 influencers found that 47.73% of influencers faced gender discrimination, 58.3% faced discrimination, 80% of whom were macro-influencers. Furthermore, the highest-paid influencers were more likely to face discrimination than those paid less. 58.4% of discriminated participants were on TikTok. 21.75% of influencers claimed discrimination was on their bodily features. Body-shaming and abusive comments on posts and videos appeared more for mega- and macro- influencers (Geyser, 2022).

Being an influencer can put psychological pressure on females as they compare themselves to others (Gritters, 2019). An example of an Egyptian influencer who has faced mental health issues is Hadia Ghaleb. Hadia documented her battle with mental health and treatment by posting a video on Instagram. In the video she stated how her mental health worsened after she was cyberbullied, and how she went to a psychiatrist (Younis, 2024; Bullying under spotlight again in Egypt after social media influencer gets criticized, 2022).

On a more positive note, influencers who decide to launch their own businesses find opportunities. Social media has enabled female influencers to participate in business activities by communicating with their followers, overcoming challenges like the hiring of professional advice (Datta et al., 2020). The growth of social applications and mobile services has generated opportunities for SMIs to enter the entrepreneurship arena in a cost-effective way (Finkle & Olsen, 2019). Also, influencers can utilise the skills they gained in social media

content creation and personal promotion in advertising their own brands. They can develop a business that aligns with them as individuals, using their own persona. Thus, followers feel close to their favourite influencer when they own a product the influencer created (Schwarz, 2021).

Influencers can affect their followers mostly if their content is authentic and creative (Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018). Likewise, influencers can engage with their followers if they involve them early in the launch of their brands. This will lead to having a more cohesive relationship with followers, built on trust and loyalty. Furthermore, by launching products or services influencers can create extra income and ensure financial stability since social media jobs can be uncertain and temporary. Influencers also have the option of collaborating with a brand in co-branding a product for a special-edition project (Schwarz, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

This study uses the following two theories to explain the challenges and opportunities faced by SMIs while advertising their brands.

Source Credibility Theory (SCT)

The source credibility theory (SCT) is the first theory discussed in this study. The SCT put forward by Hovland, Janis and Kelley in 1953, and explains how people develop attitudes and process communication depending on the effect of the perceived expertise and their credibility. According to Hovland et al. (1953, as cited in Lamm et al., 2016) source expertise is "the extent to which a communicator is perceived to be a source of valid assertions" (p. 122) whereas source trustworthiness is "the degree of confidence in the communicator's intent to communicate assertions he considers most valid" (p. 122). Hence, perceived trustworthiness and expertise of the source are the two most evident components which positively affects source credibility. Credibility denotes an individual's view of how true information is (Umeogu, 2012).

The source credibility model implies that the effectiveness of communication conveyed by an advertiser relies on customers' perception of the brand advertiser's trustworthiness, expertise, and

attractiveness. Advertiser's expertise directly effects and motivates customers to buy the advertised product. Also, when a customer deems that the source is trustworthy, she/he accepts that the communication is credible. Likewise, attractiveness, which involves an individual's outer appearance seen by customers as necessary since when the person advertising the brand is attractive this will influence the communicated message effectiveness, and the customers attitude towards the brand (Wang & Scheinbaum, 2018). It is more likely customers will purchase whatever the influencer is selling, the more attractive she/he is. Hence, source attractiveness affects source credibility in advertising (Umeogu, 2012). Furthermore, similarity (perceived resemblance between the customer and the endorser), familiarity (increase of knowledge about the expert due to repeated media coverage) and likeability (the liking of the endorser by the customer), all together can enhance endorsers attractiveness in the eyes of customers (Wang & Scheinbaum, 2018).

According to a study by Lou and Yuan (2019), results found that influencers content, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and similarity positively correlated with followers' confidence in influencer branded posts, which also influenced consumption intentions and brand awareness. Furthermore, a study by Coutinho et al. (2023) that concentrated on consumers attitude, buying intention and brand equity found that brand equity and social media influencers credibility had a positive correlation on customers' buying intentions. Whereas trustworthiness did not have a direct effect but rather an indirect effect on brand equity. Hence, one of the challenges for influencers is to initiate a powerful relationship with their followers. Therefore, their content and expertise are crucial for influencers success (Leite et al., 2024).

Self-Presentation Theory

Self-presentation early theories are useful in explaining the process of self-presentation on social media (Hollenbaugh, 2021). Erving Goffman was the first academic to use the theatre to explain self-presentation in his 1959 book titled The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. The self-presentation theory states that people try to present their ideal self to audiences, sometimes amplifying specific

parts of their persona and concealing the negative parts. Individuals get involved in "impression management" as they present themselves in a particular role to influence the way people think about them (Merunková & Šlerka 2019).

Goffman describes an individual controlling their self-presentation as an "actor." The "actor" is not always on stage and can be "backstage" (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005). When "on stage" individuals portray a specific identity. Goffman uses the simile of a "mask" that humans wear in social interaction as the "actor" networks online and offline. However, the audience is unaware that there is an alternative "self" used in other situations (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). The "self" (the consciousness) continuously changes depending on the environment, situation, and the target market. Metaphorically, when people are "backstage" or not "on stage" they are not posting on their social media pages (Artino, 2019).

Social media offers ample self-presentation opportunities and challenges. The use of social media ensures strong visibility therefore social media users must be choosy when presenting themselves. On the other hand, influencers face challenges when managing their online identity like concerns for their privacy, as well as maintaining their authenticity (Hollenbaugh, 2021; Audrezet et al., 2020).

The Research Questions are:

RQ1. What challenges did female SMIs face while owning and advertising their brand?

RQ2. How did female SMIs overcome these challenges?

RQ3. What are the opportunities gained by female SMIs while owning and advertising their brand?

RQ4. What are the challenges SMIs faced that turned into opportunities?

The in-depth interview introductory questions:

Q1. Can you please introduce yourself?

Q2. What brand do you have or have had in the past?

Q3. Why did you decide to launch this business?

Q4. Who are your main competitors?

Q5. How do you develop content for your page?

Q6. How do you get social media followers?

The in-depth interview core questions:

Q7. What fears did you have when you started?

Q8. What challenges do you face as a Middle Eastern female when building and advertising/branding your online business?

Q9. How do you overcome the challenges?

Q10. Is it tough being a female and advertising/promoting your own online brand?

Q11. What are the opportunities gained of building your own online brand?

Q12. What are the challenges that turned into opportunities when advertising/promoting your own online brand?

Q13. Have you ever felt discriminated as a female social media influencer?

Research Methodology

The Sample and Sample Size

The study consisted of eighteen structured in-depth interviews with Egyptian female SMIs who own a brand, to gather qualitative data. The interviews conducted gained insight into the challenges and opportunities SMIs face while owning and advertising their brands. The criteria needed when choosing the sample was that they had to be females, Egyptian, and own a brand. Therefore, the study used a non-probability purposive sample method where the researcher chose

respondents due to the characteristics they had (Etikan, 2016). When choosing the sample, the researcher opened numerous Egyptian female SMI Instagram pages and searched if they owned a brand. Once they were identified as owning a brand, the researcher communicated with them by directly messaging the influencers through their Instagram pages. Once they answered, contact details were exchanged and the researcher called the influencer to arrange for an interview date and time. The below table (refer to Table 1) shows the interviewed influencers names, brand names, business type and the other brands they advertised.

Table 1: Interviewees Names, Brand Names, Business Type and Other Brands Advertised

Name	Brand Name	Business Type	Other Advertised Brands
Alaa El Garhy	Foodista	Create content for restaurants. Consultation for restaurants.	Danone and Coca Cola
Amina Naguib	B-URN	Fitness and Wellbeing.	On her personal page, products she liked (non-paid)
Farida Walid	Farida Walid	A makeup artist, a special effects makeup artist, a photographer and videographer.	L'Oréal, Maybelline, SHEGLAM and Garnier
Fatima El Asmar	ProMakeup Artist, Founder of (FA)b Nails Community, and Founder of Spill the T-ika broadcast channel	ProMakeup artist, nail community and a broadcast channel.	OGX, L'Oréal Maybelline, Lancôme, Garnier, Neutrogena
Hana Ghoneim	Locken	Hair and skin products.	All sorts of products including electronics
Layla Ghaleb	Goodspace	A dance studio, a talent agency, and a dance event planning service.	KFC, Costa, Opel, Pepsi Black
Lujain Bassam	Asteria	Clothing brand.	Trindiva Cosmetics, Rose and Blue lip glosses, Kokita brushes, and Haifa Cosmetics, lenses

The Challenges and Opportunities Faced by Egyptian Female Social Media Influencers While Owning and Advertising their Brand

Malak Hany	The Front Row Studios	Women's Fashion Wear.	Lancôme, Neutrogena, Rigash, Farah Seif, Godly Pride, Mother Naked Skin and Nivea
Mariam Bahgat	Styling by Mimi	Curly hair styling.	Curly hair products, skin care products and Kwanzaa (candles and body lotions)
Menna Mostapha	Jolie broderie Manousha Shop	Modern embroidery Hand crafted products Digital artist drawing children's books.	Evenif
Mirna Aly	Satin and Lace	Women's fashion line.	Cosmetics, clothes, beauty products, wellness items, food, skin care products and Boshies
Nada Andrea	Burdogz	Burgers; fast-food restaurant.	Hair products and skin care products
Nada Gamal-Eldin	NGD Sketches	Customises paintings/gifts, pot painting workshops and brand collaborations for events or an activation.	Adidas, Azza Fahmy, Forbes and Juton
Nadine Waleed	Sjaal	Modest clothing brand.	Skin and hair care products. Mlameh fashion and Defacto
Noran Elbannan	Nut by Noran	Painting on clothes, selling vintage clothes, slow fashion, and thrifting.	Nevin Altmann, Sami Amin, Jozee, 7ebr, Rommanah Moda
Riham Elemam	Timmy & Mama	Baby food.	Sanosan, Raw African, Mothercare, Bath & Body Works
Sara Moataz	Buttercup	Natural makeup.	For accessories, clothes, makeup, clinics, laser sessions restaurants and cafes
Shahira Abdel-Rahman	The Growing Learner	Inclusion specialist and Education consultant.	Educational games

The Challenges and Opportunities Faced by Egyptian Female Social Media Influencers While Owning and Advertising their Brand

Data Collection

The interviews were conducted between August 2023 and March 2024. The researcher conducted interviews on Zoom to accommodate to the influencer's busy schedules. Before recording, the interviewees gave their consent for recording and for using the interview content in the study. Transcribing the recordings took place after each interview. The majority of the eighteen interviews were in English, and a few in Arabic. After choosing quotes from the core question answers, themes were generated and content analysed, to answer the research questions.

Interview Results:

Introductory question quotations:

Introductory question answers gave insight into the background of the influencers and their businesses. Chosen quotations from the influencer's responses to the six introductory questions are below (refer to Table 2a and 2b).

Table 2a: Quotations from Answers to the Introductory Questions

Name	Q1. Can you please introduce yourself?	Q2. What brand do you have or have had in the past?	Q3. Why did you decide to launch this business?	Q4. Who are your main competitors?	Q5. How do you develop content for your page?	Q6. How do you get social media followers?
Alaa El Garhy	"Foodista is basically our hobby, but my full-time job is a Marketing Director"	"We started off Foodista as a passion"	"The love for food and photography came in together"	"Ramy Soli, Eman Naguib and Nada Habib"	"Based on requests from our followers"	"Through our shareable content"
Amina Naguib	"I studied sports science and then I went ahead and got my master's in physical therapy in Amsterdam"	"I'm in the field of fitness, I have three studios"	"It happened very organically. My friends wanted to join in on my workout"	"Move, BeFit, Ignite and Reform Pilates"	"I just get inspiration from the photos"	"If you tag someone then they repost"

The Challenges and Opportunities Faced by Egyptian Female Social Media Influencers While Owning and Advertising their Brand

Farida Walid	"I am a beauty blogger and a special effects makeup artist"	"I take clients and I do makeup for them"	"I started to practice makeup on myself, and then I started to post my content on social media"	"Dubai, there's a lot of influencers"	"I start to write my ideas, and I plan it"	"Being consistent is the key"
Fatima El Asmar	"I'm a 25-year-old makeup artist/ influencer content creator"	"I'm a makeup artist. I have my Spill the T-ika channel"	"They are all a form of art. It all has to do with what people are interested in whether it's makeup, whether it's nails"	"Makeup artists."	"I always plan my content months in advance"	"My reels went viral, there was a lot of engagement"
Hana Ghoneim	"I'm an artist and an entrepreneur, I act"	"I currently have a cosmetics brand"	"There was a downtime, and all our revenue streams suddenly stopped. I had to find another way to make a living"	"Raw African, Joviality and Hair Addict"	"Rely on user-generated content, because that is what gives our brand credibility"	"We like to co post with the customers"
Layla Ghaleb	"I'm an international dance teacher and choreographer"	"I cofounded Goodspace with Mahmoud Shoukry"	"I wanted to have stable income"	"We have competitors. It doesn't really cause any threats to us"	"Our social media manager creates content plans"	"We make sure that we're posting at peak times"
Lujain Bassam	"I'm a freelance model/ influencer. I started my brand in 2021"	"Asteria clothing brand. It's a clothing brand, mainly casual clothes for females"	"It's been my dream since I was 12 years old"	"I'm not really focused on competitors"	"It comes really randomly"	"Using reels on Instagram or videos on TikTok"

The Challenges and Opportunities Faced by Egyptian Female Social Media Influencers While Owning and Advertising their Brand

Malak Hany	"I work in social media, digital marketing. I am also a social media influencer. I just launched my own fashion business"	"The Front Row Studios, I just launched four months ago"	"I felt like there was a huge market gap in the Egyptian fashion market"	"Rigash, Farah Seif"	"A lot of planning does go into the Front Row Studios content"	"I relied very heavily on word of mouth"
Mariam Bahgat	"I have my own business which is curly hair styling"	"I do hairstyling, haircut, treatment, consultation"	"I found that curly hair styling is my passion"	"I don't care about competitors"	"I do stories asking them what do you want to see on my platform?"	"I used to do ads but then I stopped. It is better when my reels go viral"
Menna Mostapha	"I started to learn to work with my hands, crafts, pottery, or embroidery until I got to learn about digital art"	"I draw children's books. Next to that I launched a brand called Manousha Shop, that contains products that I hand crafted"	"To break free from the routine of my traditional work"	"There are people who do what I do, but I don't feel that its competition"	"Content is divided into method of drawing, and the drawing process"	"I put a strategy for myself"
Mirna Aly	"I'm a lifestyle blogger and the founder of my soon to be launched clothing brand"	"I'm currently working on the soon to be launched brand, Satin and Lace"	"I wanted to create a unique and inclusive fashion line"	"Local brands"	"I mainly take my inspiration from current trends"	"Make sure to post more frequently. Not less than 3 times a week"

Table 2b: Quotations from Answers to the Introductory Questions

Name	Q1. Can you please introduce yourself?	Q2. What brand do you have or have had in the past?	Q3. Why did you decide to launch this business?	Q4. Who are your main competitors?	Q5. How do you develop content for your page?	Q6. How do you get social media followers?
Nada Andrea	"I ended up teaching IG students. I also do social media, which was a new addition"	"I have a restaurant it's called Burdogz, it is a family business"	"My brother launched this business a while ago with a partner. Then his partner decided to leave the business. We joined the business with our older brother	"BRGR, Maine"	"I just scroll so I could get inspos"	"When I was very consistent, I got a lot of followers"
Nada Gamal -Eldin	"I am also a self-taught artist. I opened my Instagram page and started doing art more professionally"	"I started selling paintings and selling hand painted objects and gifts"	"I think it just happened with me"	"Individual artists. A company called Brush It"	"I do the content for myself. Whenever I have a new painting or new project. I just have my tripod and I shoot the process"	"Involving people in the process, creating videos that make them feel like they are part of my process"

Nadine Waleed	"I'm an architecture engineer. I stopped doing the architecture part, and just focused on the business and the blogging"	"We started off as a hijab brand and then we started to include more of the modest clothes"	"I wanted to increase my income"	"Vala scarves or NESAA, and Your EMMA"	"We look for what people are looking for. We ask them how they see our products. We actually include that in our shoots"	"We try to connect with the audience. To make some kind of a friendship with them"
Noran Elbannan	"In 2020 I rented a workshop and I started to develop content on anything I know how to do which is thrifting and jewelry"	"Painting on clothes by upcycling and selling vintage clothes"	"I want to express myself and work in something I love that gets me money"	"Almah is my main competitor"	"When I first started, I did some research and saw videos" on content creation, reach and algorithms "	"By making content consistently. Consistency is key."
Riham Elemam	"I started social media when my son was nine months old"	"It's finger food for kids"	"It all started when my son refused to eat all kinds of vegetables "	"One competitor in the market, they have an edge, they have certifications and can put their products in supermarkets "	"I just plan for the content that I post for the week, and I start doing two to three stories per week"	"I'm posting frequently. I boost it; I pay to **Instagram**"

Sara Moataz	"I'm a fashion blogger on Instagram, TikTok, and I have my own channel on Facebook called Latte 3ala el Reha"	"I rebranded my brand two months ago. It was called Sara Cosmetics"	"A blush and rouge lipstick that was popular in the Korean culture. I kept searching for it. So, I told myself why can't I make one for myself"	"There are a lot of competitors"	"I develop content by searching for the best marketing criteria"	"By marketing myself from my blogging page and also from reviews that my customers make for my products"
Shahira Abdel-Rahman	"I studied pharmacy, so I wasn't thinking about teaching but every summer I used to work at the center for special needs"	"The Growing Learner is about me and it's about you as a parent. I offer courses, and I offer consultations "	"My best friend was the reason. She's like you have so much knowledge you need to spread, you need to tell more mums"	"The positive parenting educators. Everybody is becoming certified"	"I love creating content, I love doing slides. When Instagram suddenly, almost overnight wanted to become like TikTok. It made me scared"	"Mostly organic. I rarely did ads. I was never out to gain followers "

Discussion on the Responses of Introductory Question

The SMIs interviewed own diverse brands and had different reasons for launching them. Every one of these businesses faced competition from at least one competitor, hence there was no single brand that had a monopoly over the market. The common thread running through these influencers is that they established their businesses to generate more income for themselves from something they love doing. Influencers launching their products and services is an effective way of capitalising from their followers who became their customers. The credibility of the content posted on their social media platforms played a pivotal role in the followers' perception of the influencer and the brand. Posting
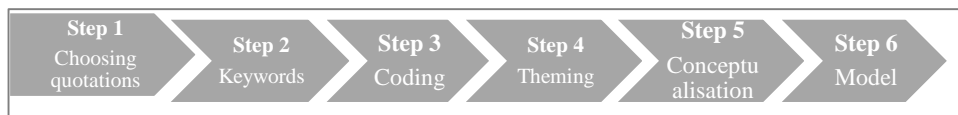
consistent and frequent social media content encourages current followers' engagement and attracts new followers. Most of the interviewees preferred organic reach than paid reach.

Themed Data Analysis of the Responses of Core Questions

The current study used Naeem et al. (2023) "systematic" six- steps of 'thematic analysis' for conceptual model development, after transcribing the interviews to examine qualitative data gathered from the core questions interview answers. Each of the six-steps built on the prior step to help understand the information. This technique allowed the detection of any connection between the data to reach decisive conclusions.

The last step of this method is the construction of a conceptual model. The design of the conceptual model was a diagram to portray the major relationships between the components. The structure of the module conveyed the information obtained efficiently (Khan, 2023). The following are the six steps of analysis:

Step 1 Choosing quotations → **Step 2** Keywords → **Step 3** Coding → **Step 4** Theming → **Step 5** Conceptualisation → **Step 6** Model

Step 1: Transcribing, Acquaintance with the Information, and Choosing of Quotations

The preliminary step of the thematic analysis procedure included the transcribing of the interviews and acquainting oneself with the information. The researcher understood the content and chose the quotes that portrayed different opinions related to the objectives of the research (Naeem et al., 2023).

Step 2: Choosing of Keywords

This step entailed precise analysis of the interview data. The researcher identified repeated terms, phrases, and assigned them keywords (Naeem et al., 2023).

Step 3: Coding

Coding detected and explained patterns, associations, and relationships in the primary data. It was a repetitive investigative practice where coding allowed the researcher to disassemble, convey, and reassemble the information obtained (Watson & Till, 2010).

Step 4: The Development of Themes

The development of themes allowed the researcher to convert the codes into a conceptual explanation that linked the interview data and research questions (Naeem et al., 2023).

Step 5: Interpretation and Conceptualisation via Analysis of Keywords, Codes, and Themes

This step included comprehending, describing, and connecting ideas developed. The researcher identified patterns and defined them, aligning with the study (Naeem et al., 2023).
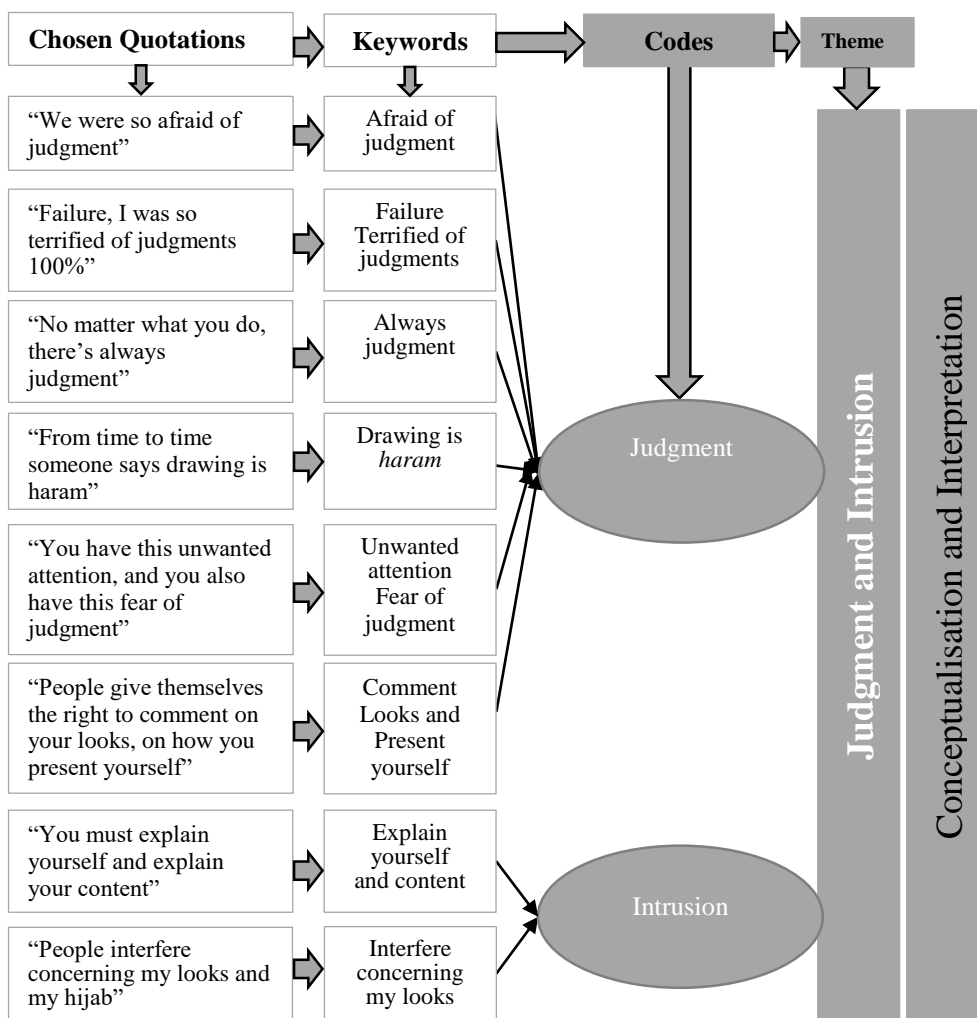
Step 6: Conceptual Model Development

The last step in the thematic procedure is the construction of a conceptual model. This procedure entailed constructing a distinctive data representation from the interviewees data (Naeem et al., 2023).
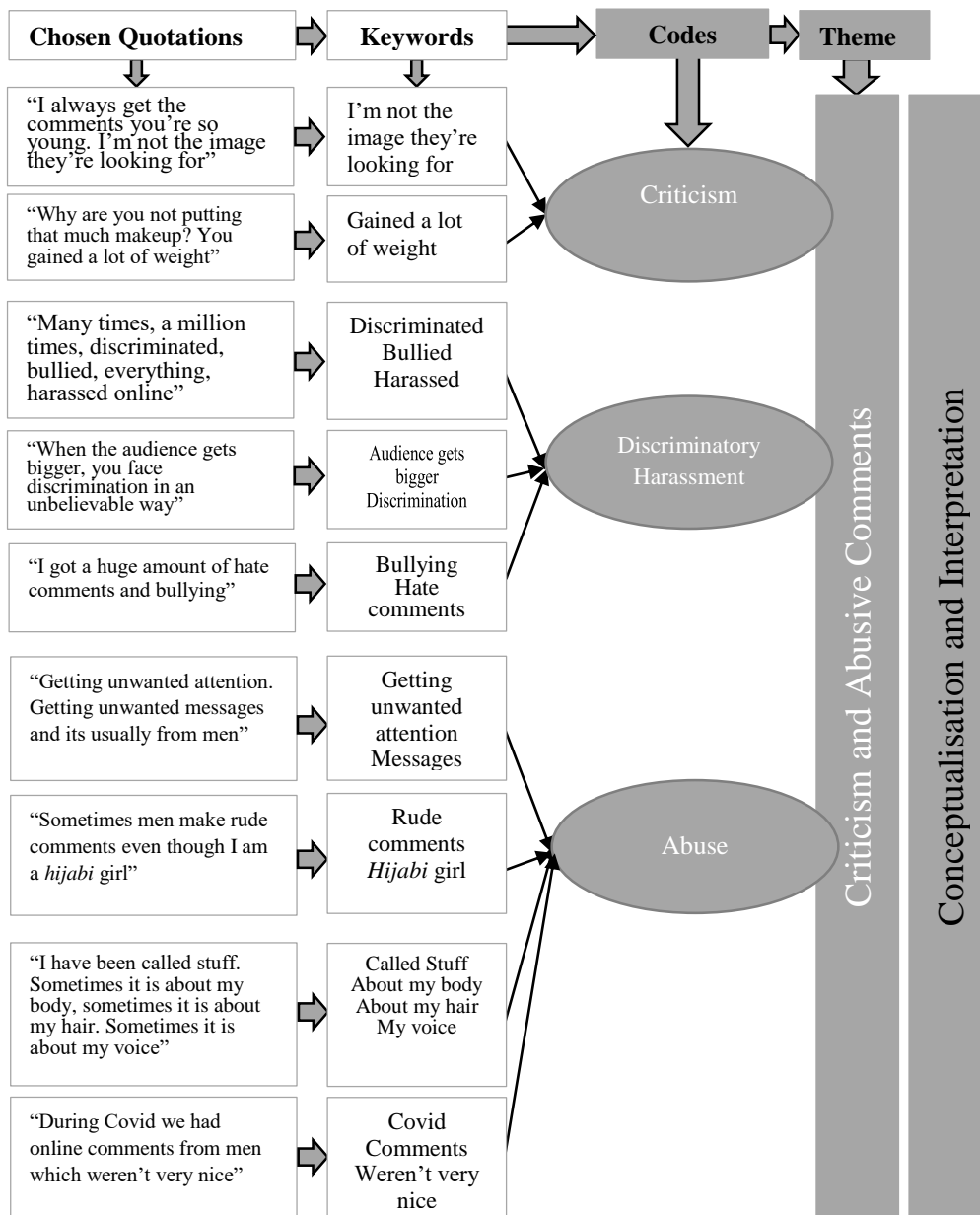
STEPS 1 to 4: CHOOSING OF QUOTATIONS TILL THEMING
Identifying the Challenges: Figures 1-4

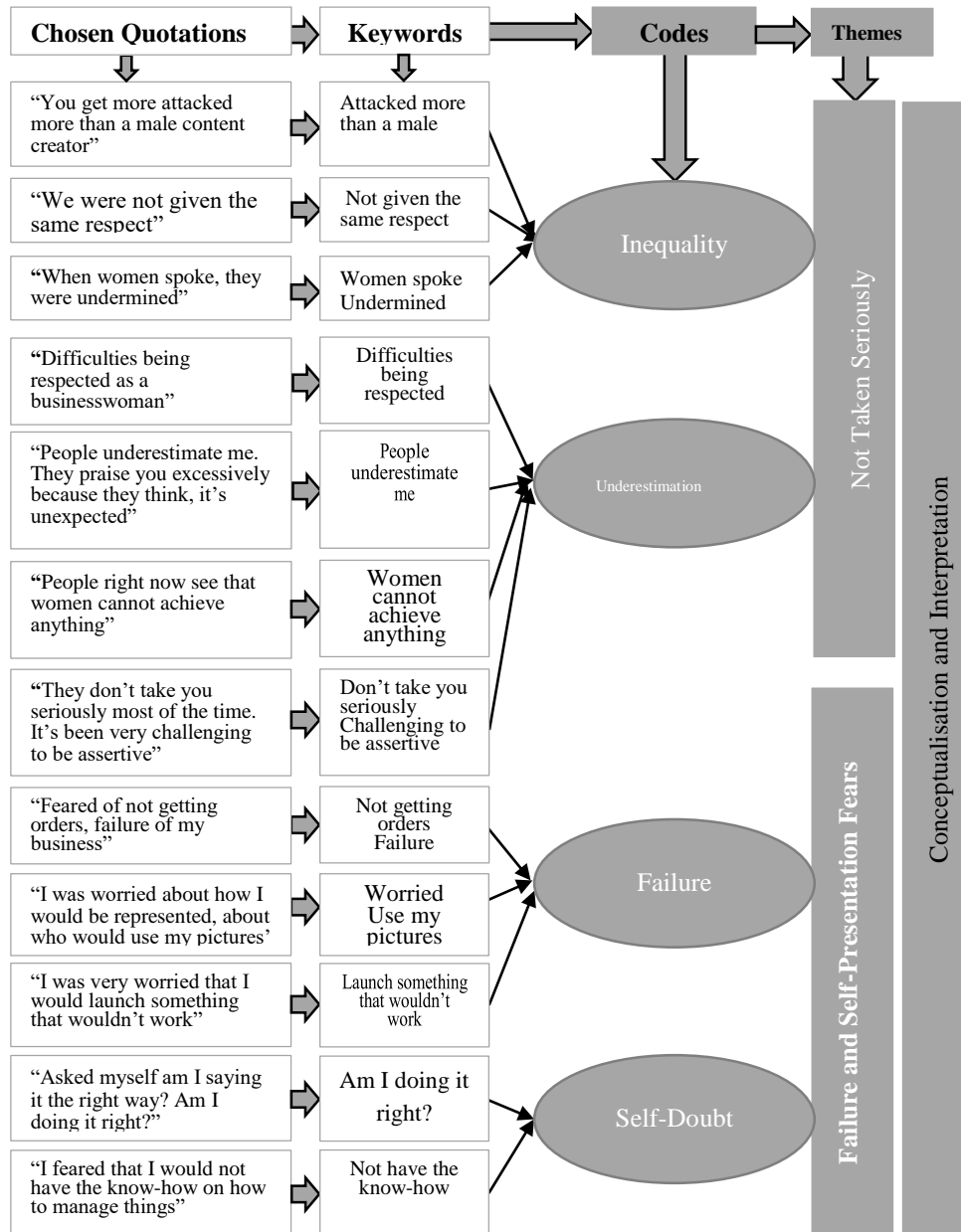| **Figure 1**	**A thematical analysis using a six-step procedure: The Challenges**

```
Chosen Quotations  →  Keywords  →  Codes  →  Theme

"We were so afraid of      Afraid of
judgment"                  judgment

"Failure, I was so         Failure
terrified of judgments     Terrified of
100%"                      judgments

"No matter what you do,    Always
there's always             judgment
judgment"

"From time to time         Drawing is
someone says drawing is    haram
haram"

"You have this unwanted    Unwanted
attention, and you also    attention
have this fear of          Fear of
judgment"                  judgment

"People give themselves    Comment
the right to comment on    Looks and
your looks, on how you     Present
present yourself"          yourself

"You must explain          Explain
yourself and explain       yourself
your content"              and content

"People interfere          Interfere
concerning my looks and    concerning
my hijab"                  my looks
```

Codes: Judgment, Intrusion

Theme: Judgment and Intrusion — Conceptualisation and Interpretation

Figure 2	A thematical analysis using a six-step procedure: The Challenges

Figure 3	A thematical analysis using a six-step procedure: The Challenges

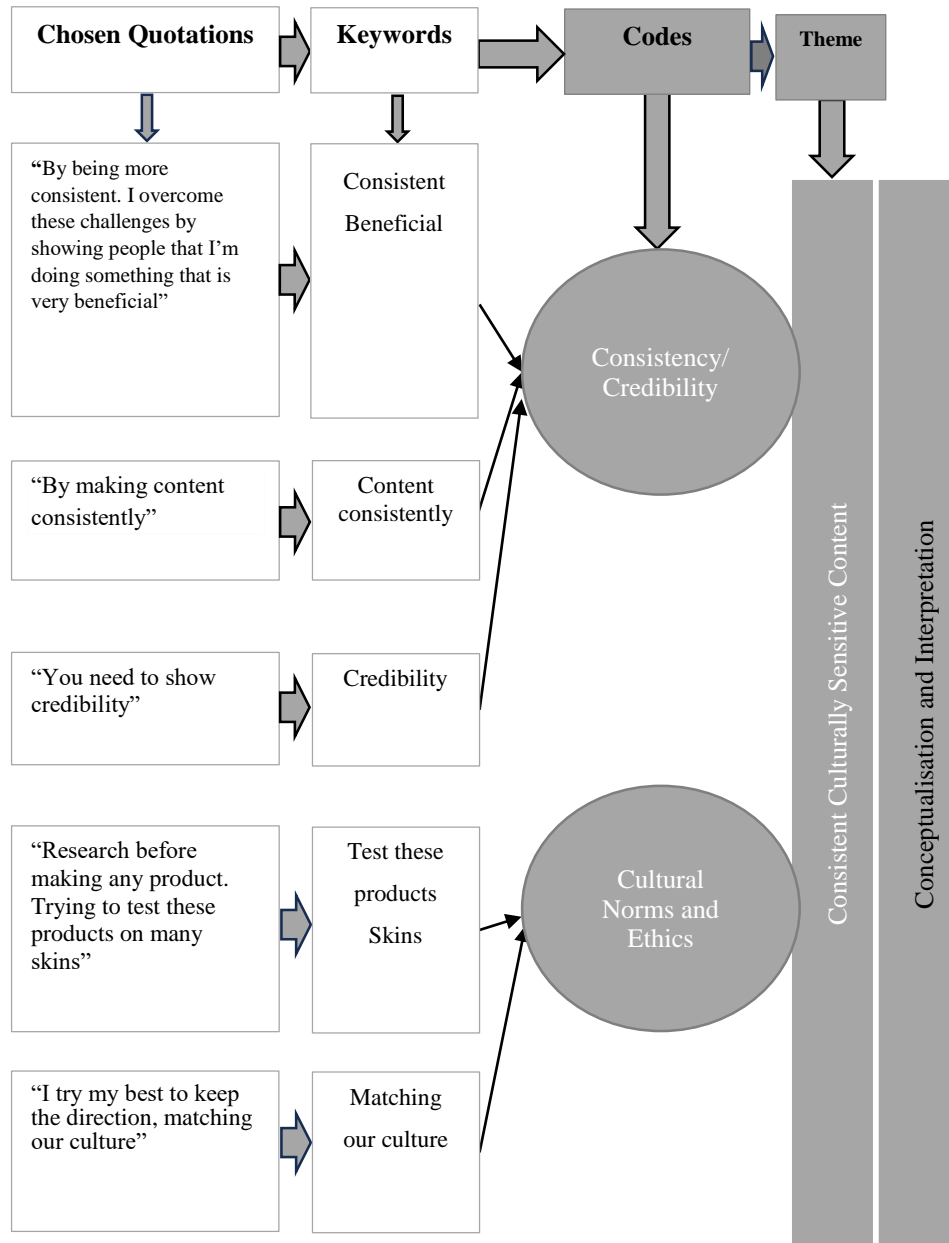| **Figure 4**	**A thematical analysis using a six-step procedure: The Challenges**
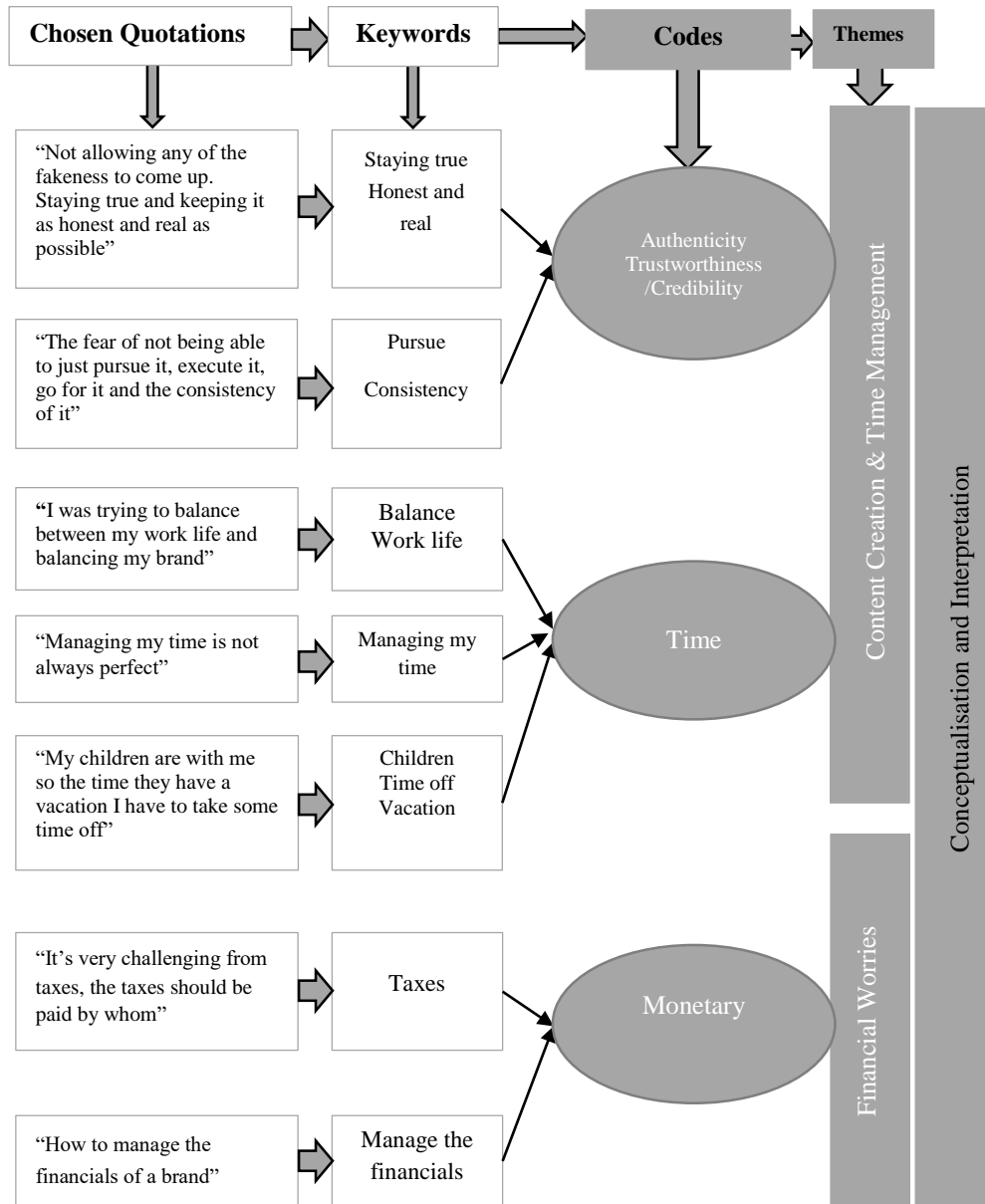
Overcoming the Challenges: Figures 5-6

Figure 5	A thematical analysis using a six-step procedure: Overcoming the Challenges
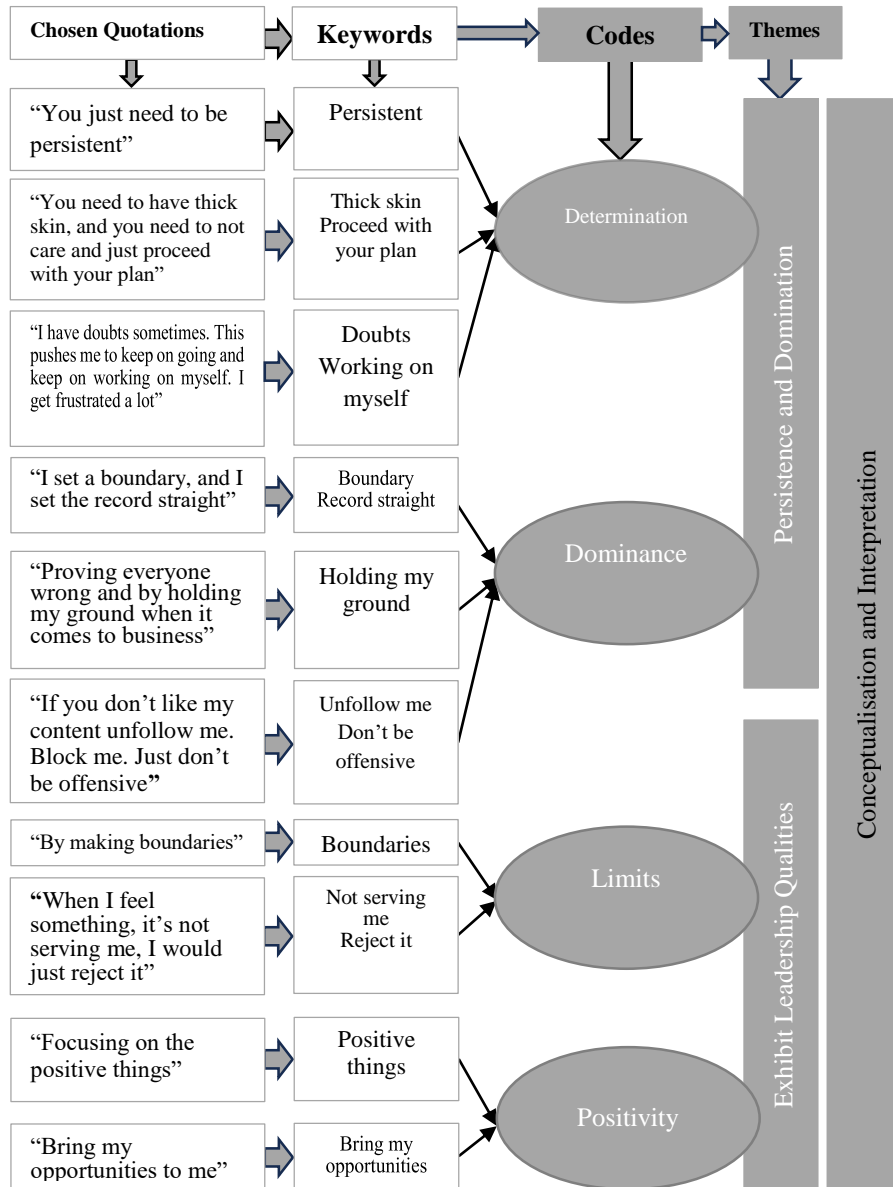
Figure 6 | **A thematical analysis using a six-step procedure: Overcoming the Challenges**

| Chosen Quotations | Keywords | Codes | Theme |

"By being more consistent. I overcome these challenges by showing people that I'm doing something that is very beneficial"

Consistent
Beneficial

"By making content consistently"

Content consistently

Consistency/ Credibility

"You need to show credibility"

Credibility

"Research before making any product. Trying to test these products on many skins"

Test these products
Skins

Cultural Norms and Ethics

"I try my best to keep the direction, matching our culture"

Matching our culture

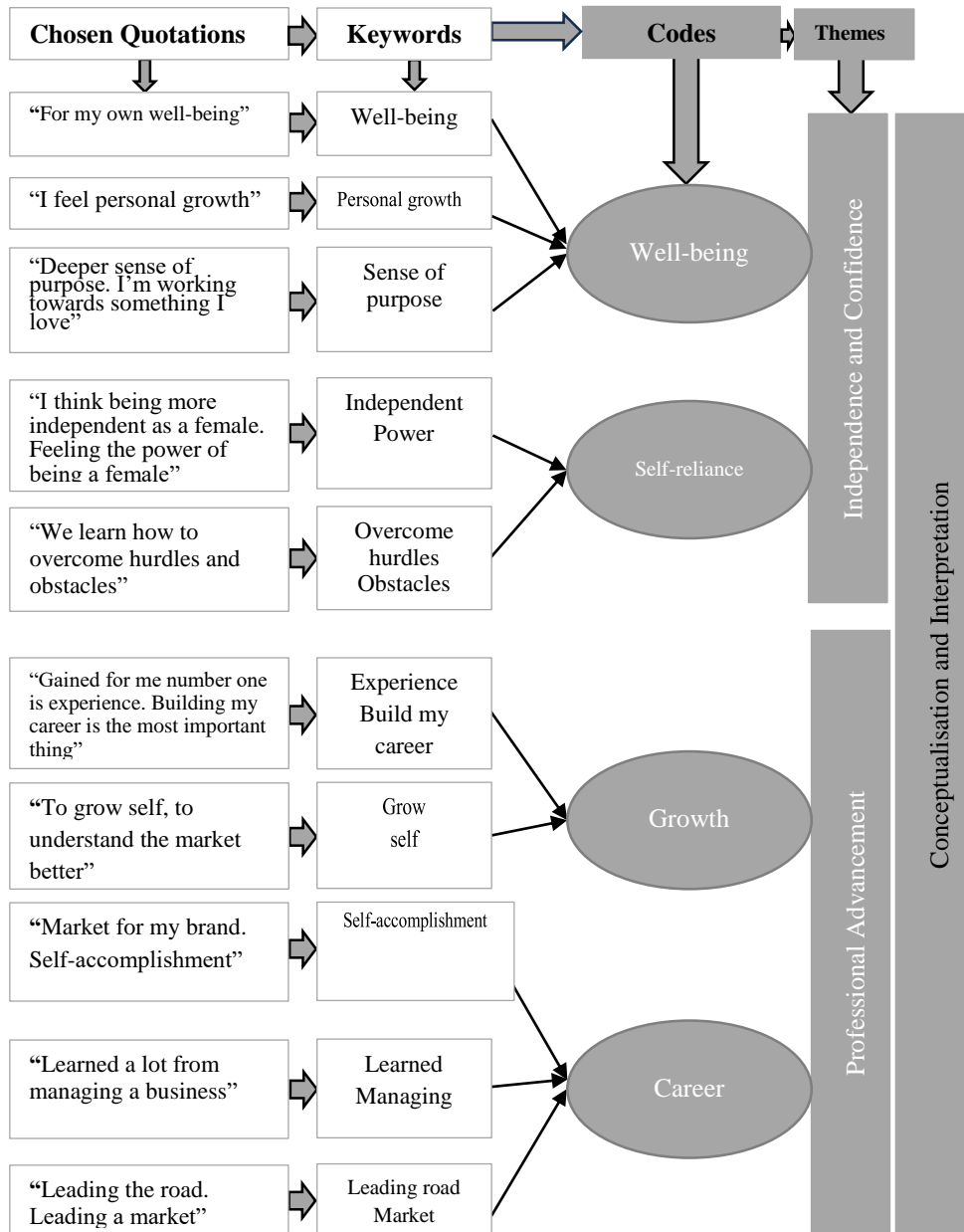Consistent Culturally Sensitive Content

Conceptualisation and Interpretation

Uncovering the Opportunities: Figures 7-8

Figure 7	A thematical analysis using a six-step procedure: Uncovering the Opportunities
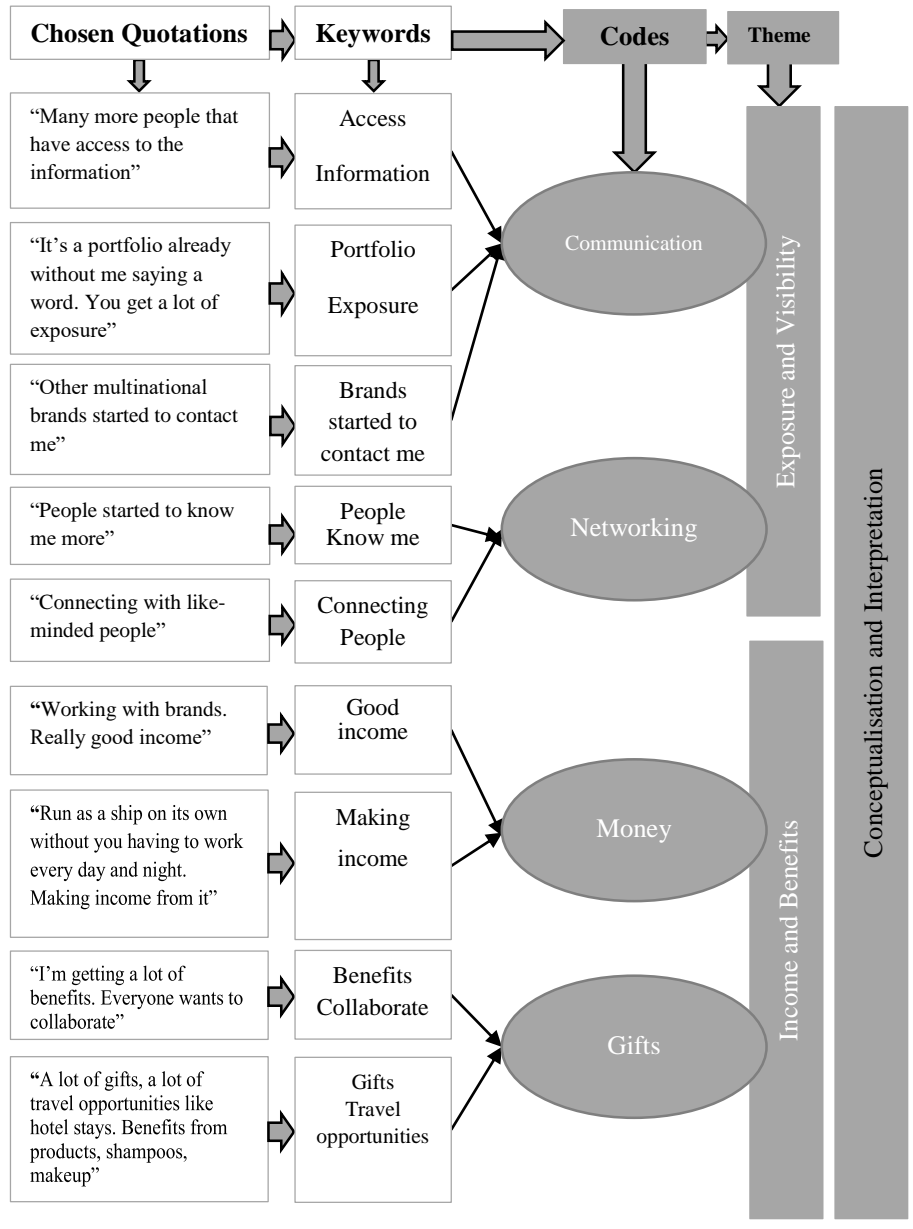
Figure 8	A thematical analysis using a six-step procedure: Uncovering the Opportunities

Challenges That Turned into Opportunities: Figure 9

Figure 9	A thematical analysis using a six-step procedure: Challenges Turned into Opportunities

Chosen Quotations → **Keywords** → **Codes** → **Themes**

"I turned the hate comments into something positive. I started telling them my story. People started to follow" → Something positive

"If someone writes a negative comment about your brand. You take this comment publicly. Turning something negative into a positive" → Negative Comment Positive comments

→ Confrontation

"Corona times. I had more time creating more art. Making more videos and making more content" → Corona. Creating more art. More content

"Downtime was for us the research time. Developed the structure of the brand" → Research time Developed structure brand

→ Time Management

"The marketing price, it's expensive. I found out that I enjoyed doing this" → Marketing Price. Enjoyed doing this

"Being tech savvy. I did the whole web website myself. I taught myself how to do it" → Tech Savvy Taught myself

→ Self-Reliance

"I went by myself looking for stuff, asking for the prices. I gained experience" → Asking for the prices

"I had problems in drawing humans. I got to learn this. People called me to take workshops" → Problems drawing Got to learn Workshops

→ Development

"I didn't stop advertising and marketing for my business and people believe that my words are the truth about my brand" → Advertising Marketing Believe Words

Themes: Negative to Positive Comments; Prioritising Time; Business Development — Conceptualisation and Interpretation

STEP 5: INTERPRETATION AND CONCEPTUALISATION VIA ANALYSIS OF KEYWORDS, CODES, AND THEMES

The Challenges Themes, Interpretation and Conceptualisation

The following six themes (refer to Figure 1 to Figure 4) identify the challenges faced by female SMIs while owning and advertising their brand. The below themes answer RQ1. What challenges did female SMIs face while owning and advertising their brand?

Judgment and Intrusion

Judgment and intrusion by followers are two main challenges that influencers faced on a regular basis. Influencers described judgment as something they are afraid of, whereas another influencer felt terrified of judgment. The respondents stated that whatever they did, they faced judgment in all different forms. One of the influencer's revealed that people even judged her drawings and referred to them as haram. Another challenge was unwanted attention. Influencers believed that followers gave themselves the right to comment and interfere into their lives even in the way they looked and presented themselves. They even interfered into hijabis looks and the way they dressed. The influencers felt that they had to explain their content to their followers who intruded into their lives. Since influencers lives are visible on social media to thousands or even millions of followers, intrusion is a part of their lives and a price they pay for fame.

Criticism and Abusive Comments

Criticism and abusive comments are other challenges that influencers faced, related to their physical appearance. They sometimes felt inadequate if they did not fit into the image that others looked for in them. Usually, comments came from people they had not even met. Examples of criticism were of influencers weight, hair, voice or even the amount of makeup they wore. Both genders send hateful comments and direct messages to influencers, however males even more than females send these messages. Similarly, influencers felt that they got criticised more than male influencers did. The amount of hate speech increased drastically during Covid when people had more time on their hands.

Influencers also faced discrimination which is a form of abuse that comes in all forms like discrimination about their age and body shaming.

Not Taken Seriously

Influencers also felt that the suppliers and other workers did not take them seriously like their male business partners were. This portrays inequality of treatment between genders. Moreover, the influencers felt undermined and underestimated when they spoke and believed that people saw them as low achievers. One influencer stated, "When women spoke, they were undermined" and another stated, "People right now see that women cannot achieve anything." In the 21st Century women are still facing inequality in their careers even though females have equaled males in numerous domains.

Failure and Self-Presentation Fears

The respondents doubted if their businesses would succeed and feared failure. Such quotes as "I feared that I would not have the know-how on how to manage things" and "I was very worried that I would launch something that wouldn't work," portrayed this. Also, self-doubt was apparent when analysing the interview quotes who stated, "Am I saying it the right way? Am I doing it right?" Additionally, influencers worried about their self-presentation since they feared criticism about their appearance from their followers. In the following interviewee quote, "I was worried about how I would be represented, about who would use my pictures" depicted worries about their self-presentation.

Content Creation and Time Management

Influencers have both a personal and brand social media platforms. Therefore, brand owners create content that ensures traffic to their brand's social media pages. Content creation and its management are challenges that influencers face daily. Sometimes followers questioned the credibility of the content posted. Consequently, influencers must ensure that their content is authentic, consistent and aligns with their persona.

 Besides, influencers faced time management challenges, as they tried to juggle roles, whether as a female entrepreneur owning and

advertising an online or offline business, or, as a mother, wife, and employee. They tried to balance their work and personal lives. One influencer stated, "Managing my time is not always perfect," since content creation is a time-consuming job.

Financial Worries

Another challenge was monetary concerns in managing their brand's finances and taxes. The female influencers launched their brands to generate extra income from something they loved. At times, the income they earned from their businesses was not enough, so they worked additional jobs to make ends meet. Whereas, for others selling their products or services were their only source of income.

Overcoming the Challenges Themes, Interpretation and Conceptualisation

The following three themes (refer to Figure 5 and Figure 6) identify the ways that female SMIs overcame the challenges while owning and advertising their brand. The below answers RQ2. How did female SMIs overcome these challenges?

Persistence and Domination

Influencers overcame their challenges by incorporating personal traits that kept them motivated to confront the challenges they faced. These traits are persistence and assertiveness to counteract the challenges and gain respect and recognition from their suppliers and workers. Even when they felt frustrated and uncertain, they pushed themselves to work hard and keep themselves motivated. The following quote relayed this: "This pushes me to keep on going and keep on working on myself." Another means of overcoming challenges is having thick skin and 'holding your ground.' The quote "You need to have thick skin, and you need to not care and just proceed with your plan" depicted this. Thus, persistence, dominance assertiveness, and resilience are important characteristics that influencers need to have to overcome challenges.

Exhibit Leadership Qualities

Both setting boundaries and positivity are great leadership qualities that helped influencers overcome their challenges. Setting healthy boundaries is an essential skill needed when building a business. Boundaries aid in determining acceptable and unacceptable business relationships. In the interviewee quote, "When I feel something, it's not serving me, I would just reject it" portrayed this. Furthermore, another skill that is important when overcoming challenges is getting opportunities come to you and seizing them when they do. Consecutively, positivity is also an important leadership quality that helped influencers well-being, to raise their morale and the morale of their followers and others around them.

Consistent Culturally Sensitive Content

Female influencers overcame the challenges they faced when advertising online content by creating consistent and credible branding content. Other than consistent content, influencers tend to develop content matching their culture. This means that the social media content influencers developed needed to echo the target audience's traditions and customs. Furthermore, the influencers made sure that their products for example makeup is tested before sold, one influencer quoted, "Research before making any product. Trying to test these products on many skins." This ensured the product is safe for consumers use.

Uncovering the Opportunities Themes, Interpretation and Conceptualisation

The following four themes (refer to Figure 7 and Figure 8) identify the opportunities gained by female SMIs while owning and advertising their brand. The below answers RQ3. What are the opportunities gained by female SMIs while owning and advertising their brand?

Exposure and Visibility

One of these opportunities is that advertising online allows a two-way interpersonal communication between the influencers and their followers. Online users have access to a vast amount of information to choose from. This enabled opportunities for the interviewed

respondents to highlight and get instant exposure for their brands. Their social media pages functioned as an open portfolio of products and services for followers to choose from. This kind of visibility boosted brand awareness and got influencer collaborations with multinational brands. Furthermore, strong online presence is a terrific opportunity for networking and career success in today's digital world.

Income and Benefits

Even though two of the challenges are related to money issues, specifically challenges in generating income from selling their brands and tax issues. Still, influencers made good income from selling their brands and from collaborating with other brands. With collaborations came benefits like gifts, such as free hotel stays and free products.

Independence and Confidence

Opportunities gained by influencers includes building their independence and confidence which gave females the power to overcome any challenges. Independence and confidence are important for individuals' well-being which gave them a 'sense of purpose.' The following interviewee quote, "I feel personal growth" portrayed this.

Professional Advancement

The final opportunity gained from owning a brand is advancement in career. SMIs have the freedom to control their own brand and achieve a work-personal life balance. They gained experience and skills as they managed their businesses. They also had the opportunity of achieving their goals to become market leaders.

Identifying The Challenges That Turned into Opportunities Themes, Interpretation and Conceptualisation

The following three themes (refer to Figure 9) identify challenges SMIs faced that turned into opportunities while owning and advertising their brand. The below answers RQ4. What are the challenges SMIs faced that turned into opportunities?

Negative to Positive Comments

Confronting the public with the negative comments posted on the influencers social media pages is a perfect way of changing these comments into something positive. When the influencers discussed the negative comments with the followers, they became more respected by their followers and even gained more followers.

Prioritising Time

Even though time constraints are a challenge faced by female influencers but at times they had enough time to create content and produce videos, such as during the Covid pandemic. One stated "Corona times. I had more time creating more art. Making more videos and making more content." Another influencer found that during her downtime she had even time to conduct research and developed her brand structure. Hence, this was another challenge that turned into an opportunity. Prioritising time is important for achieving goals and increasing productivity.

Business Development

There were challenges in the day-to-day running of influencers businesses however their self-reliance helped overcome these challenges and turned them into opportunities. They did their own advertising and marketing, since hiring an external marketing company was too costly. One influencer's challenge was not being tech savvy, but she overcame it and developed her own website. Influencers gained more business opportunities as they became more independent while owning their own online and offline business.

STEPS 6: THE CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Figure 10 | **The Model**
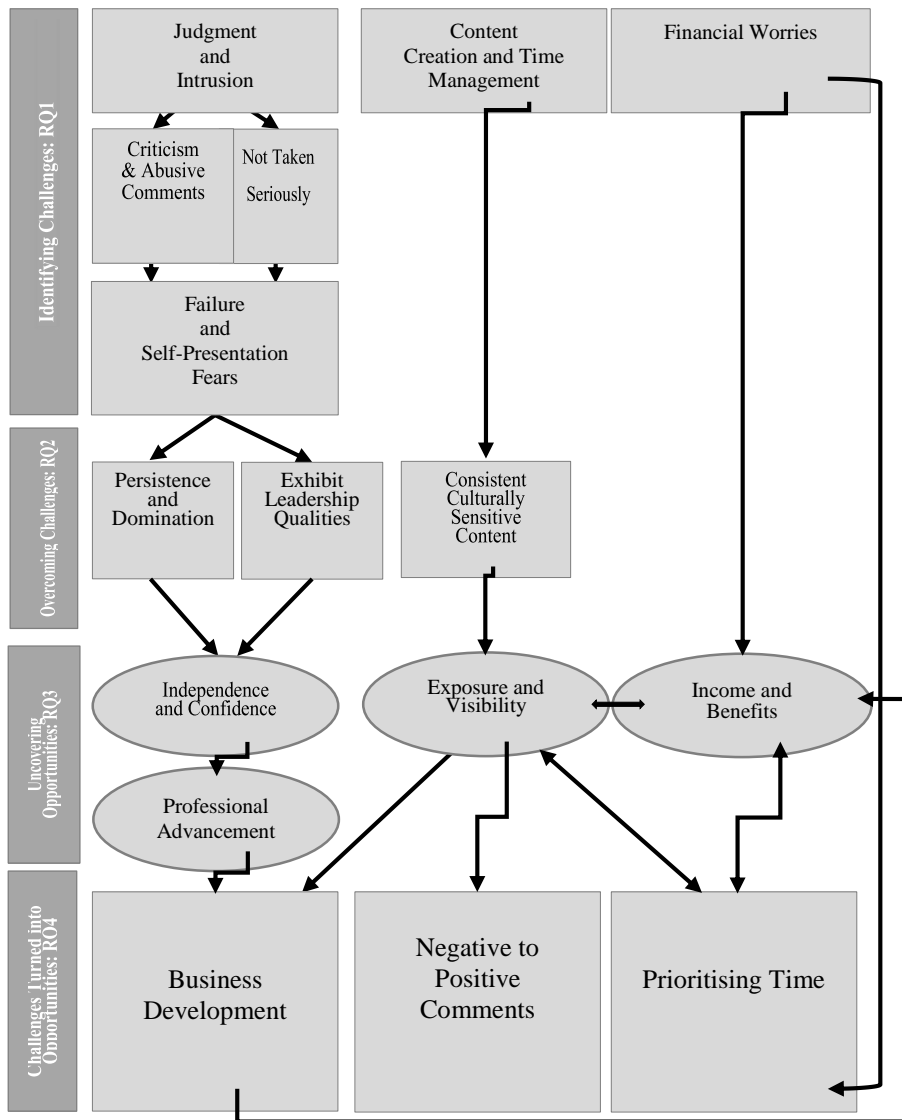
Conclusion Derived from the Conceptual Model

SMIs launched their brands to work on something they loved, and to generate income for themselves. This study highlighted the challenges and opportunities that came with owning a brand. Challenges that SMIs face are judgment and intrusion from followers and non-followers since their pages are open to the public. They feared judgment since they believed that no matter what they did, judgment accompanied it. Judgment and intrusion come with criticism and abusive content posted under the SMIs posts. Furthermore, female SMIs voiced their concern about how others did not take them seriously, mainly their suppliers and workers since people underestimated their capabilities. Judgment, intrusion, criticism, abusive comments, and others not taking them seriously, led to failure and self-presentation fears. As influencers presented themselves, they abided by societal and cultural norms, and they even feared that social media users would use their pictures. However, due to their persistence, domination, and leadership qualities they overcame these challenges and became independent, confident and advanced professionally, which were the opportunities they gained which led to developments in influencers businesses.

Their financial worries encouraged them to prioritise more time for their businesses and content. They overcame the challenges in content creation and time management by finding time to create consistent culturally sensitive content. In doing so they gained exposure and visibility of their work, which were further opportunities. The exposure and visibility of content posted on influencers' pages was an open portfolio of their work, which led to networking and further collaborations (business development), income, and benefits. Evidently, the more income and benefits influencers needed this would require more exposure and visibility, which would need them to prioritise their time. Concurrently, the more they prioritise their time, the more exposure and visibility they gained. As they gained exposure and visibility of their work, they turned all the negative comments into positive ones, hence turning a challenge to an opportunity. The more

they developed their businesses, the more income and benefits they generated. To conclude, being a SMI and owning a brand is a double-edged sword that has challenges and opportunities, but the opportunities are worth endeavouring the challenges.

Limitations and Recommendations of the Study

This study entails limitations. Firstly, there is a limited amount of literature discussing the challenges and opportunities linked to influencers brands. Secondly, the study's main limitation was difficulty obtaining interview participants who are SMIs and have their own brand. Over ten SMIs contacted did not answer my emails or messages. A similar number did not show up for the interview. It was difficult getting interview participants due to time constraints. This research proposes that further studies could conduct in-depth interviews with male SMIs to implement a comparative analysis investigating similarities and differences between the challenges and opportunities faced by both genders, across different countries.

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