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Why I No Longer Believe Social Media Is Cool...

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Abstract

Web 2.0. seemingly offered empowering opportunities for women globally. While #hashtags gained momentum, liberating women to speak-out against sexual oppression, forging networks for the right to learn to drive, to bridge the gender pay gaps, and to close digital divide, the era of the posthuman, postdigital, and postgender seemed to be just around the corner. A key aspect of this apparent empowerment has been the visual scope of social media that allows women to show the world who they are and how they want to be seen. Teaching in a media and communications program at a university in Dubai, I became interested in the emerging trend of Arab women presenting their lives on social media via image-sharing platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat and assumed that these practices challenged gender inequalities.

Keywords

social media, empowerment, visual, gender

Web 2.0. seemingly offered empowering opportunities for women globally. While #hashtags gained momentum, liberating women to speak-out against sexual oppression, forging networks for the right to learn to drive, to bridge the gender pay gaps and to close digital divides, the era of the posthuman, postdigital, and postgender seemed to be just around the corner. A key aspect of this apparent empowerment has been the visual scope of social media that allows women to show the world who they are and how they want to be seen. Teaching in a media and communications program at a university in Dubai, I became interested in the emerging trend of Arab women presenting their lives on social media via image-sharing platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat and assumed that these practices challenged gender inequalities.

Social media use by women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is generally considered a promising source of female empowerment. Arguably, it plays a crucial role in enabling women to participate in the public sphere and drawn attention to issues they deem important, for example, the social media campaigns of activists for the rights of women to drive in Saudi Arabia (Agaral, Lim, & Wigand, 2012; Berliner & Krabill, 2019) or the right to wear the hijab (veil) as postcolonial resistance (Golnaraghi & Dye, 2016). I was convinced by the literature of Henry Jenkins (2016) and others, celebrating the empowering potential of social media, and assumed that it provided women opportunities to seize the digital tools of the day and to fashion their own identities. I was encouraged by the way many individuals were using social media to counter stereotypical representations of Arab

women as either victims or the "other." My research, focusing on Arab women students, therefore, optimistically embraced the idea that social media provides opportunities for networking, self-presentation, and identity development to challenge traditionally conservative cultural–historical practices and was sure that this was ultimately something very "cool."

While there are numerous images of Arab women appearing across social media, there is not a lot of interpretive research that helps us understand the visual dimensions of representations/self-presentations and how elements such as framing, modality, color, emojis, filters, and so on, occur or the historical context of these visual processes. This requires consideration of how visual content on social media, shared via the images and videos of Instagram and Snapchat for example, produce representations that should be understood in terms of how they draw on broader visual practices that are historically located. But the routine neglect of the visual and lack of understanding surrounding meaning-making practices is literally a blind spot to the enduring ways historical inequities are reproduced. It results in a failure by scholars to ask important questions about how visual social media is shaped by complicated and layered inequalities, injustices,

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issues of identity formation, and gendered ways of being. I, therefore, started to think about how these conflicting representational practices are implicitly charged with political meaning and tacitly convey ideological significance that varies across global contexts. An interest in these visual entanglements of gender, culture, and power, surrounding Arab women in particular, drew me to social media since I became convinced that this was a terrain in which stereotypical representations were being shaken-off and reconfigured in super "cool" ways.

Cool Social Media

The extent of these visually empowering processes described in the scholarship that I sought out at the beginning of my doctoral studies, however, now appear far less promising as my PhD thesis in social media learning nears completion. Female social media influencers, or micro celebrities like @ Hudabeauty based in Dubai with 35.1 million followers or @ Model_Roz from Saudi Arabia, based in Los Angeles, with 10.1 million followers, appeal because these women appear to "have it all." Yet, in the Arab context, like elsewhere, female social media influencers engage in highly commercial and gendered self-promotion practices that routinely disempower women. This is partly because social media occurs within broader global and neoliberal visual practices that market the lifestyles, customs, and activities of women while obscuring the extent of digital labor that occurs behind the scenes. Furthermore, representation/self-presentation practices of and by Arab women, like women elsewhere, present certain gendered versions of success or empowerment while backgrounding others. It is predominantly these market versions of Arab women's subjectivities that are packaged, commodified, and idealized as "cool" via social media.

My interest in the visual scope of social media, as a source of empowerment for Arab women learners, therefore, prompted me to find out more about what being "cool" requires of social actors. Initially this pointed me in the direction of what some theorists have labeled the "cool" signs of resistance (McGuigan, 2014). A number of theorists suggest that 21st-century neoliberalism involves social actors in a particular form of individualism that are perpetuated via an intense marketization of the "cool" capitalist self (McRobbie, 2009). It is "cool" because the market incorporates the disaffected "Signs and symbols of ostensible dissent" (McGuigan, 2014, p. 238). It is also "cool" because people are subjected to such uncertainty and unpredictability that they can only thrive as competitive individuals who are exceptionally self-reliant and selfishly resourceful. I, therefore, began to question whether social media was actually "cool" at all considering its role in encouraging individualized and alienated social actors. I also realized that these speculations surrounding the "cool" practices of social actors in Western contexts actually revealed very little about how individualism is played out across other cultural–historical

localities or how conceptions of being "cool" are also highly gendered.

My research involved 63 Arab women, aged 18 years to 24 years, at universities in Dubai and Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates over a 2-year period. The study raised key questions about what empowerment for women via social media means in visual terms and the extent to which it was in any way "cool." The first phase involved visual analysis of the social media platforms Snapchat and Instagram, and participants spoke in focus groups about the visual tools that enabled them to share representations/self-presentations of their daily routines, socializing and dealing with the pressures of university life. The second phase asked participants to push the empowering potential of social media even further through designing prototypes, or learning campaigns, to promote gender empowerment for Arab women. Participants selected their own topics for developing the visual social media resources of Instagram and Snapchat to empower Arab women.

Twenty-one prototypes were produced by the participants in the study, and they presented a range of imagined ways social media could increase opportunities for communication, self-presentation, and access to resources within higher education. These included social media reading activities, study methods, learner discussion forums, inspiration and motivational support networks, psychological advice and ideas for learning, innovation, and entrepreneurship. The findings indicated that even though the Arab women participants in the study were initially positive about the role social media played in their lives, as the research progressed, and the prototype design required them to think more deeply and critically about social media, a range of anxieties began to emerge.

These concerns were also expressed visually, via the prototype designs, amplifying the constraints surrounding representations/self-presentations of Arab women across social media. Rather than imagining how social media could operate as a force for gender empowerment, the participants primarily created prototypes that amplified the current anxieties and entanglements of representation/self-presentation surrounding Arab women's highly gendered visual identities. This raised crucial questions about what empowerment means in non-Western contexts as well as the ways the Arab women participants navigated complex and contradictory aspects of visual social media. It also led me to thinking more critically about how social media representation/self-presentation practices occur interculturally and the varying ways social actors make use of visual symbols in highly gendered terms.

Emotional Temperatures

Although participants' designs of social media prototypes placed Arab women at the center of Internet commerce, participation and learning, subjectivities were positioned in predominantly gendered and commercialized terms. The prototypes suggested that many of the participants aspired
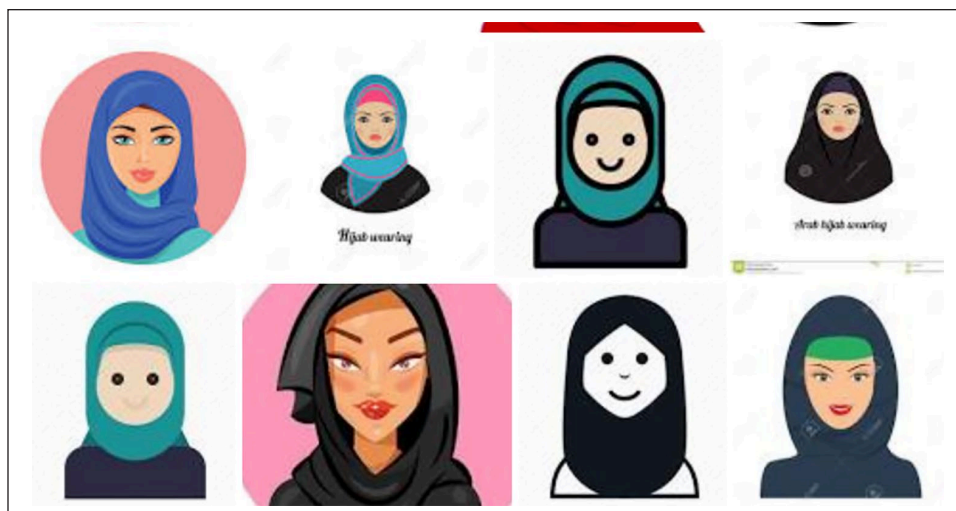
Figure 1. Sample of avatars used by Gulf-Arab women learners for self-presentation.
Source. Screengrabbed from Vector Stock.

to be like female Arab social media influencers, operating through a script of feminine mystique and "having it all" (Hurley, 2019). They wanted to manage businesses from the confines of their own homes, retain privacy, and adhere to the conservative traditions of women in the MENA region while having a postdigital persona. The postdigital refers to the blurring of online and offline practices, and this was a dominant theme emerging throughout the research (Jandrić et al., 2018). The findings, however, indicated that postdigital subjectivities were not necessarily a seamless intersection, but occur within entangled, conflicting, and contradictory enmeshments. This is also because Arab women make use of social media's visual tools and expressions, which are drawn from intercultural, postcolonial, and historical sets of semiotic resources. The selection of these cultural–historical visual resources, however, involves a problematic navigation of the push/pull factors of gender empowerment that are frequently framed in marketized or neoliberal terms.

Although both are underpinned by values of the market and individualism, the versions of neoliberal gender empowerment across Western and MENA contexts are not identical. Arab women navigate a series of contradictory discourses entangled within postcolonialism, Arab nationalism and gender histories. This research revealed that these navigations are not necessarily smooth and occur across a range of emotional temperatures. These temperatures ranged from highly individualized capitalist "cool" subjectivities based on individualized and competitive strategies, into "tepid" feminized individualism, whereby hegemonic female beauty is the solution; these intensified into "hot" fractured concerns about public participation in which social media activity was fraught with dangers for Arab women who were prohibited from dissent or speaking out of turn. Also occurring on the spectrum were prototypes displaying "boiling points"

resulting from social media's neoliberal anxieties, psychological issues, technological tethering and hybrid entanglements within the Arab neoliberal imaginary.

Hot Spaces

In particular, some of the prototypes demonstrated how "hot" spaces of social media involve Arab women in problematic intercultural, hyperneoliberal anxieties about privacy, sociality, surveillance, self-presentation, and gendered self-authoring practices. Respondents overwhelmingly reported reluctance to fully show their faces online, in accordance with local customs, and used avatars and filters for self-presentation. Importantly, these avatars and filters were stereotypically gendered, for example, cartoon-like veiled women wearing make-up, flowers, jewels as well as cute bunny or cat ears, noses, and whiskers. While some of these filters are also popular with Western women using Snapchat and Instagram, the Arab women's self-presentation practices were strongly aligned with the conservative gender-representation constraints of the MENA region (Figure 1):

Many of these avatars and filters are downloaded from Internet stock images, including Vector Stock, or in-built within Snapchat. They are also an example of how visual self-presentation occurs through prepackaged, downloadable identity templates that are gendered. However, this does not imply that Arab women are homogeneous or consider themselves to be oppressed. Yet, it does suggest respondents in the study expressed a preference to veil, conceal, or protect their visual identities online. This could be both a response to conservative gendered traditions occurring offline and the "othering" of Arab women so prevalent in the Western media. This indicates more research is required to consider the pick and mix of visual resources in intercultural, neoliberal imaginaries in relation to conceptions of empowerment. Equally, the extent to

which this high degree of visual self-censorship is carried over into a strict monitoring or filtering of self-expression and commentary on social and political discourse are critical points.

This research indicates that the Arab women respondents in this study were acutely aware of the visual resources available through social media. Yet, these visual resources continue to be configured through offline cultural–historical practices shaped by gendered traditions, social inequalities, postcolonial and neoliberal configurations of empowerment occurring simultaneously. More broadly, these findings suggest social actors' engagements with social media should be locally and historically situated rather than universalized in Western terms. Theorizations within this postdigital moment indicate that visual scrutiny of social actors' entanglements within social media has never been so crucial. The Arab women's focus groups and their prototype designs reflect how social media entangles gendered subjectivities across intercultural and neoliberal terrains. For some this results in high rates of anxiety and heated fear of the pitfalls of "inappropriate" social media use. Research, therefore, urgently needs to go beyond "cool" and dispassionate stances and to engage with the visual and emotional aspects of social media because these hot issues require critical attention.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Author Biography

Zoe Hurley is an assistant dean for student affairs in the College of Communication and Media Sciences at Zayed University, Dubai. She is a PhD candidate with Lancaster University, in the United Kingdom, and her doctoral studies focus on Gulf-Arab women's empowerment through social media. Zoe teaches undergraduate courses in social media and is particularly interested in working with students on change-based design. Her research interests include critical theory, social semiotics, and visual analysis.