4-12-2021

#reimagining Arab Women's Social Media Empowerment and the Postdigital Condition

Zoe Hurley
Zayed University, zoe.hurley@zu.ac.ae

#reimagining Arab Women's Social Media Empowerment and the Postdigital Condition

Zoe Hurley

Abstract

Social media intersects across physical spaces, digital infrastructures, and social subjectivities in terms of what is being called the "postdigital," in an increasingly merging offline/online world. But what precisely does it mean to be "postdigital" if you are an Arab woman or social actor in the Global South? How does access to social networking sites, while increasing visibilities, also provide potential for increased agency? This study is concerned with the extent to which Arab women's self-presentation practices on Instagram could be considered as empowering, or otherwise, within the postdigital condition. First, the study takes Instagram as a case to develop a theoretical framework for considering social media as a tertiary artifact, involving material, routine-symbolic, and conceptual affordances. Second, it applies the artifact framework to explore a corpus of self-presentations by five Arab women influencers. Feminist postdigital theorizing offers unique contributions to problematizing normative, ethnocentric, and neoliberal conceptions of Arab women's empowerment. The application of the novel framework leads to an interpretative discussion of Arab women's influencing practices across merging offline/online and transnational boundaries. Overall, the critical perspective begins to reimagine Arab women's empowerment, not simply as individualized or material processes, but as agencies that are interwoven within the commercialized and conceptual dynamics of visual social media.

Keywords

empowerment, agency, social media, postdigital, Instagram, self-presentations, artifact, affordances, Arab women

Introduction

Social media has been considered empowering for women in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region, due to opportunities to earn income from social media content; increasing visibility of some high-profile individuals; and the perceived rise of feminist activism, including campaigns such as Saudi Arabian women's rights to drive (Al-Khamri, 2019; Chulov, 2017). But such foci give visibility to certain forms of empowerment while backgrounding Arab women's practices and issues more pertinent locally (Le Renard, 2019). Simultaneously, conflation of Arab women's online agency with offline empowerment has tended to be conceived in neoliberal or marketized terms (Hurley, 2019a, 2019b). But gender empowerment is not conceivable in exclusively postfeminist or neoliberal terms and neither is it merely a question of visibility for the socioeconomic elite (Bannet-Weiser, 2018; McRobbie, 2009). To develop nuanced feminist conceptions of Arab women's empowerment and agency, this article offers theoretical contextualization of social media at the nexus of offline/online, gendered,

postfeminist, and postcolonial phenomena, or what has been termed the "postdigital."

The postdigital is defined as the merging offline/online sociopolitical practices or the "postdigital condition" (Jandrić et al., 2018). The prefix of "post" in postdigitalism, like other "posts," including postfeminism, postmodernity, poststructuralism, postcolonial, and so on, offers critique to prior epistemological paradigms. But postdigital theorizing, specifically, involves the critical theorizing of the merging boundaries of offline/online practices and interwoven technocultural constellations of power. Postdigital theory is concerned with social justice issues of hyper-technological ontologies or ways of being while debunking platform capitalism's cruel optimism for empowerment through online

Zayed University, United Arab Emirates

Corresponding Author:
Zoe Hurley, College of Communication and Media Sciences, Zayed University, P.O. Box 19282, Dubai, United Arab Emirates.
Email: Zoe.hurley@zu.ac.ae

consumerism, which is unlikely to deliver (Berlant, 2011). The central question of the study asks, "to what extent could the feminist postdigital framework help to reimagine Arab women's social media empowerment, or disempowerment, in terms of the postdigital condition?" To address this question, Instagram, the image and video sharing site, is taken as a case while the novel feminist postdigital framework develops textual analysis and interpretative discussion of five studied Instagram accounts of notable Arab women social media influencers. To begin, I develop the feminist postdigital notion of social media artifacts.

Postdigital Artifacts

Social media is broadly defined as the applications that enable users to interact, share, and communicate via textual, visual, and audio content (Selwyn, 2012). While recognizing that media has always been social (Papacharissi, 2015), this study defines social media as a postdigital artifact. Artifacts are also nothing new and the concept of artifacts in this study is informed by the work of American philosopher Marx Wartofsky (1979). Wartofsky distinguished three kinds of artifacts that occur within a technocultural infrastructure. "Primary artifacts" are material physical objects or tools such as axes or bowls used at basic or subsistence levels necessary for survival. "Secondary artifacts" orchestrate skills and uses of primary artifacts and include symbols, rituals, utterances, and routines. "Tertiary artifacts" entail the construction of imaginary and conceptual realms, for example, works of art, virtual worlds, or other imaginative domains. Drawing on Wartofsky's (1979) framework, Instagram can be understood as a *postdigital tertiary artifact*. First, at primary levels it is viewed as a material tool and application on a mobile device, facilitating social sharing of images and videos. Second, at routine-symbolic levels, Instagram mediates a series of routines and rituals for communication and identity performance, including selfies, avatars, profiles, filters, hashtags, likes, comments, stories, and so on, that help to tell multiple stories about the self. Third, in addition to primary and secondary dynamics, Instagram enables sharing self-presentations at tertiary conceptual levels.

Considering Instagram practices at tertiary conceptual levels helps to develop theorizing of self-presentations. Self-presentations have been defined as the performative identity displays for showing self (van Dijck, 2013). Viewed as a tertiary artifact, we can consider how Instagram facilitates and constitutes subjectivities. Going beyond empiricism, to consider conceptual levels enables theorizing of the affective, abstract, imaginary, and projective aspects of Arab women influencers' self-presentations (Hurley, 2019a).

Influencers are considered as microcelebrities, who acquire fame online (Marwick, 2015; Senft, 2013). Theorizing Instagram as a postdigital artifact refines understandings of the dynamic interrelationships between social networking technologies and situated sociocultural gendered practices within visual economies. This indicates that self-presentations on Instagram not only enable us to function and participate in the world at material and routine-symbolic levels, but they also have a self-reflexive dimension, which helps us to reflect, imagine, and navigate our subjectivities in abstract, conceptual, and aspirational terms. Moreover, due to the shared capacities of tertiary artifacts, conceptual and imaginary self-presentation practices are not only individual but simultaneously social, local, national, and transnational, moving within and across spatial and temporal boundaries.

Unknotting Instagram's tertiary dynamics could reveal how social media's so-called "affordances" are taken up in gendered terms (Hurley, 2019a, 2020b). It is an attempt to unravel platform capitalism's entangled nexus of discourses, technologies, social, and individual agencies. This helps to differentiate between material practices but also mundane daily routines and critical imaginations concerning empowerment. This is necessary in view of the range of self-presentation practices on visually orientated social media apps, including not only Instagram, but also Snapchat, TikTok, Only Fans, Tinder, and so on, that are utilized in racial and gendered terms. The feminist postdigital perspective also contests postfeminist hegemonies, including assumptions that women are already empowered and therefore no longer require or adhere to feminist epistemologies (Bannet-Weiser, 2018; McRobbie, 2009, 2020). However, just as social media involves hybrid practices, postfeminism is also not a monolithic phenomenon.

Postfeminism can be described as a traveling theory since over recent years it has been applied in numerous contexts, traveling through time and space, and articulates the diversity of women's experiences (Salem, 2016). To illustrate, I refer to Baulch and Pramiyanti's (2018) discussion of some Indonesian women's hijaber's performances of veiled femininity. They discuss Muslim variants of postfeminism, to consider how and whether women have agential control over their bodies in online entrepreneurship. They suggest that being a hijaber includes Indonesian women within a global community of transnationally mobile Muslimah, who are keen to present themselves as fashion conscious, economically empowered, tech-savvy career women. Their field of reference is specifically Muslim, but it also articulates the empowerment of socioeconomic elite Indonesian women.

This theorizing contests Western women's feminine discourses and practices as being necessarily normative since they might not be typical of Global South contexts. Baulch and Pramiyanti (2018) therefore reorientate theorizing for more nuanced perspectives of (post)digital cultures' multiplicities that are not purely relative to local trajectories and, while not in the Global North, are nevertheless certainly global. The feminist postdigital framework also travels across multiple and crisscrossing offline/online contexts, to consider the transnational gendered aspects of technology (Hurley, 2020b). These critical reorientations are discussed next.

Feminist Postdigital Framework

A feminist postdigital perspective could involve alternative histories, perspectives, and new ways of reimagining, "the world as it was, is now and might be in the future" (Deepwell, 2020, p. 250). This goes beyond marginalizing the "woman question" as a liberal Western feminist ideal, or non-Western women as the disenfranchised, victimized other. It reorientates the postdigital practices of women in different contexts, including those from within and across varying contexts of the Global South. Scholars who use the term "Global South" do so to refer to geographical locations outside of the West, but it is also a transnational political subjectivity and critique of contemporary capitalist globalization (Clarke, 2018; Mahler, 2018). Increasingly, scholars note that while geography and geopolitical relations remain important, growing gaps in wealth and power within countries must also be acknowledged. As Mahler (2018) succinctly puts it, "there are Souths in the geographic North and Norths in the geographic South" (p. 32).

Thus, the notion of the Global South looks beyond specificities of geographic location to identify the social agency of dominated groups. A feminist postdigital perspective is informed by this to consider social actors on the margins of power who also have uneven access to the empowering effects of technologies and realizes that social media affordances could impact some more positively than others. Simultaneously, the feminist postdigital perspective problematizes the gendered affordances of social media, while revealing the potential of technologically mediated practices to exploit and oppress women (Schwartz & Neff, 2019). Arguably, this calls into question the entire notion of affordance, raising critical questions about how certain social actors' benefit from technology at the expense of others. In order to develop decolonializing and feminist understandings of how affordances are not necessarily neutral, feminist postdigital conceptions of social media as artifacts are useful.

This feminist postdigital framework is developed to consider Instagram as an artifact mediating events, experiences, and emotions of social actors' hybrid entangled agencies (Leaver et al., 2020). Caliandro and Graham (2020) suggest that Instagram is an influential platform that is beginning to replace mainstream media as a space for publicizing and discussing relevant issues, for example, hashtag movements including #blacklivesmatters and #metoo. However, they suggest that the influence of Instagram upon current events and journalism represents a gap in social media scholarship, in favor of platforms like Twitter or Facebook. Therefore, Caliandro and Graham (2020, p. 4) acknowledge the changing pace of the digital news environment, as well as the need for growth in "intermedia influence" or studies that "focus on the increasing importance of the visual (and Instagram) in news agendas and current affairs."

Consequently, this study is responsive to Caliandro and Graham's (2020) call for new theoretical and qualitative approaches to consider Instagram in particular, and social media more broadly. However, a postdigital feminist framework disrupts androcentric and ethnocentric understandings of Instagram's offline/online contexts and assumptions of the Global North as being the locus of knowledge. This problematizes the notion, within some media scholarship, that particular social media platforms overdetermine social practices. This misconception is similar to the concept of "the medium is the message," coined by McLuhan (1964) that can be contested for its technological determinism. It implies a media-centrism that negates the varying interpretations of social actors (Chandler, 2013).

Conversely, the feminist postdigital framework articulates Instagram as an artifact interweaving offline/online contexts, overlapping aspects of social, technological, and user dynamics. This perspective helps to consider self-presentations as material, routine-symbolic, and conceptual levels to reveal multiple identities, hybrid local/global, offline/online subjectivities. This demystifies Instagram as a platform while facilitating a skeptical and critical perspective of technologies from exclusively North-centric perspectives. It conceives of the hyper-inequalities, racisms, misogyny, and political exploitation, of the postdigital condition that are being exacerbated via the logics of platform capitalism (Fuchs, 2017; Zuboff, 2019). Next, I define the conceptually fuzzy term "empowerment" and explain interrelated notions of "agency."

Empowerment and/or Agency

The feminist postdigital framework is developed to reorientate theorizing of Arab women influencers' uses of Instagram in relation to questions of empowerment. This is important since Arab women's Instagram practices have too often been understood in ethnocentric terms (Hurley, 2019a). Categories of measurement used to define women's empowerment more generally, for example, definitions articulated by the World Bank and applied across a wide and varying range of contexts, have tended to routinely operate according to universal or North-centric definitions of women's rights (Charmes & Wieringa, 2003; Cueva Beteta, 2006).

Conversely, social media scholarship has made considerable gains for understanding women's varying commercialized practices and performative self-presentations (Abidin, 2016, 2017, 2018). McRobbie (2009, 2020) and Bannet-Weiser (2018) have raised important questions about the framing of Western women's empowerment via popular culture and social media in neoliberal terms. Caldeira et al., (2020) explain that women's self-representation on Instagram is often discussed in popular media in polarizing terms, as either an empowering practice or as boring and mundane. However, the political and the mundane are routinely entangled. For example, Abidin (2016) develops understanding of how women's seemingly mundane self-presentations or selfies on Instagram, while often derided, are a form of "subversive frivolity."

But, in a number of Arab nations, women are culturally discouraged and uninclined to show their faces or bodies

online and hence their social media self-presentations cannot necessarily be analyzed in generic terms (Hurley, 2020b, 2020c). Furthermore, these advancements in scholarship do not develop feminist postdigital perspectives of Arab women's social media empowerment and agency directly. Meanwhile, scholarship in the MENA region, concerning Arab women's uses of social media for empowerment, is emerging but tends to suggest that Arab women have already been empowered, through consumerism, despite the lack of gender equality in the region in legal, political, physical, social, or technological terms (Eltantawy, 2013).

"Empowerment" is also a conceptually vague term that can be defined in different ways and according to varying political orientations. A number of feminist theorists problematize the casting of women's empowerment in neoliberal terms, since neoliberalism is arguably a marketized and individualizing ideological regime that is not necessarily empowering (Bannet-Weiser, 2018; McRobbie, 2009). Neoliberalism is also not considered as homogeneous as it also varies according to context and effects women in different ways (Brown, 2015). Consequently, gender empowerment should thus be conceived in terms of difference and hybridity (Bhabha, 1994; Mohanty, 1988). Furthermore, "agency" cannot be considered as located exclusively within social actors and is a central issue since patriarchy limits and molds agency through a number of mechanisms (Mohanty, 1988).

I am also cautious of notions of agency that simplistically assume empowerment is a decision on behalf of social actors, irrespective of structural inequalities and situated practices including gender. Social inequalities are entangled with gendered technologies that inhibit women's agency (Wajcman, 2004). Notions of agency from a feminist postdigital perspective could therefore go beyond understandings of individual agencies that precede or are separate to technologies.

Subsequently, understandings of apparent "affordances" of technology are also not considered as "fixed" but rather as a malleable series of dynamic elements entwined within agencies. Furthermore, in the MENA context, a number of postcolonial feminist scholars view women's agency as currently curtailed which subsequently limits their propensity for action (El Saadawi, 1983). This is because Arab women across MENA, like women in other contexts, continue to routinely face restrictions upon their domestic, political, personal, and sexual agency. Subsequently, this logic could become embedded, via the social actors who engage with them, into social media artifacts at material (physical and literal), routine-symbolic (rituals and routines), and conceptual (abstract, imaginative, and projective) levels.

I therefore concede that issues of empowerment and agency for women in the MENA region and social actors elsewhere are highly variable. Nevertheless, empowerment for all social actors is acutely related to issues of agency, which includes recognition, rights, and voice to not be disempowered, overpowered, or oppressed. Contextual background to the study is presented next to illustrate these points.

MENA Women

Social media use by Arab women in the MENA region is prolific and many have large followings on Instagram. For example, @Hudabeauty is based in Dubai with 35.1 million followers or @Model_Roz from Saudi Arabia, with 10.3 million followers (Hurley, 2019a). Arab female influencers, who promote themselves and products online appeal because, like other microcelebrities, their jet setting, and intensely consumerist lifestyles may show the signs of women appearing to "have it all" (Duffy & Hund, 2015). Arab women's penetration of the social media influencer market might indicate that women are beginning to break through the barriers of gender inequality prevalent in the Arab region (Ghobadi, 2013). However, rather than "having it all," research indicates that these representations of empowerment do not necessarily translate into action. A significant number of women within MENA have limited internet, political, or personal freedom. The Arab region is characterized by strict online surveillance, high levels of censorship, legal constraints, and harsh penalties for critical online speech or activity (Shahbaz, 2019). Eltahawy (2015), for example, rallies against enduring misogyny and what she considers to be the toxic mix of culture, religion, and patriarchy.

What could be loosely called the Arab women's liberation movement has been influenced by the feminist activisms of women in Egypt and the Levant (historic areas of Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Israel, and Syria) and was a consequence of the increase in girls' education in the 20th century. Visible feminisms and public calls for women's liberation through individual and organizational activities began to develop in Egypt with the formation of the Egyptian Feminist Union in 1923 (Tijani, 2009). Similar activities began to take place in a few of the Gulf states in the 1960s–1970s. Badran and Cooke (2004) describe a nexus between Arab women's activism and creative writing in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Furthermore, while certain feminist studies have aimed to consider how postfeminist discourses surrounding Arab women are cosmopolitan and neoliberal, some Western feminist scholarship retains dichotomous theorizing while trying to be more inclusive. Conversely, Western liberal feminism has arguably misunderstood, misrepresented, and incorrectly framed Arab women through their analytical and political attempts to "unveil" and secularize (Ahmed, 1982; Eltantawy, 2013). But non-secular approaches are considered as additional colonializing practices that misappropriate Arab women as always, the victim, in the harem, veiled, mute, invisible, and Other (Ahmed, 1982; Mohanty, 1988).

In view of the struggles surrounding gender equality, it is not surprising that there have been constraints upon MENA's visible feminisms. It is important to remember that Arab women who are considered feminist activists in MENA can receive harsh punishments, censorship, and imprisonment (El Saadawi, 1983). Subsequently, a feminist postdigital framework recognizes the political risks of seemingly

mundane women's visibilities and appreciates that Arab women influencers' make situated and pragmatic choices. These involve a spectrum of performative identities, available within MENA's current sociopolitical, religious, and transnational visual economies. Next, I briefly describe the methods of the feminist postdigital analysis that help to view the tertiary aspects of self-presentations.

Methods

A corpus of five Arab women's influencer accounts was analyzed through the feminist postdigital framework, considering Instagram as an artifact of material, routine-symbolic, and conceptual practices (Wartofsky, 1979). First, this included analysis of over 24,611 Instagram posts over a 4-year period and helped to address the central research question of the study, asking to what extent the feminist postdigital framework helps to reveal and/or reimagine Arab women's uses of social media for empowerment or otherwise?

In order to gather nuanced insights, theorizing was first informed by secondary texts, including academic scholarship, news articles, autobiographies, and advertisements. Second, digital field research involved semi-structured interviews with 23 Arab women professionals, students, academics, and activists. Third, 4 years of focused digital analysis was carried out. This included iterations with a team of three bilingual Arab-English-speaking research assistants, involved in a voluntary capacity. Bilingualism was an important aspect of the research, since Arab women influencers frequently code switch between English and Arabic (Hurley, 2019a).

A corpus of Arab women's Instagram self-presentations was collated from a broad range of Arab women social media influencers. Detailed analysis zooms in on five prominent Arab women influencers who have considerable Instagram followings within the MENA region. As indicated, social media influencers in this study are defined as microcelebrities who earn income from their postdigital labor (Senft, 2013). The influencers were selected due to their popularity in the region as well as the range of performative practices. The images included in the article are all available within the public domain of Instagram. Admittedly, the spectrum of posts discussed does not include self-presentations accompanied by hashtags that reference the theme of empowerment or reimagining explicitly. Alternatively, the posts are included as a case to illustrate routine and commercialized social media practices. These are not necessarily empowering but they are representative of commercialized practices that could reflect and negotiate social change for Arab women within MENA and the broader context of technocultural discourse. Overall, the framework is designed to enable varying examples and interpretations of gender empowerment and scope for reimagining.

The feminist postdigital framework enabled data to be explored at three different levels (Marwick et al., 2017).

These levels included description and thematic categorization of the corpus of Arab women's self-presentations; acknowledging tacit meanings and/or ethnocentric assumptions; analysis of the Arab women's Instagram corpus according to the feminist postdigital framework. The resulting thematic categories of the feminist postdigital artifact analysis are summarized as the following:

1. Primary material factors and observable elements of the influencers' self-presentations;
2. Secondary routine-symbolic actions and rituals relating to the influencers' dynamic self-presentations and practices;
3. Culmination of primary and secondary features with tertiary aspects of the influencers' self-presentations at conceptual, imaginary, and affective levels.

The feminist postdigital framework was informed by the sense of the overlapping analytic concepts while retaining a sense of the distinct values within the thematic categories. Synthesis enabled consideration of the social media practices embedded within the thematic layering of tertiary artifacts. The Instagram posts were listed, categorized, transcribed, and analyzed according to the analytic categories of the feminist postdigital framework.

In terms of ethics, all of the Instagram accounts are freely available within the public domain. Ethical considerations were taken very seriously and in terms of a cautious approach to the MENA region's strict social media censorship and internet laws. As a feminist postdigital scholar, I am also self-reflexive that analysis always involves researcher subjectivity (Hammond & Wellington, 2013; Huisman, 2008). I have attempted to address this through first acknowledging it, second adhering to the feminist postdigital framework, and third through drawing on a broad spectrum of Arab women's Instagram posts to convey the multiplicity of social meanings.

Self-reflexivity is also an important value of feminist postdigital inquiry, since it is acknowledged that the researcher always speaks from a particular gender, class, racial, cultural, and ethnic background (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In terms of my own background, while originally from the United Kingdom, I have spent my adult working life in Muslim countries in South East Asia and the Gulf, including Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates.

To further handle researcher's subjectivity in the textual analysis, the nodes of the feminist postdigital theoretical framework were central for interpreting and analyzing. I am also self-reflexive that the digital medium allows researchers to remain anonymous, unobtrusive, and sometimes a completely inconspicuous observer. This has led to different debates on the role of the researcher in digitized spaces. In the findings, I therefore identify researcher interpretation through writing in the first person. These findings are presented next.
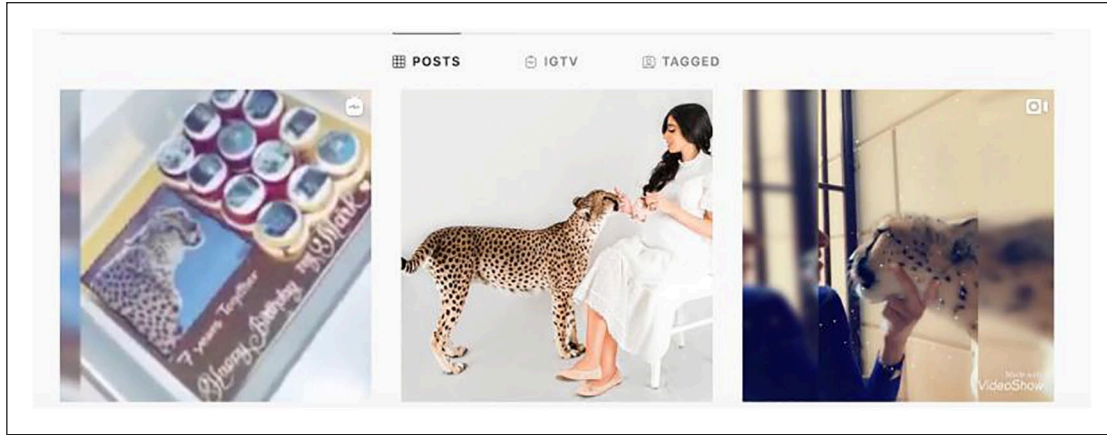
**Figure 1.** Screengrabbed from @i_love_my_cheetah's Instagram (2020).

Findings

Figure 1 frames Shahad Al Jaber, a 32-year-old Kuwaiti, whose profile on her Instagram account, @i_love_my_cheetah, is open to the public and attracted attention due to her showcasing of pet African cheetahs. Followed by more than 15.7k followers on Instagram, a magazine article states that Al Jaber bought the cheetahs through an illicit network that smuggled them from Africa in April 2013 and February 2014, respectively, for a little more than US$3,000 each (Castelier & Müller, 2018).

- First, analyzing Figure 1, through the feminist postdigital framework makes note of the observable elements presented within Al Jaber's posts. At primary material levels, the first image is of a birthday cake for her cheetah; in the second post Al Jaber gazes demurely into the cheetah's eyes; in the third she holds the cheetah by the throat as if she is about to kiss its mouth. While these images may have been intended to portray symbols of luxury and the prestige of owning an exotic cheetah, the curious juxtaposition of a wild animal being treated as a domestic pet points toward Al Jaber's seemingly misplaced affection for a wild animal. Analysis could easily suggest the blatant disregard for animal welfare in this instance. However, while not supporting the abuse of animals, but in order to develop new theoretical conceptualizations of Arab women's self-presentations, we need to realize the extent to which traditional theoretical tools and understandings of subjectivity, within communications and the social sciences, are entrenched within Western humanist dualisms and interpretations. These values may make it difficult to theorize micropractices of Arab women's self-presentations, for example, Al Jaber's, and the varying tacit meanings they could convey.
- Second, at secondary routine-symbolic levels, the feminist postdigital perspective understands performative practices in relation to the offline routine constraints of Arab women in the MENA region and in terms that could differ to women's experiences in other contexts. The range of micropractices surrounding clothing, props, and self-presentations, while not necessarily noticeable to the Western eye, enables Arab women to exercise a degree of online agency within the conservative confines of Islamic patriarchy. This is because the meanings, occurring at material and visual levels, coalesce with routine-symbolic and conceptual, affective, and imaginary meanings. For Wartofsky (1979), meanings conveyed through artifacts "are nothing but what they are made to be, in and by this activity" (p. xxi). At routine-symbolic levels, self-presentations are thus never fixed or stagnant since their significance comes about during the moments of use. Wartofsky (1979, p. xxv), as an example, suggests that a Paleolithic handprint, which is one of the earliest examples of deliberate signs of human self-presentation, indicates "the conscious imperative to know oneself" and that this quest is always "a gesture, an action, an intention."
- Third, in view of the above and at tertiary conceptual levels, Al Jaber's self-presentations (Figure 1) are not necessarily fixed symbols or indexes of meaning but could also be gestures of identity and future intentions of subjectivity. Thus, interacting with cheetahs is not exclusively symbolic of brutal (masculine) animal abuse and/or mastery. From a feminist postdigital perspective, sensitive to the spaces of disempowerment among economically empowered groups, Al Jaber's self-presentations they could also be assertions of her own human and sexual agency. In terms of the Gulf context, images of kissing are strictly prohibited in the region (Simpson, 2013). Yet, Al Jaber is teasingly posed to kiss her pet cheetah. Furthermore, it is notable that the majority of women in the Arab context tend to wear a headscarf or shayla, as it is known in the region and there are varying micro self-presentation practices
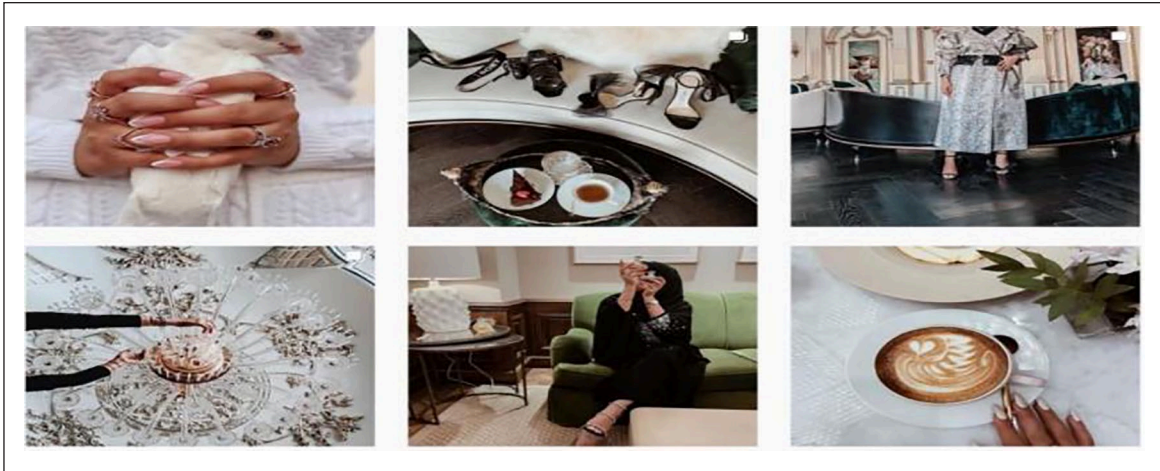
Figure 2. Screengrabbed from @koodiz's Instagram (2020).

surrounding how it is can be worn or not at all as in the case of Al Jaber. Her lack of shayla, a traditional symbol of Gulf-Arab women's status, is a signifying absence and possibly indicates her level of economic prestige in being able to disregard Arab modest fashion norms (Odeh, 1993).

In relation to the above, I suggest that it is crucial to consider how self-presentations by Arab women influencers occur within confined parameters and literal battlefield of signs surrounding intersections of patriarchy, postcolonialism, capitalism, traditionalism, and Islam (Odeh, 1993). The feminist postdigital perspective indicates that social media is entangled within these intersectional and often contradictory aspects of Arab women's lives. I propose that viewing the postdigital intersections between representations and self-presentation in terms of the fusion of offline/online, on Instagram, indicates that meanings do not necessarily occur "below" the surface but are all around us, and as technological, material, internal, external, social, conceptual and imaginary gestures, actions, and intentions. These self-presentations, while gendered, are simultaneously within us and all around us, rather than separated in Cartesian binaries, or as discourses that are "outside" of the self. To illustrate these complexities further, Figure 2 includes a screengrab of @koodiz's Instagram account of Kholoud Al Ali, the Qatari Instagrammer. Open to the public, her account has 344k followers.

- First, at primary material levels, the reader should notice that @koodiz refrains from showing her face in the above screengrab or in many of the 2,531 or more posts on her Instagram account. In the Gulf, for a number of communities, it is culturally unacceptable for women to show their face or hair in public (Ghazal, 2019; Hurley, 2020b, 2020c). This practice of avoiding iconic representation on camera or photographic

portraits in public and media outlets is a significant self-presentation practice of Arab women in the Gulf.

- Second, at secondary routine-symbolic levels, influencers, like @koodiz, continue to engage with the public and followers through avatars, voice, and innovative photos that focus on their hands, feet, or that are taken from the back of their heads so that their faces remain concealed. Furthermore, the lack of iconic depictions has not prevented @koodiz from attracting a large following of her displays and icons of luxury. @koodiz's posts include a mosaic of glamourous consumer objects, fashions, baroque, and classical interior design, a closet full of designer shoes, fur, a camera, chandelier, and a cup of coffee decorated with a heart. The only face is that of the white dove that @koodiz clutches in her hands, decorated in rings and carefully French manicured talons. A possible interpretation, at latent levels, is that the tight clutch that she has on the dove clearly curtails its freedom just as the Gulf-Arab visual micropractices limit the representation/self-presentations of @koodiz and prohibits her from showing her face in adherence to conservative Gulf-Arab customs. Simultaneously, the dove's almost anthropic smile could be a gesture of @koodiz's happiness concerning her presentations of materialism and luxury that are stereotypical symbols of the Gulf.

- Third, at tertiary conceptual levels, the abstract and imaginary meanings that @koodiz could be conveying to her followers need to be considered in relation to context. In my opinion, @koodiz's posts offer some examples of the feminized self-affirmations surrounding neoliberal empowerment (Bannet-Weiser, 2018; McRobbie, 2009). However, in visual terms, @koodiz's inability or reluctance to show her face and yet achieve popularity indicates the extent to which Gulf-Arab women, similar to Indonesian hijabers or Singaporean influencers, operate within an alternative
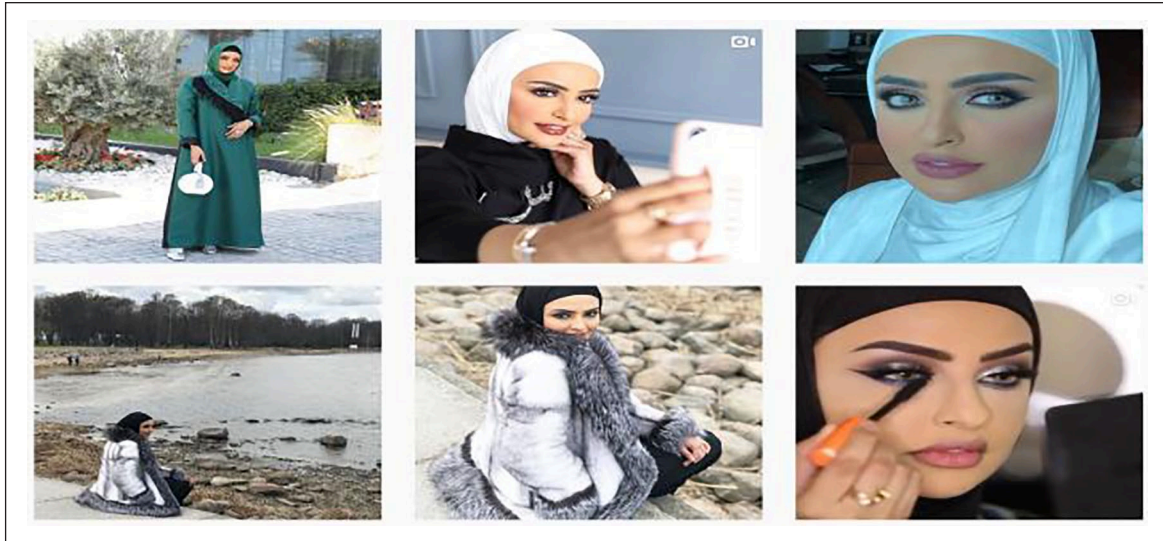
Figure 3. Screengrabbed from @Sondos_aq's Instagram (2020).

postdigital condition to postfeminist Western women (Baulch & Pramiyanti, 2018). Rather, @koodiz shows what could be considered as the excessive signs of consumerism while operating within feminized parameters of the Gulf context.

At latent levels, however, I interpreted the cluttering of objects within each of the posts as contributing to a sense of confinement as indexed in the image of @koodiz's hands grasping the dove. The ambiguities surrounding the meanings and interpretations of Arab women's self-presentations as a form of empowerment are illustrated in @koodiz's Instagram. They are considered further in the next section of the article, through a discussion of the controversial Kuwaiti social media influencer @Sondos_aq.

@Sondos_aq, or Sondos Alqattan (Figure 3), has 2.3 million followers on Instagram and is a lover of animal fur, glamorous travel, beauty blogging and in 2018 supported the so-called "kafala" system that prohibits domestic workers, who are often economic migrants from South Asia, South East Asia, and Africa, from possession of their passports or weekly rest day (McKernan, 2018). The kafala system has been reformed in a number of Gulf states, including the United Arab Emirates. Therefore, when @sondos_aq spoke out in favor of the kafala system, the backlash from followers forced her to restrict comments on her posts for several weeks.

- First, at primary material levels, @sondros_aq is wearing a mink-sable fur coat in two of the posts and this showcasing of fur indicates that not only human but also animal rights are contentious issues in the Gulf. But, while @sondros_aq's wearing of fur is likely to antagonize animal rights sympathizers and activists within and outside of the Gulf, in the Kuwaiti context

the wearing of fur and/or owning endangered wild animals could also be perceived as a transnational sign of Gulf-Arab women's status and economic privilege.
- Second, at secondary routine-symbolic levels, the feminist postdigital framework can be applied here to indicate how Gulf-Arab women are not entirely subjugated and oppressed but also operate from positions of socioeconomic privilege.
- Third, at tertiary conceptual levels, it could also suggest how some influencers promote lifestyles that are seemingly impervious to the suffering of other people, animal species, and the environment, while cocooned within individualist neoliberal imaginaries. However, these modes of agency could also be aspects of a visual imaginary or a form of what I have previously termed "fantastical authenticity" (Hurley, 2019a, p. 1).

Fantastical authenticity is mode self-presentations involving (post)digital fantasy, dress-up, and visual exploration, via social media's filters and curatorial dynamics. I suggest that Arab women influencers use fantastical authenticity in their self-presentations to explore the boundaries of positionalities within gendered neoliberal Arab imaginaries. However, in the analysis of @sondos, I do not mean to imply in any sense that all Gulf-Arab women are oppressors, economically privileged, or primarily driven by consumerism and luxury. Rather, certain influencers are making do with the limited conceptual tools for postdigital identity construction that are available within transnational neoliberal visual economies. Furthermore, this indicates that not all Gulf-Arab women's self-presentations on Instagram conform to the aspirations of hijaber Muslim modesty surrounding women's dress, behavior, and freedom of movement. To illustrate aspects of Arab women's varying politics, I discuss some of the posts of @thehala.
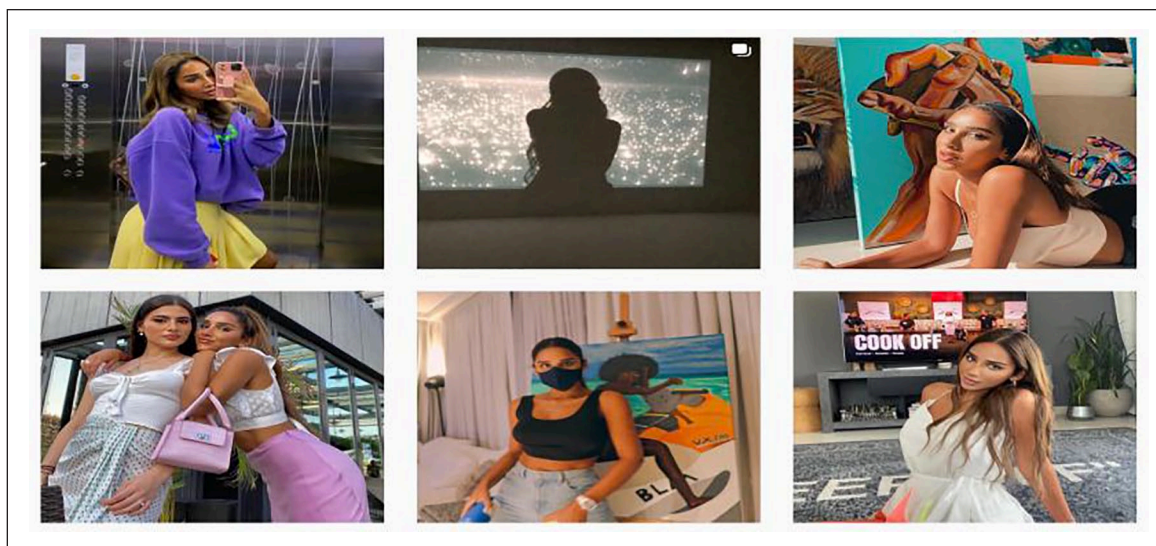
Figure 4. Screengrabbed from @thehala's Instagram (2020).

In Figure 4, @thehala is a social media influencer from Dubai with 2.5 million followers using her influencing reach to promote environmental and animal rights. This image of @thehala in Figure 4 from a Western feminist perspective could depict a hegemonically attractive women in a stance typical of female influencers who use their appearance to capitalize and objectify the self as a branding tool (Bannet-Weiser, 2018; McRobbie, 2009). But a feminist postdigital perspective is sensitive to how this image may be interpreted differently within the Arab context.

- First, at primary material levels, it is not typical to see Gulf-Arab women dressed like @thehala in the offline Gulf context since most, but not all, Arab women would be dressed more modestly in a shayla (black coat) and abaya (veil) (Hurley, 2019a).
- Second, at secondary levels, this image could be interpreted as sign-posting Arab women's liberation and resistance, by disregarding modest fashion, within the confined repertoires of Gulf-Arab women's visual micropractices and has implications at routine-symbolic and conceptual levels.
- Third, in terms of tertiary conceptual levels, throughout her Instagram posts, @thehala also harnesses the platform as a means to promote awareness of social, environmental, and political issues. For example, in two of the images above, @thehala sits before paintings which signal her allegiance to the Black Lives Matter movement. In one painting there is a black hand clasping a white one. Below, @thehala stands in front of her portrait of a black woman riding a jet ski. @thehala's paintings can be interpreted as positive representation of Arab racial harmony and solidarity.

Yet, in the Arab region, many inhabitants have suffered from colonialism and the slave trade has ingrained negative perceptions of black skin and dark-skinned Arabs. But greater awareness of issues like racism and colourism, prior to the escalation of Black Lives Matter protests in June 2020, was rarely discussed publicly in the Arab region (Dokal, 2016; Hunter, 2008; Hurley, 2020a). Subsequently, a number of young women Arabs have been keen to express solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement and took to social media to show outrage over systemic racism (Hurley, 2020a). Social media was an important postdigital outlet particularly because street protests are strictly prohibited in a number of Arab countries (Kirkpatrick, 2013). Therefore, young Arabs turned to social media to articulate their positions (Hurley, 2020a).

However, some Arab celebrities, in their social media efforts to support the protests against racism, were highly naïve (Hurley, 2020a). For example, Tania Saleh (2020), the Lebanese singer, photoshopped an image of herself with an afro hairstyle and darkened skin. She posted it on Twitter with the caption, "I wish I was black, today and more than ever . . . . Sending my love and full support to the people who demand equality and justice for all races anywhere in the world." Despite her intentions to show support to the Black Lives Matter movement, many people were appalled by her post and felt it was inappropriate. But regardless of the criticisms and calls to delete the post, Saleh (2020) continued to defend her motives and did not take it down.

The Moroccan actress Mariam Hussein (2020) similarly posted a photoshopped image of herself with darkened skin on Instagram but later deleted it. The original lightened version of the image remains with the addition of a controversial caption in Arabic stating that "there is no credit for an Arab over Ajami, nor for Ajami over an Arab." Yet, "Ajami" is a pejorative to
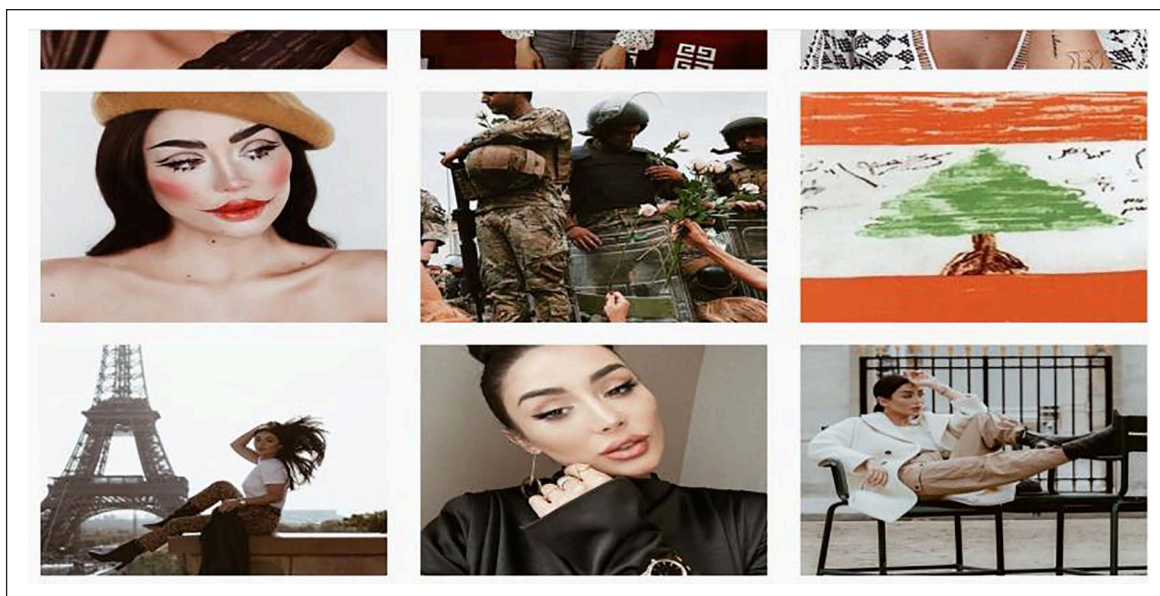
Figure 5. Screengrabbed from @themayaahmad's Instagram (2020).

refer to non-Arabic and/or Persian speakers, indicating deep-seated acceptance, by some in the region, of tacit racism.

Beyond these details, feminist postdigital analysis reveals the extent to which Instagram is also a political platform for some Arab women influencers. Since Instagram is a primary platform at material levels for Arab women to comment politically on issues occurring within the region and beyond, the postdigital framework in this study enables focus on political, racial, and gendered tensions surrounding Arab women's transnational identities. For example, Figure 5 shows a screengrab of the Instagram account of the Dubai-based content creator @themayaahmad who has 1.2 million followers.

- First, at primary material levels, in Figure 5, the observable elements include the influencer's pose in a French beret and her face heavily made-up. The image under this one is the influencer perching on a wall and looking directly at the camera in a demand gaze (Machin, 2007). Through being in a mode of demand, it seems to ask that the viewer recognize her as a social actor with agency. This agency is juxtaposed through the iconic symbol of the Eiffel Tower in the background, which is also an index of French modernity.
- Second, at secondary routine-symbolic levels, through this dual metonymical relationship, the city and the influencer can stand in for one another (Bazgan, 2010). Interestingly, while two of the posts involve signs of the Lebanese unrest in October 2019, for example, flowers being offered to Lebanese soldiers and childlike painting of the Lebanese flag, two of the other posts interlink references to French colonialism in the MENA region.
- Third, at tertiary conceptual levels, the combination of these images juxtaposes visual references to Lebanese and French history, and power relations in the aftermath

of postcolonial rule of seemingly forgotten, economically and democratically devastated Lebanon. Another example of @themayaahmad's political sensibilities includes her posts expressing concern about Lebanon's recent crisis. This crisis follows the Covid-19 pandemic and the aftermath of the explosion at the Beirut port in 2020, leading to the subsequent resignation of the Lebanese government (Figure 6).

The image shows a photograph of a building in Beirut before the explosion in front of the same building blown out in the aftermath. @themaahmad is systematically leveraging her social media reach to followers, at material, routine-symbolic, and conceptual levels, to raise awareness about the political crisis in Beirut as well as making a call for donations to advance praxis and economic support. In this instance, I suggest that @themayaahmad demonstrates political, social, and individual agency to speak out on social justice issues and uses her Instagram popularity to advocate for political change.

This brief presentation of some of @themaahmad's self-presentations and posts as well as the other Arab women influencer's practices discussed, therefore, conveys the significance of social media posts as dynamic gestures, actions, and intentions for empowerment not only for themselves but also for others. In the next section of the article, I offer further discussion of the implications of these findings.

Discussion

In this study, the feminist postdigital perspective reorientates normative assumptions surrounding women's empowerment to develop understandings of postdigital self-presentation practices across Instagram. I suggest that feminist postdigital theorizing helps to conceptualize the transnational hybridity

Figure 6. Screengrabbed from @themayaahmad's Instagram (2020)

of meanings embedded and entangled with Arab women influencers' micropractices. It reorientates visual self-presentations in terms of gendered histories, customs, and meanings that are crystallized within social actors' images, gaze, stance, ornaments, props, clothing, and other species. While these images are not necessarily conveying empowerment, they could be considered as "a gesture, an action, an intention" of agency (Wartofsky, 1979, p. xxv). The perspective reminds us that social media exists largely in the context of what people post and, as such, despite its global reach, it has a local dimension (Leaver et al., 2020). An important element in understanding Arab women's empowerment, through Instagram in the Arab context, is to appreciate how empowerment is situated within intersections of gender, race, ethnicities, and power. Thus, social media both constitutes and reflects degrees of women's empowerment and disempowerment within transnational, neoliberal, and gendered enmeshments.

However, the feminist postdigital perspective problematizes conceptions of Instagram in terms of simplistic notions of platform or context, since artifacts mediate dynamic material, routine-symbolic and conceptual practices, subjectivities, and identities. Recognition of the complex interplay of material, routine-symbolic and conceptual practices, embedded within transnational visual economies, is crucial. First, they avoid early notions of the internet as an exclusively virtual place and separate realm. Second, they contest notions that Instagram empowerment involves specific types of self-presentation, located in fixed or essentialist terms. Theorizing also suggests that revisiting Arab women's historical cultural practices and tertiary artifacts, including magazines and other media, is vital to avoid misconceptions of the Arab women's movement and social media empowerment that might overlook Arab wom-

en's particular histories, religions, current, and future predicaments within the postdigital condition.

The study therefore conveys the potential of feminist postdigital theorizing in future studies for reimagining what Arab women's social media empowerment and expansive agency could look like. For example, the cases of @themayaahmad and @thehala illustrate how influencers use their popularity and reach to promote social justice issues, albeit via feminine modes of attractiveness. From the feminist postdigital perspective, insights into Arab women's agencies as influencers therefore begin to emerge. These are viewed as crisscrossing spectrums of transnational, local/global, offline/online agential gestures, actions/intentions.

Furthermore, the feminist postdigital framework could also have scope for further critical reimagining, of Arab women's gender liberation, beyond boundaries, borders, and hierarchies concerning a postdigital feminist future. However, it is crucial not to conflate the sense of agency and empowerment of the studied influencers with wider notions of empowerment for Arab women. This would be misleading since commercialized influencer practices are not necessarily translated to other Arab women Instagram users. Following this discussion, in the final section of the article, I offer conclusions, limitations, and recommendations for further study.

Conclusion

The central question of the study asked, to what extent could the feminist postdigital framework help to reimagine Arab women's empowerment on social media, or disempowerment, in terms of the postdigital condition? In answer, I suggest that the framework develops transnational insights into Instagram

practices as a tertiary artifact within Global South contexts. It considers Arab women's self-presentations as material, routine-symbolic and conceptual, affective, and imaginary practices. The discussion of five influencers' accounts involved interpretative analysis of the hybridity of visual practices.

Theorizing hints at tense transnational hierarchies concerning some Arab women's agencies and empowerment but sometimes at the expense of migrant women from South Asia, South East Asia, and Africa, as well as the environment and animals. Analysis revealed a spectrum of images and self-presentations which included, gestures, actions, and intentions for expansive agency that are entangled with race, racism, postcolonialism, modest fashion, environmentalism, animal rights, crisis in Lebanon, allegiance to the Black Lives Matter movement, and gender in the MENA region.

Theoretical advancements resulting from the postdigital feminist framework redefine Arab women's influencing across a spectrum of material, routine, and conceptual practices. Simultaneously, this indicates how empowerment for some Arab women, as in the case of @Sondos_aq, may be to the detriment of other social actors, the environment, and animals. This is because power and its displays via self-presentations are entangled within hyper-inequalities, political discrimination, environmental destruction, homophobia, racism, and gender oppression embedded within the postdigital condition. Thus, more research concerning the impacts of Arab women's increasing agencies and empowerment on the large number of precariat domestic workers, from South East Asia, South Asia, and Africa, working in the MENA region, within the kafala system and often without citizenship, is recommended. The study also raises the additional questions about what empowerment and agency on social media could look like for the millions of precariat women working in MENA as domestic helpers, in service, tourist and health sectors, formal, and informal gig economies. In addition, what does the postdigital condition involve for lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, trans, queer, and so on (LGBTQ+) women in the Arab context? LGBTQ+ research represents a further gap in scholarship in the MENA region, which is not surprising in view of homosexuality being criminalized and pathologized in a number of Arab nations.

Reorientating Instagram as a tertiary artifact enabled nuanced feminist postdigital theorizing of the material, routine-symbolic, conceptual, affective, and imaginative dimensions of social media practices. Subsequently, reimagining Arab women's social media empowerment within the postdigital condition is neither content with ethnocentric, normative, and universalizing notions of social media practices and self-presentations nor fixed understandings of gender empowerment. Overall, feminist postdigital theory calls for critical ways of looking at social media artifacts and gender empowerment in decolonial terms, in relation to other platforms, locales, and entangled agencies. The feminist postdigital framework necessitates social media theorizing beyond Western notions of what women's empowerment should be or

how visual agencies might be theorized. Furthermore, as the postdigital condition intensifies, and technologies embed deeper into subjectivities, we urgently need agile and creative theorizing of social media platforms' constellations of power, empowerment, and disempowerment.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

ORCID iD

Zoe Hurley https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9870-8677

References

Abidin, C. (2016). "Aren't these just young, rich women doing vain things online?": Influencer selfies as subversive frivolity. *Social Media + Society*, *2*(2), 205630511664134. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116641342

Abidin, C. (2017). #familygoals: Family influencers, calibrated amateurism, and justifying young digital labor. *Social Media + Society*, *3*, 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305117707191

Abidin, C. (2018). *Internet celebrity: Understanding fame online*. Emerald Publishing.

Ahmed, L. (1982). Western ethnocentrism and perceptions of the harem. *Feminist Studies*, *8*(3), 521–534. https://doi.org/10.2307/3177710

Al-Khamri, H. (2019). The "right" to drive for women in Saudi villages. *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, *15*(2), 256–259. https://doi10.1215/15525864-7491213

Badran, M., & Cooke, M. (2004). *Opening the gates*. Indiana University Press.

Bannet-Weiser, S. (2018). *Empowered: Popular feminism and popular misogyny*. Duke University Press.

Baulch, E., & Pramiyanti, A. (2018). Hijabers on Instagram: Using visual social media to construct the Ideal Muslim Woman. *Social Media + Society*, *4*, 1–15. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3353158

Bazgan, N. (2010). Female bodies in Paris: Iconic urban femininity and Parisian journeys. *Studies in French Cinema*, *10*(2), 95–109. https://doi.org/10.1386/sfc.10.2.95_1

Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel optimism*. Duke University Press.

Bhabha, H. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.

Brown, W. (2015). *Undoing the demos. Neoliberalism's stealth revolution*. Zone Books.

Caldeira, S., De Ridder, S., & Van Bauwel, S. (2020). Between the mundane and the political: Women's self-representations on Instagram. *Social Media + Society*, *6*(3), 205630512094080. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120940802

Caliandro, A., & Graham, J. (2020). Studying Instagram beyond selfies. *Social Media + Society*, *6*(2), 205630512092477. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120924779

Castelier, S., & Müller, Q. (2018). *Meet the Kuwaitis who live with their pet cheetahs*. https://www.middleeasteye.net/features/meet-kuwaitis-who-live-their-pet-cheetahs

Chandler, D. (2013). *Technological or media determinism*. https://www.wolearn.org/pluginfile.php/45/mod_page/content/23/chandler2002_PDF_full.pdf

Charmes, J., & Wieringa, S. (2003). Measuring women's empowerment: An assessment of the gender-related development index and the Gender Empowerment Measure. *Journal of Human Development*, *4*(3), 419–435. https://doi.org/10.1080/1464988032000125773

Chulov, M. (2017). *Saudi Arabia to allow women to obtain driving licences*. Retrieved December 24, 2020, from https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/26/saudi-arabias-king-issues-order-allowing-women-to-drive

Clarke, M. (2018). *Global South: What does it mean and why use the term?* https://onlineacademiccommunity.uvic.ca/globalsouthpolitics/2018/08/08/global-south-what-does-it-mean-and-why-use-the-term/

Cueva Beteta, H. (2006). What is missing in measures of women's empowerment? *Journal of Human Development*, *7*(2), 221–241. https://doi.org/10.1080/14649880600768553

Deepwell, K. (2020). Postdigital education, feminism, women. *Postdigital Science and Education*, *2*(2), 248–253. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-019-00096-1

Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (2005). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research*. SAGE.

Dokal, H. (2016). *We need to discuss colourism in the Middle East | gal-dem*. Retrieved August 31, 2020, from https://gal-dem.com/need-discuss-colourism-middle-east/

Duffy, B., & Hund, E. (2015). "Having it all" on social media: Entrepreneurial femininity and self-branding among fashion bloggers. *Social Media + Society*, *1*(2), 205630511560433. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115604337

El Saadawi, N. (1983). *Memoirs from the women's prison*. Zed Books.

Eltahawy, M. (2015). *Headscarves and hymens: Why the Middle East needs a sexual revolution*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

Eltantawy, N. (2013). From veiling to blogging: Women and media in the Middle East. *Feminist Media Studies*, *13*(5), 765–769. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2013.838356

Fuchs, C. (2017). *Social media: A critical introduction*. SAGE.

Ghazal, R. (2019). *In focus: The culture of hiding faces in the Gulf region*. https://sekkamag.com/2019/01/31/the-culture-of-hiding-faces-in-the-gulf-region/

Ghobadi, S. (2013). Application of activity theory in understanding online communities of practice: A case of feminism. *Journal of Community Informatics*, *9*(1). http://www.ci-journal.net/index.php/ciej/article/view/828

Hammond, M., & Wellington, J. (2013). *Research methods*. Routledge.

Huisman, K. (2008). Does this mean you're not going to come visit me anymore? An inquiry into an ethics of reciprocity and positionality in feminist ethnographic research. *Sociological Inquiry*, *78*(3), 372–396. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-682x.2008.00244.x

Hunter, M. (2008). Teaching and learning guide for: The persistent problem of colorism: Skin tone, status, and inequality. *Sociology Compass*, *2*(1), 366–370. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2007.00078.x

Hurley, Z. (2019a). Imagined affordances of Instagram and the fantastical authenticity of Gulf-Arab Social Media Influencers. *Social Media + Society*, *5*(1), 1–16.

Hurley, Z. (2019b). Why I no longer believe social media is cool . . . *Social Media + Society*, *5*(3), 205630511984949. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119849495

Hurley, Z. (2020a). *As Arab students vent outrage over racism on social media, educators must be guides*. https://www.al-fanarmedia.org/2020/06/as-arab-students-vent-outrage-over-racism-on-social-media-educators-must-be-guides/?lbsf=true&id=42399

Hurley, Z. (2020b). Postdigital feminism and cultural visual regimes: Covid-19 at women's only university in the Gulf. *Postdigital Science and Education*, *2*, 645–650. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-020-00134-3

Hurley, Z. (2020c). Showing their faces online is difficult for some Arab women: Educators must respond. *Al-Fanar Media*. https://www.al-fanarmedia.org/2020/06/showing-their-faces-online-is-difficult-for-some-arab-women-educators-must-respond/?lbsf=true&id=42206

Hussein, M. (2020). *queen_maryoum*. https://www.instagram.com/p/CA8sQSpBugo/

Jandrić, P., Ryberg, T., Knox, J., Lacković, N., Hayes, S., Suoranta, J., Smith, M., Steketee, A., Peters, M., McLaren, P., Ford, D. R., Asher, G., McGregor, C., Stewart, G., Williamson, B., & Gibbons, A. (2018). Postdigital dialogue. *Postdigital Science and Education*, *1*(1), 163–189. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-018-0011-x

Kirkpatrick, D. (2013). *New law in Egypt effectively bans street protests*. https://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/26/world/middleeast/egypt-law-street-protests.html

Leaver, T., Highfield, T., & Abidin, C. (2020). *Instagram*. Polity Press.

Le Renard, A. (2019). Covering women's rights, silencing suppression. *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, *15*(2), 251–255. https://doi.org/10.1215/15525864-7491199

Machin, D. (2007). *Introduction to multimodal analysis*. Hodder Arnold.

Mahler, A. (2018). *From the tricontinental to the Global South: Race, radicalism, and transnational solidarity*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Marwick, A. (2015). Instafame: Luxury selfies in the attention economy. *Public Culture*, *27*(175), 137–160. https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-2798379

Marwick, A., Fontaine, C., & boyd, d. (2017). "Nobody sees it, nobody gets mad": Social media, privacy, and personal responsibility among low-SES youth. *Social Media + Society*, *3*(2), 205630511771045. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305117710455

McKernan, B. (2018). *Kuwaiti blogger slammed for racist post says criticism is "Islamophobic."* https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/kuwait-blogger-passport-racism-filipino-worker-islamophobic-uae-sondos-al-qattan-a8464741.html

McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. McGraw-Hill.

McRobbie, A. (2009). *The aftermath of feminism. Gender, culture and social change*. SAGE.

McRobbie, A. (2020). *Feminism and the politics of resilience. Essays on gender, media and the end of welfare*. Polity Press.

Mohanty, C. (1988). Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Feminist Review*, *30*, 61–88. https://doi.org/10.2307/1395054

Odeh, L. (1993). Post-colonial feminism and the veil: Thinking the difference. *Feminist Review*, *43*, 26–37. https://doi.org/10.2307/1395067

Papacharissi, Z. (2015). We have always been social. *Social Media + Society*, *1*, 1–2. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115581185

Saleh, T. (2020). *Twitter*. https://twitter.com/TaniaSaleh/status/1267449145217953793

Salem, S. (2016). Intersectionality and its discontents: Intersectionality as traveling theory. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, *25*(4), 403–418. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506816643999

Schwartz, B., & Neff, G. (2019). The gendered affordances of Craigslist "new-in-town girls wanted" ads. *New Media & Society*, *21*(11–12), 2404–2421. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819849897

Selwyn, N. (2012). Social media in higher education. In *The Europa World of Learning 2012*. http://www.educationarena.com/pdf/sample/sample-essay-selwyn.pdf

Senft, S. (2013). Microcelebrity and the branded self. In J. Hartley, J. Burgess, & A. Bruns (Eds.), *A companion to new media dynamics* (pp. 346–354). Wiley.

Shahbaz, A. (2019). *United Arab Emirates*. https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2019/crisis-social-media

Simpson, C. (2013). *The rules are clear, says lawyer: No kissing allowed in Dubai*. https://www.thenational.ae/uae/heritage/the-rules-are-clear-says-lawyer-no-kissing-allowed-in-dubai-1.462242

Tijani, I. (2009). *Male domination, female revolt*. Brill.

van Dijck, J. (2013). 'You have one identity': Performing the self on Facebook and LinkedIn. *Media, Culture & Society*, *35*(2), 199–215. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443712468605

Wajcman, J. (2004). *Technofeminism*. Polity Press.

Wartofsky, M. (1979). *Models: Representation and the scientific understanding*. D. Reidel Publishing.

Zuboff, S. (2019). *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for the future at the new frontier of power*. Profile Books.

Author Biography

Zoe Hurley is the Assistant Dean in the College of Communication and Media Sciences at Zayed University, Dubai, United Arab Emirates. She earned her PhD from Lancaster University, UK, and her doctoral studies focus on Gulf-Arab women's empowerment through social media. Zoe teaches undergraduate courses in social media and new media writing. She is interested in questions of power, multiculturalism, intersectional, and postcolonial feminism. She has published academic papers on Gulf-Arab women's social media practices, postdigital living, and online learning during Covid-19. She has also coordinated exhibitions on social media and digital art. Her research explores postcolonial feminism(s), visual social media, and the postdigital condition.