TRANSNATIONAL VISUAL INQUIRY: ARAB WOMEN'S INTERDEPENDENT/INDEPENDENT MOVES ON TIKTOK AND INSTAGRAM

Zoe Hurley
Zayed University

Theorising Beyond Stereotypes

Despite evident diversity of Arab women's lives, stereotyping of Muslim women as passive victims in the Western media has been talked and written about by Middle Eastern scholars for at least 40 years (Abu-Laghoud, 2013; Mohanty, 1998). Yet, Arab women's resistance to patriarchy has a history that both pre-dates and continues with Islam and is played out at visual levels (AlFassi, 2007). Theorising Arab women's social media practices beyond stereotypes requires departure from ethnocentric perspectives that the West is the locus of knowledge and experience. Therefore, while acknowledging the interdependence of global visual economies, this study recognises that Arab women's social media also occurs independently from Western visual traditions.

Curation of gendered identities occurs in visual terms so the relationship between gender and visuality is vital to consider. But visual culture is considered as "both globalising and localising quite often simultaneously" (Gruber and Haugbolle, 2013, X). This study is needed to enunciate the diversity of Arab women's visual identities but also the hybrid forms of resistance to gender hegemony occurring beyond Western frames of recognition.

Addressing the complex matrix of gendered visual interdependence/independence, this study involved a four-year comparative inquiry into Arab women social media influencers, defined as micro-celebrities generating digital incomes (Hurley, 2019). It takes Instagram and TikTok, image and video sharing platforms, as a case to illustrate examples of Arab women's curated visual identities. The central research question asks, how can Arab women's visual identities be theorised in feminist transnational terms?

Critical Framework: Transnational Feminist Visual Inquiry

To develop planes of exploration, the study synthesises feminist transnationalism and visual inquiry. Transnationalism refers not only to the movement and exchanges of

consumer items, languages, practices and peoples across national borders, but it is also a research agenda concerned with the perspectives of social actors backgrounded by mainstream scholarship (Nowicka, 2020).

In this study, feminist transnationalism is synthesised with 'inquiry graphics' (Lackovic, 2020). Inquiry graphics is not a specific method per se but a semiotic move to ask critical questions about images. This offers a unique contribution to feminist visual social media scholarship, both contextually and theoretically. Next, I outline the folds of inquiry.

Folds of Inquiry

- First, in contextual terms, feminist transnational inquiry graphics recognises the long-standing visual traditions of and by Arab women in MENA, across cinema, photography, art, magazines, fashion, mass media, music, dance, other visual and aesthetic modes (Kraidy, 2015). Acknowledging these visual practices is vital to avoid misconceptions of Arab women's visualities as static or monolithic while overlooking diverse religious and local practices.

- Second, at theoretical levels, inquiry graphics reorientates theorising of Arab women's self-presentations to decolonise perspectives of transnational visual digital cultures. It explores the interdependence of global and local gendered visual practices, while conceiving of Arab women's epistemologies in theoretically independent terms. Synthesis of feminist transnationalism with inquiry graphics is therefore not just a lens or a method. Rather, it is an ontological view of the visual subject who is always in process, interdependent and independent.

- Third, feminist transnational inquiry graphics provides the framework for construction of a corpus of 26 Arab women influencers' posts, to zoom in on situated examples of intersectional curated visual identities.

- Fourth, it stages discussion of the visual corpus via critical conversations with 12 Arab women influencers.

Findings and Discussion

The study's findings reveal Arab women's varying visual positionalities. They illustrate Arab women's visual subjectivities as occurring in simultaneously interdependent and independent relationships to commercial Western visual practices.

For example, @amyroko, from Saudi Arabia with 1.5 million followers, wears a niqab (veil) as she promotes make-up brands while never showing her face online (Morris, 2020). @amyroko's posts are mediated via TikTok and Instagram's affordances for synthetic embodiment. This involves merging and remixing American rap, hip-hop, reggaeton beats, her own dance moves and defiant stance of Arab feminist positionality. But although Arab women influencers, like @amyroko, may use Western music and beats, within TikTok and Instagram posts, they do so, not as a form of cultural appropriation, but to reconfigure its meanings in terms of localised subjectivities and situated curated identities.

Other examples emerging from the study reveal that Arab women influencers on TikTok and Instagram not only engage in commercialised self-branding practices but that they also contribute to global social justice movements and local activism. Cases include Arab women influencers' allegiances to #metoo feminism; the Black Lives Matter movement; decolonial, anti-colonial and counter-cultural positionalities; regional issues like the Kafala system (oppression of migrant workers) and environmental concerns.

The study reveals Arab women influencers' modes of visual activism. These are considered significant in the Middle East context since public protests are illegal in many nations. Arab women's visual practices are thus highly political, subject to strict censorship and surveillance. Critical conversations with Arab women influencers provide further insights into visual social media's curatorial affordances. While these remain gendered, they are locally situated.

Theorising reveals the intense levels of surveillance of and by Arab women in the Middle East. This occurs within online visual economies which position Arab women in gendered terms. However, hegemonies cannot be understood in exclusively Western terms but also as situated, local and scattered articulations (Grewal, 2006).

Beyond Fixed Positionalities

Overall, the study offers nuanced insights into Arab women influencers' varying positionalities and localised visual subjectivities. It illustrates Arab women's curatorial identities as consecutively interdependent/independent within broader hyper-inequalities, systemic and local patriarchal oppression.

The study is generalisable to feminist transnational visual inquiry in other contexts. It makes the important point that, despite the crisscrossing, hybrid and multicultural onto-epistemologies of visual subjects, Western emancipatory agendas, for example liberal feminism, cannot be graphed on to Arab women. Attempts to do so are arguably re-colonialising mechanisms.

Conversely, feminist transnational inquiry graphics opens theorising to consider the nuances of social media's hybrid curatorial visualities. It also disrupts conceptions of Arab women's fixed positionalities, to consider situated emerging, ephemeral visual agencies, beyond theoretical essentialism.

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