

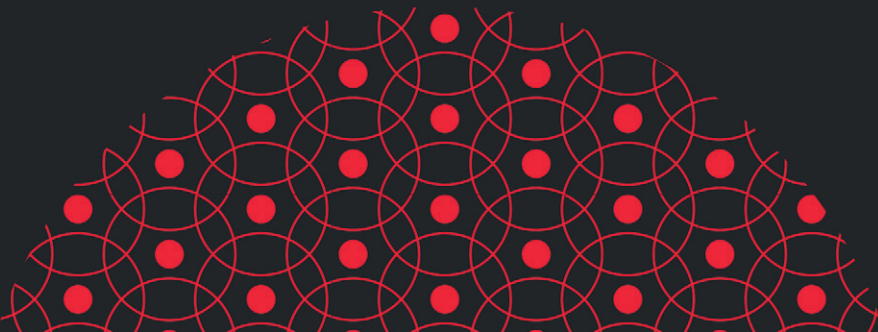


EMERALD POINTS

**SOCIAL MEDIA  
INFLUENCING IN  
THE CITY OF LIKES**

Dubai and the Postdigital Condition

**ZOE HURLEY**



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Dubai and the Postdigital Condition

BY

**ZOE HURLEY**

*Zayed University, UAE*



United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India  
Malaysia – China

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*To my children Max, Eliot and Ruby and their father, Peter Flynn*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Zoe Hurley** is an Assistant Professor at Zayed University, Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE). Originally from London, she has taught in Malaysia, Kuwait and Brunei and is currently located in the United Arab Emirates. Her work focuses on social media in relation to power, gender, visuality and the post-digital condition. She has published articles in leading academic journals, including *Feminist Media Studies*; *New Media + Society*; *Social Media & Society*; *Visual Communication*; *Information, Communication & Society* and *Postdigital Science and Education*.

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# PART ONE: SIGNS OF INFLUENCE

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# INTRODUCTION

*Dubai will never settle for anything other than first place.  
(His Highness Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Prime Minister  
of the United Arab Emirates and the ruler of the Emirate of Dubai)*



Source: ©Richard Cawood (2020) @Photographing Dubai.

**Fig. 1. 'Power Now Is All the Rage'.**

## @INSTACITY

Prior to the discovery of oil in 1966, Dubai was a fishing village: small, unremarkable and poor (Kunzig, 2017). Today, with its soaring skyscrapers, ubiquitous Wi-Fi and shimmering infinity pools, it epitomises a world that is 'young, urban, wired and hot' (see Fig. 1) (Mirzoeff, 2016, p. 4). The iconic Burj Khalifa, standing at 828 metres (2,716.5 ft), is not merely the tallest structure on the planet but a 5G mobile operator; spectacular laser-light-show; and monument to the social media revolution. Social media can be defined as a series of applications facilitating user-driven content. This involves a stack of platforms which organise human connectivity at individual, cultural and economic levels while online and offline spheres are increasingly interdependent (van Dijck, 2013). Alongside Dubai's social media infrastructures, the cityscape itself has been accused of acting like an influencer (Banks, 2021). To understand Dubai's proliferation as a social media cityscape, this book is concerned with why Dubai has become a hub for social media influencers, earning incomes via product endorsements, services and lifestyle promotions. To consider these issues, it will explore the pivotal role of influencing in Dubai's development via three core focus areas.

Focussing on popularism, the study discusses secondary literature, mainstream and popular media surrounding Dubai. Focussing on performance, the study develops a corpus of case studies via visual content analysis, interviews and audience focus groups. Focussing on platforms, the study employs a walkthrough method of social media applications, including Instagram and Facebook (owned by Meta) and TikTok (owned by ByteDance). Examining these interdependent areas will help to locate Dubai's influencer cultures at the nexus of the global visual economy.

Anthropologist Deborah Poole (1997) uses the term visual economy to discuss visual objects' mobilities, exchanges and commodification. Across visual economies, performers, artists, photographers, filmmakers, merchants, writers and influencers have often travelled and consequently the boundaries between distinct visual cultures are impossible to draw (Belting, 2011a). To gauge crisscrossing visual histories, material, political, economic and multi-cultural constellations, the study's interdisciplinary methodology is informed by semiotics, feminism, critical theory, postcolonial and decolonial perspectives while theorising locates Dubai's social media cityscape within the broader context of the postdigital condition.

The term 'postdigital' was first coined by Kim Cascone (2000, p. 12) to signify that the 'digital information age has surely passed' since we live in an era in which digital media are no longer new (Cramer, 2015). Postdigital

theorising acknowledges the merging offline/online contexts while casting a critical-eye on platform capitalism and the promises of big tech (Jandrić et al., 2019). The fusion of social media influencing with city-branding also incorporates shifting patterns of labour within the Global South. The term ‘Global South’ stems from critical scholarship and is used to refer to geographical locations outside of the west but also groups at the fringes of wealth and power within western contexts (Clarke, 2018; Mahler, 2018; Meghji, 2021). The visual cultures paradigm has been debating the role of art, digitalisation and globalisation for some time and expanding approaches for conceiving of visual practices beyond Eurocentric perspectives or theoretical amnesia (see Belting, 2011a; Mirzoeff, 2016; Nakamura, 2008). Building on these perspectives, this book challenges the view that ‘the social significance of visibility is increasing dramatically’ (Fairclough, 1989, p. 28). It contests the idea that digitalisation is the driving force of visual imagery or the common-sense notion that we are experiencing a democratisation of images (Aiello & Parry, 2020). Conversely, it will suggest that visibility has always been a central tenant of culture and power and that many forms of (post)digital imagery are influenced by the conventions of earlier media (Rose, 2015). For instance, a lot of popular social media performances replicate the visual and narrative structures typical of early Hollywood cinema skits.

To develop deeper historical and transnational insights, the study’s novel postdigital visual perspective is conceived to extend scholarship in theoretical terms. The approach draws on semiotic philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) and helps to unpack the significance of visibility in everyday terms (Hurley, 2021a). Peircean semiotics contrasts with (although is not in opposition to) the semiotics of Ferdinand Saussure (1857–1913) (Hurley, 2021a). Whereas Saussure (1916) was concerned with the dyad of sign and signifier, Peirce (1903, 1908) developed a complex doctrine of signs. Signs are defined as social phenomena, including images, sounds, or any qualia communicating meaning (Bergman, 2009; Nöth, 2014; Peirce, 1908). As Mats Bergman (2009, p. 1) suggests, Peircean semiotics is inherently ‘communicative in ways that have not been fully appreciated’ and the concept of semiosis is a powerful analytic tool for conceiving of how signs and their objects of meaning come together at the point of interpretation and to create new meanings in combination. Under the global semiotics’ umbrella, a range of postdigital visual methodological approaches are developed in the book to explore social media influencing beyond fixed contexts or essentialist parameters. In synthesis with semiotics, the study derives from the visual culture paradigm of photography, art history, postcolonial feminism and decolonial theory and refers to the works of Roland Barthes (1957); Walter Benjamin

(1968); Susan Sontag (1977); John Berger (1972); Nicholas Mirzoeff (2006); Lisa Nakamura (2008) and Hans Belting (2011a), who each regard visuality as central to culture and images as a conduit of power. The novel postdigital visual framework underscores each of the chapters which are concerned with addressing the following questions:

- What precisely is a social media influencer?
- Why is Dubai behaving like one?
- Why should we care?

### Structure of This Book

These questions will be addressed across the book's three sections. In the first section, this introductory chapter sets the scene of the study. Chapter 2 will review relevant literature and develop a unique influencer-genealogy to explore the diverse pre-histories of social media influencing. In the second section, Chapter 3 will develop the novel framework of theoretical *pentimenti* which is designed to conceive of the layering of influencer cultures. Chapter 4 will explore notions of authenticity and the pivotal role that Dubai's social media influencers are playing in constructing the emirate's identity. The third section will present a series of case studies. Chapter 5 will describe the case of a social media influencer agency. Chapter 6 shall apply global semiotics to the case of lifestyle influencers. Chapter 7 develops analysis of Middle Eastern influencers' heuristics. Chapter 8 expands postcolonial understandings of Dubai-based British social media influencers. Chapter 9 advances decolonial theorising of the mobile migrant platformed marketplace. Chapter 10 will bring the enquiry to its conclusion while reflecting on the study's limitations and proposing recommendations for future scholarship. Each chapter can be read individually, and in any order, to attend to the Janus-faced questions of why Dubai is acting like an influencer. The following section will offer a brief rationale of how the study's methods are designed to explore Dubai's post-digital condition.

### Methods

The study's novel framework of theoretical postdigital visual *pentimenti* involves a layering of methods, including interviews with influencers,

marketeers and audience focus groups. Analysis involved daily engagements with social media platforms, including Facebook; Instagram; Twitter; TikTok; and YouTube. With the help of research assistants, I collated an extensive corpus of hashtags, URLs and image screenshots which was stored on Pathbrite, the portfolio platform software tool. This enabled content to be displayed across a single dashboard as well as within thematic folders. Influencers referenced in the study are listed in Appendix I. The 14 in-depth case studies of the Dubai-based influencer industry are listed in Appendix II. Appendix III is a glossary of key terms and Appendix IV summarises the study's acronyms.

Parts of this book are written in the first person in order to signal authorial perspective. This aligns with the widely held view that people writing about social matters are influenced by their own political perspectives and experiences (Fairclough, 1989, p. 5). Self-reflexivity is also a crucial tenant of postdigital scholarship (Hayes, 2021). In terms of my own positionality, I am originally from the United Kingdom (UK) but have spent my adult life teaching in Malaysia; Kuwait; Brunei; and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). As a member of the transnational mobile middle classes, I am interested in post-digital ways of belonging and the motivation of the study stems from my commitment to transnational, decolonial and feminist social justice. However, I am cognizant of my privilege as a white, middle class, British passport holder yet aware that teachers are lower down on Dubai's economic hierarchy than corporate professionals employed in banking, security, aviation and technology sectors. My students and I occupy very different Dubai(s) and our experiences can occur in sharp contrast to the lives of construction workers, service contractors, domestic-helpers and drivers of the gig economy. I am also mindful that Gulf academics must critique sociocultural and political issues in broad-brush strokes and authors engaging in fieldwork research could find themselves in vulnerable positions (Hedges, 2019). The fieldwork for this book involved me working closely with Dubai's social media influencers who are part of the brave new generation of Middle Eastern content creators. I say that these influencers are brave because the Gulf context is highly conservative and has harsh penalties for challenging the status quo. These ethical concerns are taken seriously, and I refer only to influencers' materials that have been deliberately shared as public posts and exercise a cautious awareness surrounding Dubai's Internet and defamation laws that prohibit criticisms or views that run counter to governmental regimes (u.ae, 2022).

## CONCLUSION: MULTI-STAKEHOLDER APPROACH

Dubai's postdigital context is complex, transnational and fragmented. Theoretical postdigital visual *pentimenti* will help to explore the sometimes-contradictory postdigital visualities of Dubai's social media influencers and the commercial, cultural and political industries which constitute them. This multi-stakeholder approach is designed for diverse insights into the evolution of Dubai as a social media influencing hub as well as its relationship to the transient channels of postdigital labour. Consecutively, I would like to invite you – a reader – to (re)imagine how far Dubai and its influencers are prepared to go in the quest for social media attention. The following chapter develops an influencer-genealogy which will encourage a rethinking of much of this terrain and sets the conceptual premise for the rest of this book.