

Mapping Visual Cultures of the United Arab Emirates: Past, Present and Future Visions

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Summary

Purpose and importance of study for the UAE

This study explores Dubai's visual cultures and visible economies via the comparative case of two Dubai-based social media influencers (microcelebrities), @Stacey (pseudonym) from the United Kingdom (UK) and @Al.maiiith from the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This helps to reveal the diverse visual practices of the emirate that are being mapped by social media influencers' past, present and future visions of the cityscape. The central question asks, how do images of Dubai circulate in the global, visual economy, why and with what effects? This study's focus on Dubai culture(s), at the nexus of visibility, is important to develop critical insights into how social media influencers not only draw on the contemporary visibilities of the Dubai cityscape but also utilise the historical and future orientated visual practices constituting the UAE.

Methods

The study develops a novel visual framework to explore the social media influencers' visualities within the nexus of Dubai's visible economies (Hurley, 2019; 2022a; 2022b). As author, I was the preliminary instrument, overseeing selection and analysis of the images. Images were selected by searching popular hashtags including, #mydubai; #lovedubai; #dubaimarina; #dubainightlife, #dubailiving, #dubaidreams, etc. This led to the mining of a network of Dubai-based influencers' contrasting backdrops of the Dubai cityscape, in order to monetise content, services, locations and themselves online. Image selection was conducted with the help of three research assistants and images that my undergraduate students brought to our attention. A total of 24,611 Instagram posts were collated over the two-year period. Constructing the corpus of Instagram posts involved collating the images on the software application Pathbrite, to enable visual, statistical and interpretive description.

Study key points

The comparative case of Dubai-based influencers suggests that representations of the Dubai cityscape, on social media, include visual layering, masks, filters, facades, surfaces, architectural styles, experiences and social subjectivities. These visualities culminate to construct differing views of the cityscape, and its diverse social actors, while involving a multitude of geolocational hashtags, locations, spaces and temporalities. While images of Dubai's luxurious social-media-landscape are popular on social media, not all social actors or influencers living in Dubai are carving out substantial incomes from the visual economy. Neither are they necessarily steeped in the same visual practices, traditions and meanings. As a transnational cityscape, images of Dubai are varied, eclectic and contradictory. This study is therefore seeking to understand the diverse mapping of visual cultures within the Dubai cityscape and beyond.

Findings (and how the findings are interpreted)

The comparative case of @Stacey and @Al.maiiith revealed some of the varying visual mappings available to social media influencers in Dubai. @Stacey's images of Dubai were orientated towards Anglo-American followers and portrayed cosmopolitan, glamorous and luxurious aspects of the emirate. Meanings within these aspirational images can be understood as indexes of the influencer's social class mobility since moving to Dubai as well as the construction of Dubai itself as exotic and exceptional imaginary. @Al.maiiith, as a UAE national, showcased Emirati culture and visualities as grounded in Gulf traditions and everyday practices. Interpretations of these visual meanings point towards an entirely different version of Dubai beyond the exceptionalism and exoticism of a neo-Oriental cartography. Overall, Dubai emerges from this study as a visual staging-post that capitalizes on its own visual attractions much like a social media influencer. While it draws on the visual mappings of other cities, it is also deeply informed by its own visual practices and Gulf aesthetic traditions, contemporary practices and future forward aspirations or ru'ya (vision). Considering the multidirectional mappings of a social media cityscape like Dubai, beyond a neo-Orientalist lens of exceptionalism, reveal insights into the Dubai's staging within the global visual economy. Finally, this reveals the potential of Dubai's

diverse cityscape in attracting members of the visible economy, including influencers, for generating revenue in a post-oil-and-gas economy.

Recommendations

Recommendations for future studies are to consider Dubai's everyday visualities and social actors' hybrid interpretations of the transnational cityscape.