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Postfeminist subjectivities across borders

Italian-Bangladeshi Muslim young women's self-representations in digital media culture

Pofi, Maria Paola

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POSTFEMINIST SUBJECTIVITIES ACROSS BORDERS:

Italian-Bangladeshi Muslim young women's self-representations in digital media culture

Maria Paola Pofi

The thesis was submitted to the Department of Culture, Media and Creative Industries at King's College London for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, December 2022.

ABSTRACT

My PhD thesis is driven by the contradictions inherent in contemporary European society, where the discourses on women's empowerment and agency advocated by postfeminism coexist with the widening of social inequalities on multiple levels. While literature on postfeminism has largely focused on white, middle-class subjects, little research has been done on how diasporic women, notably those of South Asian and Muslim cultural backgrounds, experience its effects. The thesis therefore investigates feminine subjectivities through the mediated self-representations and self-narratives of a group of European young women belonging to the Muslim Bangladeshi minority in Italy and the United Kingdom. In particular, I focus on online practices as representational and performative acts situated in the broader context of the young women's everyday lives and, through an intersectional investigation across borders, I take into account the diverse and changing positionings and constitutive social categories (gender, ethnicity, race, nationality, class, and religion) of their subjectivity formation.

The thesis asks the following research questions: How do Italian-Bangladeshi Muslim young women use social networking sites (SNSs) to articulate their female subjectivities? How do they engage with, appropriate and/or contest, dominant gendered discourses? How does gender intersect with other social categories in the process of subjectivity formation? By critically engaging with contemporary postfeminist and neoliberal paradigms in relation to the question of diversity, I seek to bring to light the nuances and contradictions of emerging feminine subjectivities, which are generated by the multiple and competing positions these young women move across both in the sociocultural contexts they inhabit and the dominant discourses they consume and produce.

The thesis draws on a mixed methods research design that was adapted in response to the challenges posed by COVID-19. Online ethnography was the primary method employed, incorporating online questionnaires (n=70), the analysis of Social Networking Profiles (SNPs) (n=71 profiles; n=45 participants), and written interviews (n=37). Grounded theory was applied to generate themes from within the data itself. This led to the generation of nine inter-related codes: selfies and personal portrayals, fashion and beauty, everyday narratives and social time, girl power and success, South Asian gender norms, Bangladeshi culture, Italian culture, online advocacy, and Islam.

The findings reveal that European women belonging to the Bangladeshi-Muslim minority simultaneously do and undo postfeminism by adopting and repudiating dominant discourses through their mediated self-representations. On the one hand, they represent themselves as the new entrepreneurial subjects, capable of navigating not only individual but also structural constraints to re-write their individual biographies. On the other hand, in the process of appropriating and reproducing postfeminism, second-generation young women reformulate its pillars by disrupting some of the binary logics and fixed categories on which it is built. The analysis ultimately suggests that axes of categorisation and layers of discrimination (gender, race, ethnicity, class, and religion) offer insights into how young women negotiate postfeminist and neoliberal demands as well as systemic inequities in their process of subjectivity formation.

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1 YOUNG WOMEN BETWEEN BANGLADESH, ITALY, AND THE UNITED KINGDOM

1.1 Introduction

Representations of migrants, and Muslim migrants in particular, have attracted political and media attention in Europe over the last two decades as a consequence of the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, and the so-called ‘migration crisis’ that broke out in the Mediterranean region in 2013. While there has been great academic interest in the ways new arrivals and people from minority groups were subjected to xenophobic and exclusionary discourses in media coverage of these events (see Alsultany, 2013; Bulli & Soare, 2018; Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017; Osman, 2016; Powell, 2011) little has been explored about how the cultural construction of ‘Others’ is encountered, experienced, and negotiated in diasporic people’s lives. This is particularly the case for diasporic women, who remain largely silent within these discourses and representations. Hence, my thesis considers the relationship between media culture and feminine subjectivities (Gill, 2008a) by focusing on the mediated and lived experiences of a group of European young women belonging to an ethnic and religious minority. In particular, I examine the discursive construction of feminine subjectivities through the online self-narratives and self-representations of 45 Italian-Bangladeshi Muslim young women living in Europe (Italy and the United Kingdom). The choice of this specific group of young women was made based on unexpected findings from my first period of fieldwork in Torpignattara, a multicultural neighbourhood in Rome (Italy), where I was supposed to investigate diasporic belonging and citizenship within a context marked by compounded crises: the 2008 economic crisis and recession, and the 2013 migration crisis and intensified racism. The Muslim Bangladeshi community was initially selected as one of the largest minority groups settled in Rome more adversely affected by a hostile and racist imagery due a combination of racial and religious prejudices, primarily fuelled by the political and media discourses that have marked the Italian

landscape over the last ten years. The disruptions that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic, and the impossibility of being in the field and meeting potential participants in person, led me to interact remotely with members of the young generation mainly through the use of social media. By chatting with them and visiting their social networking profiles (hereafter, SNPs), two main insights were yielded. The first one was that the young women represented themselves and their lifestyles in glamorous and consumerist ways, which contrasts sharply with the Italian and European collective imaginary of South Asian Muslim migrant women as backward and passive subjects (Ahmad, 2016; Dasgupta, 1998; Richardson, 2004; Yu, 2010). The second one was that a considerable number of Italian-Bangladeshi young women had moved from Italy to the United Kingdom for study purposes. I saw in some of their stories my own experiences, as well as those of many motivated and privileged young Italian women who relocate to the United Kingdom for better academic and professional careers. These two findings highlight some of the contradictions of European contemporary culture and, in particular, reveal the deep gap between how Italian-Bangladeshi Muslim young women position themselves and are positioned within European communities and Eurocentric discourses. What intrigued me the most, by looking at their Instagram stories and pictures, was that the representation of femininity was overall in line with dominant postfeminist ideals of physical attractiveness, female empowerment, and career success (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Gill, 2017; McRobbie, 2004, 2007; Tasker & Negra 2007). This led me to think about the pervasiveness and impact of contemporary postfeminist and neoliberal paradigms on the one hand, and to consider how the empowered and successful self-representations shared online could clash and/or be negotiated with the positionings of these young women both in dominant European and Bangladeshi-Muslim discourses. In this chapter, I briefly present the rationale, context, sample, and aims of my study. In particular, I start by explaining the main reasons that motivated me to undertake this specific research project. Thereafter, I contextualise my case study by providing an overview of the Bangladeshi

diaspora in Europe, the diasporic communities in Italy (Rome) and the United Kingdom (London), and the recent phenomenon of onward migration of Italian-Bangladeshis from Italy to the United Kingdom. I continue with a specific focus on my sample by identifying how the young women who took part in my project are positioned both in Eurocentric and dominant South Asian Muslim discourses by making reference to existing academic literature. I conclude by presenting the overall aims and structure of the thesis.

1.2 Rationale for the study: Contradictions of contemporary Europe

My PhD thesis is driven by the contradictions inherent in contemporary European culture, where discourses of female empowerment and agency advocated by postfeminism coexist with the widening of social and economic inequalities. Contemporary postfeminist media culture, which will be discussed in Chapter 2, is permeated by discourses around female power and success, gender equality, and women's agency and choice (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). Within this context, I engage in a critical reading of postfeminism by questioning its overall Eurocentric project that functions as a 'mechanism of power and exclusion' (Butler, 2013, p. 47). In essence, I argue that it is based on the reproduction of simplistic binaries between free and empowered European women and those victimised and oppressed by backward cultural and/or religious practices who still need to be liberated. Gill (2007, p. 163), for instance, talks about postfeminism as 'racialised and heterosexualised', Butler (2013, p. 47) asks whether postfeminism is 'for white girls only', while Dosekun (2015) questions the idea that postfeminism is a sensibility restricted to the Global North. All these stances are based on the common premise that women should not be reduced to a homogeneous yet biased group and highlights the need to be attentive to not only differences across women but also the frames of reference and analysis. Therefore, by drawing on existing literature (e.g. Butler, 2013; Dosekun, 2015; McRobbie, 2009; Tasker & Negra, 2007), I adopt an intersectional and transnational approach to postfeminism.

In doing so, I seek to take into account the ways in which it incorporates difference through an investigation of feminine subjectivities in relation to social categories such as race, ethnicity, nationality, class, and religion.

I believe that such a recognition, and further analysis, is particularly urgent within contemporary Europe where, along with optimistic narratives around transnational mobility, interconnectedness, and multiculturalism, a resurgence of phenomena such as nationalism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia has been identified as a major crisis of the new millennium (Gilroy, 2019; Hall, 2017). In particular, in the last decades, non-European and Muslim communities have been at the centre of polarised debates about ‘the future of cosmopolitanism and the values of social and cultural diversity in Europe’ (Tsagarousianou, 2012, p. 285). In Italy, as a consequence of the so-called ‘migration crisis’ in the Mediterranean, newcomers have been represented predominantly as a threat to Italian culture, security, and economy (Bulli & Soare, 2018). People from non-European and Muslim countries, in particular, have created fertile ground for xenophobic populist reactions and debates on how to deal with an emergency, which have progressively evolved into conflicts and anxieties around ethno-cultural differences (Castelli Gattinara, 2017). Furthermore, in the United Kingdom, the racist political climate, strengthened by the ‘hostile environment’ introduced by Theresa May as Home Secretary in 2012 and pursued by the following Conservative administrations, has found new legitimacy in Brexit campaigns where migrants, often linked to Muslims, have been represented as a growing menace (Poole & Williamson, 2021). Hence, within such a political and social landscape, a number of questions arise: How can celebratory discourses about female empowerment and equality coexist with exclusionary discourses against non-white and/or veiled women? How do European women belonging to historically marginalised ethnic and religious groups deal with competing discourses of femininity? Does the increasing visibility of women belonging to minority groups in

the media, consumer, education, and employment sectors necessarily challenge the structures that support systems of power? These questions, which motivate my work, are not new but they might take on new meanings in a contemporary context marked by deep cultural changes and contradictions. Therefore, my choice to select a group of young women where these discrepancies become evident and to focus on digital media culture brings novel elements to the critical reading of both feminine subjectivity formation and contemporary postfeminist media culture. In particular, my objective is not only to investigate the impact of dominant gendered discourses on the process of subjectivity formation but also to reveal the multiple struggles endured and the forms of agency enacted by European women belonging to an ethnic and religion minority in their process of self-definition within the changing political and cultural map of Europe. As will be further explained in Chapter 3, such an investigation is pursued to bring to light how representations of femininity are consumed, negotiated, reproduced and/or contested online, and what effects they have on young women's self-identification and self-representation processes.

1.3 Context of the study: The Bangladeshi diaspora in Europe

The diasporic phenomenon has strongly characterised the history of Bangladesh and its population (Carnà & Rossetti, 2018), and Europe is one of the main destinations for Bangladeshi migrants along with the United States, India, and the United Arab Emirates. The end of British rule over South Asia in 1947 and the following partition of India have triggered one of the largest mass migrations in history (Kibria, 2022). However, it is only after the proclamation of the Bangladesh independence in 1971 that a distinct diaspora has developed with its specific migratory flows and settlements. In particular, my focus is on two European destinations: Italy and the United Kingdom. While the United Kingdom can be considered as the historical diasporic location for Bangladeshi migrants in Europe (Morad et al., 2014), hosting a large and relatively stable community, Italy has only recently emerged

as a country for immigration, and the Bangladeshi community is still taking shape (Morad, 2021). These two countries are of special concern as they are linked by two phenomena that marked the Bangladeshi diasporic experience in Europe. The first one is the 1971 UK Immigration Act, which restricted immigration to the United Kingdom and so projected migratory flows towards other European countries, thus offering the genesis for Bangladeshi migration to Italy. The second one is the 2008 global (and Italian) financial crisis, which triggered a new flow of migration of Italian-Bangladeshis from Italy to the United Kingdom, pursued especially by the youngest generation. This is why, in the process of rethinking and rescheduling my research project, I decided to include the United Kingdom as a new location for my study, in addition to Italy. This migratory journey is relevant for my case study as it affects two-thirds of participants. As will be discussed across the thesis, the London dream becomes a distinctive feature of young women's postfeminist subjectivities and provides the framework for an investigation of postfeminism across borders and within a minority group of women. In the following sub-section, I provide an overview of the diasporic communities in the United Kingdom (London) and Italy (Rome), by highlighting their historical and structural features, and describe the recent phenomenon of onward migration of young Italian-Bangladeshis to the United Kingdom. In addition to providing an overview of the context of the study, the objective of this sub-section is to reveal how both the ethnic groups, settled in Italy and the United Kingdom, are historically marked by social, economic, and gender inequalities and struggles.

1.3.1 Bangladeshi diaspora in Italy and the United Kingdom

Italy

In January 2021, the Bangladeshi ethnic group was ranked eighth on a list that indicated the highest presence of non-European citizens in Italy. This list was composed of 138,509 regular residents (members holding a residence permit) (Ministero del Lavoro e Delle Politiche Sociali, 2021). The

beginning of the Bangladeshi diaspora in Italy dates back to the 1970s. This period was characterised by a shift in Italian migratory patterns due to a range of social, economic, and political factors: the country's rapid economic growth, which attracted foreigners looking for better living and working conditions; its strategic position in the centre of the Mediterranean, which facilitated arrivals from multiple international routes; and its flexible migration policy, which enabled processes of regularisation. Multiple studies (see Carnà & Rossetti, 2018; Rahman & Kabir, 2012) recognise the 1971 UK Immigration Act, which decreed the expulsion of those Commonwealth citizens with no residence permits, as one of the main push factors that directed Bangladeshi migratory flows toward Italy. The specificity of immigration governance in Italy, in addition, played a key role in defining not only the composition of foreign communities but also their socio-economic integration within the national territory (Bettin & Cela, 2014). Italy has more traditionally been known as a country from which people emigrated. However, since the arrival of the first immigration flows, a number of patterns have become evident in Italy's management of immigration, mainly the lack of both an effective immigration policy and an active national integration plan (Albani et al., 2014). Overall, the main effects of such an approach can be observed in the high number of illegal entries, the significant percentage of irregular immigrants employed in the informal economy, and the low levels of foreign integration (Albani et al., 2014). Many scholars (Ambrosini, 2013; Bulli & Soare, 2018; Castelli Gattinara, 2017; Colombo, 2013) claim that the main reason behind the absence of a structured institutional plan is the longstanding management of the immigration phenomenon as an 'emergency' that, indeed, has made the mass regularisation measure (called *Sanatoria* in Italian) a recurrent legislative instrument of migration policy aimed at erasing illegal foreign presence retrospectively. This legislative provision entails the legal regularisation, through the mass release of residence permits, of all those foreigners already present in the Italian territory at the moment in which it is approved. The first of a long series of mass regularisations was approved in 1986, and that helps to

explain how, from the late 1980s and increasingly from the early 1990s, the periodical regularisation laws encouraged Bangladeshis, including those who were already present in other European countries, to move to Italy to obtain a regular documentation (Morad, 2021). Since the establishment of the first diasporic settlements, Bangladeshi migratory patterns in Italy have taken three main forms: opportunistic migration (Bangladeshis from other countries came to Italy to seize the opportunity to become regular migrants); recruitment migration (based on formal and informal recruitment businesses); and family or kinship migration (related to family reunion policies) (Rahman & Kabir, 2012). Furthermore, a new migratory wave has been registered since the mid-2000s, especially from Bangladeshis already settled in Libya, which is one of the main stopovers on the route from Bangladesh to Italy that goes through Turkey and Saudi Arabia. The number of Bangladeshi migrants arriving in Italy by sea has risen significantly over the last ten years with a related increase in asylum applications (IOM, 2017). This phenomenon has contributed to the Italian collective imagery of Bangladeshi migrants as irregular ones, coming from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and so as a cultural, economic, and security menace. Despite the high percentage of undocumented Bangladeshi migrants living in Italy, however, IOM (2017) reports that the number of Bangladeshis who acquired Italian citizenship grew from 1,460 in 2012 to 5,953 in 2015, and such a gradual stabilisation has affected the composition of the community as well as the living conditions and future prospects of its members.

Overall, Bangladeshi migration to Italy is characterised by a significant gender imbalance. In 2021, the community consisted of 69% male members and 31% female members (Ministero del Lavoro e Delle Politiche Sociali, 2021). These projections reflect the structure of the community which, since the first settlements in the 1970s, has been composed mainly of single men looking for job opportunities to maintain economic ties with families left behind (Rahman & Kabir, 2012).

Bangladeshi women began to reach Italy from the 2000s, mainly due to family reunification processes. The release of residence permits due to family reasons, however, did not impact already existing family units but, conversely, gave rise to a phenomenon called ‘wives by correspondence’ (Bisio, 2013, p. 80), namely marriages arranged at a distance to benefit from regular access to Italy. Once arrived in Italy, Bangladeshi women often find themselves in social and economic conditions below their expectations and/or the promises made by their husbands (Bisio, 2013; Carnà & Rossetti, 2018). Women’s daily lives come to revolve around the education and care of children, which usually takes place within the domestic environment. The lack of familiarity with the urban context and poor knowledge of the Italian language makes it extremely difficult, especially for the newcomers, to socially integrate into the Italian collectivity (Bisio, 2013; Montanari, 2018). Bisio (2013), for instance, talks about a process of ‘re-Islamization’ taking place among Bangladeshi citizens in Rome, expressed through a strong attachment to cultural and religious practices to safeguard their cultural distinctiveness within a foreign, and often hostile, social context. Overall, employed Bangladeshi citizens are marked by a low level of education with 73.6% having at most a secondary school licence (Ministero del Lavoro e Delle Politiche Sociali, 2020) and 6% having a degree (Ministero del Lavoro e Delle Politiche Sociali, 2021). Gender discrepancies are traceable in the employment and remuneration rates too. In 2021, the occupation rate within the community was 82.2% for male members and only 5.2% for female members (Ministero del Lavoro e Delle Politiche Sociali, 2021). Furthermore, while men are involved in the trade, commercial, and restoration sectors with a high number of individual entrepreneurs and small commercial activities, the few employed women are mainly engaged in undeclared domestic work (e.g. as cleaners and housekeepers). Notwithstanding the longstanding female domestic role, however, Bisio (2013) claims that great empowerment for Bangladeshi women takes place through motherhood and commitments related to the growth and education of children, through which they establish social relations with Italian mothers, take part in

school activities, learn the Italian language, and move across the city. In that way, Bangladeshi women and mothers become key players in the process of mediation between the Bangladeshi domestic sphere and the Italian public one.

United Kingdom

According to the 2011 UK Census, 451,529 citizens were of Bangladeshi origin (0.7% of the total population) and Greater London in particular was the city where almost half of the community (222,127) lived (Office for National Statistics, 2013). The Bangladeshi community in the United Kingdom is the oldest and most established of the diaspora in Europe, as it is connected to the country's history of British colonialism. It was formerly based, since the 19th century, on colonial seafaring links between the Bangladeshi region of Sylhet and Britain, where Sylheti lascars were employed by the East India Company (Alexander et al., 2010). From the end of the Second World War, and especially after Indian Independence and Partition (1947), an increasing number of ex-lascars started settling in East London boroughs and Tower Hamlets in particular. The period from the 1950s to 1962 is described as the 'golden age' (Gardner, 2002, p. 93) of migration to Britain as immigration controls were relatively lenient. The migration pattern changed with the first Commonwealth Immigration Act (1962), which was aimed at limiting the numbers of migrants from Commonwealth countries. The provision, in particular, restricted migration to three main categories: those with a specific job to do in the United Kingdom, those with specific skills and qualifications needed in the United Kingdom, and unskilled workers. Moreover, the period from the early 1970s to the 1980s, after the Bangladeshi Liberation from West Pakistan in 1971, registered a further shift in migration patterns, marked by a process of chain migration, based on family reunifications and parental relations, which fostered the creation of a more stable and permanent community in the United Kingdom. The 1981 Census recorded around 65,000 Bangladeshis in the United Kingdom,

which included 16,000 second-generation Bangladeshis born and raised in Britain. Six years later, in 1987, the Labour Force Survey counted 116,000 Bangladeshis, only half of whom were born in Bangladesh (Alexander et al., 2010).

The longer history of Bangladeshi migration to the United Kingdom, in comparison to that of Italy, has enabled the shaping of a more diverse population both in terms of class composition and cultural capital (Della Puppa & King, 2018). Notwithstanding its historical and stable settlement, however, the community is still marked by a range of socio-economic issues including poor housing, a low level of education, and a high level of male unemployment (Alexander et al., 2010). The UK Government reported that in 2021 only 56% of people from the combined Pakistani and Bangladeshi ethnic groups were employed, registering the lowest employment rate out of all ethnic groups in the country (GOV.UK, 2021). A project on the Bangladeshi diaspora in Britain, run by the LSE in 2010, also disclosed that almost half of the population had no qualifications, even though in London the percentage of Bangladeshis aged 16 to 24 who were students was slightly higher than the national average (Alexander et al., 2010). Generational shifts have started taking place over the last decade, as exemplified by an increasing number of middle-class households (Della Puppa & King, 2018) and an improved educational success rate among third-generation Bangladeshis in particular (Alexander et al., 2010). Notwithstanding non-negligible changes at a social and economic level, however, ethnic and gender-based gaps still mark the prospects of British Bangladeshis. The 'Ethnicity, Gender and Social Mobility' report (2017) highlights how, even though young people from a Bangladeshi background are likely to attend university and succeed in education, they are less likely to find permanent employment in managerial or professional occupations in comparison to the British white population (Anonymous, 2017).

1.3.2 Bangladeshi communities in Rome and London: Local settlements and struggles

Rome

Lazio is the Italian region that hosts the highest number of Bangladeshi citizens (28%). They are particularly concentrated in the metropolitan area of Rome (26.8%) where Bangladeshis represent the second biggest non-European community after the Filipino one (Ministero del Lavoro e Delle Politiche Sociali, 2020). Since the first migratory flows in the 1970s, Rome has become the primary city in which the diasporic community in Italy settles. In particular, the eastern part of the city (called Esquilino) is the area that registers the highest presence of foreigners in Rome. At the beginning of the 20th century, after the end of Fascism and the Second World War, this historically proletarian area became a place of internal migration (from the centre and south of Italy). Since the beginning of the 1980s and 1990s, moreover, it suffered from a progressive demographic evacuation, also due to a relatively high crime rate that devalued properties, leaving space for foreign settlements (Broccolini & Padiglione, 2017; Fioretti, 2011). Hence, this district experienced a new repopulation phase thanks to foreign inhabitants and their small and medium scale commercial activities. With the rise of residents, the Bangladeshi community gradually moved towards the eastern neighbourhood of Torpignattara. The settlement in Torpignattara is described by Caragiuli (2013) as an example of diasporic self-identification with the city and, in a relatively short period of time, the term ‘Banglatown’ became part of everyday language, being used to refer to the neighbourhood. Here Bangladeshis have given rise to new forms of social, economic, and associative life, with foreign shops, restaurants, food markets, and prayer rooms visible in the area. This transformative process has been promoted mainly by the Bangladeshi leadership, which has shaped a new urban space and redefined the foundations of a new diasporic political mission: to redevelop a degraded land by incorporating foreign cultural and political dynamics within Italian local social life (Broccolini & Padiglione, 2017). In addition, within the area, numerous Bangladeshi cultural and political

associations have been founded to build institutionalised networks with community members across Italy as well as with those in Bangladesh and abroad.

Notwithstanding the commitment of the Bangladeshi community to the development of the urban settlement area, the economic, social, and housing conditions of foreign residents are still significantly less advanced than that of the average Italian population. Within political and media debates about the management of immigration in Italy, Torpignattara has been described as an ‘emergency area’ at risk of becoming the Italian ‘banlieue’ (Fioretti, 2011, p. 1). An increasing number of clashes between the local and foreign populations have been registered over the last number of years, mainly due to seemingly incompatible social, cultural, and religious practices and values. Ethnographic studies conducted in the neighbourhood (see Broccolini & Padiglione, 2017; Fioretti, 2011) highlight how foreign inhabitants are often blamed for the perceived degradation and danger of the area, as well as for the replacement of local commercial activities with foreign ones. Among the several racist and violent attacks against foreign inhabitants of the neighbourhood, it is relevant to mention the so-called ‘Banglatours’, namely punitive expeditions against Bangladeshis organised by a group of neo-fascists in 2013, which aimed to physically assault them for no apparent reason. Vereni (2017), in his article on male violence in the streets of Dhaka, London, and Rome, explains how, in comparison to other ethnic groups, Asians (Filipinos and Bangladeshis in particular) has been socially constructed through imagery that portrays them as good workers, quiet citizens, and passive subjects, therefore making them an easy target for xenophobic violence. Another reason for local conflict is the Bangladeshis’ Islamic religion, which is often perceived suspiciously by Italian institutions and citizens. For instance, seven worship rooms (five of which were managed by Bangladeshis) were closed in Rome between June 2016 and February 2017. In response, members of the Muslim community in Rome reacted against the disposition by organising outdoor prayers in

public spaces to reclaim religious freedom rights (Russo, 2019). To create a more collaborative multi-ethnic coexistence, a series of cultural associations have also been founded in the area. When I arrived in Torpignattara to start my fieldwork, for instance, I took part in a cultural project called ‘Migrantour’, which runs city tours within multi-ethnic neighbourhoods, designed to give Italian participants a close-up view of the ethnic groups who inhabit and shape the city.

London

London is the city where almost half (222,127) of the Bangladeshi population in the United Kingdom live (Office for National Statistics, 2013). In the Borough of Tower Hamlets, which includes the famous West Indian docks, the Bangladeshi community represents the largest ethnic group (32%) after white British (Tower Hamlets, 2013). There is evidence of a Bangladeshi presence in this area since the 1920s, and this is the reason why the borough is often described as the heartland of the diasporic community in Britain. The district has become popular for Bangladeshi markets and restaurants, especially in the area around Brick Lane, where the community holds the annual Boishakhi Mela (Bangladeshi New Year) in April and Brick Lane Curry Festival in September. This is also the location where the Shahid Minar (Tower of the Martyrs) has been erected as a memorial to the Bangladeshi Liberation Struggle. In addition, as a multi-ethnic borough, Muslims make up 36% of Tower Hamlets’ residents, the vast majority being of Bangladeshi descent, and there are over 40 mosques, including the famous Brick Lane Mosque and the East London Mosque (Alexander et al., 2010). As in the Italian case, therefore, the Bangladeshi settlement in London has led to a transformation and revival of the original site through the introduction of diasporic links and cultural blends (Eade & Garbin, 2006).

In London, the Bangladeshi ethnic group is historically marked by local institutional hostility and, as a response, community mobilisation. In the 1970s and 1980s, Bangladeshi men were involved in local Asian youth organisations, which reacted against the high levels of racist attacks and police harassment that distinguished that historical period. Afterwards, second-generation Bangladeshi activists especially made alliances with left-wing and anti-racist movements in Britain to tackle local issues of discrimination in housing, education, employment, and police-community relations. They also became active participants in local government institutions throughout the 1980s, particularly in Tower Hamlets, which provided a strong foundation for forms of engagement with local politics that has continued until the present time (Alexander et al., 2010). Community institutions, mosques and cultural organisations also grew in the neighbourhood during this period, and Bangladeshis became part of the social imaginary of multicultural London. For instance, in 2020, to pay tribute to the contribution of the Bangladeshi community in East London, the Tower Hamlets Council installed a dual language sign (in English and Bengali) at Whitechapel Station in London.

1.3.3 Italian-Bangladeshi migration to the United Kingdom

The 2017 IOM report, which focuses on migration trends from Bangladesh to Italy, highlights a ‘non-negligible number of Italian citizens of Bangladeshi origin (...) who have moved to the United Kingdom’ (IOM, 2017, p. 1). Recent studies on the Bangladeshi community in Italy, likewise, recognise the same trend of onward migration from Italy to the United Kingdom, pursued especially by the youngest generation. Between 2013 and 2016 alone, more than 6,000 young Italian-Bangladeshis left Italy to reach the United Kingdom, and this choice was usually made for the purpose of studying after obtaining Italian citizenship (Russo, 2019). Della Puppa and King (2018), in their article on Italian-Bangladeshis relocating to London, argue that the 2008 economic crisis, together with perceptions of Italy as a static country, raised concerns among Bangladeshi families about future

prospects, especially for the new generation. Compared to Italy, the United Kingdom is a preferred destination due to the collective perception that there is a more vibrant economic environment and a more prestigious education system for children born and/or who have grown up in Europe. In particular, Bangladeshis living in Italy feel discriminated against both in the labour market, where they are systematically classified as unskilled workers with no chance of social mobility, and in social life, where Italy is considered as a country unprepared for the acceptance of diversity and inclusion measures (Della Puppa & King, 2018). Overall, behind the choice to move to the United Kingdom, there is a widespread aspiration to live in a more cosmopolitan, inclusive, and meritocratic country with higher chances of upgrading one's individual and family social status. Della Puppa and King (2018), however, reveal how the journey to London often leads to a sense of disillusionment as the hope to improve economic and social conditions is undermined by a much more complex reality marked, for instance, by flexible and insecure job positions, poor housing conditions in deprived and working-class boroughs, and limited social relations with the local population.

The Bangladeshi-Italy-UK case study is relevant for the understanding of Italian-Bangladeshi young women as part of a transnational diaspora (Brah, 1996). I link this phenomenon to academic literature on diasporic transnational movements that go beyond the understanding of migration as a linear bipolar model of origin-destination (Della Puppa & Kings, 2018). Transnationalism, in particular, points to the 'systems of ties, interactions, exchange and mobility' that are spreading throughout the globe (Vertovec, 1999, p. 1). The transnational condition, therefore, reflects a 'growing disjunction between territory, subjectivity and collective social movement' (Appadurai, 1996, p. 189) and involves the multiple global flows and relations that surpass national borders and generate new transnational networks, communities, and social spaces (Nedelcu, 2012). A multiplicity of terms have been used to point to the plurality of migratory pathways that arise from transnational and networked

diasporic trajectories: transit migration (Collyer & de Haas, 2012), secondary migration (Nielsen, 2004), stepwise international migration (Paul, 2011), serial migration (Ossman, 2004), and twice migrations (Bhachu, 1985). Collyer and de Hass (2012), in analysing the developing dynamics within the broad category of migration, highlight how the emergence of new terms reflects more complex and changing migratory realities that involve a rapid diversification of both migrant profiles and mobility patterns in Europe as well as elsewhere. In particular, transnational migration includes a new reading of diasporic lives and actions through the inclusion of the multiple locations that the migration experience includes, as well as the connections and ties established and maintained across borders through time/space distancing technologies (Tsagarousianou, 2016). Within a highly mediated society, new digital media are deeply involved in such processes as they enable one to participate in and to develop a simultaneous connection to multiple realities, whether geographically or culturally distant. As highlighted by Georgiou (2006), sustaining transborder lives implies a constant encounter and interaction with multiple ‘others’ that activate processes of cultural comparison and negotiation. Such interactions are both lived and experienced in the migration journey and the processes of re-settlement and coexistence with new local and foreign communities, and imagined through mediated communication. Appadurai (1996), likewise, claims that electronic media ‘offer new resources and new disciplines for the construction of imagined selves and imagined worlds’ (p. 3). With a focus on Italian-Bangladeshi young women in Italy and the United Kingdom, therefore, my primary research interest is to analyse media practices as transnational realities across borders but also to examine their local appropriation in the context of everyday life and in the process of subjectivity formation.

1.4 Sample for the study: Second-generation Bangladeshi Muslim women in Europe

Italian-Bangladeshi Muslim women living in Europe find themselves at the intersection of multiple, and often conflicting, subject positions. As mentioned in the Introduction, my preliminary findings

revealed a deep gap between how they position themselves and are positioned within European communities and Eurocentric discourses. In my analysis, I draw on Brah's (1996) concept of 'diaspora place', a space inhabited not only by diasporic subjects but also those culturally constructed as native, which favours the ambivalence of subject positions and recognises the power dynamics behind the ways in which subjectivities can be articulated. I contextualise my research as a critical space that is sensitive to power discrepancies and contradictions by recognising how multiple and diverse cultural discourses coexist and are negotiated in the process of subjectivity formation. In the following sub-section, I first of all describe how South Asian and Muslim women are situated and represented within dominant gendered and racialised Eurocentric discourses. Furthermore, I explore the contemporary condition of young second-generation Bangladeshi Muslim women within diasporic communities settled in Europe. Finally, I discuss the position of participants within a transnational youth culture of Muslim consumers and fashionistas. In doing so, I follow Ahmad's (2016) criticism of academic feminist literature about Muslim women located in the West on the basis that it relies on and is framed within discourses produced in the Middle East, where the economic, political, and social conditions contrast starkly with those of European countries. To avoid an essentialist and reductionist reading of South Asian and Muslim families and women in Europe, I aim to contextualise my analysis within a specific historical and cultural space where differences between first and second generations of women as well as women who grew up in Italy and Bangladesh are recognised.

1.4.1 South Asian and Muslim women in Eurocentric discourses

People of Bangladeshi descent living in Europe are, most of the time, regarded and labelled as members of the South Asian ethnic group. South Asian is a term commonly used in Europe and North America to denote people originating from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. The

aggregation of these countries is linked to commonalities in sociocultural contexts, colonial experiences, and histories of migration that shape their diasporic communities (Anitha & Dhaliwal, 2019). The use of this term reinforces the common ‘othering’ of people of South Asian descent in dominant European discourses, which recognises neither the distinctiveness of their historical and cultural features nor the heterogeneity of their diaspora. Furthermore, Euro-American mainstream narratives tend to perpetuate the colonial image of South Asian women as weak, passive, submissive, exotic, and subservient subjects (Dasgupta, 1998). In terms of sexuality, in addition, they are portrayed by following two seemingly contrasting narratives: as modest and undesirable or as hypersexualised and fetishised others (Ahmad, 2003; Patel, 2007). Both these racialised and gendered stereotypes not only place South Asian women within a homogeneous group but also reinforce the binary opposition between South Asian traditional cultural loyalty and European modern empowerment (Patel, 2007). Research on South Asian women in East London (Bhopal, 1999), for instance, reveals how they are positioned as ‘traditional women’ with no or low qualifications or as ‘educated women’ described as single, independent, and often ‘deviant’. In that way, the only South Asian women regarded as emancipated are those who have detached themselves from and/or rejected their religious and cultural background (Bhopal, 1998).

Moreover, Bangladeshi women are part of another stigmatised and widely discussed group: Muslim women. Hence, Bangladeshi Muslim women are positioned within discursive frameworks focused on a reductive representation of both culture and religion (Ahmad, 2003, 2016). Thus, as subaltern women belonging to the Global South, they are doubly silenced in systems of representation in the Global North (Spivak, 1988/1993). The question of gender in Islamic culture has been widely debated, in academic and non-academic studies, mainly focusing on the public-private dichotomy that, in turn, has resulted in essentialist discourses on the patriarchal aspect of Muslim societies, the

subordinate role of women, and the separation of male and female roles and activities (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2002, p. 165). Events such as the 2001 US terrorist attack, the 2004 Madrid and 2005 London bombings, and the 2015 Charlie Hebdo attack in France have contributed to the unprecedented visibility of Islam and Muslim communities in Europe, thus reinforcing securitisation discourses (Ahmad, 2003; Tsagarousianou, 2012). As a consequence, there has been an increase in representations of Muslim (especially veiled) women as symbols of terror and subservience (Ahmad, 2016) and so as domesticated and subjugated by male members (Richardson, 2004). Yu (2010) reports that, especially in the aftermath of the September 2011 terrorist attack, Euro-American mainstream discourses have tended to reproduce a monolithic representation of Muslim women as ‘victim subjects, susceptible to misogynistic and systematic violence in Muslim nations, which are deemed as acts of terrorism’ (Yu, 2010, p. 8). Khiabany and Williamson (2008), in their article discussing the contemporary depiction of veiled women in the British tabloid ‘The Sun’, disclose two predominant themes that mark journalistic narratives: the veil as an act of refusal and the veil as an act of resistance. While the first narrative is related to the construction of the veil as a symbol of Muslim women’s refusal to accept British culture and so to embrace modernity, the second one reflects the status of the United Kingdom that suffers from ‘the tyranny of a “culture” imposed by a minority’ (p. 71) and so encloses the threat of terrorism. Both these themes are constructed around a clash between secular-modern Europe and traditional-backward Islam. In particular, the opposition between Muslim and non-Muslim women, as McRobbie (2009) and Macdonald (2006) suggest, is frequently coded in terms of gender equality and sexual freedom. Cooke (2007) coins the term ‘Muslimwoman’ to describe the process through which Muslim women are primarily seen through their religious identification, which has led to the establishment of binary oppositions between pious and modest Muslim women, and liberated and sexy non-Muslim women, which will be further analysed in Chapter 2 by making reference to Neo-Orientalism and gender politics.

1.4.2 South Asian and Muslim women in diasporic communities

The image of the Bangladeshi woman has changed considerably over time due to historical shifts that have marked the country. Since Bangladesh was previously part of the Indian subcontinent, Bangladeshi femininity originally related to the ideal Indian woman constructed around the ‘selfless and motherly’ attributes embraced by Mahatma Gandhi (Ali, 2012). While during the Bangladeshi liberation war (March 26 to December 16, 1971) a new iconic image of women as militants emerged, Bangladeshi femininity has gradually been associated with that of the Muslim woman, given that Bangladesh is a Muslim majority country. After gaining independence from Pakistan in 1971, Bangladesh declared itself an independent secular nation even though, within a short timeframe, Islam became a determinant social force in the Bangladeshi collectivity (Huque & Akther, 1987). Balk (1997), in her paper on rural Bangladesh – where 61% of the population still lives (The World Bank, n.d.) – highlights a rigid division of gender roles, aimed at maintaining control in the social system, with men providing economic support to the household and women taking care of children. Studies and reports (see Blunch & Das, 2014; Ferdaush & Rahman, 2011), recognise how, despite a relevant increase in women’s education and the improvement in women’s social status registered over the last few decades, gender inequalities are still persistent in many areas of the country based on the coexistence of a strict kinship system and conservative attitudes towards women’s role. Conservative attitudes can be detected in diverse domains of domestic and social life: the practice of marriage, which is seen as the culmination of women’s upbringing, the relevance of family honour or ‘izzat’ (the reputation of oneself and one’s family within the group of reference) (Ghuman, 2003), and the performance of gendered public behaviours such as ‘purdah’ (women’s seclusion and restricted mobility in public spaces, which aims to protect women’s chastity and purity) (Blunch & Das, 2014; Mahnaz Murshid, 1997). It is relevant to highlight how in these social contexts, male dominance is not necessarily coercive but, on the contrary, often based on passive consent of the

subordinated female subjects who accept their status as given (Hartmann, 1981). Kabeer (2011), indeed, discusses how female dependence on men for economic needs and social protection makes women particularly vulnerable as their dependent status leads them to comply with, rather than challenge, the social structures within which male dominance is rooted. In addition, the state's inability to deal with poverty, illiteracy, and corruption has prevented the effective development of civil rights plans for women (Mahnaz Murshid, 1997). Women's movements over the last 30 years, notwithstanding their weaknesses and the fact that they are restricted to urban and middle-class circles, have fought to increase women's economic empowerment, tackling domestic violence, and ensuring female public roles (Mahnaz Murshid, 1997).

Other studies (e.g. Ahmad, 2003), however, criticise the literature's over-emphasis on issues related to kinship systems, household structures, and arranged marriages, which serve to reinforce the stereotyping of South Asian Muslim women, thus failing to 'situate subjects as diverse and dynamic politicized individuals with both macro and micro contexts' (Ahmad, 2003, p. 45). Academic research on second- and third-generation South Asians and Muslims in Europe, indeed, attempts to grasp more complex dynamics by relating issues of social change, agency, and identity to questions of power structures, structural inequalities, subjectivity, and self-reflection (Ahmad, 2003; Basit, 1997b; Brah, 1996; Butler, 1999; Lazreg, 1988). In particular, research on the Bangladeshi ethnic minority in Europe overall reveals the contradictions inherent in diasporic families and communities, where elements of continuity and change intertwine. First of all, the social structure of the community, based on family and kinship ties, is often reproduced abroad and plays a key role in shaping gender relations. Akter (2013, p. 20), in her PhD thesis on the social networks of British-Bangladeshi young women, talks about 'extended family networks', while Shariff (2009, p. 38) refers to 'the collectively oriented South Asian culture' to explain how the emphasis on collectivism reinforces intra-familial

interdependence and how the interests of the group come prior to those of its individual members (Basit, 1997a). Furthermore, both Carnà and Rossetti (2018) and Akter (2013), in investigating respectively the Bangladeshi diasporic communities in Italy and the United Kingdom, claim that family-centric values are often maintained abroad. This is also reinforced by the Bangladeshi masculine diasporic model, which is based on the role of the family head, successful entrepreneur, and efficient breadwinner (Vereni, 2017). One of the main reasons why gender dynamics are often preserved by the older generations is precisely because of the close-knit social structure of the community and the preservation of family respectability and honour (Ghuman, 2003), which is interpreted as the reputation of oneself and one's family as the group of reference.

Despite the seeming reproduction of the communitarian social structure abroad, however, novel elements can be identified especially in the sphere of women's education as well as participation in media and consumer culture. More recent studies on South Asian and/or Muslim women in Europe (Abbas, 2003; Ahmad, 2001, 2016) have highlighted not only their growing visibility in higher education institutions but also the role of parents in encouraging daughters to obtain degrees and succeed both at academic and professional levels. Education for women, in particular, becomes a form of investment. The acquisition of daughters' academic qualifications becomes not only a means to achieve upward social mobility and increase the family's reputation and prestige within the collectivity (Abbas, 2003; Afshar, 1989; Basit, 1997a) but also a way of overcoming the stereotypical imagery of South Asian families as uneducated, patriarchal, and backward (Ahmad, 2001). However, concerns have emerged among families regarding both the perceived corruptive influence of the wider secular society abroad and the effect that education may have on daughters' role as wives (Ahmad, 2001; Basit, 1997a; Ijaz & Abbas, 2010). On the one hand, a degree upgrades daughters' reputation and prestige, but on the other hand it may limit their future marriage prospects due to an

increased marriage age but also their upgraded social position. At the same time, though, research on the impact of education on South Asian women in East London reveals how women with high levels of education are more likely to reject gendered practices such as arranged marriages and dowries (Bhopal, 2000). Likewise, Ijaz and Abbas's (2010) research on British Muslims highlights that education offers young women a growing sense of independence and confidence in their personal development. While some scholars (e.g. Ali, 2003) locate diasporic women's forms of resistance in the act of the transgression of communitarian social norms, others (e.g. Jahan, 2011) recognise agency in the action of living strategically with norms. Lindridge et al. (2004), for instance, in their exploration of postmodern ethnic families and households, use the term 'cultural navigators' to refer to second-generation South Asian women in Britain who adapt their cultural identities, attitudes, and practices of consumption to the contrasting cultural frameworks with which they interact.

1.4.3 Young women in the global community of Muslim fashionistas

Second-generation women are also positioned within a transnational youth culture of Muslim consumers and influencers, which has been discussed in academia especially in relation to the 'cyber-Islamic environment' (Beta, 2014, p. 377), Islamic culture industry, and consumer capitalism (Gökariksel & McLarney, 2010; Fayaz, 2020). A relevant transformation taking place within Muslim communities is related to the emergence of Islamic digital and consumer cultures, which have provided women with new premises, formats, and contents to cultivate the Islamic faith as well as perform Muslim femininity. An increasing number of scholars have started investigating the relationship between Islam and technology, by focusing both on how digital media have been adapted to meet Islamic cultures and how Islamic practices have been transformed by digital media and information (e.g. Nugraha, 2020; Lengauer, 2018; Qayyum and Mahmood, 2015; Slama, 2018; Zaid et al., 2022). Research on contemporary Muslims (e.g. Fealy & White, 2008) reveals how Islam is

increasingly approached as a rational and pluralistic faith, and these new personalised reinterpretations of religious dogma are further facilitated by digital platforms (Beta, 2014). The media and the adoption of the principles of the market economy, in particular, have changed not only Islamic practices but also Muslims' self-perceptions and self-definitions (Akou, 2010; Kiliçbay & Binark, 2002).

Within such a scenario, Muslim women increasingly emerge as agents in the moulding of Islamic popular culture (Baulch and Pramiyanti, 2018), actively involved in the production, circulation, and exchange of content by women for women. In her study of Muslims in France and Germany, for instance, Jouili identifies a growing 'feminisation of the Islamic institutional landscape' as a trend (2015, p. 24), while Weng (2018) talks about the 'beautification' of Da'wah (Islamic proselytisation) to refer to new formats of social media that favour sensation and aesthetic to disseminate religious messages. Furthermore, especially across female audiences, Islamic knowledge, performances, and selves are increasingly mediated through commodified cultural forms and spaces (Gökarıksel & McLarney, 2010). In particular, the meanings behind the practice of veiling have changed due to the articulation of the Islamic faith into consumption culture (Kiliçbay & Binark, 2002). Kiliçbay and Binark (2002), for instance, discuss how in Turkey from the religious/traditional meaning (linked to the Islamic principles as stated in the Quran) and the political meaning (seen as a symbol of political Islam), the practice of veiling has acquired a new meaning into the capitalist system. In particular, they highlight how the veil cannot be fully understood in contemporary times without taking into account its relation to patterns of consumption, commodity, and pleasure, which are fostered by local and global trends of the market economy. Muslim fashionistas, influencers, and bloggers have promoted this transformation by shaping a global community of Muslimahs (Muslim women) or Hijabers

(veiled young women) in which the Islamic faith is increasingly associated with fashion trends, consumer practices, and glamorous lifestyles.

The increasing visibility of veiled women within influencer culture (Ahmad, 2016), consumer and brand cultures (Fayaz, 2020) has been discussed in their potential to produce alternative narratives that question stereotypical Eurocentric ones, which represent them as oppressed and victimised subjects (Kumar, 2012; MacDonald, 2006). Contemporary urban Muslim women, on the contrary, are increasingly featured in brand culture as empowered (Banet-Weiser, 2018), stylish and beautiful (Lewis, 2013), and entrepreneurial (Duffy & Hund, 2015) with the hijab acting as a ‘key signifier of their marked difference’ (Fayaz, 2020, p. 2). However, emerging mediated Muslim platforms and figures have also been critically examined in relation to their risk of promoting consumerism and the commodification of difference. For instance, Baulch and Pramiyanti’s (2018) analysis of Hijabers on Instagram reveals that the effort to emulate role models and be part of successful circles ‘validate the idea that the ideal woman is a consuming woman’ (2018, p. 2). Gökariksel and McLarney (2010), likewise, in examining Muslim women as a new market niche within the Islamic culture industry, argue that ‘contemporary Muslim femininities are increasingly mediated through the market forces of consumer capitalism’ (2010, p. 2). Mainstream fashion industries have gradually commodified the hijab (Bahrainwala & O’Connor, 2019) and the emergence of Muslim women in mainstream advertisements has also been explained through a sense of pleasure derived from the visibility of racial difference (hooks, 2005). The intersection between brand culture and Islam, therefore, shapes a particular image of the Muslim woman as a ‘marketable global citizen and neo-liberal subject’ (Kassam, 2011, p. 544) integrated into Western culture. Banet-Weiser (2018) is also critical on how, in the economies of visibilities, advertisements ‘privilege beauty and the body’ (p. 52) and so Muslim women are often featured as fashion models and/or are conventionally beautiful. Therefore,

constructed under the ‘corporate gaze’ (Wissinger, 2012), new representations of Muslim women tend to conform to the Western taste (Mamdani, 2004) and perform within the economy of visibility (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

1.5 Aims of the study: Digital media culture and feminine subjectivities

Taking the aforementioned social and cultural context as a point of departure, the objective of my thesis is to investigate the relationship between digital media culture and feminine subjectivities. My interest, in particular, is to further explore how multiple and competing gendered discourses are consumed, reproduced, negotiated, and/or resisted by Italian-Bangladeshi Muslim young women, and what the effects are on their self-identification and self-representation processes. In doing so, I focus on online practices as representational and performative acts (Naezer, 2020) situated in the broader context of young women’s everyday lives. By following an intersectional approach to subjectivity, which will be discussed further in Chapter 2, the interplay between gender, ethnic, racial, and religious identifications are disentangled to identify the nuances and contradictions of the feminine subjectivities generated by the multiple and competing positions these young women move across both in the sociocultural contexts they inhabit and the dominant discourses they consume. Through my analysis, I aim to address three main research questions:

1. How do Italian-Bangladeshi Muslim young women use social networking sites (SNSs) to articulate their female subjectivities?
2. How do they engage with, appropriate and/or contest, dominant gendered discourses?
3. How does gender intersect with other social categories in the process of subjectivity formation?

1.5.1 Structure of the thesis

In Chapter 2, I discuss the literature review on which I will build my research project. It consists of three main sections. In the first one, I explore the relationship between media culture and subjectivity by employing Foucault's (1982, 1988) theory of 'technologies of the self' and Butler's work on performativity (1990) to recognise both the power of the regulatory discourses through which subjectivity takes shape and the potential agency of the subject to alter them. In the second section, I contextualise my research within the domain of postfeminist culture and, in particular, by harnessing Rosalind Gill's (2007, 2017) conceptualisation of postfeminism as a 'sensibility' in order to recognise how it has expanded to operate across discursive, affective, and psychological spheres and turned into a 'taken-for-granted common sense' (2017, p. 609). In particular, I focus on gendered self-representations and the social construction of femininity on social networking sites (hereafter, SNSs), and I highlight my choice to adopt an intersectional approach to the study of subjectivity through mediated and lived experiences. In the last section, I debate the politics of representation and difference, by drawing mainly on Stuart Hall's (1992, 1996, 2017) critical stances, to interpret social categories of nation, ethnicity, and race as discursively constructed and to investigate contemporary struggles over difference by focusing on diasporic phenomena and encounters with the 'Other'. I then specifically focus on Neo-Orientalism in relation to gender politics to examine the European construction of South Asian and Muslim women in cultural and media discourses as a reproduction of the Orientalist rhetoric and practice.

In Chapter 3, I introduce the methodological design of my study. I start with an account of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on my original research plan and present my ethnographic study, which I conducted using a mixed methods approach. In particular, I explain in detail how I collected data through questionnaires, analysis of SNPs, and interviews, and the steps I followed to code, integrate,

and critically interpret data through grounded theory. I conclude by discussing the ethical issues that emerged from both the remote interaction with participants and my own position as a researcher within a group of young second-generation South Asian Muslim women and the mitigation strategies implemented.

In Chapter 4, I investigate the common strategies employed to represent the female body, appearance, and lifestyle, which bring to light the restricted and standardised visual repertoire young women draw from to mould a desirable and successful self-image online. In particular, I claim that the apparent diversification of female subjects and bodies – in terms of size, shape, skin colour but also fashion styles – appears to be constrained by normative ideals of female attractiveness, confidence, and wealth promoted by postfeminist popular media culture. Furthermore, I discuss young women's interpretation and performance of femininity through neoliberal ideologies at the centre of which is the self, which stands out as the main subject of investment. In particular, I illustrate how participants seek to recreate themselves as empowered through two main practices: the embracement of self-esteem and self-worth narratives, and the pursuit of academic and professional success. I ultimately suggest that Italian-Bangladeshi Muslim young women are invited to become the new 'ideal subjects' (McRobbie, 2007, p. 718) of female liberation and empowerment within alleged postracial and postfeminist European societies, where structural inequalities are considered as individual issues. Thus, those who succeed become exemplary cases of self-reliance and self-determination.

In Chapter 5, by following an intersectional approach to the study of subjectivity, I further investigate how participants find themselves at the crossroads of multiple and conflicting subject positions through the analysis of additional axes of categorisation such as nationhood, ethnicity, and race. My objective is to reveal participants' sense of being as woman in relation to their condition of being

simultaneously migrant, South Asian, and European. In particular, I am interested in examining how participants are positioned, and position themselves, within diverse national contexts and the ethnic groups they inhabit and move across on a daily basis. After exploring the impact of the action of mobility on participants' sense of belonging, I structure my analysis by following two main perspectives. The first section analyses how young women of South Asian descent are positioned within Eurocentric dominant discourses, and how they react to processes of exclusion through the use of SNSs. Data collected through online ethnography demonstrates that their subject position as 'Other' triggers processes of identification with diverse minority groups and movements to collectively claim recognition and participation within European societies. The second section is based on participants' positioning within the Bangladeshi community and identifies two main strategies through which young women react to and negotiate domestic gender norms and expectations: the tactical use of their SNPs, and what I refer to as online confessions with South Asian brown female users where personal stories and experiences are shared to build awareness, support, and collective change. Finally, I both recognise that participants are subjected to competing ethnicised and racialised interpretations of femininity, and the potential role of digital platforms to become avenues to resist the dominant discourses in which they are placed, as well as to reconfigure symbolic boundaries, as a way of expressing and performing what being an Italian-Bangladeshi woman means.

In Chapter 6, in line with the analysis of Chapter 5, I further investigate participants' feminine subjectivities in relation to religion, which emerges as another relevant axis of categorisation and an additional layer of discrimination within the sample. In particular, my primary interest is in investigating how young Italian-Bangladeshi Muslim women experience and manifest their faith online both individually and collectively and how they respond to and negotiate multiple and competing interpretations of Muslim femininity rooted both in European and Islamic dominant

discourses. In particular, the first section presents the diverse approaches through which participants consume and produce Islamic knowledge online. Results suggest that the individualistic and self-reflexive approach to religion that SNSs favour, which facilitates greater access to knowledge and the fragmentation of religious authority, also challenges historically established Islamic gender norms. The second section shows the multiple and contrasting performances of Muslim femininity enacted online by participants, which contribute to dismantling essentialist Neo-Orientalist discourses on Islam and the Muslim woman. I ultimately suggest that SNSs, and the emergence of Muslim digital media culture, provide young Muslim women with new means and premises to mould alternative interpretations and performances of both religion and femininity that, despite simultaneously questioning official Islamic practices as well as European stereotypical imageries of Islam, conceal new potential traps related to the questions of diversity and visibility in media culture.

In Chapter 7, I summarise the key findings that emerged from the critical interpretation of collected data and the most relevant insights enclosed in the three main chapters (4, 5, and 6) of the analysis. I structure my discussion into three main arguments. I start by debating the need to think about and critically investigate postfeminism across borders, which provides for a transnational and intersectional approach to the study of feminine subjectivities that recognises the multiple and mutable positions of the subject. Furthermore, on the second and third levels, I focus on my specific sample of young European women belonging to the Bangladeshi-Muslim minority and examine how, in the process of self-representation online, they simultaneously do and undo postfeminism. I explore both sides of these contemporary dynamics. On the one hand, I explore how the reproduction of the postfeminist sensibility intersects with the question of diversity and examine under what conditions and at what cost historically marginalised women gain visibility in Eurocentric contemporary dominant discourses. On the other hand, I recognise how, in the process of appropriating and

reproducing postfeminism, second-generation South Asian Muslim young women contribute to the reformulation of its pillars by disrupting some of the binary logics and fixed categories on which it is built. In particular, I suggest that axes of categorisation and layers of discrimination (gender, race, ethnicity, class, and religion) offer insights into how young women negotiate postfeminist and neoliberal demands as well as systemic inequities in their process of subjectivity formation.

1.6 Conclusion

In this first chapter, I introduced the rationale, context, sample, and aims of my study. I explained the reasons why, after the disruption of my original research project due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I decided to focus my attention on the relationship between digital media culture and feminine subjectivities by selecting a group of European young women who remains largely silent both in Eurocentric discourses and feminist media studies scholarship. In particular, I contextualise my study in the contemporary European cultural landscape, which is characterised by deep changes and contradictions. The discourses of female empowerment and agency advocated by postfeminism, indeed, coexist with a resurgence of phenomena such as nationalism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia. The young women who took part in my research project are affected by such contradictions. They are European, and thus subjected to postfeminist and neoliberal forces, but they are also part of an ethnic and religious minority, and thus more vulnerable to social and economic forms of discrimination. Furthermore, the Bangladeshi diaspora in Europe is relevant as this ethnic and religious minority group is historically marked by social, economic, and gender inequalities and struggles; yet, the recent phenomenon on onward migration from Italy to the United Kingdom reveals the transformations that are taking place within the new generation of women. These young women, as demonstrated by existing debates around Eurocentric and dominant Bangladeshi-Muslim discourses, find themselves at the intersection of multiple, and often conflicting, subject positions.

Therefore, my objective is to explore how they consume, reproduce, negotiate, and/or resist multiple and competing gendered discourses, and what the effects are on their self-identification and self-representation processes. By employing an intersectional approach to the study of subjectivity, I will reveal how postfeminism operates across borders and incorporates diversity through an investigation of identity categories such as gender, ethnicity, race, nationality, class, and religion. This is why my literature review, which will be discussed in the following chapter, incorporates academic scholarship on media culture and subjectivity, critical stances on postfeminism, and the politics of representation and difference.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

In this second chapter, I discuss the literature on which I have built my research project. It is composed of three sections that cover the main academic debates surrounding the critical analysis I have pursued. I start by exploring the relationship between media culture and subjectivity by employing Foucault's (1982, 1988) theory of 'technologies of the self' and Butler's (1990) work on performativity, to recognise both the power of the internal regulatory discourses through which subjectivity takes shape and the potential agency of the subject to alter them. I specifically focus on diasporic subjects and identify a gap within media and diaspora studies, which I try to fill by paying attention to generational and gender differences within the selected diasporic community. In the following section, I contextualise my research within the frame of contemporary postfeminist culture by following Gill (2007) in her understanding of postfeminism as a 'sensibility'. I focus in particular on gendered self-representations and the social construction of femininity on SNSs. Moreover, through an engagement with diverse streams of criticism of postfeminism and neoliberalism, I highlight my choice to adopt an intersectional approach to the study of subjectivity. In the last subsection, I debate the politics of representation and difference, by drawing on Stuart Hall's (1992, 1996, 2017) and Paul Gilroy's (1987, 2019) critical stances, in order to interpret social categories of nationality, ethnicity, and race as discursively constructed, and to investigate contemporary struggle over difference by focusing on diasporic phenomena and the encounter with the 'Other'. I specifically draw attention to Neo-Orientalism in relation to gender politics in order to examine the European construction of 'Other' women (i.e. South Asians and Muslims) in cultural and media discourses as a reproduction of the Orientalist rhetoric and practice.

2.2 Media culture and subjectivity

2.2.1 *The discursive production of subjectivity*

My research project seeks to inquire into the relationship between media culture and feminine subjectivities, or ‘lived embodied experiences of selfhood’ as Gill (2008a, p. 433) defines it. Historically, this relation has been explored by Foucauldian-influenced scholars (e.g. Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993) by focusing on feminine subjectivities and disciplinary power, as well as by feminist social psychological scholars (e.g. Grogan, 1999; Wykes & Gunter, 2005) interested in psychological issues related to body image and self-esteem. In more recent times, the academic field of cultural and media studies has been marked by a criticism of the hypodermic and deterministic model of cultural influence on subjectivity in favour of more nuanced theories based on notions of subjects’ autonomy and agency. In particular, I follow both Foucault’s (1982, 1988) theory of ‘technologies of the self’ and Butler’s (1990) work on performativity in an effort to recognise both the power of the internal regulatory discourses through which subjectivity takes shape and the potential agency of the subject to alter them.

Foucault's attempt was ‘to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects’ (1982, p. 777). His theory is primarily based on the acknowledgement that subjectivity is discursively constructed and that power and knowledge work to constitute ‘regimes of truth’ (1988, p. 18), which define the ways in which subjects come to understand themselves. In fact, according to Foucault, it is ‘the operation of power [that] constitutes the very subjectivity of the subject’ (Bartky, 2020, p. 106). Subjectivity, in addition to being constituted, is historically constituted – so might take different forms at different times – and constituted through practices or techniques – understood as ‘models’ that an individual ‘finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, and his social group’ (Foucault, 1997, p.

291). In particular, by following Foucault, I am interested in the disciplinary practices young women are subjected to in multiple social institutions of their daily life (e.g. family, peer group, media) and the effects they have on subjectivity formation. As Foucault argues, in modern societies, effects of power 'circulate through progressively finer channels, gaining access to individuals themselves, to their bodies, their gestures and all their daily actions' (1980, p. 152). Foucault's work, however, has been criticised for being overly deterministic and reducing the subject as a passive effect of power (see Borg, 2015). Feminist researchers have critically engaged with Foucauldian theory. Pini (2004), for instance, claims that 'technologies of the self' include 'all the different ways in which we work upon our bodies so as to become a self' (p. 164). In his later works, indeed, Foucault moved from an inextricable passive subject, constructed within discourse, to a more autonomous subject, where agency is located in the ability to self-reflexively adopt a discourse within a set of available discourses. Hence, it is useful to harness Foucault's theorisations in tandem with Butler's concept of performativity (1990), as she brings forward the notion of agency, recognising the ability of the subject to not only select but also to alter the available discourses, even though these alterations always take place within power structures. In particular, according to Butler (1988), gender is not a stable identity but rather constituted in time 'through a stylized repetition of acts' (p. 519). It is precisely because gender identity is constituted through repeated acts through time, that the possibilities of gender transformation should be founded in the 'arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style' (p. 520). I use both these theorisations to identify how subjectivities are regulated by a repetition of disciplinary discourses surrounding femininity but also how these may be actively negotiated by the subject through counter or alternative discourses and performances.

In my thesis, gender is conceptualised as socially constructed and thus shaped by embodied and discursive social practices and interactions (Butler, 1990). In order to link subjectivity with media and cultural discourses, I follow Gill (2008a) in her approach to understanding and investigating media culture ‘as a collection of material practices’ that do have material effects (p. 435). Media culture, and the Internet in particular, is seen as a key site where beauty norms and codes of sexual conduct are defined (McRobbie, 2004, p. 258), and so where women are offered social discourses and imaginaries that play a significant role in the process of their gender and sexual identity formation (Arnett, 1995; Brown et al., 1994; Durham, 1999, 2004; Milkie, 1994). Cultural constructions of femininity, therefore, operate as technologies of the self, namely as discourses that invite audiences to transform and regulate themselves (Gilchrist, 2020). As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, in my analysis, the digitally-mediated space becomes the everyday life context in which young women are exposed to and engage with a multitude of resources they draw from to model their interpretation and performance of femininity. My interest, in particular, is in further exploring the ways in which these media discourses are understood, appropriated and/or subverted by taking into account the lived and mediated experiences of the subjects and the specific social, cultural, and economic conditions in which they are placed.

2.2.2 Media culture and diasporic subjects

Media scholarship related to diasporic phenomena and subjects has primarily drawn attention to the significance of ethnic minorities’ engagement with media and popular culture within a transnational and interconnected space. In particular, migratory movements have been investigated to comprehend how boundaries, cultures, and identities are transformed not only through the action of mobility but also through transnational connections and cross-cultural exchanges and conflicts, which are increasingly enhanced by intensified mediation (Georgiou, 2006; Gillespie, 1995). Madianou (2014)

claims that for many migrant individuals and groups who voluntarily or involuntarily flee their country of origin to reach new destinations, their engagement with media and communication technologies has become crucial to their existence. Georgiou and Ponte (2013) further highlight how media consumption has become intense and diversified within migrant audiences precisely because of their ‘transnational condition and their multiple connections between and within spaces’ (p. 3).

Since the early 1990s, a new body of research has started to empirically investigate the use of media and communication technologies within ethnic minority groups settled in European and North American countries in order to identify consumption patterns at local and global levels. Early studies were mainly focused on the engagement with satellite TV, such as those of Naficy (1993), Gillespie (1995), and Aksoy and Robins (2000). Naficy, for instance, by examining Iranian exiles living in Los Angeles, reveals how the use of Iranian TV programmes aims to reproduce the original culture but also to constitute and transform the community itself, since TV triggers processes of negotiation between the country of origin and that of settlement (Naficy, 1993, p. 90). Gillespie reaches similar conclusions in analysing the roles that TV programmes and movies occupy within the Punjabi community in Southall (London) by focusing specifically on second-generation young migrants. She observes how TV provides them with imaginative resources through which to mediate between the parental (Punjabi) culture, the dominant (white English) culture, and the global teen consumer culture. In particular, the juxtaposition of culturally diverse TV programmes and movies stimulates cross-cultural and contrastive analyses of media texts, thus increasing the awareness of cultural differences and encouraging cultural change (Gillespie, 1995, p. 76). Furthermore, Aksoy and Robins (2000) analyse the implication of media, and in particular Turkish transnational TV, in the process of cultural negotiation among the Turkish diasporic community in London. They explain how a direct daily engagement with Turkey through media consumption produced mixed feelings, notably ambivalence,

criticism, and even alienation since, within the new local context of settlement, the audience is involved in constant cultural comparisons. These early studies elaborate on the experience of transnational media culture and its role in enabling diasporic subjects to think and live across cultures and spaces.

More recent studies on diasporic subjectivity and digital technologies have followed multiple directions and produced diverse outcomes in terms of: diasporic transnational lives and identities in highly mediated worlds (Georgiou, 2006, 2010), transnational families (Madianou, 2016), transnational cultural practices (Fazal & Tsagarousianou, 2002), questions of multiple belongings (Christiansen, 2004) or cross-borders belongings (Madsen & van Naerseen, 2003), identities drawn from web hyperlinks (Diminescu & Loveluck, 2014), post-national identities (Hopkins, 2009), transnational identities (Vertovec, 2001), and so on. Despite the significant insights that come from the conceptualisation of identity and belonging as unmoored from fixed geographical and cultural boundaries, the majority of these contributions take into account diasporic communities as a whole, without paying specific attention to their internal diversification, especially in terms of generation and gender. A few studies more specifically investigate youth migrant audiences and digital technologies, such as those of Leurs and Ponzalesi (2013) in their work on digital identity and performativity among Moroccan Dutch young migrants, or Mainsah (2011) in his analysis of Norwegian immigrant youths' use of SNSs as spaces of individual expression. An exception is the work of Durham (2004) who investigates the role of media in South Asian American girls' sexual identity construction, although it must be noted, however, that in contrast to my work, her analysis is based on interviews and lived experiences only and not mediated ones. Overall, therefore, the research field that focuses on the link between digital media culture and South Asian European

feminine subjectivities remains still largely unexplored in media and cultural studies, a lacuna my work seeks to address.

2.3 Gendered cultural formations in Europe

2.3.1 Elements of a postfeminist sensibility

As introduced in Chapter 1, I contextualise my research by taking into account the contradictions of contemporary Europe, as well as the concepts of postfeminism, neoliberal and popular feminism, which have been used to refer to dominant gendered popular cultural formations in Europe. Over the last 30 years, the notion of postfeminism has become of greater relevance within the vocabulary of the feminist cultural field, even though its popularity has not been supported by a clear, unique, and shared definition. Despite multiple attempts to identify the features that constitute postfeminism, its conceptualisation has remained anchored to broad theoretical stances with no analytical specificity. Overall, three dominant accounts of postfeminism have been developed so far: a new epistemological/political position based on feminism's encounter with difference, a historical shift within feminism, and a backlash against feminism (Gill, 2007, p. 148). McRobbie (2004) refers to postfeminism as an active process through which the feminist achievements of the 1970s and 1980s began to be undermined, taken into account and/or repudiated. Indeed, the distinctiveness, and the resulting complexity, of this theoretical construct lies precisely in its tangle of feminist and antifeminist discourses, built on internal contradictions (Gill, 2008a). Gill (2007, p. 147), in particular, understands postfeminism as a 'distinctive sensibility' marked by an intersection of recurrent themes: the notion of femininity as a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the dissemination of self-surveillance, monitoring, and self-discipline practices; the emphasis on individualism, choice, and empowerment; the role of the make-over paradigm; and the return to ideas on natural sexual difference.

One of the central concerns, which is a pivotal part of all themes related to a postfeminist sensibility, is of female agency, choice, and empowerment. Such long-awaited breakthroughs in the feminist struggle can be first of all anchored to the woman's body. Since the late 90s, the intensification of the scrutiny of female bodies has transformed and is now explained through discourses around self-pleasure. Thus, rather than being subjected to regulatory and punitive mechanisms, practices that female bodies are exposed to and that are employed as a form of self-improvement are presented as freely chosen (Gill, 2008a). Hence, in postfeminist popular and media culture, women are no longer depicted as passive objects of the male gaze but conversely as confident, autonomous, and powerful subjects (Arthurs, 2004; Lazar, 2006). Gill (2008b) claims that the shift from female objectification to subjectification is framed and sold through discourses of 'playfulness, freedom, and, above all, choice' (p. 42). Women's goal, in postfeminist societies, is not to seek male approval but, on the contrary, to please themselves through an internalisation of heteronormative gender norms and expectations that act as a new form of disciplinary regime. Indeed, one of the main reasons why feminism is 'taken into account' or 'no longer necessary' is precisely because female sexualisation is not perceived as externally determined but, conversely, as individually chosen and targeted towards women's own enjoyment and empowerment (McRobbie, 2004, p. 259). The overwhelming commodification and sexualisation of female bodies have been widely explored in a variety of disciplines, from psychology to media and feminist studies, with multiple and contrasting approaches and findings (see Gill, 2012). As Gill (2012) articulates, the expression 'sexualisation of culture' points towards 'the perception that Western societies are becoming increasingly saturated by representations of sex' (p. 483), which have become widespread, mainstreamed, and normalised. Postfeminist media culture – including magazines, TV programmes, music videos, blogs, social media etc. – is saturated with hypersexualised female representations. As such, the media has become a 'key site for defining codes of sexual conducts' (McRobbie, 2004, p. 258) by offering young women

social discourses and representations that play a pivotal role in the process of constructing their gender and sexual subjectivity (Arnett, 1995; Brown et al., 1994; Durham, 1999, 2004; Jackson & Vares, 2013; Milkie, 1994). The increasing sexualisation of femininity has been associated with media culture as well as the contemporary fashion and beauty industries, which have paved the way for an excessively sexualised feminine appearance that recalls that of the sex industry (Dobson, 2011; Evans et al., 2010; Gill, 2007). Beauty and sexiness have ‘become a prerequisite for subjecthood itself’ and so ‘compulsory sexual agency’ has been turned into a required feature of the contemporary postfeminist subject (Gill, 2008a, p. 443). One shared criticism advanced by feminist scholars with regards to how sexiness is represented in media and cultural discourses (see Gill, 2003; McRobbie, 1999; Pitcher, 2006) is that it promotes a limited, homogeneous viewpoint which favours the ideal of the heterosexual, white, slim, young woman.

The emphasis on the female body and personal choice has led to the intensification of self-surveillance, self-monitoring, and self-discipline practices, which are pursued especially by young women. Practices of work upon the self – that range from make-up to plastic surgery, from fashionable wardrobes to slimming diets – have become key requirements for performing femininity successfully. Such disciplinary practices, disguised as individual choices, can be related to the ‘make-over’ paradigm, which has gained popularity mainly through magazines, talk shows, and TV programmes. This format is based on the premise that one’s life is lacking in some way and, as such, needs to be improved and transformed mainly through the advice of experts and consumer choices (Gill, 2008a). Roberts (2007), in an analysis of the TV show ‘What Not to Wear’, highlights how a young woman’s body can be transformed into ‘a new self’ through beautification and consumption practices, and so how self-confidence and sexual attractiveness may be purchased as a new form of female empowerment. Feminist scholars have widely investigated consumer culture since the early

20th century, which coincided with women's increasing access to the public sphere, to emphasise how the fashion industry has been identified as a feminised sector and women produced as its ideal subjects especially in the Global North. Such social transformations led consumerist and feminist studies to emphasise the liberated character of female consumption, in terms of women's freedom and pleasure, primarily experienced by middle-class, white women in most advanced countries. McRobbie argues that nowadays commercial values 'occupy a critical place in the formation of the categories of youthful femininity' (2008, p. 532). In addition, due to the intensification of the 'aestheticization of everyday life' (Bell & Hollows, 2005, p. 4), women are increasingly being driven towards more reflexive and individualised models of consumption and expression where the self is a privileged site of action (Tincknell, 2013). Duffy and Hund (2015), for instance, discuss how young women's everyday lives aspire to be represented in terms of a 'glam life' on social media through the consumption and exhibition of glamorous goods, international travels, and the attendance of fancy restaurants or clubs. The exposure to idealised female imageries and the invitation to self-improvement proposed by postfeminist culture have been widely investigated in the academic literature in relation to the social pressure that young women may experience to conform to standardised and often unattainable body canons and lifestyles (Dobson, 2011). Gill (2008a) identifies three main risks in the postfeminist age: the intensification of self-surveillance, which accompanies the refusal of its regulatory mechanism; the extensiveness of surveillance over new spheres of life and intimate conducts; and the severity of the psychological effects caused by the requirements to transform one's body and remodel one's interior life. In extreme cases, these risks may result in critical self-surveillance, body shame, appearance anxiety, and eating disorders (Davis, 2018; Feltman, 2018; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2016).

Furthermore, in *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009), McRobbie discusses the ‘undoing of feminism’ as an active process developed in neoliberal societies, through which feminism has been replaced with ‘aggressive individualism’ (p. 5). Likewise, Gill (2016) refers to postfeminism as a distinctive yet contradictory ‘sensitivity intimately connected to neoliberalism’ (p. 610). Some of the key themes that shape the postfeminist sensibility, indeed, are reflected in the neoliberal agenda. In its basic form, neoliberalism can be described as a set of ideas that promotes free-market capitalism and applies the idea of commercial exchanges to all areas of a person’s life (Guardiola-Rivera, 2010, p. 6). As a system of political and economic thought, it has its origins in Germany during the 1920s and 1930s, but it reached its epoch, notably with the leadership of Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom and Ronald Reagan in the United States, during the late 1970s and 1980s. In recent years, neoliberalism has shifted from being a political and economic rationality to be considered as a mode of governmentality that operates across a range of social spheres (Gill, 2008a) and institutions (Rottenberg, 2014) which encourages individuals, especially women, to see themselves as entrepreneurial actors. Under neoliberal conditions – influenced by a political and economic paradigm in which private interests control social life to maximise personal profit (Chomsky, 1999) – individuals are expected to manage themselves, to take responsibility for their own actions, and to be efficiency orientated and economically independent (Carstensen, 2009, p. 109). Foucault’s (2008) studies on governmentality highlight how neoliberal, free, autonomous, and enterprising subjects are governed not by state control or moral standards but by structuring the possible field of action in which they govern themselves. Gill (2008a), in particular, identifies three main common elements that connect postfeminist and neoliberal cultures: the emphasis on individualism; the notion of active, freely choosing and self-reinventing subjects; and the focus on female rather than male subjects. In particular, postfeminist discourses around choice, agency, and empowerment are at the root of neoliberal ideologies that see individuals as entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and

self-regulating (Gill, 2008a). The neoliberal subject, indeed, is required to be fully responsible for its own life biography, regardless of the constraints and hardships the process may entail (Walkerdine et al., 2001).

According to feminist scholarship, the requirements of contemporary femininity take multiple shapes that go beyond the female body and reach also the fields of education and employment where young women become ‘ideal subjects of female success, exemplars of the new competitive meritocracy’ (McRobbie, 2007, p. 718). McRobbie (2007) defines this as a ‘new sexual contract’ (p. 718) that comes from a political neoliberal orientation that addresses young women, mainly proposed in advanced democracies of the Global North. Through the modern education system – based on neoliberal economic policies aimed at promoting meritocratic values and competitive individualism – young women are encouraged to gain qualifications and visibility within allegedly gender equal societies. ‘Having a well-planned life’ (McRobbie, 2007, p. 729), orientated towards a successful and independent future, has become a social norm in the neoliberal and postfeminist age. Within such a new social and political context, women have emerged as key figures of success, who have the chance to exceed previous gender limitations and discriminations and achieve their individual freedom and equality in society (McRobbie, 2007). Over the last 30 years, representations of empowered and successful women (in the fields of academia, work, and private life) have become widespread in popular media culture, which increasingly offer girl power mottos based on the premise that girls ‘can do anything’ (Dobson, 2012, p. 377) and ‘have it all’ (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 9) by just using their innate skills and abilities, despite the structural gender-based, class-based and racial inequalities that still persist in European democracies (Harris, 2004; McRobbie, 2007; Walkerdine et al., 2001). Hence, the potential discrimination that may come from external factors – gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class – is addressed through a strong expression of individualism, competitiveness, and self-

determination. Such a cultural turn helps to explain why feminism, as a collective politics, has become unnecessary for women, who are invited to view and treat structural inequalities as individual issues (Baer, 2016; Budgeon, 2001) rather than political and social one. As Mohanty (2013, p. 968) claims, processes of individualisation and privatisation that mark neoliberal societies tend to turn ‘systemic projects of resistance into commodified private acts of rebellion’ (p. 968). Bhopal (2018), likewise, in her book ‘White Privilege’, reinforces the fact that neoliberal policymaking, in its attempt to promote greater individualism, responsibility, and meritocracy, has failed to achieve inclusion and social justice and, on the contrary, has further marginalised minority ethnic groups.

2.3.2 Neoliberal and popular feminisms

In the last decade, approximately since 2016, feminist scholarship has been marked by cutting-edge debates about whether or not we are still in a postfeminist moment. In particular, postfeminism has been called into question due to an increasing interest and visibility, in mainstream media culture especially in the United States and the United Kingdom, of both feminist discourses and forms of feminist activism. Gill (2016), by reviewing updated understandings and criticisms of postfeminism, brings to light the complexity of the current cultural moment marked by the emergence of a multiplicity of different feminisms circulating in media and popular culture, such as popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018), popfeminism (Eismann, 2007; Kauer, 2009) and corporate or neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg, 2014; Gill, 2008a; 2016), which co-exist with revived forms of antifeminism and misogyny. Banet-Weiser (2018), for instance, traces how, in U.S. popular culture, an increasing visibility of popular feminism is accompanied by a reinforcement of popular misogyny.

In particular, the current debate is centred on the recognition that feminism seems to have changed from being unnecessary and even repudiated to becoming popular and mainstream (Banet-Weiser,

2018). Baer (2016) claims that, while in the Global North the 1990s and early 2000s were characterised by the near absence of collective forms of feminism, the increasing sense of uncertainty and inequality, experienced predominantly by women and minorities in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, has led to a resurgence of feminist collective movements. Scharff et al. (2018), likewise, recognise that, since early 2000s, feminist activism has changed considerably due to the spread of digital technologies as well as the developments in the social, cultural, and economic fields. As a consequence, feminist scholars have started debating the rise and/or decline of feminism and, in particular, how new digital technologies can influence feminist politics (Scharff et al., 2018) and enable new forms of intersectional conversations (Baer, 2016).

Everyday politics on media platforms has gained prominence, in academic and non-academic literature, especially in relation to hashtag activism (Highfield, 2016) and digital protests (Gerbaudo, 2014; Gerbaudo & Trerè, 2015). The #MeToo hashtag, for instance, launched by the actress Alyssa Milano in 2007 to encourage users to share and denounce experiences of sexual violence, captured attention worldwide in an unprecedented way (Nau et al. 2022). Based on prominent digital campaigns that occurred in the last decade (e.g. Slutwalk, Occupy, 15-M Movement), scholars of digital activism have revealed the values of inclusiveness and the forms of collectivity and solidarity shaped by communicative digital practices of networking (see Gerbaudo, 2014; Gerbaudo and Trerè, 2015; Kavada, 2015; Melucci, 1996; Milan, 2015). Scharff et al. (2018) discuss the role of online protests and hashtags, digital initiatives and events, feminist blogs and apps under neoliberal force and structural inequalities. Baer (2012, 2016), for instance, recognises how digital protests re-signify the tensions of contemporary feminism and re-establish the ground to question the neoliberal reduction of the political to the personal level. Lewicki & O'Toole (2017) analyse the political mobilisation of Muslim women in the UK and identify 'everyday practices of citizenship' (p. 156) as

the means through which they engage with, reinterpret and challenge, established Islamic social norms. Arda and Akdemir (2021) discuss ‘connective and collective group identity’ (p. 1078) through the case study of ‘You Won’t Walk Alone’, a social media platform of solidarity for women experiencing pressures for the Islamic dress code in Turkey. Lee (2013), likewise, explores an online community of female Korean migrants in the USA to bring to light how gendered discourses are discussed and shared in relation to their diasporic condition.

Mediated protests and movements, however, have been questioned for their effectiveness in challenging postfeminism and bringing back feminism as a political movement. According to some authors, indeed, feminist discourses are perceived as ‘desirable, stylish, and decidedly fashion’ (Gill, 2016, p. 611) while being a feminist has become synonymous with being ‘cool’ (Valenti, 2014). Gill (2016) highlights that media attention is given just to specific feminist issues, which usually reflect the concerns of white and middle/upper-class women (e.g. gender pay gap or work-family balance) or are projected to ‘other’ disempowered women who still need feminism. For instance, ‘I am Malala’ or ‘Bring Back Our Girls’ represent ‘comfortable feminist campaigns’ (Gill, 2016, p. 616) for Global North audiences, by projecting and supporting feminism ‘there’ and thus reinforcing, rather than challenging, racism and classism. Scharff (2011a), likewise, by investigating women’s engagement with feminism in Germany and Britain, reveals that women are aware of gender inequalities but confident in navigating them self-responsibly. More interestingly, she argues that such an empowered representation is constructed in opposition to ‘other’ Muslim women, perceived as victims of patriarchal oppression. Baer (2012), notwithstanding recognising that popfeminism in Germany has brought feminism back into the collective consciousness, observes how it tends to neglect privilege, ignore differences among women, and frame feminism as an individualist enterprise. Hence, feminist issues in mainstream media culture tend to be discussed as individualistic matters complicit with

capitalism rather than collective, systemic, and structural issues (Gill, 2016). In that sense, as Orgad and Gill (2022) argue, confidence culture becomes the answer to gender injustice that works as a technology of the self.

According to multiple scholars (Fraser, 2013; McRobbie, 2015; Rottenberg, 2014, 2019), the popularity of emerging feminist discourses is increasingly intertwined with neoliberal and economic paradigms. Rottenberg (2014) discusses the emergence of a new trend in popular and media culture, which she refers to as corporate/neoliberal feminism, characterised by high-powered (mostly well-educated and middle-class) women who embrace and promote feminism. This new form of feminism, however, is entrenched in neoliberal rationality and imperialist logic and gives birth to an emerging subject that is simultaneously feminist and neoliberal. The female subject is feminist as the subject is aware of current gender inequalities (e.g. work-family balance) but is simultaneously neoliberal because she denies the underlying social, cultural, and economic forces that produce such inequalities and accepts the full responsibility for her well-being and self-care. In that sense, the neoliberal feminist subject, notwithstanding recognising gender disparities, is led to transmute them into an individual matter. By individualising and responsabilising women, emerging versions of feminism tend to reproduce the neoliberal paradigm, also analysed above, which prompts them to increase their value in all aspects of their lives (e.g. career, relationship, family, hobbies). As Rottenberg (2014) suggests, the ideal female subject is not only conceived as ‘human capital’ but it produces and manages itself as an ‘individual firm’ or ‘business enterprise’ (p. 1074) in which to invest. Consequently, more collective forms of action and well-being are eroded (Rottenberg, 2014) so are either notions of social justice (Larner, 2000).

The co-existence of multiple and contradictory tendencies is relevant for my analysis because it represented the contemporary (mediated) cultural context in which female subjectivities are formed. Participants, indeed, by virtue of being born and/or growing up in Italy and the United Kingdom in the 1990s and 2000s are subjected to (post)feminist and neoliberal discourses, promises, and ideals that constitute contemporary European popular culture. My interest, as will be discussed below, is to specifically investigate how contemporary mediated constructions of femininity are received, understood, appropriated and/or subverted in relation to their positionings as Italian-Bangladeshi Muslim women in Europe.

2.3.3 The social construction of femininity on Social Networking Sites (SNSs)

After the early studies on mainstream offline media (e.g. TV, movies, magazines) that aimed to investigate the construction of femininity in media culture, in recent years the interest of feminist, media and cultural scholars has shifted towards the Internet. A relatively new stream of research has focused on the strategies of self-representation enabled by SNSs, and so on the ways in which femininity and sexuality are understood and performed online through the action of sharing multimedia content (e.g. selfies, personal pictures, videos of activities related to everyday life). Selfies, for instance, are now considered as a ‘mainstream cultural practice’ (Mascheroni et al., 2015, n.p.) used especially by young people to ‘see and shape’ themselves (Rettberg, 2014, p. 1). Through the publication of images, videos, and web links, users are invited to become active agents and to maintain control of their representation by selecting, managing, and highlighting specific aspects of their identity to share online (Leurs, 2015). An increasing number of academic studies have investigated the ways in which the younger generation of users socially construct, reproduce, and reinvent their sense of gendered self through the daily use of social media (Albury, 2015; Burgess et al., 2016; Dobson, 2015; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Leurs, 2015; Mascheroni et al., 2015; van Oosten et

al., 2017). By following a similar approach, I interpret and investigate SNSs as everyday social contexts where young women constitute their gendered subjectivity through 'performative acts' (Butler, 1988, p. 521), which may conform to the disciplinary 'cultural orders that sanction the subject' (Butler, 1990, p. 134) and/or embody the possibilities 'for the cultural transformation of gender' (Butler, 1988, p. 521). In particular, in my specific case study, I am interested in exploring how young women perform their gendered subjectivity online through the appropriation, reproduction, negotiation and/or subversion of multiple and contrasting dominant gendered discourses.

One of the main concerns that has been raised within the academic debates surrounding online self-representation relates to the extent to which digital culture and online platforms may provide young users with new spaces to express gender and sexuality and/or reinforce dominant discourses of heteronormative femininity. Mascheroni et al (2015), for instance, in their article on teenagers' self-presentation online, argue that the liberating and empowering potential of social media, which can be associated with the possibility to select and control one's appearance, is actually constrained by processes of social approval and acceptance based on normative patterns of sexualised femininity and masculinity. Dobson (2011), in her article on young Australian women's self-representations on MySpace, highlights how a 'hetero-sexy' aesthetic is reproduced through forms of gender performativity as not only sexualised but also aligned with a specific gendered and heterosexual imaginary, where 'traditional' femininity is combined with heterosexual pornography. What emerges, overall, is that the action of self-exposure and self-presentation online reflects the models, imaginaries, and promises offered by media popular culture and fashion and beauty industries, which determine the socially accepted and rewarded expressions of femininity. Hence, empowered sexiness comes to be collectively recognised as a valid imagery to draw from to successfully participate in

online youth female communities, in such a way that ‘presenting legible and peer-accepted femininity involves displaying sexiness visually somehow’ (Dobson, 2014a, p. 104). Furthermore, Leurs (2015), in his analysis of hypertextual narratives of the self on SNSs, confirms that teenagers seek to meet the definitions and expectations of what is appropriate and rewarded in youth, consumer, and influencer culture. A recent body of research, indeed, has arisen in relation to microcelebrity and influencer culture (see Duffy & Hund, 2015; Khamis et al., 2017; Senft, 2008), where young women adopt the logic of self-promotion through the textual and visual narration of their personal lifestyles. This online practice can be seen as a form of self-branding online (Berger, 2011; Marwick, 2013, 2015) that includes online promotional practices – originally associated with celebrities and micro-celebrities – now adopted by ordinary users in the process of modelling an ‘edited self’ (Marwick, 2010, p. 340). In order to construct this edited self, users strategically reveal only certain aspects of their personal lives that reflect the desired and rewarded lifestyle or brand (Marwick, 2013, p. 15). Fashion, beauty, and lifestyle influencers and bloggers occupy a prominent role in launching and determining trends, ideals, and roles in the female imaginary. Duffy and Hund (2015), however, reveal that the top influencers ‘overwhelmingly conform to the European heteronormative beauty aesthetic’ (p. 4) that includes young age, slim body shape, and light skin. These online practices, therefore, do not only reproduce Eurocentric and heteronormative notion of beauty and femininity (Ahuja, 2019; Bauer, 2020) but also reflect the postfeminist and neoliberal ideologies that invite young women to improve themselves, realise their fullest potential, and become entrepreneurs of themselves through the means offered by the Internet. Social networking sites, and in particular those based on visual content (e.g. Instagram, TikTok), have been investigated in relation to young people’s mental health. Excessive use, social comparison and approval, unattainable body and living standards, photo filters and other forms of digital manipulation (see O’Reilly et al., 2018; McCrory et al., 2020) are some of the main reasons behind physical and psychological distress among young users. High

levels of social media engagement are linked, for instance, to body-related and eating disorders (McLean et. al, 2015; Lonergan et al, 2018; Cohen et al, 2018), self-objectification (Feltman, 2018), loneliness (Wang et al., 2018), depression (Frison & Eggermont, 2017), cyberbullying (Calvete et al., 2015) as well as online harassment and misogyny (Barker & Jurasz, 2019).

In addition to studies focused on the relationship between digital culture and the reinforcement of biologically deterministic gender roles (Nakamura, 2002) and/or the backlash against feminist discourses and activism (Barratt, 2018), most recent debates have focused on the role of online activities and movements in their potential to both challenge heteronormativity and patriarchy and favour the resurgence of feminist ideas and discourses (see Caldeira et al., 2020; Cooper & Dzara, 2010; Nau et al. 2022; Scharff et al., 2018), as discussed above. Feminists of colour, queer scholars, and intersectional theorists have contributed to deepening discourses about gender and inequality in order to challenge hetero-centric, white, and middle-class feminism. Caldeira et al. (2020), for instance, analyse practices of online self-representation at the intersection of mundane and political, by revealing their potential to ‘upheld hegemonic hierarchies of visibility’ (p. 1) and lead to political action. In particular, they argue that the increasing visibility of diversity in mainstream media (in terms of body types and beauty markers) as well as the action of sharing personal experiences related to gendered issues might lead to forms of collective awareness and grassroots action among female audiences. Chittenden (2010), likewise, highlights that fashion blogs might operate as ‘safe spaces’ (p. 511) that, through a ‘dialogic interaction’ (p. 504), enable users to play with multiple expressions of identity, mitigate isolation, and build self-esteem. Van Doorn et al. (2007) reveal that, in their analysis of Dutch and Flemish weblogs, authors engage with multiple heterogeneous performances of gender that, albeit circumscribed within a binary gender system, might open up space for alternative expressions of femininity online beyond dominant gender norms and expectations. Pham

(2011), by analysing Asian American and British Asian fashion bloggers, discloses the potential of blogging practices to challenge racist hierarchies of beauty and knowledge production and, in so doing, contribute to undermining the power of mainstream trendsetters. All these studies reveal the potential resistive capacity offered by digital media where mediated self-representations, personal experiences related to structural inequalities, and dialogic interactions might become the engine for the resurgence of counter-narratives and new forms of feminist collectivities.

2.3.4 Transnational and intersectional feminism

Much of the academic literature on (post)feminism and neoliberalism engages with popular culture in the United States and United Kingdom and concerns middle-class, heterosexual, and white women. As introduced in Chapter 1, two main interrelated streams of criticism have developed as a response to postfeminism and neoliberalism. The first one relates to its overall Eurocentric approach that has not been sufficiently imagined, theorised, and empirically investigated in non-white or mixed cultural contexts (Ahmad, 2003; Butler, 2013; Dosekun, 2015; Gill, 2007). The second one refers to the overemphasis on female choice and agency, which leaves institutional inequalities and power relations unexamined (Gill & Orgad, 2017). Both these tendencies risk reinforcing existing hierarchical classification among women and reproducing discrepancies in terms of race, class, religion, and sexuality (Butler, 2013).

First of all, postfeminist culture overall celebrates the new freedoms achieved by women, considered as a homogeneous gendered group that however privileges young, white, middle-class, heterosexual and able-bodied female subjects. In the process, it reproduces dichotomies between ‘Global North’ and ‘Global South’ women and reinforces the distinction between empowered and sexually free women and constrained and victimised women. Mohanty (1988) critically highlights how the

longstanding representation of the 'West' as the epicentre of modernity and progress for women has led towards the construction of 'western' actors as rescuers of 'other' women, by reconfiguring the 'Third World Woman as singular monolithic subject' (p. 61) that needs to be empowered. The need to go beyond a Eurocentric frame of analysis is based on the assumption that postfeminism should be conceived as a 'dominating discursive system' (Tasker & Negra, 2007, p. 2-3) – which is fostered and sold globally across multiple cultural and media formats and consumer circuits – and a 'sensibility' (Gill, 2007) – which does not reflect a culturally specific historical phenomenon. Hence, the assumption that non-white, non-European or non-heterosexual women do not appear in, do not consume, and are not affected by postfeminist popular media culture is 'over simplistic and empirically unfounded' (Butler, 2013, p. 48). As suggested by Dosekun (2015), just by watching TV programmes or movies, listening to music or singers' videos, reading magazines, surfing the Internet or participating in the consumer market, different women around the world access and enact postfeminism. What needs to be taken into account, however, are the multiple ways in which postfeminism relates to difference and so how it might be reproduced, adapted, transformed and/or questioned in specific contexts and in relation to structural categories of the subjects.

Furthermore, contemporary (post)feminist and neoliberal discourses produce an idealised and essentialised notion of femininity that symbolically evades or transcends institutional inequalities and social issues (Bae, 2011; Butler, 2003; Dosekun, 2015; Griffin, 2004; McRobbie, 2007; Tasker & Negra, 2007). Postfeminism celebrates a female empowered society, where women can be who they aspire to be and can choose the life they want to live through entrepreneurial activities. As stated by McRobbie (2004), women are invited to 'become more reflexive in regard to every aspect of their lives, from making the right choice in marriage, to taking responsibility for their own working lives' (p. 261). The foundation of postfeminist thinking, influenced by neoliberal ideologies, is based on

two misleading promises: first, that women, as a uniform group of gendered subjects, have the same possibilities to access education, employment, and consumer culture; and second, that the great expectations and success of female empowerment rely on women's individuality, as manifested through increased reflexivity, responsibility, and commitment. In postmodern societies, individuals are expected to reflect on the social conditions of their existence and acquire the ability to change them (Beck, 1992). The neoliberal and postfeminist paradigm, therefore, neither sufficiently recognises the ongoing institutional inequalities that mark postmodern societies (in terms of age, class, race, ethnicity, and sexuality), nor the forms of exclusion that the celebrated notion of individual choice may entail. Since the subject is invited to determine its own future and expected to make the right choice on the basis of personal responsibility, a new line of demarcation is drawn between those who have the possibility and ability to succeed and those who are incapacitated and fail (McRobbie, 2004). This reflects the status of European societies, where both racial difference and gender discrimination are deemed to be no longer salient and where individual empowerment comes prior to collective political struggles and structural social changes (Banet-Weiser, 2007).

Feminist scholarship on gender and subjectivity has attempted to address these central theoretical and empirical concerns through an intersectional approach. Overall, intersectionality refers to the interrelationship and interdependence between multiple axes of categorisation that construct and define identities (Crenshaw, 1989; Davis, 2008; Leurs & Ponzalesi, 2015). This concept has acquired great popularity within feminist studies, and Black feminist scholarship in particular, which recognises how complex systems of power operate systematically through the intersection of diverse identity categories (Crenshaw, 1989). Crenshaw (1991) claims that social categories such as gender, race, class, sexuality and dis/ability are inextricably interconnected in the production of social practices of exclusion. In particular, I follow Leurs and Ponzalesi (2013), who urge researchers to

draw attention to the configurations of subordination and agency resulting from the intersection of overlooked and neglected social categories:

A focus on intersectional sociocultural configurations of subordination and agency urges scholars interested in internet practices to localize how various previously hidden categories – such as age, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, generation, and religion – may interrelate and impact differently (p. 634).

Therefore, my interest is in critically investigating how multiple and contrasting gendered discourses are appropriated, reproduced, negotiated and/or subverted within a specific group of women who find themselves in the middle of intersecting positions and expectations. They are European, and thus subjected to (post)feminist and neoliberal forces, but they are also part of an ethnic and religious minority, and thus more vulnerable to social and economic forms of discrimination. In particular, I seek to bring to light the nuances and contradictions of the feminine subjectivities generated by the multiple and competing positions these young women move across both in the sociocultural contexts inhabited and dominant discourses consumed, thus addressing a major lacuna within the existing literature.

2.4 Politics of representation and difference

2.4.1 Nationhood, ethnicity, and race

In order to pursue an intersectional approach, I follow Hall's (1992, 1996) poststructuralist approach to the question of subjectivity, to interpret nationhood, ethnicity, and race as socially constructed categories. In particular, Hall (1996) articulates the relationship between subjects and discursive practices to explore the question of identification. According to Hall, identities are constructed through discourse, or 'regimes of representation' (Hall, 1997, p. 6), which emerge within specific

relationships of power and are the results of the making of difference and exclusion. The discursive construction of the nation as an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson, 1983) explains how the meanings historically produced around the notion of national identity influence the way in which its citizens organise both their actions and conceptions of themselves, as well as their sense of legacy and belonging (Hall, 1992). The unity and purity of the nation is discursively reproduced by the common legacy of memory, the desire to live together, and the will to perpetuate the heritage received (Renan, 1990). One of the ways of thinking about national identities as unified is through the expression and reproduction of an underlying shared culture. Ethnicity, according to Hall (1992), is the term given to shared cultural features – such as language, religion, customs, and traditions – that are symbolically and historically rooted in a specific bounded place. Race, likewise, is a system of representation and an ‘organizing category’ (Hall, 1992, p. 617) that encloses a set of physical features (e.g. skin colour, body characteristics) that become symbolic markers for identifying with one ethnic group and thus differentiating oneself from others. Hence, the concept of cultural identity comes to be related to ‘coordinates of space and time’ that ‘create a sense of location’ (Hall, 2017, p. 6), and therefore belonging. Hall (2017) describes it as a ‘symbolic guarantee of stable, continuous, cultural patterns consistently reproduced through traditions that mirror the stability of kinship and blood ties among a settled, gathered, and interrelated population’ (p. 106). Nationhood, ethnicity, and race emerge as key categories of cultural identity strictly associated with a sense of place and group of origin that is given, unified, stable, and bounded parameters. Discursively conceptualised as closed constructs, therefore, these categories are based on ‘myths of purity and origin that rely on exclusionary closure against difference’ (Hall, 2017, p. 5).

As introduced in Chapter 1, the past few decades have seen a resurgence of interest, across both academic and non-academic fields, in the relationship between media representations of ethnic and

religious minorities with related debates around race, ethnicity, multiculturalism, and identity politics (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017). In order to understand today's struggle over difference and cultural identity, I focus on diasporic phenomena. Both Gilroy (2019) and Hall (2017) recognise how today's society, albeit being mobile and interconnected, is marked by a proliferation of antagonism around cultural difference. Gilroy (2019), in his analysis of the resurgence of phenomena such as nationalism, populism, and xenophobia in Europe, argues that, even in allegedly democratic societies, race and nationhood are viewed as the primary resources of 'groupness and absolute ethnicity' (n.p.). The 'growing proliferation of antagonism around cultural difference' (Hall, 2017, p. 11), as highlighted in Chapter 1, has become a key issue of contemporary times and a direct response to the process of globalisation. Gilroy (1987) emphasises the cultural consideration of race as linked to the nation, and discusses 'a new form of cultural racism which has taken a necessary distance from crude ideas of biological inferiority and superiority' but yet 'seeks to present an imaginary definition of the nation as a unified cultural community' (p. 49). For instance, anti-immigration stances, which have spread across Europe in reaction to the so-called 'migration crisis' in the Mediterranean, aim to assert national control and the ideal of a monocultural nation-state where foreign newcomers are depicted as a threat to national culture, a security menace, and an economic burden (Bulli & Soare, 2018). By making societies more ethnically plural and transcultural, diasporas activate processes of boundary reinforcement that mark a line between insiders and outsiders. Especially in situations of intra-ethnic interaction, the question of ethnicity remains crucial as it involves a process of self-identification but also a process of boundary formation and maintenance (Barth, 1969). While on the one hand scholars have recognised the risks associated with today's global politics of identity and difference, Hall (2017, p. 12) argues that subjects' identity and belonging – coded by nation, ethnicity, and race – is always open to change precisely because it is discursively constructed. Our society, marked by a 'massive dislocation of anchoring points within the symbolic order of culture' (Hall, 2017, p. 6), may

encourage processes that have the potential to reconfigure symbolic boundaries and to offer new ways of articulating difference. The shift towards viewing the movement of people across national borders as unavoidable has given rise to new symbolic forms of identification and attachment that goes beyond geographical closure and cultural specificity (Hall, 2017). The binary hierarchical discourses that frame diasporic subjects, therefore, may be reconfigured through ‘a multidimensional structure of similarities and differences’, which defines contemporary politics of identification as ‘a field of positionalities’ (Hall, 2017, p. 172). My interest, therefore, is in exploring not only how, on the basis of the intersection of multiple social categories, specific subjects are positioned as different within Eurocentric discourses but also how diasporic subjects may challenge and reconfigure fixed categories of exclusion into new combinations through mediated practices and interactions.

2.4.2 Neo-Orientalism and gender politics

The concepts of Orientalism and Neo-Orientalism have been shaped and questioned within postcolonial research and literature. Said’s most prominent work, ‘Orientalism’ (1978), refers to the systems of knowledge that historically produced the Eastern world as an ‘Other’ of the Western one. In particular, Said highlights the colonial binary discourses that portray the Orient as an exotic, primitive, irrational, violent object, and essentially inferior to its Western counterpart. Hall (1994), in addition, talks about the ways Black people have been historically subjected to ‘dominant regimes of representation’ as the effect of the exercise of cultural power and normalisation (p. 223). Scholars such as Said (1978, 1994) and Fanon (1967) have highlighted the pervasive effects of hegemonic discourses on the ways in which members of colonised societies imagine themselves in relation to the ‘Other’, by revealing the devastating impact of the process of othering on the colonial subject.

Neo-Orientalism is a term used to point towards the implications of postcolonialism at positional and structural levels in contemporary culture. Boehmer (1998) highlights how most European knowledge systems are still based on essentialist inheritances that ‘are often expressed through a coded racialized and gendered logic of self and other’ (p. 19), and as a repetition of the past within the present. Meanwhile, Bartholomeusz (1998) discusses the emergence of Neo-Orientalism as an ‘internalization of Orientalism in the neo-colonial world’ (p. 20). Multiple scholars (e.g. Giolfo & Sinatora, 2018; Kerboua, 2016) understand the concept of Neo-Orientalism as the reproduction and exacerbation of Orientalism, and focus on the essentialist reconstructions of Islam, Muslim societies and people as backward as well as violent and threatening in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attack and the resulting ‘War on Terror’ declared by the United States against Al Qaida. The main effect has been the depiction of the Muslim world as intricately connected with terrorist-related activities (Giolfo & Sinatora, 2018), thus producing sentiments of fear and/or hatred of Muslim people.

I use the concept of Neo-Orientalism in relation to gender politics in order to focus on the European construction of South Asian and Muslim women in contemporary cultural and media discourses as a reproduction of the Orientalist rhetoric and practice. As already highlighted in Chapter 1, the dominant image of Islam and Islamic civilisation has been historically based on the assumption that Muslim and European cultures and values are intrinsically different and incompatible (Goodwin, 2015). The relationship between non-Muslim and Muslim communities has been re-interpreted in Neo-Orientalist terms (Saeed, 2007) through a dichotomy and clash of civilisations (Kumar, 2010). Ahmad (2016), for instance, highlights the overall racialised and gendered discursive frameworks used to reiterate the notion that Muslim women are ‘objects of pity’ (p. 39) who need to be rescued from bigoted families, cruel Islam, and uncompromising cultural backgrounds, often implying the role of the ‘West’ as saviour. Abu-Lughod (2002) reflects on the notion of saving by highlighting a

new discursive framework constructed around concerns for human rights, which is used to create an image of Muslim women as in need of Western pity and intervention. Macdonald (2006) discusses the desire to ‘unveil alien cultures’ (p. 9) through practices of domestication and conformity to dominating European ideological norms, as a reflection of the colonial exercise of power. Meanwhile, Yegenoglu (1998) talks about the ‘desire to master, control, and reshape the body of the subjects by making them visible’ (p. 12). The political and media discussion around Muslim women and the veil, therefore, has been predominantly constructed in terms of victimhood, barbarity, and oppression, thus implying a process of unveiling as a symbol of freedom and the success of Western interventionism (Macdonald, 2006).

2.5 Conclusion

In this second chapter, I discussed the main academic debates on which I have built my research project. I started by exploring the relationship between media culture and subjectivity by employing Foucault’s (1982, 1988) theory of ‘technologies of the self’ and Butler’s (1990) work on performativity, to recognise both the power of the internal regulatory discourses through which subjectivity takes shape and the potential agency of the subject to alter them. I specifically focused on diasporic subjects by identifying a gap within media and diaspora studies, which I try to fill by paying attention to generational and gender differences within the selected diasporic community.

Furthermore, I contextualised my research within the frame of contemporary postfeminist culture by following Gill (2007, 2017) in her understanding of postfeminism as a ‘sensibility’ in order to recognise how it has expanded to operate across discursive, affective, and psychological spheres and turned into a ‘taken-for-granted common sense’ (2017, p. 609). I focused in particular on gendered self-representations and the social construction of femininity on SNSs, by revealing the

contradictions, risks, and new trends of digital media culture in relation to feminist discourses and subjectivities. Moreover, through an engagement with two main streams of criticism of postfeminism and neoliberalism, I highlighted my choice to adopt a transnational and intersectional approach to the study of feminine subjectivities that recognises the multiple and mutable positions of the subject. In that way, through my specific case study, I seek to bring to light the nuances and contradictions of the postfeminist subjectivities generated by the diverse and competing discourses consumed and produced, thus addressing a major lacuna within the existing literature.

Ultimately, I debated the politics of representation and difference, by drawing on Stuart Hall's (1992, 1996, 2017) and Paul Gilroy's (1987, 2019) critical stances, in order to interpret social categories of nationality, ethnicity, and race as discursively constructed, and to investigate contemporary struggle over difference by focusing on contemporary diasporic phenomena and the encounter with the 'Other'. I specifically drew attention to Neo-Orientalism in relation to gender politics in order to examine the European construction of 'Other' women (i.e. South Asians and Muslims) in cultural and media discourses as a reproduction of the Orientalist rhetoric and practice. Having discussed the theoretical foundations of my study, in the next chapter I will discuss my methodological approach and research design, which has been constructed by taking into account both the pandemic restrictions and the new research objectives.

3 METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 Introduction

As introduced in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, my research project aims to investigate the relationship between digital media culture and diasporic feminine subjectivities. In particular, it seeks to explore the ways in which femininity is discursively constructed and performed by Italian-Bangladeshi Muslim young women through lived and mediated experiences. To do so, I explore how cultural and media discourses are consumed, negotiated, reproduced and/or contested online and what the effects are on young women's self-identification and self-representation processes. In particular, I focus on online practices as representational and performative acts (Naezer, 2020) situated in the broader context of young women's everyday lives. Since the 1990s, feminist and media scholarship has primarily focused on text-based research, thus overlooking the investigation of the social practices related to and the social contexts surrounding the consumption of media texts (Grindstaff & Press, 2014; Orgad, 2016). However, after the pioneering ethnographic study by Janice Radway, 'Reading the Romance' (1984), which analysed everyday reading practices within women's social and domestic contexts, a multiplicity of studies have looked at how women interpret and construct their sense of self and interpretation of femininity in relation to specific media texts or practices (see De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013; Dobson, 2011, 2012; Naezer, 2020; Ringrose, 2011; Van Doorn, 2010). By following the same approach, I pursue an ethnographic study designed to explore how feminine subjectivities are shaped by and/or against dominant cultural discourses. In particular, I draw on McRobbie (1994) who suggests that the ethnographic approach is the most appropriate to understand 'the social conditions and experiences which play a role in constituting their [women] subjectivities and identities' (p. 193). In this chapter, I present my research design, which is composed of a mixed methods approach (questionnaires, SNSs analysis, and interviews) to online ethnography. I describe

in detail the processes involved in data collection, coding, as well as data analysis and critical interpretation, which is followed by a discussion of relevant ethical issues and mitigation strategies.

3.2 Research design

3.2.1 Impact of the pandemic

My empirical study is based on 19 months of online ethnographic fieldwork conducted between March 2020 and September 2021. The data collection and analysis period was extended due to the disruptions wrought by the outbreak of COVID-19 in February 2020, which led me to adjust my methodology to these unexpected circumstances. As outlined in Chapter 1, my fieldwork was originally supposed to take place in the Bangladeshi neighbourhood of Rome (Torpignattara), starting in February 2020 and lasting for a period of 8 to 12 months. Being in the field would have enabled me to first of all gradually become familiar with the Bangladeshi community, with the additional support of cultural intermediaries; get in touch with potential participants; and establish a stable relationship with them. This was seen as an essential step in pursuing the collection of data given my role as an ‘outsider’ within the selected ethnic group. Multiple ethical issues and potential risks related to the cultural and religious features, age, language, and gender of participants, were evaluated and mitigated before the beginning of fieldwork. The objective, in particular, was to conduct in-person questionnaires and interviews with adult Bangladeshis, along with an ethnographic exploration of the neighbourhood in which they were settled.

The disruption of my fieldwork at the end of February 2020 led me to completely rethink not only the methodology, given the impossibility of interacting with potential participants in person, but also the sample and research questions. Notwithstanding a series of tentative adjustments, it proved impossible to approach, interact with, and maintain an online relationship with the original sample

precisely because of each participant's specific features and circumstances. In particular, managing online interactions with adult participants, with limited knowledge of Italian and/or English and without the support of cultural intermediaries, would have made the process of data collection extremely challenging. As introduced in Chapter 1, the new research design was the result of unexpected insights that arose during the period in which my fieldwork was put on hold. Being in Italy (Rome), under a nationwide lockdown, encouraged me to first of all look at Bangladeshi Facebook public communities and pages. In addition, I liaised with one Bangladeshi young woman (Amira) I met and interviewed in the field before the spread of the pandemic. She permitted me to access her SNPs (Facebook and Instagram) and also suggested the names of some of her friends to whom I was introduced. After a few weeks of evaluating different mitigation strategies, during which the pandemic worsened in Italy and Europe and my hope of coming back to the field dwindled, I decided to undertake a new research project focused on Italian-Bangladeshi young women only. This choice enabled me to get in touch more easily with participants remotely through social media; to achieve a higher participation rate due to the young age, gender, and knowledge of the Italian language of participants, and to conduct the collection of data online. Therefore, I amended the research design with the introduction of a mixed methods approach to online ethnography composed of questionnaires, interviews, and analysis of SNSs. The extended length of the empirical study was influenced by two main factors. The first was the need to approach and establish a 'virtual' relationship with potential participants before they decided to be involved in the study which, in some cases, took longer than expected. The second was the need to rework the overall structure of the thesis (e.g. research questions, literature review, methodology, ethical approval) in conjunction with the collection of data.

3.2.2 *Online ethnography: A mixed methods approach*

My ethnographic study has been conducted entirely online using a mixed methods approach, to respond to both the pandemic restrictions and the new research objectives. The foundation of my investigation, in particular, is shaped around the data collected through the analysis of participants' SNSs, making online questionnaires and interviews two appropriate methods for supporting and deepening the analysis. The ethnographic approach has been mainly used in media studies since the 1980s to gain a broad understanding of how media are integrated into everyday life and how media content becomes meaningful to people (Gómez Cruz & Ardèvol, 2013). More recently, the field has registered an increasing interest in digital, online, and virtual ethnography (Coover, 2004; Jones, 1999; Miller & Slater, 2000; Murthy, 2008) precisely because, as Gómez Cruz and Ardèvol (2013) highlight, it has become almost impossible to do ethnographic research on media without taking into account digital technologies and ethnographic studies of the Internet. In line with this new stream of research, my project follows an online ethnographic approach by interpreting media use as 'practice' (Couldry, 2004, p. 115), hence a set of acts or 'creative processes' (Gómez-Cruz & Ardèvol, 2013, p. 32) enacted by individuals surrounding and through the use of digital technologies, with different goals and purposes. Fieldwork conducted on online platforms, in addition, enabled me to investigate young women's media practices in transnational realities and virtual spaces as well as to examine their local appropriation in the context of their everyday lives. This is made possible by the conceptualisation of the 'field' in digital ethnographic studies that goes beyond a circumscribed physical location and expands virtually beyond fixed material borders (Murthy, 2008). Büscher and Urry (2009), for instance, refer to 'mobile methods' as empirical tools for tracking how multiple and intersecting mobility systems (of people, images, information, and objects) affect social life (p. 100). In contrast to on-site ethnography, by employing an online and virtual approach, I tried to 'follow the people' (Marcus, 1995, p. 106) on multiple media platforms and access people's 'communicative

repertoires' (Varis, 2014, p. 2) to investigate how participants consume, produce, circulate, and appropriate media materials in transnational virtual spaces. Murthy (2008) highlights how digital ethnography may offer researchers a broader and more exciting set of methods to collect and tell social stories, but also enable them to demarginalise the voice of respondents. In my case, given the young age of participants who are tech-savvy and the pandemic restrictions, online ethnography proved to be an effective methodological tool to reach a considerable number of women, also settled in dispersed cities and countries, with whom I could not have interacted in person.

3.3 Data collection

The collection of data officially started in March 2020 and was not simultaneous but, conversely, followed a chronological and logical order. In particular, I started with online questionnaires, at the end of which I asked respondents if they were interested in taking part in the second and/or third phases of research (interview and/or analysis of their SNPs). The unfoldment of these steps usually took some weeks and even months, during which I gave potential participants the chance to read about the objectives of the study, ask questions, and establish a relationship of trust with me. In some cases, I spent a period of time chatting with them before they decided or refused to take part in the study. I found that many young women were interested in and very surprised to be selected for the project but, at the same time, intimidated and doubtful about their participation. Their relatively young age, the online interaction with an unknown researcher, and the lockdown conditions created a challenging context for the recruitment process.

3.3.1 Groups of participants and online snowball sampling

In order to select a specific sample strategy, I took into account both theoretical and practical considerations. I decided to opt for a purposeful selection procedure given the need to identify and

recruit ‘information-rich cases’ (Suri, 2011, p. 66). In particular, I included in my sample women over the age of 18, with Italian-Bangladeshi nationality, living in Italy or the United Kingdom. The selection procedure I pursued began with an Italian-Bangladeshi young woman (Amira) I met in person in Rome before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. She became my initial point of reference for establishing further relations with potential participants. First of all, she completed the online questionnaire, took part in a face-to-face interview, and gave consent to access her SNPs (Facebook and Instagram) and lists of friends. From this point, I recruited participants, and so built up my sample through the snowball technique (Suri, 2011). In particular, for each new participant’s list of friends, I selected several social media accounts and sent a friend request along with a personal presentation and explanation of the research project. The identification and selection of new users to contact was facilitated by the public biographic section of Instagram and Facebook, which often included the user’s name or nickname, age, city of residence, and two flag emojis (Italian and Bangladeshi) to point towards a dual nationality. These clues were the basic criteria of inclusion in the first step of the recruitment process.

The group of participants who took part in the online questionnaires included 70 Italian-Bangladeshi young women who lived in Italy and the United Kingdom. At the initial design stage, my objective was to recruit 40 participants for the analysis of SNSs and interviews. The decision to achieve a higher number of respondents for online questionnaires was due to the prediction that none all of them would have participated in the following steps. In particular, 76% of the sample was composed of women aged 18-23 years and 24% aged 24-30 years. Furthermore, 36 respondents (51%) were born in Bangladesh and moved to Italy at an early age, while 34 respondents (49%) were born in Italy to Bangladeshi parents. Within the sample, in addition, 39 participants (56%) lived in the United Kingdom while 31 (44%) lived in Italy at the time the questionnaires were being completed. Among

those based in Italy, 20 young women lived in Rome and 11 were resident in different Italian cities (Brescia, Treviso, Perugia, Vicenza, Bologna, Venezia, Palermo, Ancona, and Torino). Among those based in the United Kingdom, 28 young women lived in London and 11 were resident in smaller UK cities like Manchester, Cardiff, Leicester, Leeds, and Birmingham. Out of 70 respondents, 68% were students, 6% were students and part-time workers, 19% were employees, and 7% identified as unemployed or housewives. Furthermore, the young women who took part in the analysis of SNSs were part of a subgroup of the first one and included 45 Italian-Bangladeshi young women who live in Italy and the United Kingdom (Appendix a). This subgroup reflects the number of participants who gave consent to take part in the second step of the study and was overall in line with my initial objective to recruit 40 participants for the analysis of SNSs. This number has been chosen by taking into account the traffic data produced by every single participant for a year period, and so it was considered appropriate for achieving a significant and diversified dataset. In particular, out of 45 participants, 24 were born in Bangladesh and moved to Italy at an early age, and 21 were born in Italy to Bangladeshi parents. Furthermore, 13 young women lived in Italy and 32 in the United Kingdom at the time of the online ethnography. Overall, within the whole group, 17 participants have lived in all three countries, 22 have lived in 2 countries (7 in Bangladesh and Italy, and 15 in Italy and the United Kingdom), and just 6 were born and lived in 1 country only (Italy). Finally, among this second group of participants, 37 young women participated in online interviews. This subgroup reflects the number of participants who gave consent to take part in the third step of the study.

3.3.2 *Online questionnaires*

The first step in the data collection was the distribution of online questionnaires. There were two main reasons for this choice. The first was the need to collect general information on participants' engagement with media and communication technologies during the specific period in which the

direction of my study, disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, was still uncertain. The second was the relative simplicity of the participant recruitment and questionnaire distribution process, as compared to other more intrusive methods, which enabled me to collect a relatively high number of first contacts for the following steps. Furthermore, the considerable advantage of online questionnaires, in comparison to traditional ones, is the ease and speed of the processes of distribution, completion, and collection (Murthy, 2008). I circulated the questionnaire through chains of contacts by sending a web link and its completion, which could take place through diverse technological devices, required just a few minutes. Once I forwarded the questionnaire to the first respondents, I managed to spread it across their female friendship circles and, over six months (March to August 2020), I collected 70 completed questionnaires.

I prepared the questionnaire using SurveyMonkey software. This is a popular online survey tool that enables the design of customizable surveys with a wide variety of templates and features. I selected it especially for the ease of use and the wealth of options to create questions. Each questionnaire was drafted in Italian, which was the common language of all participants, both those living in Italy and the United Kingdom. It was structured around four main sections. The first one provided the respondents with relevant information about the research project, its objectives, the KCL Ethical Commission number, and the researcher's KCL mail, along with a declaration of voluntary participation, adult age (at least 18 years old), and personal data processing consent. The second section included the respondent's relevant biographical data (gender, age, place of birth, country/ies of residence, city of current residence, profession), which was used to delineate a general profile of participants. The third section was composed of a series of multiple choice and open questions, with the aim of acquiring key information about patterns of media and communication technology consumption within the sample. In particular, respondents were asked which communication

technologies (e.g. standard TV, satellite TV, on-demand TV, radio, computer/laptop, tablet, smartphone, laptop) and media contents (e.g. movies, TV series, entertainment programmes, international and local news) they consumed the most in their everyday lives, for how many hours a day, and for what purposes. The fourth and last section was mainly focused on SNSs (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, Snapchat, Tumblr, YouTube, TikTok etc.), asking questions that aimed to investigate the main purposes of use (e.g. sharing personal life, posting selfies, following influencers and fashion trends, being informed on international news, getting involved in online activism). Replies related to this section were the basis of my choice to select Facebook and Instagram as the two SNSs to include in the analysis of participants' online accounts as they were among the most popular ones within the sample. As well as this, they emerged as personal spaces that enabled participants to create their own media content as well as interact with other user-generated content. Ultimately, at the end of the questionnaire, I asked respondents to leave their contacts (mail, Facebook and/or Instagram accounts) if interested in taking part in an interview and/or analysis of their social SNPs. In this final section, which aimed to recruit participants for the following phases of the research, I included a brief description of the aims underpinning the research, the methods employed, along with a guarantee of anonymity and a declaration of voluntary participation.

3.3.3 Analysis of Social Networking Profiles (SNPs)

After obtaining a general picture of participants' media consumption practices, I focused on the relationship between digital media culture and young women's interpretations and performances of femininity. Virtual ethnography, conducted through passive participation in social networking spaces and the analysis of SNPs, enabled me to investigate participants' engagement with and appropriation of media and cultural discourses (Dobson, 2011, 2012). My interest, in particular, was in examining a set of practices routinely enacted online, which included the consumption, production, reproduction,

and exchange of media content, and to interpret their relevance for young women's self-expression and self-representation processes. Indeed, the action of publishing personal content (e.g. selfies, pictures or videos of activities in everyday life, personal comments and thoughts) was investigated along with the act of sharing cultural and media content (e.g. news, advertising, music, TV series, information about celebrities, other social media users or posts). In that way, I understood media content in a broad and holistic sense, not limited to personal pictures shared online, but encompassing a series of interrelated cultural practices enacted online. In doing so, I followed Leurs (2015) in his interpretation of the 'multiaxial hyperlinked dimensions' (p. 174) of SNSs that enable users to mould 'hypertextual narratives of selves' (p. 210) through a series of online affordances and practices. I consider SNPs as social spaces where self-descriptions, self-representations, and self-narratives are constructed through textual and visual materials produced and appropriated online. In particular, my interest in these specific online media platforms lies in their ability to bring to light communication as a 'dialectical' process by considering not only the relation between the consumption and production of media content but also the broader 'circulation of meaning' (Silverstone, 1999, p. 13) it entails. Therefore, I draw on Silverstone (1999, 2005) in an effort to recognise the dynamic exchange of information and communication that SNSs encourage and the agency of audiences/users within the process of meaning production. Dobson (2012) highlights 'the richness of expressive data' (p. 374) contained in SNPs, while Murthy (2008) identifies the 'vast stores of multimedia materials' (p. 845) as one of the main advantages of ethnography conducted on SNSs. Young women's online profiles, therefore, became my main field of research, which I considered to be 'social, experiential, and mobile' (Postill & Pink, 2012, p. 125) platforms of analysis.

From August 2020 to September 2021, I conducted passive participation in social networking spaces and engaged in an analysis of 71 SNPs (Facebook and Instagram) belonging to 45 young women.

The number of accounts exceeds those of the number of participants because some of them consented to the analysis of more than one personal digital platform. Online ethnography was composed of four main activities: regular monitoring of users' profiles, collection of data, thematic cataloguing, and critical analysis. For each user, I followed the same procedure. After receiving consent to access and analyse a new SNP (or series of profiles) from the online questionnaire, I sent a friend request by using a personal account with my name and my role as a researcher at KCL. At the initial stage, I collected permanent content in terms of visual and written posts already published on the profile page. Afterwards, I started monitoring it regularly to be updated on not only new posts but also stories (temporary content that would disappear after 24 hours). I followed participants on their online platforms in this way for a year. All content has been collected through screenshots and then catalogued inside a folder created for each user. In particular, every user's folder contains the consent form, a general picture of the social networking account (that reports the profile image of the user along with her biographical description) and subfolders classified as FB (Facebook) and IG (Instagram) posts, stories, and highlights. Over time, I assembled 45 folders. This process enabled me first of all to maintain all the data clustered and catalogued by users, and second to shape a profile of each young woman according to the visual and written content collected on her SNP/s.

3.3.4 Online and written interviews

The data collected on SNSs represent the foundation of my analysis. However, interviews were conducted to support and/or deepen relevant themes already raised in the previous phase. Overall, I collected 37 online written interviews between March 2020 – the date on which I interviewed Amira in person before the nationwide lockdown – and September 2021. The main objective of the interviews was to further investigate the relationship between digital media culture and young women's lived experiences, focusing in particular on their own position as young women, as well as

their status as migrants, Bangladeshi, and Italian/European. I asked respondents about their experiences, feelings, and opinions regarding both their understanding of and relationship with dominant discourses of femininity (e.g. representations of the female body in the media, beauty ideals, effects of body image on self-esteem) and their identities as South Asian and Muslim women in Europe (e.g. sense of belonging, representation of Islam in Eurocentric discourses, relationship with parents). At first, I planned to conduct semi-structured interviews online via online communication platforms, such as Skype, Zoom or Microsoft Teams, but I then opted for a less intrusive approach due to the discomfort displayed by numerous young women and the low rate of participation. Many of them, indeed, refused to take part in online interviews or absented themselves from the research, the moment that I scheduled an online meeting. Even though verbal interviews would have enabled me to establish a more intimate connection with respondents and deepen multiple and even unexpected topics, I offered potential interviewees the chance to reply to open questions sent by mail along with a consent form and explanation of the research project both in Italian and English (Appendix b). This choice had two main advantages: young women felt more confident in taking part in the interview, having removed my presence and any potential intimidation; and had more time to read, reflect on, and answer the questions. Unexpectedly, some participants replied to my queries with very long and detailed responses that looked like a stream of consciousness or a private confession, especially when discussing personal issues related to, for instance, the relationship with their parents or the discriminatory events they had experienced in their lives. These results confirm Miller and Slater's (2000) and Murthy's (2008) opinions that online interviews might provide different, and sometimes more personal and intimate, responses compared to face-to-face ones due to the physical invisibility of the interviewer. Furthermore, by employing writing interviews, I had in mind 'women's testimonial literature' (Santos & Crowe Morey, 2013), which is described as a genre that 'breaks silence, raises consciousness, and builds solidarity among women' (p. 89). In particular,

‘Telling to Live. Latina Feminist Testimonios’ (The Latina Feminist Group, 2001) is a collection of women’s life experiences and stories, established by the Latina Feminist Group, with the aim to resisting patriarchal conditions and shape motherhood as a form of empowerment, solidarity, and sisterhood. This genre stems mainly from women’s condition of marginality and silence (Sternbach, 1991) and is based on liberating actions pursued by testimonials. Therefore, notwithstanding testimonial writing as a genre has its foundation in Latin American literature, within the feminist context, it more broadly focuses on ‘the racialisation of feminist discourse in the hopes of raising communal consciousness of the repression of language, culture, gender, and race’ (Santos & Crowe Morey, 2013, p. 92). Given the low level of participation in online interviews, I adopted an approach to interviews that could respect young women’s private spaces and, at the same time, invite them to take part into a creative writing process as a ‘liberating’ aspect of womanhood (Sandoval, 2008). Ultimately, each completed interview received by mail was then included in the participants’ folders, already created for each user for the analysis of their SNPs.

3.4 Data analysis and Grounded Theory

Having described my three datasets, I will now discuss how the data were integrated, analysed, and critically interpreted. To do so, I adopted a grounded theory approach. Grounded theory consists of systematic yet flexible guidelines for analysing qualitative data by bringing themes out from the data themselves (Charmaz, 2006). After the data collection, I followed a series of steps, as suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and taken forward by Charmaz (2006), to construct analytic codes and categories from the data, make a comparison across the data, advance the development of theories during each step of data collection and analysis, draft memo-writing to elaborate categories, and conduct the literature review after developing an independent analysis. These processes helped me to move the qualitative data forward from a descriptive analysis into explanatory theoretical frameworks

(Charmaz, 2006). Since Glaser and Strauss (1967) invite researchers to use grounded theory in flexible ways, I developed my strategy through a series of attempts, adjustments, and improvements made especially during the first period of data management. In this way, I refined the multiple steps throughout the whole process, which enabled me to systematically interrogate my data when gathered and collected (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020). In the following sub-section, I illustrate the three main stages I developed: coding data, integrating data, and critically interpreting data. Ultimately, I introduce some of the ethical issues that emerged, especially in the phases of participant recruitment and data analysis. I discuss my role as a researcher and the mitigation strategies implemented.

3.4.1 Stage 1: Coding and integrating data

After the first phase of data collection, as explained above, I managed and analysed the three datasets. The first set, which came from online questionnaires, was analysed separately from the other two, as it was mainly composed of quantitative data on participants' media preferences and reasons for use. In addition, results were downloaded using the SurveyMonkey software, which automatically aggregated and calculated respondents' answers. The analysis process, therefore, was relatively simple and fast, and was used to investigate patterns of media consumption and production, with a specific focus on SNSs. The other two datasets were coded and integrated jointly by following a series of steps. I started with the data collected through the analysis of 71 SNSs. It must be noted, however, that even though I included both Facebook and Instagram in the analysis, the majority of data came from Instagram as it emerged as the social network most used and regularly updated among the sample. As introduced above, I created a folder for each participant, containing all their relevant biographical information and data collected from the analysis of participants' social networking activities and interviews. The following step was to identify the main and recurrent themes across all participants' SNPs and so across the data contained in all 45 folders. To do so, I first of all analysed

the online content of each folder separately and drafted a concept map for each participant (Appendix c), thus reporting on the main themes detected. The analysis of each participant's SNP/s has been used for the presentation and discussion of specific case studies (e.g. Chapters 6.3.2 and 6.3.3), in which I focused on selected users and the content generated in their online accounts. After this phase of individual analysis, I compared all participants' maps and identified nine broad thematic categories (codes) in which I placed almost 3,000 online visual and written posts in the form of screenshots. The original number of posts collected across all participants' SNPs was much higher but, to analyse a manageable set of data, I purposefully included only the most relevant ones in the thematic categories and discarded any misleading and/or recurring ones. The nine codes included in the code list are:

1. Selfies and personal portrayals (580 pictures)

Posts that portray users' personal pictures, both selfies and pictures taken by someone else, as well as close-up, half-length, and full-length photos.

2. Fashion and beauty (310 pictures)

Posts related to fashion (e.g. shopping moments, fashion trends, new purchases, unboxing videos), and make-up and beauty practicals (e.g. DIY tutorials, beauty product reviews, before and after make-up videos, skincare routines).

3. Everyday narratives and social time (360 pictures)

Posts depicting everyday narratives in terms of lifestyle (e.g. travels, visits to restaurants, bars, exhibitions, food) and social life (e.g. parties, nights out, dinners with friends).

4. Girl power and success (230 pictures)

Posts produced by users and/or retrieved from social media accounts related to women's empowerment (e.g. girl power slogans, motivational mottos, self-love and self-esteem encouragement, tips for success).

5. South Asian gender norms (185 pictures)

Posts produced by users and/or retrieved from social media accounts related to the condition of South Asian women in their communities of belonging, and gender norms (e.g. family expectations, female roles, forms of surveillance).

6. Bangladeshi culture (250 pictures)

Posts related to Bangladeshi family culture and sense of belonging (e.g. celebrations, festivals, food, family and community events, trips to Bangladesh).

7. Italian culture (160 pictures)

Posts related to Italian national culture and belonging (e.g. lifestyle, cities, childhood memories, trips to visit friends, racist incidents).

8. Online advocacy (340 pictures)

Posts produced by users and/or retrieved from other media platforms (e.g. social media, news, TV programmes) that raise awareness of and/or condemn discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities.

9. Islam (520 pictures)

Posts produced by users and/or retrieved from social media accounts related to Islam (e.g. prayers, pillars, reminders, codes of conduct) and Muslim women (e.g. Muslim speakers, influencers, fashion trends, the hijab).

After identifying the major categories, I created nine new folders (one for each code) and, through a coding frame, all participants' posts, already collected and catalogued for each user, were coded and split into the respective thematic category folder. The process through which I identified the definitive codes was the result of a series of attempts and adjustments in which I constantly compared data and interrogated their relevance for answering my research questions. In particular, moving back and forth

between data and codes, as Charmaz and Thornberg (2020) suggest, helped me to check the pertinence of my preliminary analyses, and thus to ‘raise the analytical level of those that hold up, and support them more fully’ (p. 307). In addition, from each thematic folder, I created subfolders according to specific emerging subthemes. For instance, within Code 9 (Islam), I identified six subtopics (i.e. male preachers, female speakers, participants’ productions, veiled women, fashionable Muslimahs, and empowered Muslimahs), which then became the main sub-sections of Chapter 6. Furthermore, the integration of data collected through the interviews followed a very similar pathway. As soon as I received a new interview via mail, which was already in written form, thus bypassing the transcription phase, I carefully read it more than once to identify topics associated with the main thematic categories that had already emerged from the analysis of SNSs. I then coded relevant sections of each interview and added them to the respective folder of codes. For example, all the interview sections in which participants declared how they used social media to express and/or practise their religious beliefs were joined into one common document and included in folder 9 (Code: Islam). In that way, I tried to connect the self-representations and self-narratives published by users online with the personal lived stories and experiences they shared in their interviews. Interviews, indeed, as stated above, have been used to support and/or deepen the main thematic categories. This entire process, albeit complex and composed of numerous steps, enabled me to reduce, refine, and categorise a large corpus of data according to significant themes and patterns (Given, 2012). Indeed, the following and final step of critical interpretation was facilitated by pre-made macro- and micro-categories of data.

3.4.2 Stage 2: Critically interpreting data

After the phase of coding and integrating data, I focused on the nine codes (and sub-codes) as the main themes to be analysed and critically interpreted. This process involved a series of readings by

using connecting strategies to create links between the emerging insights. In particular, I tried to connect data to my research questions and emerging theoretical frameworks. Even though my main interest was in representations of femininity, I tried to relate this macro-theme to narratives about participants' ethnic background, migratory experience, domestic context, nationality, and religion. These connections and critical examinations led me to identify three main macro topics that constituted the three chapters of analysis (4, 5, and 6). In particular, in Chapter 4, I focus on young women's interpretations and performances of femininity on SNSs by focusing on Code 1 (Selfies and personal portrayals), Code 2 (Fashion and beauty), Code 3 (Everyday narratives and social time), and Code 4 (Girl power and success). In Chapter 5, I investigate the intersection of social categories of gender and ethnicity (which includes issues of race, culture, and nation) by focusing on Code 5 (South Asian gender norms), Code 6 (Bangladeshi culture), Code 7 (Italian culture), and Code 8 (Online activism). Finally, in Chapter 6, I examine the intersection of social categories of gender and religion by focusing on Code 9 (Islam). The definitive draft of these chapters has been the result of 'memo writing' (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020, p. 307) that included initial and provisional analysis through the discussion and interpretation of codes, analytic questions, and comparisons between data. It was only after a series of tentative drafts that I compared my insights with existing literature to define the definitive and most relevant arguments to include in my thesis and connect them logically and coherently to historical and contemporary theories and academic debates.

3.4.3 Methodological issues and mitigation strategies

My mixed-method approach was based on the collection of data conducted entirely online. At a methodological level, I identified a series of interrelated ethical issues, which emerged in the phases of participants' recruitment and engagement, and management of personal data. I considered my own position as a researcher during multiple steps of the research process in order to mitigate any

imbalance of power as far as possible and any concern resulting from the 'virtual' relationship established with participants.

First of all, as explained above, my methodology followed an ethnographic approach, which aimed to establish a relationship with participants through initial informal conversations, passive observation of SNPs, and written interviews. The initial step of online recruitment made me face the challenge of identifying an effective way to interact with unknown young women remotely. I decided to approach participants professionally, by explaining my role and research objectives, while trying, at the same time, to establish as reciprocal and non-hierarchical a relationship as possible. I gave all participants the chance to ask questions and share their doubts with me. I responded to queries about myself, my studies, my Italian nationality, and my personal and professional experiences in London when asked. In some cases, this online exchange of preliminary messages turned into a relatively stable relationship as some participants used to send me messages on Instagram to be updated about myself and my project. In that way, I tried to reduce the risk of distancing and objectifying participants by involving them in the whole research process. Likewise, the interviews through written questions had the potential to bring to light issues around power and reciprocity as fixed questions dictate the frameworks of the dialogue (Oakley, 2016, p. 197). To prevent respondents from feeling powerless, I wrote, at the beginning of each interview document, that questions could be skipped and that responses could be deepened in accordance with their personal level of confidence in dealing with the suggested topics. In addition, I structured very broad and open questions to give respondents the freedom to interpret and answer them on the basis of their understanding and viewpoint.

Furthermore, the analysis of social media data led me to take into account a series of ethical issues mainly related to informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and profiling of individuals, as

multiple academic and non-academic authors suggest (see Derr, 2021; Mahoney et al., 2022; Moreno et al., 2013). First of all, I received informed consent from all participants, even those whose SNPs were public and so did not require a request to access it. Mahoney et al. (2022) highlight how, on the basis of ethical guidelines such as those of the British Psychological Society (2021), observation and collection of data ‘should be limited to public areas of platforms, where individuals have no perception or expectation of privacy’ (p. 233). While I was interested in requesting all participants' permission to include their data in the study, regardless of the private or public security setting of their SNPs, I removed the consideration of informed consent for those public social media accounts and/or posts (e.g. Instagram and Twitter) that participants reshared on their personal SNPs. This happened, for instance, when participants published the posts of popular Instagrammers or bloggers, whose social media platforms were public, thus allowing any user to access them. Furthermore, as discussed above, I explained to participants the objectives of the study and the implications of being involved in it, asked the explicit permission to use their data, and guaranteed anonymity in the final publication. In order to avoid the disclosure of individuals' names and the possibility to directly identify participants (Moreno et al., 2013), I used pseudonyms that I randomly selected from a list of Bangladeshi female names, given that all participants had Bangladeshi and not Italian names. Furthermore, for the images included in the thesis, retrieved from the SNPs analysed, women's features have been blurred and any sensitive information (e.g. name, nickname) removed to protect confidentiality.

3.4.4 Epistemological concerns and self-reflexivity

My group of participants was composed of young (the majority of them aged 18-23) Muslim women of Bangladeshi descent and Italian nationality living in Italy and the United Kingdom. In addition to the methodological issues posed by the online collection of data, in my analysis, and in particular in

the critical interpretation and discussion of the data collected, I faced epistemological challenges mainly related to my role not only as a researcher but also as a white, middle-class, non-Muslim woman of Italian nationality. In the phase of data reading and analysis, I drew on Wood's (2009) suggestion that media consumption and production constitute a form of gendered performativity where the self is reflexively constructed through an engagement with media as part of a communicative act. Therefore, I tried to be very careful in the examination and interpretation of the self-descriptions and self-narratives the young women shared in their online profiles as well as interviews by self-reflexively interrogating my own position in relation to that of the participants.

When I analysed the data collected on SNPs and through interviews, it was unavoidable that my position as a white, middle-class, non-Muslim, Italian woman could affect the interpretation process albeit unconsciously. Questions of representation and positionality were crucial to my critical analysis, and my main objective was to refrain from speaking for 'others' (Alcoff, 1991) or reproducing redundant and stereotypical discourses about 'others' from my privileged position. With this purpose, I undertook a self-reflexive exercise, along the multiple stages of data analysis, aimed to recognise and question my positionality and so reveal the 'assumptions, histories, identities and how they influenced the construction of intersubjective research relations and the research process' (Nencel, 2013, p. 76). By referring to existing literature on reflexivity in qualitative research as well as feminist research, I understood reflexivity as the exercise that enables the researcher to analyse 'the complexity of the data, avoiding the suggestion that there is a simple fit between the social world under scrutiny and the ethnographic representation of it' (Brewer, 2000, p. 132-133). In that way, as suggested by Nencel (2013), the researcher recognises its presence in the text. While conducting my analysis, I felt I was simultaneously an insider, by sharing with participants my gender identity and Italian nationality as well as the migratory journey from Italy to the United Kingdom for study/job

purposes, and an outsider, for sharing with them neither the ethnic nor the religious background. As an Italian, I have an in-depth understanding of the Italian political, economic, and social context in which participants were born and/or grew up. I refer in particular to the so-called ‘migration crisis’, which has triggered a climate of hostility around ethnocultural difference, and the economic crisis and recession, which have caused a rise in unemployment and social exclusion. The changing Italian political and media narratives as a consequence of these crises, and the resulting effects on minority communities’ socio-economic position and integration within Italian society, were extensively analysed during the first year of my PhD as a central theme of my original research project. Despite this, however, I recognised that my knowledge was limited by a lack of identification with the Bangladeshi Muslim minority group. As a consequence, in order to understand as much as possible what it means to be a second-generation Italian-Bangladeshi Muslim woman, I relied on what participants shared with me during the interviews and in their SNSs as well as on contemporary literature and research in the field with specific attention of those conducted among second-generation women in Italy and the United Kingdom. Furthermore, I was meticulous in identifying the main sections of analysis in which my role and perspective could influence my interpretation more markedly and, especially in the analysis of young women’s positionalities in relation to dominant gendered discourses and within the diverse national contexts and ethnic groups they inhabit, I recognised both potential sites of oppression and agency.

First of all, my very first challenge was to position participants in relation to dominant gendered cultural formations in Europe and to comprehend to what extent their ethnic and racial identification had a role in the process of appropriation and/or resistance. In Chapter 4, I will reveal how the self-representations and self-narratives shared by participants on their SNSs reflect dominant imageries of sexuality, consumerism, empowerment and career success and how, therefore, young women

overall pursue a work upon themselves that does not only concern their aesthetical side but also psychological and professional one. I recognised how such a result is neither new nor distinctive of my group of participants but, on the contrary, may be read as a collective response to neoliberal ideologies based on entrepreneurial individualism. White and non-Muslim women might pursue the same ideals and, even unconsciously, I also find myself entrenched into this paradigm based on self-investment. However, in my analysis, by following an intersectional approach, I was interested in investigating precisely gendered subjectivity and the performance of femininity by taking into account multiple social categories of exclusion. Participants' ethnic, class, and religious background differs from that of more privileged white, middle-class, non-Muslim young women. When I refer to more privileged European young women, I mean that, despite the fact they might experience gender inequalities in different areas of daily life, they do not suffer from racist, classist, xenophobic, or Islamophobic forms of discrimination as women from minority and/or unprivileged backgrounds, conversely, do. Therefore, while participants perform a successful and empowered version of femininity as much as other young women would do, their positionalities differ along with the effort and/or struggle pursued in order to achieve those ideals related to the perfect. My critical approach, therefore, was not towards participants being seduced by postfeminist fashion and beauty practices and desirous of a wealthy life and rewarded career. Conversely, it was directed to further investigate how gender norms and expectations affect women differently according to their constitutive social categories and positions. In particular, my reflexive analysis was based on the recognition that, in contemporary competitive and meritocratic systems that do not recognise ongoing gender, racial, and class inequalities, women belonging to minority groups are likely to be subjected to more punitive and pervasive forms of regulation to gain visibility and recognition. This is one of the main points that led me to claim, in Chapter 4, that Italian-Bangladeshi Muslim young women might be considered as the new 'ideal subjects' (McRobbie, 2007, p. 718) of female agency and empowerment

in allegedly multicultural and egalitarian European society, as those who succeed become exemplary cases of self-reliance and self-government. Moreover, through an intersectional approach and an investigation of overlapping social categories such as nationality, ethnicity, class, and religion, I sought to further investigate the negotiation of postfeminist and neoliberal stances by taking into account the position of participants as Europeans, South Asians and Muslims. The analysis conducted in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6, indeed, will disclose how the young women not only negotiate postfeminist and neoliberal discourses but also demonstrate critical self-awareness and collective action to reclaim social change and justice.

Furthermore, in the analysis of participants' sense of being woman in relation to their condition of being Italian-Bangladeshi (Chapter 5) and Muslim (Chapter 6), I tried to shed light on participants' shared narratives and representations by recognising both the potential sites of oppression and resistance. I was particularly careful especially in the analysis of dominant Bangladeshi and Islamic gendered discourses where my position as an 'outsider' became apparent. I analysed both the forms of discrimination and exclusion they suffer in their multiple communities of belonging (as shared by themselves) and the forms of resistance enacted (through their online activity). In addition, I structured my arguments only based on those data where the analysis could be confirmed across participants, and I avoided advancing theories if the data did not provide enough insights. As I will also discuss in Chapter 7, when reflecting on the limitations of my investigation, I decided, for instance, not to include a discussion around marriage as the data collected online from a number of participants did not enable me to pursue a comprehensive reading and interpretation of this topic. Finally, I paid close attention to relevant historical and contemporary academic and non-academic literature to be informed as much as possible on the conditions of and questions surrounding South Asian and Muslim women outside conventional Eurocentric scholarship. The work of Black, South

Asian, and Muslim (feminist) scholars has been an integral part of my theoretical background (see Afshar, 1989; Ahmad, 2001, 2003, 2016; Basit, 1997a, 1997b; Bhopal, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2018; Ijaz & Abbas, 2010; Jahan, 2011; Lazreg, 1988; Mahnaz Murshid, 1997; Spivak 1988/1993), as it has enabled me to incorporate diverse, and sometimes contradictory, positions, and to grasp the complexities and nuances of diasporic feminine subjectivities. Notably, I paid close attention to recent scholarship on second-generation South Asian and/or Muslim women in Europe, in Italy and the United Kingdom. I follow Ahmad's (2016) criticism of academic feminist literature about Muslim women located in the West on the basis that it relies on and is framed within discourses produced in the Middle East, where the economic, political, and social conditions contrast starkly with those of European countries. To avoid an essentialist and reductionist reading of South Asian and Muslim families and women in Europe, I contextualised my analysis within a specific historical and cultural space where differences between first and second generations of women, as well as women who grew up in Italy and Bangladesh, are recognised.

3.5 Conclusion

In this third chapter, I discussed my methodology and research design, which is composed of a mixed methods approach (questionnaires, SNSs analysis, and interviews) to online ethnography to respond to both the pandemic restrictions and the new research objectives. I explained how the foundation of my investigation has been shaped around the data collected through the analysis of participants' SNSs, making online questionnaires and interviews two appropriate methods for supporting and deepening the analysis. In particular, virtual ethnography, conducted through passive participation in social networking spaces and the analysis of SNPs, enabled me to investigate participants' engagement with and appropriation of media and cultural discourses (Dobson, 2011, 2012). My interest, in particular, was in examining a set of practices routinely enacted online, which included

the consumption, production, reproduction, and exchange of media content, and to interpret their relevance for young women's self-expression and self-representation processes. In that way, I drew on Silverstone (1999, 2005) in an effort to recognise communication as a 'dialectical' process by considering not only the relation between the consumption and production of media content but also the broader 'circulation of meaning' (Silverstone, 1999, p. 13) it entails. Indeed, the action of publishing personal content was investigated along with the act of sharing cultural and media content. In that way, I understood media content in a broad and holistic sense, not limited to personal pictures shared on SNSs, but encompassing a series of interrelated cultural practices enacted online.

Furthermore, I discussed in detail how I collected data through questionnaires, analysis of SNPs, and interviews; and how I integrated, analysed, and critically interpreted my three datasets through grounded theory. In particular, I followed a series of steps to construct analytic codes and categories from the data. This led to the generation of nine inter-related codes: selfies and personal portrayals, fashion and beauty, everyday narratives and social time, girl power and success, South Asian gender norms, Bangladeshi culture, Italian culture, online advocacy, and Islam. After the phase of coding and integrating data, I focused on the nine codes as the main themes to be analysed and critically interpreted. This process involved a series of readings by using connecting strategies to create links between the emerging insights. In particular, I tried to connect data to my research questions and emerging theoretical frameworks. Furthermore, I identified the main ethical issues related to the remote interaction with participants; inform consent, anonymity, and confidentiality of participants; and my own position as a researcher within a group of young second-generation South Asian Muslim women. I finally discussed the mitigation strategies that I implemented.

4 GLOW UP. EDUCATE YOURSELF. DRESS WELL. MAKE MONEY. WORK HARD

4.1 Introduction

In my research project, gender is conceptualised as socially constructed, and thus shaped by embodied and discursive social practices and interactions (Butler, 1990). As discussed in Chapter 3, I focus in particular on online practices as representational and performative acts (Naezer, 2020), situated in the broader context of young women's everyday lives. By relating gender with mediated online practices, the following chapter aims to explore the ways in which Italian-Bangladeshi young women interpret and perform their feminine subjectivities through self-representations and self-narratives shared on their SNPs. In particular, I start by analysing the common strategies employed to represent female appearance and lifestyles, which shed light on the narrow and standardised visual repertoire young women draw on to mould a desirable and successful self-image online. Data suggest that young women's attempt to aestheticise and/or mask their femininity online, through aesthetic and consumer practices, proves to be unsuccessful in relation to the mainstream (racialised) beauty canons that dominate European societies. In the second section, I discuss young women's interpretations and performances of femininity through the neoliberal paradigm, whereby the self stands out as the main subject of physical, psychological, and professional investment. Results reveal that female subjects seek to recreate themselves as liberated and empowered through two main practices: the embracement of self-esteem and self-worth narratives, and the pursuit of academic and professional success. I ultimately suggest that second-generation young women are invited to become the new 'ideal subjects' (McRobbie, 2007, p. 718) of female liberation and empowerment within alleged postracial and postfeminist European societies, where structural inequalities are regarded as personal issues (Scharff, 2011a), and so those who succeed become exemplary cases of self-reliance and self-determination.

4.2 Femininities aestheticised and masked

Data collected through questionnaires and interviews showed that one of the main reasons why participants use SNSs is to express themselves and share their everyday lives with extended circles of online followers. Facebook and Instagram, in particular, are image-based platforms where users' self-representations are shaped primarily through visual content. For the sampled young women, sharing selfies, personal portraits, and snapshots of daily life were the most effective and popular means to frame their image online. In line with studies on users' agency and control over their representation through digital technologies (see Leurs, 2015; Mascheroni et al., 2015; Rettberg, 2014), participants recognised and praised the possibility afforded by social media to choose how to publicly present themselves. Dhara, for instance, in her interview, claimed that 'social networking sites, nowadays, provide women with tools to choose how to be viewed' (Dhara, Interview, 05/02/21). Therefore, I first explore the most common strategies young women employ to represent themselves (body, appearance, and lifestyle) on their SNPs. The online ethnography suggests that participants, in the processes of self-modelling and self-disclosure online, draw from a restricted and standardised visual repertoire – based on physical attractiveness, personal confidence, and economic wealth – promoted by postfeminist media, consumer, and influencer cultures in order to successfully take part in online female circles. I suggest that the increasing visibility of diversity across digital media platforms – in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, and class – is masked behind a combination of aesthetic means and consumer practices (fashion, make-up, material goods, lifestyle choices) that contribute to the reproduction and reinforcement of a monolithic prototype of contemporary successful woman that reflects the postfeminist and neoliberal 'ideal'. Notwithstanding the attempt to strategically use the resources that consumer and influencer cultures offer them in order to get closer to mainstream definitions and performances of femininity, the prescriptive and exclusionary character of beauty and body standards reproduced on digital platforms is clearly revealed by the gap

between the apparent confidence shown online and the social pressure and personal insecurity expressed by participants in their interviews.

4.2.1 Attractive and confident self-portraits

The first tendency detected through the analysis of participants' SNPs is the representation of female bodies and attitudes through attractive and confident self-portraits. This visual strategy is based on the production and publication of images in which young women pose in front of the camera, alone or in the company usually of female friends, using a series of techniques designed to emphasise their appearance and look aesthetically pleasant and/or appealing. The set of images examined fall within Code 1 (Selfies and personal portrayals) and Code 3 (Everyday narratives and social time), which include 580 and 360 pictures respectively, as illustrated in Chapter 3. Overall, this category of images includes both Facebook and Instagram posts (permanent pictures) and stories (temporary pictures and videos, which disappear after 24 hours) and is composed of amateur selfies (self-taken with smartphones) and seemingly professional pictures (taken by somebody else with smartphones or cameras). The majority of images, in addition, are close-up portraits, especially when face and/or make-up are displayed; and full portraits, especially when body and/or outfit are shown.

What immediately emerges by scrolling through participants' SNPs is the eclectic character of the self-representations proposed, which are marked by a wide range of fashion proposals. While in some pictures young women follow a more European style, represented by casual and sporty clothes, as well as glamorous, fashionable, and sexy dresses, in others they wear Bangladeshi clothing represented by sarees and salwar kameezes. In some cases, in addition, they find mixed modes of expression by combining global fashion brands and styles with specific ethnic or religious symbols, such as the veil (hijab), South Asian jewellery (e.g. nath, nose ring) and make-up (e.g. mehndi, hand

skin decoration). On a first glance, in these images, participants seem to identify themselves with and move across multiple interpretations of femininity through the selection of identifiable fashion items. In this context, the appropriation of global commercial brands and European youth trends is combined with the reproduction of Bangladeshi design and style, often in creative ways. What emerges from a more focused examination, however, is that despite the tool used, the location selected, and the dress worn, these young women tend to pose in their shots, suggesting a level of management and control of their online image. The visual imagery reproduced reflects that of models' photoshoots in fashion magazines or commercial advertisements and influencers' posts on social media, in which the exposure and beautification of the female body follow dominant representations of 'hetero-sexy' (Dobson, 2011, p. 1) femininity. With this term, by following Dobson's (2011) analysis of women's self-representation on MySpace, I refer to a performance of femininity which is not only sexualised but also in line with 'a specific gendered and heterosexual aesthetic' (p. 2) through a combination of notions of traditional femininity (e.g. delicate colours, glittering decorations, innocent gazes) and references to heterosexual pornography (e.g. provocative poses, high heels, strong make-up). Hence, through a set of visual and communicative strategies, also enabled by Instagram functions as well as photo filter apps, the sampled young women align themselves with the widely investigated normative patterns of sexualised and empowered femininity promoted by contemporary media, and the beauty and fashion industries, which are often reproduced by ordinary young women through social media (e.g. Dobson, 2011, 2014a; Fardouly et al., 2018; Murray, 2015; Naezer, 2020).

Farida, for instance, is a 23-year-old woman who was born in Italy (Rome) to Bangladeshi parents and who moved to London at the age of 19. Farida is at the centre of her Instagram profile, which comes as a collection of pictures that portray her enjoying a variety of occasions, places, and styles: on holiday in Madeira wearing a minidress with high heels, in a fancy sky view bar in Central London

wearing casual clothing while sipping a cocktail, at a Bangladeshi wedding wearing a pink saree dress, or in a trendy South African bar restaurant in London wearing a glittering dress and posing on a sofa showing her legs (Figure 1). Despite the diversity presented in terms of contexts, locations, and fashion styles, these depictions broadly reflect Farida's attitude, which is marked by the desire to show off in a confident, dynamic, aesthetically pleasing and/or sexy way.



Figure 1. Farida Instagram account

Overall, Farida conveys an image of herself as a cosmopolitan and experienced young woman who is used to traveling (e.g. Las Palmas de Gran Canarias, Barcelona, Crete island, Dubai), hanging out at chic sky bars in central London (e.g. Jin Bo Law, The Skyline) or ethnic restaurants in the vibrant area of Camden Town (e.g. Shaka Zulu), and moving across multiple fashion styles (e.g. minidress, formal suit, jeans and t-shirt, saree). The overall visual composition of the photographs (background, body orientation, gaze, outfit) is not spontaneous and natural but conversely designed to publish Instagram posts that meet the requirement of looking appealing on social media. In many of her posts, she adopts plastic poses, emulating fashion models or influencers by putting one hand on her hip, over her head, or under the chin; crossing her legs or bending one leg only; looking straight at the camera or looking down, and so on. The strategies adopted by Farida are not only aimed towards

publishing likable pictures on her Instagram account, but also towards delivering a representation of herself as happy with and in control of her body image, as well as self-assured in publicly exposing it. For instance, in a collection of video selfies saved on her Instagram highlights, she films herself with her smartphone, engaging in different activities from daily life (e.g. in front of the mirror, in her bedroom, in a bus, in a park), in an attempt to please herself and her followers. In the shared videos, she shows her made-up face, usually with the application of Instagram filters that enhance her features by, for instance, smoothing her skin, plumping her lips, or changing the colour of her eyes. In addition, she usually moves her body sensually, turns her head to assume seductive facial expressions, gently touches her hair, winks or blinks at the camera with an apparent purpose of flirting. By reproducing influencers' popular visual templates, adopting unrealistic beauty filters, and demonstrating experience and confidence in self-exposure, this young woman proves a desire to appear attractive by conforming to a mainstream definition of femininity that is centred on the female body, as defined by postfeminist culture. In her interview, indeed, she claimed to be 'definitely in favour' of women who expose their bodies on social networking sites, and she added:

'If you appreciate something and you want to show it off, why shouldn't you do that? Even though exposing one's body is frowned upon in Bangladeshi culture, I believe that every woman can do whatever she wants on her social networking profile.' (Farida, Interview, 18/05/20)

Farida's statement brings to light how exposing one's body on SNSs is not only a personal and enjoyable choice, but also an empowering act against normative and restrictive performances of femininity as defined within the Bangladeshi community. Such a practice, based on a reinterpretation of South Asian traditional femininity through the incorporation of 'hetero-sexy' (Dobson, 2011, p. 1) references, is largely detected within the sample of young women. Ira, for instance, is a 21-year-old

woman who was born in Italy (Milan) to Bangladeshi parents and moved to the United Kingdom (London) in her twenties. She regularly publishes pictures of herself wearing sexy and provocative clothing (e.g. skirts with slits, skinny leather trousers, minidresses, short tops, high heels) on her Instagram account. Regardless of the different locations (e.g. Dubai, Sydney, London, Dhaka, Santorini) and settings (e.g. bedroom, street, restaurant, club, beach) selected for taking pictures, Ira tends to put forward a captivating image of herself by adopting plastic poses and sensual postures. In a picture posted in May 2020, for instance, Ira sits on the golden stairs of a restaurant. She wears a green and black minidress, which leaves her legs and shoulders uncovered, and stares into the distance with a hand gently placed under her chin. Her hyperfeminine aesthetics and bold attitude, however, are detected also in those portrayals in which she wears Bangladeshi dresses that overall tend to cover the female body. In June 2020, she published a very similar shot taken on the occasion of Eid (an official holiday celebrated within Islam), where she sits on the stairs of her flat, with her back towards the balustrade and a hand over her head. Ira wears a black, white, and red saree that matches her red handbag, black high heels, red lipstick, and jewel earrings. She does not look straight into the camera; conversely, she gazes downwards, thus conveying a message of sensuality yet innocence (Figure 2). While the location and the outfit selected to be photographed vary, Ira's intent to look attractive remains unchanged. In particular, in her pictures, Bangladeshi dresses are presented in such a way that garments regarded as traditional, exotic, and designed to cover the body from a European perspective, are aestheticised and made glamorous. This strategic action contributes to blur the opposition between European style as audacious and free and Bangladeshi style as traditional and innocent by assigning new cultural significance to South Asian historical adornments that become symbols of femininity and sensuality within a new contemporary 'ethnic chic' (Durham, 2001, p. 201) fashion style.



Figure 2. Ira Instagram account

The aestheticisation of Bangladeshi style is a recurrent practice detected within the sample, through which young women combine South Asian dresses and jewellery with flawless make-up, plastic fashion model poses, and Instagram beauty filters (e.g. skin smoothing, green/blue eyes, freckles, full lips). Nishad, for instance, is a 25-year-old woman who was born in Bangladesh (Dhaka), and who moved to Italy at the age of 2, and then to the United Kingdom (London) at the age of 18. Her Instagram profile is composed of a series of portrayals featuring her in trendy locations in London, wearing fashionable dresses. Her refined style and attention to detail is observed also in those pictures in which she wears Bangladeshi luxury dresses and/or covers her head. In a selfie taken in her car, wearing a veil, Nishad shows her face perfectly made up with smooth skin tone, red lips, fake eyelashes, and blue contact lenses that make her look like a model. In other images published along with the hashtag #voguechallenge, she designed a Vogue Magazine issue featuring her on the front page, posing with a sparkling gold salwar kameez with heeled furry shoes or with her face covered by a light pink cloth that allows a glimpse of her made-up face and seductive pose (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Nishad Instagram account

By presenting such feminine imageries, young women prove to be inspired by South Asian models and influencers, such as Kaaviya Sambasivam, Ishini Weerasinghe or Rowi Singh, whose content online is followed and reshared by multiple participants. A clear example is Kaaviya Sambasivam, an Indian-American TikTok star who reflects the body canons of a fashion model: she is tall and slim with a striking body shape, has long silky hair, green eyes, and full lips. Her Instagram profile features a collection of pictures of herself portraying a highly sexualised aesthetic (e.g. provocative poses, flirty gazes, bodily parts exposed, sexy outfits, strong make-up). In an interview published on the Instagram account of Revolve (an American online retailer), she declares: ‘I’m passionate about representation + inclusivity, and I love expressing that by incorporating Desi culture into my fashion and lifestyle content!’ (Revolve, n.d., n.p.). When she incorporates Desi culture into her portraits, for instance by wearing the saree or applying a bindi on her forehead, this is not only aestheticised, as in the case of some participants analysed above, but also sexualised by combining ethnic symbols with references to soft pornography culture (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Kaavikiwi Instagram account
Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/kaavikiwi/>

The visual content proposed by these young women suggests that appearing aesthetically attractive and in control of one's own body is a goal pursued regardless of the dress worn or the body parts exposed and that, therefore, this tends to go beyond fashion styles to encompass ethnic, class, or religious boundaries. The same attitude, indeed, has been detected among young women who opt for a modest way of dressing. Swati and Aysha, whose case studies will be analysed in depth in Chapter 6, are two young participants who share pictures of themselves wearing the hijab, usually matched with long dresses, on their SNPs. They use their social media platforms for the purpose of Islamic proselytism. Notwithstanding the fact that the choice to cover the head and body does not seemingly fall within the mainstream definition of empowered femininity, they seek to shape multi-faceted and dynamic representations of themselves by combining religion with notions of female empowerment, beauty, fashion, consumption, and academic success, thus giving rise to new interpretations of the postfeminist subject. Swati, for instance, regularly publishes short videos featuring herself walking the catwalk along the streets of her neighbourhood with a confident gait, looking straight at the

camera, or pictures of herself at the gym along with encouraging messages of self-love and self-improvement (Figure 5).

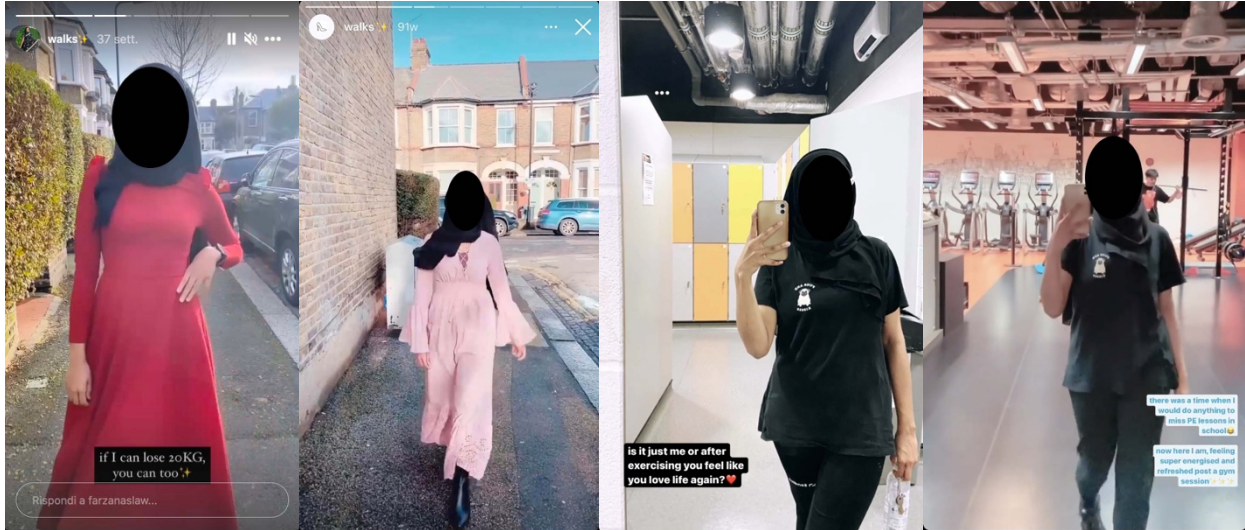


Figure 5. Swati Instagram account

All these recognisable and popular visual strategies reproduced by participants indicate an attempt to emulate charming and confident women as they represent themselves and/or are represented within contemporary postfeminist media culture (fashion magazines, TV programmes, music videos, blogs, social media etc.). These representations are composed of a rich collection of female models that, nevertheless, embody sensuality and demonstrate self-awareness. The media, and the Internet in particular, is confirmed to be a key site where beauty norms and codes of sexual conduct are defined (McRobbie, 2004), which young women draw from to model their interpretations and performances of femininity. Participants are familiar with such sexualised imageries, skilled in moving across diverse interpretations, and able to adapt them according to their individual styles and preferences. Here the objective is not to attract the male peer audience and receive men's approval; conversely, it is to be part and to be valued within online female circles where users manage, beautify, and expose their bodies as a part of a freely chosen, self-pleasing, and empowering practice. This clearly emerges

when reading the comments related to the pictures and selfies analysed which, indeed, come mostly from female users who express positive evaluations, appreciation, and encouragement, mainly based on aesthetic appearance, such as: ‘You look so good’, ‘Wow a queen’, ‘Pretty woman’, ‘Miss perfect’, ‘A princess 💖’; ‘Gorgeous!’, ‘OMG a whole model’, ‘Looking beautiful dear ❤️’, ‘The cutest’, ‘So hotttt 🔥’; ‘Sexy!’. In other cases, comments are closely related to specific body traits (e.g. ‘OMG your hair!’, ‘Your face is majestic’, ‘The shape of your eyes is beautiful’, ‘You’ve flawless skin 😍’), or fashion and beauty items (e.g. ‘I’m in love with your outfit ❤️’, ‘Love your make-up’, ‘The necklace is beautiful’, ‘Where’s the dress from? Love it’). These young women are acting overall in line with the postfeminist agenda that rejects the old feminist discourse of women as victims of the male gaze and promotes a radical shift in which the aestheticisation, enhancement, and exposure of female bodies is explained through discourses around self-pleasure and choice (Gill, 2008b). The appropriation of the postfeminist discourse of sexual liberation and the celebration of women’s freedom over their own body arose in the interviews too. Dipika, for instance, claimed that ‘all women should feel free to do what they want with their body’ (Dipika, Interview, 04/03/21), while Nishad reinforced the idea that ‘every woman should have the right to make her own decision about her body, regardless her faith or culture’ (Nishad, Interview, 04/02/21). That does not mean all participants actually show their bodily parts on their SNPs but nonetheless supports women’s right to make use of their appearance for their own gain. While these stances may reflect the overcoming of gender restrictions endured by the older generation of Bangladeshi women and the claiming of greater freedom among the new generation, the attention to female bodies responds to postfeminist ideals of women’s empowerment, achieved also through self-determination and control over one’s appearance. The public exposure and power of choice available to participants were not culturally possible or permissible for their mothers. Afrin, for instance, in a discussion with other female users on her Instagram account, claimed: ‘Let’s be honest, none of our mothers are appreciated enough for being

“just housewives” and if they had the chance, they’d worked more on themselves without having to rely on men only’ (Afrin, Instagram, 03/03/21). Choosing for one’s self and working upon the self regardless of men’s approval is one of the key themes that shapes the postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007, 2008) and that is reproduced across participants’ self-representations to symbolise the view that women ‘are now empowered’ (Dosekun, 2015, p. 1) and that the freedom achieved should be celebrated.

The emerging imagery of autonomous femininity is emphasised also through the public performance of confident, brash, and provocative feminine attitudes as a form of women’s liberation and self-determination (Dobson, 2014b; Levy, 2005). The analysis of pictures and/or videos included in Code 3 (Everyday narratives and social time) yielded insights on the participants’ experience of social time spent with friends, depicting it as not only enjoyable but also unbridled, which overall conveys a perception of these young women as audacious and knowledgeable. In the representations examined, participants are often portrayed with female friends, engaging in pre-party activities (e.g. getting dressed, wearing make-up, listening to music, taking selfies) and weekend activities (e.g. shopping, dinners out, bars, drinks, parties, dancing, twerking). In their representation of these occasions, references to alcohol consumption and nights out – practices originally prohibited for women in South Asian Muslim contexts – are commonly adopted to represent a carefree life and uninhibited attitude (Figure 6). By adopting a hedonistic and brash lifestyle, which has become legitimised and widespread among young women in the postfeminist context (Dobson, 2014b, 2014c), participants also seek to prove they have gained freedom and power by distancing themselves from more traditional models of femininity (Harris, 2004) through the appropriation, for instance, of typically masculine gestures and habits (e.g. smoking, drinking alcohol, shouting). This is also emphasised through their use of explicit language in comments accompanying pictures published concerning

celebrations or weekend activities, such as: ‘My favourite whore, baddest bitch queen’; ‘My ladies: may we stay crazy like this forever’; ‘We got the power’; ‘The true gang’; ‘We’re sexy and we know it’; and ‘Entering into the weekend bitcheeeee!’



Figure 6. Social time with friends

What emerges from this initial analysis is that, despite the heterogeneity of participants’ self-representations, there is a shared attempt to reproduce a visual imagery based on female attractiveness, confidence, and empowerment as fostered by postfeminist popular media culture. The shared visual narratives suggest that the sampled young European women – even though their ethnic, class, and religious background differs from that of extensively studied European, middle-class, white, young women – tend to conform to normative postfeminist definitions and performances of femininity. This demonstrates how the increasing standardisation of beauty ideals and female attitudes has become socially accepted across the boundaries of class, ethnicity, and race. These results confirm Butler’s (2013) argument that as a ‘versatile and pervasive cultural discourse’, postfeminism manages to ‘travel through complex social terrains, deftly adapting to cultural, economic, and political shifts while maintaining its core characteristics’ (p. 45). Looking at the female celebrities (e.g. singers, models, actresses, influencers etc.) followed or whose content is reposted by

participants, indeed, it can be noticed that they conform to normative contemporary female imagery, regardless of their ethnic origin or racial features. Some examples are Rihanna, Kim Kardashian, Ariana Grande, Mishti Rahman, Kylie Jenner, Chiara Ferragni, and Bella Hadid, among many others. All these well-known female figures, despite being diverse in terms of ethnic background, skin colour, size, profession, and style, refer to the same ideals of attractiveness, confidence, and empowerment that characterise the ultimate successful woman in postfeminist culture. Participants' self-exposure online reflects the dominant models, imaginaries, and standards offered by the media, fashion, and beauty industries, which determine the socially accepted and rewarded expressions of femininity. Hence, being attractive and fashionable, having an active and unbridled social life, and showing it confidently online come to be collectively recognised as a valid means to successfully participate in online female youth circles. These preliminary results confirm the need to go beyond the formulation that postfeminism is for white and middle-class women only (Butler, 2013; Tasker & Negra, 2007) and to further investigate how it intersects with, and incorporates, difference. As argued by Butler (2013) and Dosekun (2015), postfeminist culture increasingly circulates across borders, addresses diverse groups of women, and is enacted by prominent non-white female figures in such a way that it has become 'the new normal, a taken-for-granted common sense' (Gill, 2017, p. 609).

4.2.2 Glam lifestyle through consumer practices

In addition to drawing on ideals of physical attractiveness and confidence to present their appearance online, the majority of participants' SNPs are shaped through the active use of the resources that consumer and influencer cultures increasingly offer to the young generation of users. The analysis of 310 images included in Code 2 (Fashion and beauty) reveals that young women adopt the logic of self-promotion through the textual and visual narration of their personal lifestyles. In particular, by

following the make-over paradigm, commercial products (e.g. fashion, make-up, beauty, food, technology, travels) become a valuable means to generate an upgraded self and credibly take part in the consumer and influencer sectors. The online ethnography disclosed how some participants pursue such a practice in a seemingly professional way, acting as aspiring and/or amateur influencers and managing their accounts as a side business, while others adopt a more domestic use of their profiles, which are usually addressed to a selected and smaller circle of followers. In both cases, however, the objective is to mould and present a desirable lifestyle online through beautification and consumption practices, which emulate influencers' and micro-celebrities' marketing strategies.

The young women who manage aspiring professional accounts are used to standing as enthusiasts about and/or experts in one or more genres of female consumption (usually fashion, make-up, and beauty) and as such offer arguments, tips, reviews, and news on specific products and brands to their followers through Instagram posts, stories or reels (temporary or permanent short entertaining videos). Dipika, for instance, is a young woman in her twenties, who was born in Bangladesh (Narsingdi) and moved to Italy (Treviso) when she was 1 year old. Her Instagram account is followed by more than 2,000 users and deals mainly with skincare and beauty. The page is composed of a series of pictures (mainly close-up) of herself in which she wears different styles of make-up with captions revealing all the beauty brands used, and reels (short videos) in which she introduces and tests beauty/make-up products and shows her transformation through their application. In other posts, in addition, she explains in detail beauty-related topics, such as: 'Today's topic: sunscreen. Why is it so important?'; 'My obsession: vitamin C. Why should you add it to your skincare routine?'; 'Main skin types', and so on. As an enthusiast and make-up expert, Dipika shows her followers, mainly South Asian ones, how to take care of and improve themselves through the application of specific beauty and make-up products. In her videos, she discloses all the steps and techniques to be followed

in order to achieve the best results. Her objective is to reproduce the beauty blog template for a specific group of women and beauty lovers with specific ethnic features. Indeed, she often gives advice about make-up tones and clothing colours that match and/or complement brown skins. For instance, in an Instagram story, she claims: ‘Brown ladies hear me out! You ABSOLUTELY need something mint green in your closet. Imo [in my opinion] it brings out beautifully all the warm tones in our skin’ (Dipika, Instagram, 23/11/21). Dipika’s dedication in managing her Instagram page resulted in an emerging career as a make-up artist for weddings that involve brown skinned brides, not only those of Bangladeshi descent but also, for instance, North African descent. Even though she works as an administrative employee, she managed to create a personal blog where she offers make-up and hairstyle services to be booked online. The blog also includes a link to her Amazon page with a list of her favourites products; TikTok and YouTube accounts; preferred online shops (e.g. Lookfantastic, Yesstyle, Tellonym); and business collaborations with specific beauty brands (e.g. Charlotte Tilbury, Kaima Cosmetics) through which she offers followers special discounts by using her personal promotional codes. Dipika’s case reveals not only how the beauty blogging phenomenon is increasingly defining female beauty standards and inviting women to portray an ideal version of themselves, but also how it is increasingly driven by the capitalist market through the promotion and consumption of make-up, beauty, and fashion brands and products. Furthermore, it highlights the status of fame, celebrity, and success assigned to bloggers and influencers that, indeed, tends to be imitated and replicated by common users.

The online ethnography disclosed how other aspiring influencers are not specialised in one feminine field but, conversely, include a variety of feminine topics in their Instagram narratives. In this case, the objective is not to provide a service and/or show a creative ability, as in the case of Dipika, but to centre one’s lifestyle as the main product to be promoted. Rahima, for instance, is a 29-year-old

woman and mother who was born and raised in Italy (Ancona) by Bangladeshi parents. She moved to the United Kingdom (London) in the summer of 2021. Her public Instagram account is followed by more than 3,000 users; deals with fashion, photography, family, and travel; and is mainly focused on her style and life, which is narrated in detail daily. Overall, Rahima introduces herself as a fashionable wife and mother, as also stated in the bibliographic section of her Instagram account. First of all, she publishes pictures of herself posing with new glamorous outfits, shots of new fashion items bought (e.g. clothing, accessories, jewellery, perfumes), and stories in which she advises on fashion/beauty matters (e.g. ‘3 looks with chunky boots’; ‘Decluttering: have you already done it?’; ‘Fall manicure inspiration’; ‘Sunglasses season’; ‘Easter look ideas’). In addition to a focus on the fashion realm, the selection of published pictures is constructed in such a way as to convey an image of herself, her family, and her life as desirable. Details of recognisable and expensive fashion brands (e.g. Chanel perfume, Apple laptop, Gucci fashion bag) are combined with stylish locations in London (e.g. Rawshà restaurant, Selfridges department store) or posh areas of the city (e.g. South Kensington, Chelsea), and popular international holiday destinations (e.g. Santorini, Tenerife, Monte Carlo, Nice). Through the adoption of distinguishable material goods, Rahima displays her family life in a highly aestheticised and consumerist way. For instance, she regularly publishes happy family portraits on holiday where all members wear matching outfits, pictures of her daughter posing like a model in front of South Kensington’s iconic Victorian style houses, romantic dinners with her husband wearing a sparkling dress in glamorous restaurants in London, or self-portraits posing as a fashion model in outdoor settings (Figure 7). These examples reveal how consumer choices become valuable resources for customising young women’s sense of femininity. Being updated on the latest beauty products and fashion trends, capturing shopping moments, and sharing new purchases are activities routinely detected on the majority of SNPs analysed. By following and imitating fashion bloggers and influencers, who are guided by the capitalist market and profit-based motives, these

ordinary young women, even without an effective economic return, are encouraged to reproduce and exchange online content that sustains feminine ideals mainly through commercial products and brands as well as the cultural and material values attributed to them.



Figure 7. Rahima Instagram account

Participants do not monetise on Instagram but the format they adopt and the choice to show commercial brands online may be considered not as a business action but as a personal strategic choice. This approach, which has the specific purpose of turning their ordinary life into a desired and desirable lifestyle, seeks to maximise the likeability of their online content, by reproducing successful feminine imageries based on consumption goods and practices. Such an activity, indeed, is not only promoted by the young women who act as aspiring influencers, but is also appropriated by those with a more domestic approach to SNSs. Hence, exhibiting a pleasing and wealthy self-image is not only the goal of Instagrammers who seek to gain new followers and increase their popularity online, but also of those ordinary young women who manage private accounts and, nonetheless, aim to present their lifestyle as appealing within their restricted circle of followers. For instance, the display and/or review of the latest products bought (mainly through the so-called ‘unboxing’ practice) and places visited (mainly through the use of the tag and localisation functions) are two common practices

detected within the sample, regardless of the structure and goal of users' accounts. In that way, in their everyday lives, the young women aspire to be represented in terms of a 'glam life' (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 6) through the exhibition of glamorous goods but also international travels, fancy restaurants, and popular venues. These mundane and Instagrammable fragments of daily life give rise to a recognisable and desirable lifestyle deemed to be successful online, as proposed by prominent influencers and celebrities. Rifah, for instance, uploads a story of her new pair of exclusive 'Adidas SC Premiere'; Lavit takes a picture of a delivered parcel that contains the highly publicised 'The Ordinary' beauty products; Satviki publishes a photo entitled 'Shopaholic' that portrays a multitude of shopping bags; Anika regularly shares shoots of all her new glamorous purchases, such as 'Farsali' beauty products, 'Michael Kors' watches, 'Apple' Air pods; while Rahima shares her latest 'Chanel' lipsticks. Even though these brands do not reflect the luxury and high-priced ones sponsored by popular fashion influencers, the practice of publicly showing one's purchasing capacity online enables these young women to take part in consumer culture. Instagram's emphasis on visual storytelling invites users to reproduce and/or imitate the template of successful users, where commercial goods or exclusive experiences stand for the social condition of wellbeing achieved and contribute to outlining a definition of empowered women through access to a cosmopolitan and consumerist lifestyle.

In addition to consumer products, participants use the tag and localisation functions to indicate the trendy venues they hang out at. The majority of them are highly recognisable venues in London, which have become popular on social media, mainly because of their striking aesthetics. God's Own Junkyard, for instance, is a kaleidoscopic warehouse in Walthamstow, completely filled with fascinating neon lights, glittery disco balls, and vintage signs. It also has an on-site art gallery and café even though the major attraction is taking pictures and selfies. Pink Lemonade Lounge is a

cocktail bar, restaurant, and music club in East London that became famous thanks to a small pink room decorated with a wall of flowers with a neon sign that reports #girls do it better, and a sofa where young women take pictures. Finally, the Pink Lemonade Lounge is an Insta-friendly popup store composed of different distinctive backdrops and rooms with vibrant colours and cartoonish instalments where visitors can take selfies (Figure 8). In addition, participants use the tag function to track their movements and international travels (e.g. Valencia, London, Santorini, Madrid, Amsterdam, Paris, Ibiza, Nice, Miami, Dubai). In the cases of Farida and Ira, as analysed above, the image that overall emerges from these representations is that of independent, affluent, cosmopolitan, and urban young women moulded through the appropriation of the symbolic value of commercial goods, trendy places, popular destinations, and cool social activities.



Figure 8. Instagrammable locations in London

The constructed lifestyle imagery reveals how, in order to be part of and valued in online communities, young women are required to conform to specific, often unrealistic, premises based on a mix of consumerism, wellness, and wealth. Such practices can be linked to the academic debate on self-branding online (Marwick, 2013, 2015) that includes online promotional practices, originally

associated with celebrities and micro-celebrities. This has subsequently been adopted by ordinary users in the process of modelling an 'edited self' (Marwick, 2010, p. 340) by strategically revealing and/or highlighting only certain aspects of their personal lives that reflect the desired lifestyle or brand. However, by understanding contemporary consumer culture as a field of symbolic values, participants' purchasing practices trigger a meaning-making process in which class plays a key role. Female consumption, and its liberated character in terms of women's freedom and pleasure, is traditionally linked to and investigated among white and middle-class women (McRobbie, 1997, 2008). Participants in this research, who do not fall into this group of women, seem to share their ordinary consumer choices and glamorous lifestyles as a way of symbolically expressing not only the nuances of their 'edited self' (Marwick, 2010, p. 340) but also their upgraded self, reached through increased cultural knowledge, social achievements, and economic capacity. Young women's access and attachment to certain material goods and brands, in this case, may be linked to the formation of advanced social subjectivities aimed at receiving social attention and reward and, in so doing, detaching themselves from the stereotypical imagery of South Asian Muslim women as uneducated, patriarchal, and backward (Ahmad, 2001). The majority of participants, who come from migrant working-class families, recognise the gap between their generation and that of their parents in terms of education and economic opportunities. Nasima, for instance, in her interview explains how her parents had to make so many sacrifices while her generation can study and have a prosperous future with no hardship. She recognises how 'the young generation lives in luxury in comparison with what parents had to go through' (Nasima, Interview, 20/01/21). Meanwhile, Anouka feels lucky to be able to have a 'comfortable life, wealthy and secure' (Anouka, Interview, 23/01/21) and recognises the struggles her parents went through, as they had to look for a new life and work hard to build it. Participants' statements help to explain how, while on the one hand these young women seek to credibly take part in consumer and influencer cultures, the practice of consumption and the choice to

display it online can also be read as a means of creating social and cultural distinctions, and expressing the certain freedom and well-being that has been supposedly achieved by the young generation. Overall, behind such work of upgrading the self lies the desire to flatten social and economic disparities through the active and strategic use of the resources that consumer and influencer cultures offer to them, with the aim of getting closer to the feminine imagery of the middle-class, affluent, and independent postfeminist woman. As also highlighted by Baulch and Pramiyanti (2018) in relation to Hijabers, the exhibition of advanced consumer power by young women historically excluded from the consumer market suggests an effort to link women's power to their identities as consumers and, as such, to reinforce the notion that the ideal woman is a consuming woman. In that way, participants seek to position themselves as privileged consumer citizens through practices of conspicuous consumption that, understood 'as an individualistic mechanism of empowerment' (Butler, 2013, p. 45), become a criterion for inclusion in the 'global sisterhood of power femininity' (Lazar, 2006, p. 515).

4.2.3 Unattainable promises of postfeminist ideals

The previous sub-section demonstrated how, in the process of consuming and producing online media content, participants tend to edit images of themselves so as to appear attractive, confident, affluent, second-generation young women, in line with the ideals and performances of femininity proposed by postfeminist media culture. Young women manage their image and the impressions they give online through selected strategies or masks in order to shape an idealised, desired, and upgraded self. These mediated forms of representation are based on young women's will to be part of and be seen as well as be valued and rewarded in contemporary online female circles. The socially constructed desirable self, however, is often the result of a struggle where social approval and recognition are key issues. Participants are aware of the increasing objectification and self-objectification of women's bodies in

contemporary online and offline contexts. Taslima, for instance, in her interview, claims that ‘the female body is used in many occasions as an object to attract the attention of the public eye, but also to achieve a certain level of fame’ (Taslima, Interview, 21/01/21). Similarly, Shakila believes that ‘women are often objectified and represented as tools for male pleasure’ and adds that social networks are a ‘toxic environment especially for the youngest generation’ (Shakila, Interview, 16/02/21). The harmful effects that this might have on women’s social reputation and personal esteem is recognised and experienced by some interviewees. Lima explains how female objectification leads many young women to be verbally assaulted by male peers through sexual comments and vulgar advances, and discloses how these incidents have been experienced by many of her friends. Nasima adds that many women feel inadequate and not enough when comparing themselves to perfect female bodies and faces often retouched through excessive make-up and plastic surgery, while Avya believes that unattainable beauty ideals are the main reason why women in their teenage years become very insecure and might experience depression. Despite the well-acknowledged risks associated with the exposure and scrutiny of female bodies, as also discussed in Chapter 2, young female users cannot avoid emulating mainstream feminine imageries and feeling pleasure and gratification when they receive attention and approval for personal images shared on SNSs. Umme, for instance, believes that ‘every person who publishes something online wants to receive positive feedback, both from friends and unknown users’ (Umme, Interview, 19/02/21). In particular, Instagram metrics used to measure users’ performance (likes, comments, and followers) are considered as a means to evaluate users’ popularity and success. Jannatul explains how, until a few years ago, ‘likes and positive comments were of vital importance to the point that if a post did not receive enough likes [she] used to delete it’ (Jannatul, Interview, 23/02/21). Dritika, moreover, interprets ‘likes as a small [amount of] attention’ and believes that this is particularly important for ‘girls who often tend to be unsure of themselves and see likes as a form of approval’ (Dritika, Interview, 26/03/21). In order to attract positive feedback

on their posts and be recognised within online female circles, participants seek to meet the definitions and expectations of what is appropriate and rewarded in youth, consumer, and influencer cultures (Leurs, 2015). The data analysed above demonstrates that, within the sampled group of young women, this approval includes, on the one hand, seeking to look attractive through posting aesthetically pleasant visual content, and on the other hand, showcasing a desirable lifestyle through consumer choices.

Online social reward, however, does not come without consequences. Young women are subjected to the burden of reaching the social validation of their content and maintaining recognised social standards. The use of SNSs to observe, monitor, and emulate successful female users, both celebrities and non-celebrities, and to seek online approval, engenders feelings of inadequacy in relation to standardised and often unattainable beauty and lifestyle canons, which may be understood as regulatory discourses (Ahuja, 2019; Bauer, 2020). Insecurity about personal shared contents and concern about followers' judgements and expectations undermine the apparent freedom of choice and autonomous pleasure of participants in selecting the images and looks to be published. Nasima and Shakila, for instance, in their interviews, disclose the fact that they are vulnerable to outside approval:

‘I am a pretty insecure person and I am so afraid of other people’s judgements. On social networks, I do not always express opinions on a variety of topics but only on those I care about the most. I share only pictures in which I feel comfortable and I look confident.’
(Nasima, Interview, 20/01/21)

‘I try not to be swayed [by other women’s online images] but I think that, sooner or later, everyone is affected by influencers with a perfect body without realising that they got plastic surgery or are photoshopped. I happened to compare myself with those women and feel insecure.’ (Shakila, Interview, 16/02/21)

Furthermore, a couple of participants discuss how their mental health and self-esteem are adversely affected when they compare themselves with other women online. Gopika, for instance, explains how sometimes she is ‘affected by other women’s online images but others not really’ and that mostly depends on her mental health status (Gopika, Interview, 05/03/21). Ira, moreover, recognises that ‘nowadays there are unreal beauty canons on social networks, which are often unreachable’ and she adds: ‘unfortunately, this hurts people’s self-esteem, mine in the first place’ (Ira, Interview, 22/02/21). While these results reflect earlier studies on body surveillance related to processes of monitoring attractive peers and internalising appearance ideals (e.g. O’Reilly et al., 2018; McCrory et al., 2020; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2016), in the case of young women of South Asian descent, the attempt to conform to standardised (Eurocentric) beauty canons may also result in the refusal of not only bodily features but also distinctive racial features such as skin colour, as expressed by Jannatul:

‘Nowadays I have a broader vision and I believe that each community or culture has its specific beauty canons but (...) I remember that when I was a child, I could not accept my brown skin, and I also aimed to be skinnier and I avoided sunbathing.’ (Jannatul, Interview, 23/02/21)

Jannatul’s personal experience suggests that, in the attempt to conform to a dominant European definition of beauty, whatever strays or diverges from it tends to be masked with often hurtful and unsuccessful practices. The fact that she could not ‘accept’ the colour of her skin implies the normative and racialised character of beauty and body standards, which have negative effects especially on young women and lead them to experience social exclusion and resort to corrective actions of self-regulation. As suggested by Deliovsky (2008), physical markers within a society that places a great deal of importance on women’s bodies ‘represent a powerful political aesthetic that belies the salience of race for gender normativity’ (pp. 49-50). The attempt of hiding potentially

discriminatory markers emerges also during Jesmin's interview, in particular when she explains the double face of Bangladeshis inside and outside their homes. As she argues:

'I've always noticed that Bangladeshis show themselves in a different, more modern, way when they are outdoors but, as soon as they get inside a Bangladeshi household, they change. This is precisely because at home we can be ourselves (...) The sad thing is that we Bangladeshis, but also other foreigners, in order to be accepted, have to immerse and mix into the new culture (...) otherwise we get judged.' (Jesmin, Interview, 09/06/20)

Jesmin's disclosure brings to light how offline forms of discrimination might be replicated in online platforms, where actions of social comparison, evaluation, and judgement occur and where restrictive body and lifestyle standards reproduce exclusionary practices against racial and/or class difference. Social expectations, therefore, might produce a tension between the public, where young women tend to conform to normative 'white' femininity, and private, where they perform femininity in line with South Asian and Muslim cultural norms. The construction and performance of an image of the self that appears integrated, or that meets the standards of appearance and behaviour expected in European societies, reveals the act of mimesis enacted by participants both in online and offline public contexts. With this term, I refer to Taussig's work 'Mimesis and alterity: A particular history of the senses' (1993) in which the action of imitation is not only aimed at copying the 'outside' of the 'Other' but also its power by appropriating its meaning. In online contexts, while the active and strategic use of the resources that consumer and influencer cultures promote might be seen as a means of getting closer to the ideals of successful contemporary femininity, the persistent racialised beauty conventions unveil the unattainable promises of postfeminism based on individual agency and empowerment as well as the structural inequalities that continue to mark European societies. Participants, indeed, support greater acceptance of historically marginalised groups of women and seek to achieve greater levels of diversity in media representations. Nishad, for instance, highlights

how ‘women are represented as if there was only one way to have a nice body and be called beautiful: being thin, small waist, big back etc.’ and she adds: ‘it seems like brown and black means not beautiful (...) what I want to say is that there is not very much acceptance of diversity’ (Nishad, Interview, 04/02/21). Young women’s attempts to aestheticise and/or mask their femininities online, through aesthetic and consumer practices, proves to be unsuccessful when viewed through the lens of the white feminine ideal (Deliovsky, 2008) that dominates cultural and media discourses in Eurocentric societies. These results confirm Bordo’s (2003) argument about the homogenisation of images in Western culture, where racial, ethnic, and sexual markers ‘that disturb Anglo-Saxon, heterosexual expectations and identifications’ (p. 25) are smoothed over. However, the consciousness of not fully conforming to the social requirements of contemporary regimes of femininity triggers processes through which young women attempt to tackle systemic differences and socio-economic constraints individually and self-responsibly through self-regulatory practices that go beyond aesthetics and beauty and also involve their personal and professional spheres. Such responses, fed by an overwhelming neoliberal individualism, are the main focus of the following section.

4.3 Self-made liberated young women

The online ethnography revealed how young women shape and perform their feminine subjectivities online not only through visual representations of their aesthetic appearance and lifestyles, but also through discourses on autonomous and empowered femininity that are consumed, produced, and exchanged across digital platforms. In particular, participants’ interpretation of femininity overall reflects girl power stances and neoliberal ideologies, at the centre of which is the female self who stands out as the main subject of physical, psychological and professional investment. The analysis conducted on 230 posts included in Code 4 (Girl power and success) suggests that such a model is constructed through two main narratives based on: self-esteem and self-worth values, and academic

and career success. The first narrative is aimed at the promotion of female authenticity and invites young women to feel confident in and proud of their own bodies, despite social pressures and/or individual insecurities, by working upon themselves. The second narrative is built on the pursuit of success in the field of education and/or employment. Notwithstanding participants' resolve to overcome the socio-economic limitations of the older generation, this is also a response to the increasing expectations placed on unprivileged women in European democracies and competitive markets. I ultimately suggest that both these narratives reflect neoliberal conditions, as outlined in Chapter 2. In this context, young women belonging to minority groups are invited to become self-entrepreneurs and recreate themselves as liberated and empowered through increased autonomy and commitment, whilst failing to acknowledge the structural challenges they face. In particular, I argue that second-generation South Asian and Muslim young women might be seen as the new 'ideal subjects' (McRobbie, 2007, p. 718) within postfeminist and postracial European societies, where those who succeed become exemplary cases of self-reliance and self-determination.

4.3.1 Self-esteem and self-worth narratives

Participants, who fall into an age range from 18 to 29 years old, are in the middle of a life stage in which self-experimentation and self-consciousness are essential steps within the process of moulding their interpretations and performances of femininity. This is also a response, as suggested above, to the overwhelming social expectations and resulting individual insecurities experienced by young women. The online ethnography evidenced how, on their SNPs, they embrace and disseminate visual and written narratives based on self-esteem and self-worth, with the aim of promoting values of female authenticity. What is emphasised, in particular, is the recognition, appreciation, and enhancement of one's self both at both physical and psychological levels. On a physical level, interviews disclose how all participants are aware of the artificial character of the 'perfect' women's

bodies encountered in media discourses. What is criticised, in particular, is the sham surrounding media representations of women, which emerge as handled and untruthful. Aysha, for instance, explains how ‘social networks nowadays show female bodies and even faces that are not real and instead photoshopped’ (Aysha, Interview, 14/02/21), while Bharati argues that media images portraying women are often ‘forged with extreme make-up or cosmetic surgery’ (Bharati, Interview, 18/01/21). In response to this, by following the body positivity movement, participants support women’s will to show themselves as they ‘really’ are beyond online filters and socially constraining norms, and they do so by situating female authenticity and distinctiveness as the main features to be valued and promoted. The standardisation of beauty canons, the promotion of unreachable ideal bodies, and the exclusiveness of the fashion and beauty industries have been accused of increasing levels of dissatisfaction and insecurity among female audiences, and have therefore been challenged by counter-narratives that normalise, praise, and promote ‘imperfect’ bodies. Such a claim has given rise to a grassroot phenomenon of female advocates promoting body positivity themes that have become popular across online and offline media (e.g. books, magazines, TV programmes, blogs etc.). Participants said that they regularly follow body positivity influencers (e.g. Lounorthcote, Deepica, Danae Mercer, Nebela Noor, Sarah Nicole Landry) who promote the value of truthfulness in terms of body features and diversity in terms of racial features. All of these influencers have built their online activity and popularity by encouraging women’s empowerment through self-improvement (health, fitness, DIY tutorials) but also self-confidence narratives (body positivity, plus size women, Black and Muslim women). The recurrent messages spread by these influencers are related to the appreciation of one’s flaws, acceptance of one’s shape and size, confidence in one’s body, and sharing one’s worth. Some of them, in addition, fight against the hegemonic standards that are still rooted in white beauty and advocate for more diversity and inclusion within the cosmetic and fashion industries. Deepica Mutyala, for instance, is a South Asian influencer followed by multiple

participants. She is a beauty entrepreneur, businesswoman, founder and CEO of ‘Lived Tinted’, a multicultural digital community that ‘explores diverse beauty and creates products for “every shade in between”’ (Deepica, 2020, n.p.). The aim of her digital community is to give ‘voices and story-tells for underrepresented individuals and features their personal journeys with beauty, culture and identity’ (Deepica, 2020, n.p.). All these mediated figures and platforms tend to promote consumerism and the commodification of difference, which constitute the postfeminist sensibility outlined by Gill (2007), through neoliberal and entrepreneurial practices which become the key instruments for achieving women’s independence and freedom (Ahl & Marlow, 2021).

The fostering of female confidence has led to the celebration of women’s bodies, regardless of their skin colour, shape, size, flaws, disabilities, and despite regulatory constraints and social pressures. Participants prove to have appropriated these promises and support women’s bodily autonomy and right to make use of their appearance for their own gain. Indeed, all interviewees share the same position based on freedom and personal choice when discussing women who publicly expose their bodies online. What is emphasised, in particular, is that agency and confidence in relation to one’s appearance should not only be restricted to women with perfect bodies but conversely should be expanded to all women. Mottos that encourage self-acceptance, self-love, and self-esteem can be routinely detected on the young women’s SNPs in the captions accompanying the pictures published. Such captions include: ‘Know your worth’, ‘Accept yourself, respect your uniqueness’, ‘Love yourself’, and ‘You are art’. In addition, some participants take part first-hand in the dissemination of positive messages through the publication of self-portraits that come with hashtags claiming female liberation by virtue of showing authentic and/or imperfect bodies (e.g. #bodypositive, #nobodyisperfect, #goodvibesonly, #confidence, #selflove, #strongwomen, #girlpower,

#womenpower). Swati, for instance, uploads a selfie on her Instagram account with no make-up along with a caption reporting:

‘Feeling so uncomfortable showing my bare/no make-up face, but I feel this should be normalised even if your skin is not perfect, full of scars and acne spots like mine. That’s how you learn to love yourself unconditionally. Love your imperfections!’ (Swati, Instagram, 09/09/21)

This narrative, based on the ideal that each body deserves to be accepted and valued and that every woman has the right to feel beautiful and appreciated, contrasts sharply with the prescriptive and exclusionary character of beauty and body standards offered by the media, fashion, and beauty industries, as discussed in the previous section. Consequently, the responsibility to challenge unrealistic and restricted body ideals and get rid of social pressure lies with women. Within such a girl power movement, female confidence may turn into a new regulatory force. The promotion of ‘confidence culture’ (Orgad & Gill, 2022, p. 4) is a recurrent theme fostered by celebrities, influencers, advertisements, and social institutions that encourage women to increase their self-esteem in diverse fields of their social and private lives. Hence, on a psychological level, women are invited to discover and reveal their value and strength through their own cognitive development and self-disciplinary work upon the self. According to these narratives, the female self takes shape through an individual pathway along which women ultimately recognise their fulfilment and happiness despite physical flaws, social expectations, structural inequalities, and personal struggles. Participants identify with and are involved in this process of self-discovery and share it online through the publication of personal thoughts and, more often, through the sharing of content retrieved from Instagram accounts (e.g. Myselflovesupply, Rebelfeminism, Bossladiesmindset, Thefemalehustlers, Girlyouareaqueen, Selfcareisapriority) designed to empower women mainly through a process of self-

determination and self-enhancement. Girlyouareaqueen, for instance, is ‘a platform that empowers all QUEENS’ (Girlyouareaqueen, n.d., n.p.), Myselflovesupply provides ‘self-care, wellbeing, and inspiration[al]’ tips for women (Myselflovesupply, n.d., n.p.), while Wealthymotivated is aimed at ‘helping you become the best version of yourself!’ (Wealthymotivated, n.d., n.p.). The majority of the posts retrieved by participants from these accounts are affirmations of self-love and motivation mottos, which encourage women to draw out their qualities, skills, and sense of agency to pursue achievements and returns. Farida, for instance, published an Instagram story retrieved from a Motivationdirector account that reported: ‘Don’t give up on the woman you’re becoming’; Aysha shared an Instagram post of Selfcareisapriority that claimed: ‘There is a past version of you that is so proud of how far you have come’; while Jesmin reposted a Recoverysayings post that stated: ‘But did you congratulate yourself on the process that no one knows about? Honour yourself Sis’. The implicit message of these slogans is a process of transformation aimed towards reaching an enhanced version of the self as well as a sense of pride in the work done so far. The terms ‘the woman you are becoming’, ‘how far you have come’, and ‘no one knows about’ also entail a never-ending journey that is often traversed alone with hardship. In addition, in order to value one’s self and show it off proudly, women are told to rid themselves of social pressures and expectations and the resulting feelings of insecurity and inadequacy. Minati, for instance, shared an Instagram story that reported on the sense of external oppression experienced and wrote: ‘Our families, our friends, society, media: we are surrounded by images and voices telling us who we should be and what we should do’ (Minati, Instagram, 02/02/21). Dipika, likewise, shared an Instagram story from the Hardpoetry Instagram account that cited a few verses signed by the artist JH Hard (Hardpoetry, n.d., n.p.):

‘Society breaks us down. It forces us to try to fit in instead of standing out. We end up trying to be what we think others want to see, or what we see on the TV. But you are what

you are. Your spirit is what it is. And that is everything (...) Be braver than that and let your differences continue to make the difference.'

As a response, participants appropriate and disseminate messages that prompt women to prioritise themselves, which is seen as an essential step to achieve happiness and gratification. Jesmin, for instance, published a post retrieved from the Glimpseofwisdom account that reported: 'This year is teaching me that putting yourself first isn't selfish, it's necessary', while Lekha shared a story published by Secretly_twisted2 page that claimed: 'When you start taking care of yourself you start feeling better, you start looking better, and you start to attract better. It all starts with you'. According to these empowering discourses exchanged online, the self turns into the main object of investment. In the process, self-actualisation comes to be an individual responsibility and so requires strength and determination. McRobbie (2007) suggests that the laborious process behind female empowerment implies that 'young women become important to themselves' (p. 723) as they are in charge of their own happiness and fulfilment. Hence, they are encouraged to take care of themselves, find inspiration and motivation, accept their flaws, make plans, and work hard to achieve their fullest potential. Participants asserted that they find in digital media culture (e.g. Instagram accounts, blogs, influencers, celebrities) a rich repertoire of resources and inspirations to draw from in order to regulate and transform their selves. For example, Satviki published an Instagram reel from the Businesswifey Instagram account that cited a public speech of Selena Gomez, a popular American singer, songwriter, and actress, in which she claimed: 'No matter what people perceive of me, I always shine through at the end of the day. I've had a lot of people try to tear me down, but I'm here and I'll always be myself'. Tania, moreover, follows Kristen Butler, a blogger that 'teaches positivity' and is founder of the 'Power of Positivity' Instagram account (Positivekristen, n.d.). Through her online activity, she trains female users to become positive people and reach a rewarding and proud

version of themselves. In one Instagram post reshared by Tania, Kristen Butler reminds followers of a list of ‘10 positive affirmations of self-worth’ (Power of Positivity, n.d., n.p.) with the caption:

‘If you don’t feel good enough (...) you can do something about it (...). It starts in your self-talk and the affirmations you are declaring about yourself and your life. Are you telling yourself you are AMAZING? You are! You are not your circumstances.’

While these empowering discourses that privilege the individual self and its agency may be seen as a response to the standardised and restricted body and beauty canons that limit women’s confidence and potential, the achievement of female liberation and celebration of female authenticity conceal new normative ideals based on practices of self-surveillance and self-regulation. In particular, mediated narratives consumed and reproduced by participants tend to place full responsibility on women to fulfil their potential. Hence, the structural differences and discriminations women experience – which are the primary reasons behind feelings of inadequacy, insecurity, and vulnerability – are translated into individual challenges and thus addressed through an individualistic commitment to change. As previous research (Baer, 2012; Scharff, 2011b) has highlighted, contemporary public debate on (post)feminism is marked by a distinct neoliberal outlook, which invites women to deal with collective forms of inequality individually through self-entrepreneurial practices aimed at developing a critical gaze on the self and corrective procedures to conform to a successful empowered subject. The post shared by Tania is meaningful in bringing to light how women are invited to believe that ‘they are not their circumstances’ and that every external factor that undermines their happiness, confidence, and accomplishment can be overcome individually. In that way, the inability and/or impossibility to reach recognisable achievements ends up being explained as a personal rather than a social failure.

4.3.2 Education and career success: *The London dream*

The journey that leads to self-actualisation at the physical and psychological levels is accompanied by a process of improvement and success in the academic and/or career fields. The second narrative detected on participants' SNPs discloses notions of individual female achievement, constructed through economic independence and professional reward. Such discourses complement the ones analysed before. This means that having career goals is part of the overall project of liberated and empowered femininity promoted by postfeminist and neoliberal cultures. Here, as in the previous case, such a narrative is constructed by young women through the publication of personal thoughts and, more often, through the sharing of motivational and empowering Instagram accounts focused on how to succeed in one's life and/or career (e.g. Successfulmaster, Successowner, Motivationaldirector, Bossbabe.inc, Girlsbuildingempires, Businesswifey). Girlsbuildingempires, for instance, is an Instagram account aimed at 'empowering ambitious women to build their own empires' (Girlsbuildingempires, n.d., n.p.), while the Businesswifey account is described as a 'platform for ambitious women' (Businesswifey, n.d., n.p.). These Instagram pages sell the imagery of forceful femininity mainly through inspiring and motivational quotes and/or life experiences of fearless, strong, and determined contemporary women and celebrities such as Rihanna (singer, actress, and businesswoman), Jennifer Lopez (singer, actress, and dancer), Kendall Jenner (model and media personality), Nick Minaj (singer), Christine Quinn (actress, fashion designer, and realtor), Mel Robbins (lawyer, author, and motivational speaker), and Rupri Kaur (poet and author), among many others. Participants take inspiration from these female models, who are viewed as exemplary success stories and contribute to moulding an imagery based on knowledgeable, assertive, and productive women. Aysha, for instance, published an Instagram post with the caption 'Be a queen' that reported on a Businesswifey Instagram account post: 'Glow up. Educate yourself. Dress well. Make money. Work hard'. To be a queen – a respectable and empowered female subject – women

not only need to yearn to shine or to dress well, as already demonstrated, but also need to educate themselves, work hard, and make money. Being professionally satisfied and economically rewarded is a shared goal within the sample. For instance, Samiha published a *Girlsbuildingempires* post that claimed: 'Being financially stable and genuinely happy is my ultimate goal right now', while Lekha posted other *Girlsbuildingempires* content that stated: 'I aspire to be a woman who wakes up and loves what she does for a living every day. Travels often, spiritually secured, and financially stable'. Overall, the discourses exchanged by participants online evoke an imaginary of contemporary women not only as confident in their own bodies but also ambitious and committed to their careers. As in the previous paragraph, participants recall the rationale of determination, perseverance, and hard work in order to achieve recognisable results, in terms of autonomy and independence, thus constructing a bright future through their own efforts.

McRobbie (2007) defines the new compulsory female capacity as a 'new sexual contract' (p. 718), which has its origins in a neoliberal political orientation, is mainly proposed in advanced democracies of the Global North, and addresses young women. Successful femininity in contemporary life takes many different forms and is also embedded in the fields of education and employment, where young women become 'ideal subjects of female success, exemplars of the new competitive meritocracy' (McRobbie, 2007, p. 718). Through the modern education system, based on neoliberal economic policies aimed at promoting meritocratic values and competitive individualism, young women are encouraged to gain qualifications and visibility within allegedly postracial and postfeminist societies, where it is deemed that there is equal space and opportunity for everyone to stand out. Among 45 participants, indeed, only 2 identify themselves as housewives and both of them are mothers. The majority of the sampled young women, on the contrary, study in recognised universities both in the United Kingdom (e.g. Queen Mary University of London [QMUL], Middlesex University London

[MDX], King's College London [KCL], Manchester Metropolitan University [MMU]) and Italy (e.g. La Sapienza, University of Padua [UniPD], Bologna University) across a variety of disciplines (e.g. clinical & positive coaching psychology, architecture, law, pharmacy, natural science, accounting and management, medicine). What emerged from the online ethnography is that the participants demonstrated ambition, motivation, and commitment to expressing their potential and achieving high standards at academic and professional levels. First of all, the majority of participants included their academic level in the biographic section of their SNPs (e.g. BSc at Middlesex, MSc at King's College London) as a distinct feature of their achievements. Some of them, in addition, placed their academic and/or professional life at the centre of their online activity. Swati, for instance, whose case study will be analysed in depth in Chapter 6, is a 22-year-old woman who was born in Italy (Rome) to Bangladeshi parents and moved to the United Kingdom (London) when she was 11 years old. She holds a 1st class LLB (Bachelor of Law) and set up a personal blog and YouTube channel to share tips on productivity and self-growth in academia. Samiha, in addition, is a 27-year-old woman who was born in Bangladesh (Dhaka), moved to Italy at the age of 2 and then to the United Kingdom at the age of 21. After obtaining a MSc in Clinical and Positive Coaching Psychology, she became a mental health coach, mentor, and academic tutor. She manages a Facebook page whose content promotes her work based on personal wellbeing, health, and enhancement. Participants' resolve and resilience is also evoked through written content retrieved online and reshared on their SNPs. Aysha, for instance, published an Instagram post on an account called Successfulmaster, reporting that: 'Self-discipline is doing all of the little things you don't want to do because they are needed to make the future life you want' (Aysha, Instagram, 10/11/21). Meanwhile, Mutholi shared a quote claiming that: 'The distractions you avoid today set you up for success tomorrow' (Mutholi, Instagram, 05/02/21). Such discourses exchanged online suggest that young women are not only committed to their future prospects, but are also well-equipped to and informed on how to achieve them. This reflects how

‘having a well-planned life’, as McRobbie (2007) argues, has become ‘a social norm of contemporary femininity’ (p. 729).

In the case of second-generation women coming from an ethnic and religious minority, however, academic and professional success and economic independence are first of all pursued as a means of taking a step forward and overcoming the economic and social limits faced by the older generation by positioning themselves credibly in the competitive labour market. In this process, as discussed in Chapter 1, the role of parents is crucial in encouraging daughters to obtain degrees and succeed both at academic and professional levels. Education for women, in particular, becomes a form of investment. The acquisition of daughters’ academic qualifications becomes not only a means to gain upward social mobility and increase family’s reputation and prestige within the collectivity (Abbas, 2003; Afshar, 1989; Basit, 1997a) but also to overcome the stereotypical imagery of South Asian Muslim families as uneducated, patriarchal, and backward (Ahmad, 2001). Coming mainly from unprivileged backgrounds, participants explained how the main reasons for having moved from Italy to the United Kingdom, often under parents’ solicitation, were state-funded schools, better education opportunities, and limitless job opportunities. Jesmin, who moved from Italy to the United Kingdom at the age of 15, claims that ‘by studying and getting good degrees here [in the United Kingdom], there are far more chances to have a bright future worldwide’ (Jesmin, Interview, 09/06/21). This is confirmed by other participants who, in their interviews, recognise the British Government’s support for families with financial hardship through funds and grants and the overall British acceptance of and investment in foreigners. Amena, for instance, claims:

‘Italy is a marvellous country to live in, but it has little to offer to foreigners (...) while London is a city where you can succeed with your abilities. It does not matter who you

are or where you are from, if you are skilled you are welcomed.’ (Amena, Interview, 20/01/21)

Amena’s words reflect the neoliberal promise that both racial difference and gender discrimination are no longer salient (Banet-Weiser, 2007) in a country considered as multicultural and open to diversity, and thus women are encouraged to pursue achievements based on individual abilities and skills. Within neoliberalised European social and economic contexts and competitive markets, these young women are not only compelled to compete in the education and job systems on par with more privileged white and upper middle-class young women, but are also expected to be grateful for the support and chance they have received. The London dream (or myth), and its promises of a successful future (Della Puppa & King, 2018), is widespread within the sample and demonstrated by the fact that two-thirds of participants had moved from Italy to the United Kingdom. Participants praise the UK government for its role in supporting people coming from unprivileged social contexts and thus fostering equal opportunities in the education and job systems. In doing so, persisting gendered and racialised disparities that affect women belonging to ethnic minorities, which will be discussed in depth in Chapter 5, are hidden behind an individualistic and neoliberal rhetoric. McRobbie (2016), in her book about the formation of the creative economies in the neoliberal era, talks about the ‘creativity dispositif’ (p. 11) to refer to a set of policies, guides, instruments, devices, schemes, and dispositions that encourage young people to enter a seemingly exciting yet precarious risk economy. According to her stance, it is a new form of governmentality that directs young people towards the education system in order to promote competition and self-entrepreneurialism as a new ideal. By moving to London, participants become ‘privileged subjects of social change’ (McRobbie, 2007, p. 722) as the chance to study in prestigious universities and to have prosperous career prospects is seen as a form of investment and as a means of upgrading their social status. Behind such a narrative is young women’s desire to demonstrate their capability and determination to go beyond economic constraints

and achieve social respectability. Such a responsibility, however, is entirely on themselves. Once they receive governmental support and get into the job market – marked by racialised, gendered, and classed hierarchies – the possibility to succeed depends on their level of determination, enthusiasm, and resilience. Potential discriminations that may come from external and structural factors are addressed through a strong expression of individualism. Such a position helps to explain why any issues that women may encounter in achieving their goals depend on individual rather than political issues (Budgeon, 2001; Scharff, 2011a). In this way, participants follow the meritocratic ideology that adopts education as the primary instrument to obtain a respectable job position and a dignified life. Career becomes one of the main cultural spheres of self-determination, which involves values of sacrifice and rigour as a means to be evaluated as worthy and virtuous within competitive societies where gender and racial discrimination are hidden behind values of meritocracy and competition. The endless and tenacious work that women are invited to engage in as a way of achieving empowerment and liberation, in that way, becomes a form of self-regulation and self-discipline that trains female subjects to become the only ones responsible for their future. The analysis suggests that there is an ongoing process of self-surveillance and self-management in order to meet the unattainable expectations of contemporary postfeminist and neoliberal cultures, while young women belonging to ethnic minorities continue to be adversely affected by everyday discrimination and systemic racism. Ringrose and Walkerdine (2008) highlight how the subject of self-intervention is middle-class, while Scharff (2011b) reinforces the point that the empowered and neoliberal female self is often constructed in opposition to seemingly powerless ‘Other’ women. Within an individualistic, consumerist, and neoliberal society, gendered and racialised inequalities are regarded as personal issues (Scharff, 2011a) and not political responsibilities. Therefore, the impossibility of affording an expensive lifestyle or achieving a recognisable job position is configured as an individual fault rather than a social condition. This implies that women coming from minority ethnic groups and/or

disadvantaged backgrounds are subjected to more punitive forms of regulation in order to gain visibility and recognition.

4.4 Conclusion: Italian-Bangladeshi Muslim women as new ‘ideal’ female subjects

In this chapter, I examined the ways in which Italian-Bangladeshi Muslim young women interpret and perform their feminine subjectivities through the self-representations and self-narratives they share on their SNPs. My interest, in particular, was in investigating how European women belonging to an ethnic and religious minority engage with postfeminist and neoliberal demands, which have been promoted by educational systems, media cultures, and global brands. Furthermore, by engaging with existing criticism of postfeminism and neoliberalism, I sought to critically reflect on the concept of diversity and on how participants represent, recount, and manage their bodily and racial features as well as social and economic conditions in their process of self-disclosure online.

Overall, the chapter reveals how young women, in the action of engaging with cultural and media discourses online, are invited to embrace an individualistic project of the self that involves their physical, psychological, and professional spheres. By recalling Foucault’s (2008) neoliberal subjects, these young women evidence traces of self-reflexivity and self-creation that make them entrepreneurs of themselves. I suggest that, while in postfeminist and neoliberal societies women emerged as key figures of success (McRobbie, 2007), second-generation Bangladeshi and Muslim young women may be considered the new ‘ideal subjects’ (McRobbie, 2007, p. 718) of female liberation, empowerment, and redemption in allegedly multicultural and egalitarian European societies. Through increased self-reliance, they are encouraged to re-write their individual biographies in order to take part and gain credibility in competitive social and professional environments. In doing so, they embody the image of the new self-made liberated woman who strives to come forward in different sectors of social life.

While young women prove to be seduced by fashion and beauty practices and desirous of a wealthy lifestyle and rewarded career, with no noticeable difference with other European women, it is by looking at their positionalities and the resulting forms of discrimination and inequality that we can understand how young women belonging to minority groups respond to contemporary postfeminist and neoliberal demands to be empowered. In particular, in a capitalist society where neoliberalism operates as a form of self-governance and where values of competition and meritocracy reward ‘individual exceptionalism’ (Idriss, 2022, p. 807), these women found themselves in a particular vulnerable position, with little recourse to institutional support and severe demands for self-government and self-promotion. In that sense, the self-representations and self-narratives analysed might be understood as entrepreneurial and self-branding strategies pursued to redeem themselves from the stereotypical European interpretation of migrant, working-class, brown women with limited capacity and future prospects, and demonstrate the ability to effectively use their acquired agency and take advantage of the opportunities offered to negotiate not only gendered (Ahl & Marlow, 2021) but also racialised and classed constraints. Hence, women from minority groups are subjected to forms of self-reliance and self-regulation that are more punitive and pervasive than those European white, non-Muslim, middle/upper-class women are invited to. Rifah, for instance, published a message where she vented her frustration on Facebook, writing that: ‘Someday I’ll be successful and all of you who underestimated me will eat your words. Success is the greatest revenge!’ (Rifah, Facebook, 28/01/19). Examples of historically marginalised women who succeed through individual commitment and determination resonate with comments participants make on their SNPs. Swati, for instance, in an Instagram story, published the cover of a book entitled ‘I Am My Brand’ written by Rubi Springer – a Black woman, brand-building expert, speaker, author, and founder of SheBuildBrands – along with the caption: ‘One quote that resonated with me is: success is a choice, it’s not given’ (Swati, Instagram, 23/07/21). The book is focused on the skills needed to succeed, and

the author supports readers in their journey to self-improvement in work and life on the basis of her personal experience. In addition, Rifah shared a reel of Ayesha Hak – a Muslim blogger and YouTuber who deals with ‘modest fashion, lifestyle, weight loss, and travel’ (AyeshaHak, n.d., n.p.) – with the caption ‘True inspiration’. In the Instagram video, the blogger reports on her transformation during the period from the age of 19 to 37 years old, and demonstrates how while at 19 she was ‘unemployed, off the rails, with marriage issues, no education and debts’, at 37 she is a ‘happily married, mum of three, head of service, master graduate, homeowner and landlord’. These representations of self-made, liberated, and empowered Black or Muslim women reflect the assumption that gender, class, and racial differences and discriminations might be overcome self-responsibly through hard work and resilience. There is here an attempt to go beyond narratives of victimhood and exclusion to portray a new life scenario based on acquired wellness, pleasure, and achievement. Postfeminist media culture, therefore, presents feminism as unnecessary by offering women ‘a notional form of equality, concretised in education and employment, and through participation in consumer culture and civil society’ (McRobbie, 2009, p. 2). Participants, through their online self-representations, prove to have appropriated the postfeminist mottos that women can be anything and do anything with their skills and abilities, despite and/or against the systemic forms of discrimination that affect and constraint their daily lives (see Harris, 2004; McRobbie, 2007; Walkerdine et al., 2001). These results highlight the role of postfeminist and neoliberal culture in reinforcing existing power relations by creating an idealised and essentialised notion of femininity that symbolically transcends institutional inequalities (Butler, 2013; Tasker & Negra, 2007). Therefore, by regarding social inequalities as personal issues (Scharff, 2011a) in the process of ‘applying individualised postfeminist sensibilities to address collective subordination’ (Ahl & Marlow, 2021, p. 63), those who succeed become exemplary cases of self-governing subjects.

To conclude, what emerges from the analysis conducted in this chapter is an increasing number of consumed and produced media narratives where European women coming from ethnic minorities are represented, and represent themselves, in idealised terms as beneficiaries of the same rights of European, upper middle-class, white women (Projansky, 2001). They not only show themselves as fashionable and proactive subjects, attentive to aesthetics and consumption, determined and educated, but also as skilled to deal with material inequalities and social disadvantages in a self-responsible manner. What these celebratory digital narratives do not adequately consider, however, is either the discrimination that this group of women face in European societies and the struggles they experience within their community of origin. Structural inequalities and the resulting practices of social exclusion and forms of resistance will be investigated in Chapters 5 and 6, which are focused on the impact that social categories such as ethnicity, race, nationality, and religion have on young women's understandings and performances of self. On the basis of the results that have emerged so far, my objective is to engage with existing academic literature to further explore contemporary (post)feminism across borders and so to examine how the intersection of women's subject positions might reproduce, reconfigure, negotiate or challenge hegemonic concepts of gender, race, and religion. By following an intersectional approach to the study of subjectivity, I further explore how the empowered and successful self-representations shared online contrast and/or are negotiated with the positionings of these young women in European and Bangladeshi-Muslim private and public sociocultural contexts and dominant discourses.

5 LIVING STRATEGICALLY ACROSS BORDERS

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter revealed that young women draw from the repertoire of postfeminist media culture in order to conform to an idealised monolithic representation of femininity and to successfully take part in online female circles. I ultimately suggested that, in allegedly postracial and postfeminist European societies, second-generation young women are invited to become the new ‘ideal subjects’ (McRobbie, 2007, p. 718) of female visibility, agency, and empowerment through participation in education, employment, and consumer culture. However, such a celebratory narrative of global female progress, freedom, and equality – produced by the media, popular culture, and European polity, and reproduced by young women themselves – is oversimplistic as it is based on the assumption that European non-white and Muslim women are equal beneficiaries of the same rights as more privileged European, middle-class, white women (Projansky, 2001). Thereby, the relationship between gender and other social identity categories is ignored, as are the structural inequalities and forms of exclusion endured by specific groups of women in different spheres of social life. In response, by following an intersectional approach to the study of subjectivity, as introduced in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, in this chapter I start to further investigate how participants ‘are caught up at the intersection of multiple, sometimes conflicting, subject positions’ (Shi, 2005, p. 55) through the analysis of additional axes of categorisation such as nationality, ethnicity, and race. The objective is to reveal participants’ sense of being woman in relation to their condition of being simultaneously migrant, South Asian, and European, and how it is precisely this interrelationship, and the multiple conflicts and responses that arise, that define young women’s positionalities, possibilities, and choices. In particular, I am interested in examining how participants are positioned, and position themselves, within the diverse national contexts and ethnic groups they inhabit and move across on a daily basis. After exploring the impact of the act of mobility on participants’ sense of belonging, I

structure my analysis around two main perspectives. First, I analyse how young women of South Asian descent are positioned within dominant Eurocentric discourses, and how they react to processes of exclusion through the use of SNSs. Data collected through online ethnography demonstrate that their subject position as ‘Other’ triggers processes of identification with diverse minority groups and movements with the aim of collectively claiming recognition, participation, and citizenship within European societies. The second perspective is based on participants’ positioning within the Bangladeshi community and identifies two main strategies through which young women react to and negotiate domestic gendered norms and expectations: the tactical use of their SNPs, and online confessions where personal stories and experiences are shared to build awareness, support, and collective change. Ultimately, I recognise both the effects of competing ethnicised and racialised interpretations of femininity on the process of subjectivity formation, and the potential role of digital platforms to become avenues to resist the dominant discourses in which participants are positioned and reconfigure symbolic boundaries. In line with more recent research on renewed interest in feminist issues in popular and media culture (e.g. Baer, 2016; Banet-Weiser, 2018; Scharff et al., 2018), participants prove to be aware of gender inequalities (Rottenberg 2014; Scharff 2011a) as well as racial discriminations that affect their daily life. Notwithstanding being involved in the neoliberal rhetoric of individualistic empowerment as demonstrated in the previous chapter, they also look for and give rise to collective forms of action and resistance. In that way, they challenge the postfeminist premise that feminism’s work is over and, on the contrary, reinforce the need of a feminist consciousness directed to social justice.

5.2 Moving across borders: Where do I actually belong?

The acts of border crossing, dislocation, and relocation define participants’ life journeys, which are marked by a double transition: from girlhood to womanhood, and from one country to other(s). The

concept of mobility becomes central to investigating how the notion of gender (which includes issues of femininity and sexuality) is strictly related to that of ethnicity (which include issues of race, culture, and nationhood). In particular, it is employed to investigate how boundaries, cultures, and subjectivities are transformed not only through the action of mobility but also through transnational connections and cross-cultural exchanges and conflicts, which are increasingly enhanced by intensified mediation (Georgiou, 2006; Gillespie, 1995). In particular, the sample for my research project is composed of a mixed group of women who share bonds – real or imagined – in relation to three countries: Bangladesh, Italy, and the United Kingdom. Even though, as revealed in Chapter 3, not all the sampled young women have spent their lives in all three countries and gained direct experience of their diverse national cultures, a transnational imaginary tie binds these places together and makes them relevant for this young generation. In particular, Bangladesh is the country of origin of all participants' parents. The questionnaires revealed how Bangladeshi popular and media culture – in terms of language, food, customs, celebrations, but also movies, TV series, music, news etc. – has been reproduced and experienced daily by participants since birth, within their domestic and diasporic communitarian environment. Furthermore, Italy is the country that connects all participants. Some of them were born in Italy while others moved to Italian cities in early life. That makes Italy the country where all of them grew up, spent their childhood and teenage years. Finally, the United Kingdom is the place where some participants became adults, or the desired future destination for others. The majority of the young women interviewed moved to the United Kingdom during or after high school for study and/or work purposes. Those who still live in Italy think about the chance to move to the United Kingdom for better living and job opportunities. During the period of study, indeed, two participants moved from Italy to the United Kingdom while one planned to do so in the near future. As introduced in Chapter 1, London is the reference city for the Bangladeshi diaspora in Europe and has become an attractive destination for economic, sociocultural, and religious reasons,

as confirmed by academic and non-academic studies about the new phenomenon of Italian-Bangladeshi onward migration (see Carnà & Rossetti, 2018; Della Puppa & King, 2018; IOM, 2017; Russo, 2019). Indeed, out of 32 participants (taking part in the analysis of SNSs) who moved to the United Kingdom, 26 settled in London. The diasporic communities in the United Kingdom and Italy, in addition, are linked by diasporic social ties. All participants living in Italy maintain relationships with family members, relatives, and friends who live in London, and the security of finding hospitality and support from community members is one of the main reasons behind the choice to move. Dhara, for instance, a young woman who was born in Italy (Rome) to Bangladeshi parents and moved to the United Kingdom (London) at the age of 22, explains how ‘all parents have many relatives and friends who moved earlier [to the United Kingdom] and, by word of mouth, a chain of relationships is established’ (Dhara, Interview, 05/02/21).

These three countries, therefore, are thought of as the symbolic diasporic locations in which young women’s subjectivities take shape. In particular, the interviews revealed that belonging or being linked – effectively or imaginatively – to more countries and their diverse national cultures offers an edge for participants. Jannatul, for instance, claims that ‘belonging to multiple cultures provides people with the chance to see things according to different viewpoints’ (Jannatul, Interview, 23/02/21); Umme believes that ‘by receiving more information and walking along more pathways, people’s minds open and light up’ (Umme, Interview, 19/02/21); while Dhara recognises ‘knowledge of the other’ (Dhara, Interview, 05/02/21) as the greatest benefit of a rich wealth of experiences gained in different countries. Overall, these young women support the idea that moving across geographical and cultural borders entails an ongoing process of questioning and learning that ‘teaches a lot about the world and its differences’ (as argued by Aysha, Interview, 14/02/21), while being stuck in one country means that ‘people will remain forever locked inside unquestioned ideals without the

possibility of experiencing what's out there' (as argued by Nasima, Interview, 20/01/21). What is reiterated by many participants is the distinction between the open and tolerant mindset of Bangladeshi members who belong to the second generation and live abroad, and the backward and inflexible attitude that marks the first generation or those Bangladeshis who remained in the country. The chance to move to Europe is recognised as a valuable opportunity to acquire new perspectives; encounter diverse people, lifestyles, and cultures; appreciate differences; and question the strict set of cultural and moral norms that defines the community of origin. Some informants, moreover, point towards specific valuable experiences and teachings that each country offered them in their path to womanhood. Aysha, for instance, is a 19-year-old woman who was born in Italy (Prato) to Bangladeshi parents and moved to the United Kingdom (London) at the age 14. Aysha claims that the Bangladeshi, Italian, and British communities provided her with 'the opportunities and challenges that made the person [she] is now' (Aysha, Interview, 14/02/21). In her interview, she further explains how being born in a Bangladeshi family drove her to learn a lot about her 'original culture and history' and the struggles that people of her country went through, in relation to the 1971 Bangladeshi war for independence and genocide. It should be noted that Aysha refers to Bangladesh and Bangladeshis as 'people from my country', thus suggesting a sense of imaginary belonging to a country in which she was not born. The diasporic experience of her parents led her 'to appreciate and be more grateful for even little things in life that usually people take for granted such as a house, education, or free healthcare' (Aysha, Interview, 14/02/21). Aysha considers herself a very hardworking yet humble, grateful, and respectful person thanks to the teachings she received from her Bangladeshi parents, who worked hard to achieve better standards of living for their children. Furthermore, being born and raised in Italy brought her to learn the importance of social life and meeting diverse people. As she claims: 'You can't learn everything about life by being locked up at home'. In this statement Aysha refers to the chance to learn and explore human differences in relation to the country and culture one

grew up in. For example, she claims that Italian and Bangladeshi people are more light-hearted and lively compared to British people, while Italians tend to be judgemental in comparison to British people and Bangladeshis who are more respectful towards diversity in terms of religion and race. Indeed, she explains how Italy made her a more 'lively, open-minded, and light-hearted person', while moving to London in her mid-teenage years helped her to become more conscious of herself as an Asian Muslim woman. The diversity in terms of ethnicity and religion that Aysha experienced in London, in comparison with that of an Italian provincial town like Prato, enabled her to become a confident person and 'feel more comfortable in [her] own skin'. As she recounts:

'I've learnt the importance of not being ashamed of being different and that instead I could be proud of my own origin and beliefs. I've become a more religious and cultured person as I live in an area of London where there are more Asian people like me but also because I found at school people from different ethnicities and religions.' (Aysha, Interview, 14/02/21)

In addition to the enriching aspects of mobility, however, participants also recognise a series of drawbacks in relation to making contact with multiple social and cultural contexts from a very young age. Charvi, for instance, who at the age of 21 has already lived in three different countries, explains how the hardest part of moving is to 'get used every time to new places, rules, laws, customs, and people' (Charvi, Interview, 27/07/20). Jannatul, likewise, mentions more practical aspects of daily life that are compounded by the act of living across borders. These include the 'effort of managing diverse languages', which results in a mix of languages that prevents her from expressing herself properly in any of them (Jannatul, Interview, 23/02/21). Other participants, in addition, disclose more intimate feelings when talking about their lives in movement, like loneliness, nostalgia, emotional weakness, and instability. A sense of uncertainty concerning their origin and sense of belonging arises in particular when they are asked where they come from or where their home is. Although recognising

multiple points of geographical and cultural reference has its enlightening aspects, this might also give rise to feelings of estrangement and alienation. Minati, for instance, in her interview argues that: ‘I believe that if you grow up in a country that is different from your original one, it will be really hard to understand and define your identity’ (Minati, Interview, 02/02/21), while Lima states: ‘To be honest I struggle to identify myself in one culture. On the one hand I feel I’m influenced by my origins, and on the other hand I feel I belong to Italy’ (Lima, Interview, 27/01/21). What emerges from the interviews is that respondents struggle to identify their ‘place’ of identification and consequently to recognise themselves within a specific and fixed set of symbolic national cultural values. The ‘sense of location’ (Hall, 2017, p. 6), which underpins the concept of cultural identity, is scattered across places and so is unstable among this group of diasporic young women. The result, in many cases, is a simultaneous sense of belonging to nowhere and/or everywhere. Expressions such as ‘I feel I belong to none of these cultures’ (Manali, Interview, 22/01/21), ‘To be honest I feel I don’t belong to any culture’ (Minati, Interview, 02/02/21), ‘It’s really hard to say which community I feel closer to because none of them belong to me completely’ (Bharati, Interview, 18/01/21), and ‘I feel I belong to none of the two but also to both of them’ (Jannatul, Interview, 23/02/21) were repeatedly stated during the interviews. A story Minati published on her Instagram account reports on a fun image that straightforwardly represents the complexity of answering an apparent simple question such as ‘Where are you from?’ (Figure 9). The multiple potential replies suggested (e.g. my nationality, my ethnicity, my passports, where I live, where I was born, citizen of the world, third culture kid) make it clear how Italian-Bangladeshi young women cannot reach a unique definition of themselves through identity categories such as nationality and ethnicity.



Figure 9. Where are you from?
Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/imthathabibi/>

The feeling of being part of but also estranged from multiple symbolic places is explained by the fact that participants do not conform to a comprehensive set of idealised and agreed upon definitions of national and cultural identities, and therefore do not comprehensively recognise themselves in fixed and shared cultural features of either of the countries of reference. Despite their demonstrated appreciation of the multicultural aspect of their lives, clashes come from the conflicting requirements that these young women are expected to meet in order to be classified as part of the ethnic and national groups they are simultaneously linked to. This is one of the main reasons why they feel they belong to nowhere and, in some cases, to be excluded from and discriminated against by both the communities. Yuvati, in her interview, reinforced this point:

‘It’s hard to be recognised as an integral part of any society: a Bangladeshi who lives in Italy struggles to be recognised as Italian by Italian society, but he/she struggles to be accepted and integrated into the Bangladeshi society too.’ (Yuvati, Interview, 23/07/20)

Yuvati's statement suggests that it is precisely the movement across national and ethnic groups that entails multiple dynamics of positioning in relation to referent others, which gives rise to processes of border formation and a lack of openness towards difference (see Barth, 1969; Hall, 2017). In particular, the resulting struggle for ethnocultural identification and belonging comes from the diverse subject positions that participants assume as South Asian migrant women in Europe (Italy and the United Kingdom) on the one hand, and European-influenced women within the Bangladeshi community on the other hand. Hence, they experience a feeling of multiple exclusions as disclosed by Deshna in an Instagram story:

'Does anyone have identity issues? Quick example: when I go to Bangladesh, I'm not "Bangladeshi enough" or "I speak Bengali so well for someone who grew up abroad". When I meet some Italian people, they say to me "Your Italian is so good for a foreigner. How did you learn it?". After 11 years in the UK, people still say to me "OMG your English is so good for someone who speaks it as a third language". Wherever I go, I'm perceived as an "outsider" or someone who doesn't exactly belong to a specific place/nation (whether this is said directly or indirectly). So, where do I actually belong?' (Deshna, Instagram, 20/01/21)

Race and ethnicity, therefore, become crucial factors that give rise to processes of inclusion and exclusion, and outline the practices of domination and subordination these entail (see Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1983). In the multiple national and social contexts constantly crossed, participants' roles differ according to the mutable ethnic groups with which they identify, or are identified with, and the resulting relationships of power established between those in dominant and subordinate positions.

5.3 Reclaiming recognition and participation of minorities

All participants were born and/or grew up in Italy. In addition to being legally recognised as Italian citizens, the majority of them perceive Italy as their home country or the place that they have been embedded within since an early age. Despite the significance of the attachment to their racial-ethnic background, the young women feel Italian precisely because, as argued by Ira in her interview, they ‘grew up and attended schools in Italy and [were] bred within Italian culture’ (Ira, Interview, 22/02/21). The sense of emotional attachment to this country comes out especially in the Instagram and Facebook pictures and stories published by those young women who moved to the United Kingdom. Pictures of Italian food, streets or neighbourhoods where they grew up, or journeys to Italy to visit relatives and friends are accompanied by captions such as: ‘I miss you so much, Rome’, ‘Honestly I miss Italy so much’, ‘Missing home’, ‘Italy is always in my heart’, and so on. Lavit, for instance, on December 31, 2020, shared a picture on her Instagram account with a dedication to her Italian city of birth on the occasion of her forthcoming move to London. She wrote:

‘This is the city where I was born: PALERMO (...) Here I spent beautiful and awful moments, but it taught me how to get up after any fall and now I feel a stronger woman ready to chase my future full of dreams (...) This is my land and I’m proud of being Palermitan. After 19 years I’m moving but I hope this is just a short goodbye.’ (Lavit, Instagram, 31/12/20)

Lavit’s love dedication expresses a strong emotional bond with Palermo, which is described as ‘beautiful, always cheerful, full of fantasy and colours’. What emerges, in addition, as also confirmed by other participants, is that the decision to move to London, mainly for the purpose of studying and/or working, and often under their parents’ solicitation, is often seen as a way of living a dream, even though Italy remains the primary site of their childhood, memories, and affections. Another example that symbolises national belonging and pride is the 2021 European Championship during

which participants, both those in Italy and the United Kingdom, published messages of support for the Italian football team and pictures of celebrations where supporters waved Italian flags and sang Italian songs on their SNPs. Notwithstanding their affective ties to Italy and the legal recognition of Italian citizenship, however, insights collected through the interviews and online ethnography reveal that participants' ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds stand as a barrier to being recognised as part of the Italian (and European) community. Contrary to the overly positive promises of women's progress, freedom, and equality that mark postracial and postfeminist European societies, as discussed in Chapter 4, what emerges from a deeper analysis is that it is precisely through the intersection between gender and other social categories that processes of exclusion and systems of power operate in the context of these young women's everyday lives. In the following sub-section, therefore, I further examine the ways in which Italian-Bangladeshi young women are positioned within dominant European (Italian and British) social, political, and mediated discourses and how they react to processes of discrimination and marginalisation through the use of SNSs.

5.3.1 Being South Asian in Europe

In the discourses retrieved from the online ethnography under Code 5 (Italian culture) and collected through interviews, participants claim that Italian and British citizens view and treat them as foreigners, migrants, and outsiders. In that way, they assume the subject position of 'Others' that European society and dominant Eurocentric discourses externally assign them. Hence, despite their Italian citizenship status, they cannot avoid being categorised on the basis of their ethnic and racial backgrounds, which become predominant identifying and exclusionary markers and prevent young women from meeting the requirements for being 'real' or 'fully' Italians and Europeans. In particular, what emerges from participants' life stories is that they suffer from a double discrimination in Europe: being subjected to the gendered and racialised conception of South Asian migrants as a monolithic

marginal group with no internal differences, and being ideologically and socially excluded by the society in which they were born and/or grew up and lived in.

First of all, participants feel that they are categorised as part of a homogeneous minority group composed of South Asians. Neither their country of origin nor their ethnic and cultural distinctiveness are recognised within the broader European community. Overall, in the Global North, the term South Asian combines people who originate from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal as bearers of uniform historical, social, and cultural features. Participants declare that Bangladesh is ‘non-existent’ in the mental and geographical map of many Italians. As Dhara, Minati, and Amena among others argue, the majority of the Italian population does not even know about the presence of a nation called Bangladesh as it is usually mistaken for or mixed up with neighbouring India. For those Italians who recognise it, moreover, Bangladesh is imagined as a poor, overpopulated, and uncivilised state, similar to any other located on the South Asian subcontinent. Nishad, in her interview, explains how, on the basis of her personal experience, ‘being Bangladeshi means being uncivilised and unruly’ and thus a person ‘who needs to be educated’ (Nishad, Interview, 04/02/21). This claim can be read as a reproduction of the Orientalist rhetoric and practice based on essentialist discourses expressed through the opposition between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Said, 1978). Here there is not only the reproduction of a system of knowledge about the ‘Other’ but also a critical evaluation of the inferiority of the ‘Other’ that, indeed, needs to be civilised. In particular, by making reference to Mohanty’s (1988) ‘Third World Woman’, it brings to light the historicised binary opposition between ‘Western’ women, beneficiaries of modernity and progress, who are viewed as already empowered, and ‘Other’ women, who need to be rescued by the former. The perception expressed by Nishad confirms early research on the Italian look of South Asian migrants. Vereni (2017) claims how, in comparison to other ethnic groups, South Asians (Filipino and Bangladeshi in particular) have been socially constructed through imagery of good workers, quiet citizens, and passive subjects, therefore

making them an easy target for xenophobic violence. In addition, as bearers of South Asian racial features, the young women in this research are seen as part of a broader and indistinct group of immigrants with lower status, rights, and chances. In relation to this, in her interview, Yuvati blames European media for promoting stereotypical and essentialised representations of ethnic minorities. She explains how media and popular discourses on foreigners tend to be based on stories related to crime and/or illegality and never focused on humanity, therefore stripping them of an identity and dignity. In particular, the process of ‘othering’ is emphasised through participants’ physical and racial traits (e.g. skin colour) and, in some cases, public presence (e.g. modest way of dressing), which differ from those of European women. Poole and Williamson (2021), with a specific focus on Muslims, highlight how in Western democracies a ‘toxic atmosphere’ (p. 3) has been created by targeting immigration as a key issue. Concerns over a ‘demographic crisis’ (Huntington, 2004 in Poole and Williamson, 2021, p. 3) have justified the exclusion of migrants and ethnic minority groups from citizenship and basic rights. Participants recognise that, albeit being born and/or having grown up in Italy, their aesthetic features and ethnic origin preclude them from being considered as ‘real Italians’, as expressed by Raima: ‘Even if in the documents we are classified as Italians, our physical features stand as a barrier, and in the eyes of white people we are seen as immigrants’ (Raima, Interview, 14/02/21). While some participants feel the gaze of Italians/British people by virtue of being different, others talk about the everyday acts of discrimination they experience as a burden to live with. In her interview, Amira, for instance, expresses feelings of frustration when she recounts an occasion in which she experienced prejudice at the hands of Italian Institutions:

‘I’m Italian but when I go to Italian offices or institutions, I’m always asked for my residence permit. I feel sorry for that. I’m Black but that does not mean I’m a foreigner. I might be adopted or I might be born from an Italian parent, there are so many possibilities. Prejudice annoys me so much. I don’t get angry because I’m Italian and I’m

asked for the residence permit, but because that [being Black and so a foreigner] is taken for granted.’ (Amira, Interview, 27/02/20)

Amira’s experience reflects the status of contemporary European societies, in which higher transnational mobility has not necessarily been matched by a broader acceptance of cultural difference. The taken-for-granted relationship between being non-white and being a foreigner, and thus the notion of race as a genetic inheritance, suggests that the boundaries and definitions of groups are socially constructed in a concrete sense by assigning individuals a common origin and shared attributes. In particular, this highlights the system of classification that underpins the political map of Europe, where power relations between dominant and subordinate groups are established. In this case, the consolidation of Italian identity and belonging is constructed in opposition to non-white Others. The definition of the nation as a closed construct built on the ideal of a pure, original, and unified cultural community (Gilroy, 1987; Hall, 2017) implies practices designed to demarcate boundaries between insiders and outsiders, and between authentic and deceitful citizens. This becomes clear in another Instagram post from Amira in which she publishes a picture of herself at the Registry Office in Rome (Italy) the day she received her Italian citizenship documents. The image is accompanied by a message that reports:

‘Shot of the day in which I swore loyalty to the Italian Republic. From that day I have been an Italian citizen. Just on the documents though as prejudices will never disappear from people’s minds (...) Now I’m a “naturalised Italian citizen” and that already feels like I’m a second-class citizen.’ (Amira, Instagram, 25/11/20)

Amira’s subordinate position within the Italian community is related to her ancestral origin, racial features, and cultural background, which do not reflect the criteria for being considered an ‘original’ or ‘pure’ Italian. Indeed, as she claims, she is a naturalised, hence not an original and not a complete,

Italian citizen. These insights highlight how the concept of citizenship, far from being a legal ascription of nationality, is a social construct based not only on the respect for social norms (Lewicki & O'Toole, 2017) (e.g. language) but also the embodiment of authentic racial features (e.g. skin colour), as exemplified by Avya's experience:

‘Whenever someone asks me where I’m from, I always answer Italy because this is where I was born and grew up my whole life. However, the next question is “but where do you REALLY come from?”. That’s something that’s always bugged me alongside the statement “Wow you speak Italian really well!”’ (Avya, Interview, 26/01/21)

From participants' life stories, it emerges that both ethnicity and race become categories of social exclusion (Essers et al., 2010) and the underlying reasons for forms of xenophobic discrimination experienced. On SNSs, participants report and condemn racist events as an empowering and liberating act. Aysha, for instance, shares a long post on her Instagram account to denounce all the racist, Islamophobic, bullying, and sexist abuse she has experienced in her life. By following the message ‘we have a voice and we must use it’, she decides to report on the xenophobic events she suffered when she was a child in Italian schools, such as when her peers called her ‘Black head’ or teachers bullied foreign students. Similar discriminations, however, are experienced also by those Italian-Bangladeshi young women who moved to and live in the United Kingdom. Rifah, for instance, in a story published on her Facebook account, discusses all the daily acts of racism she has experienced in her workplace in London. The objective of her post is to demonstrate how racism does not only include verbal insults ‘getting hurled at you in the street’ – for example when she is called ‘Paki’ (a racial slur often used indiscriminately towards people of perceived South Asian descent) – but also all those subtle prejudices and stereotypes that are part of dominant European thinking. She mentions, for example, that her manager regularly asks her if she has got an arranged marriage; that

Italy is not considered to be a good answer for explaining where she comes from in job interviews; that colleagues call her by a nickname because her name is too difficult to pronounce; and that she is called ‘Bong’ (a neologism that originated in India in the 1980s as a slightly pejorative exonym for educated middle-class Bengalis from the Indian state of West Bengal) at work (Rifah, Instagram, 04/06/20). The stories shared in person during the interviews and online on SNSs not only question the postfeminist and neoliberal claims based on individualised agency but also seek to work towards a more collective stance. Furthermore, they also reveal how the making of difference and exclusion leads to forms of symbolic violence women belonging to ethnic minorities in Europe subsequently endure. The processes of ethnic categorisation and social subordination recounted by participants can help us to understand how their struggle for belonging is not only the result of mobility, and so the lack of a specific place of identification but, above all, the effect of race and nationhood as the primary resources of groupness and ethnicity (Gilroy, 2019) that underpin advanced democratic European societies.

5.3.2 Enough is enough: Online citizenship practices

The ‘Other’ subject position that young Italian-Bangladeshi women assume in European societies and dominant discourses triggers processes of identification with and support for the struggles of diverse minority groups. What emerges from the online ethnography, and the analysis of 340 (visual and written) posts under Code 8 ‘Online advocacy’ is that participants are reclaiming recognition and equal consideration as European citizens through their online activity. As existing studies on online forms of activism show (see Evolvi, 2017; Lewicki & O’Toole, 2016), these citizenship practices may be seen as young women’s attempt to contest discriminatory social norms. In her interview, by discussing the failure of multiculturalism in Italy, Yuvati claims: ‘Ethnic minorities do exist and, even though [they] are not perceived as an integral part of the society, their existence cannot be denied!’

(Yuvati, Interview, 23/07/20). Therefore, in addition to using SNSs to report on racist events suffered in everyday life, as in the cases of Rifah and Aysha mentioned above, online platforms become open and connective spaces in which young women actively take part in forms of participatory activism for the local/global condemnation of diverse forms of discrimination and injustice. Instagram stories that report on international news, racist events, social and political issues, activists' initiatives, memes and viral images were routinely detected on participants' SNPs during the period of analysis. Beyond the will to share information about international events of concern, such a practice of resharing, supporting, and promoting specific social and political causes has, on the one hand, the aim of increasing awareness and visibility of events and issues often underrepresented in dominant European media and political discourses. On the other hand, in the process, users take part in borderless online networks bound together by their common struggles and intents. The title of this sub-section, 'enough is enough', is taken from the headline that one participant, Yuvati, gave to a folder of her Instagram highlights in which she collected news and facts found on the web, denouncing racism and xenophobia against minorities as a form of individual online protest. The majority of posts included in this analysis were retrieved from Instagram accounts of activists and/or users and were endorsed by participants mainly through Instagram stories. All of them concern ethnic and religious minority groups, including Asian, Muslim, Black and migrant people, with which the young women identify themselves.

The first group participants identify themselves with is composed of Bangladeshis and (South) Asians in general. Participants follow and repost content mainly produced by Bangladeshi Instagram users and online activists (e.g. Lordbengali, Haraaamdesh, Bddevelop). The main objective of these pages is to make the rest of the world know about natural disasters (e.g. flooding), working conditions (e.g. exploitation and underpayment of Bangladeshis who work in textile industries for EU and US fashion

brands), sexual abuse (e.g. rape and harassment of women), and religious conflicts (e.g. genocide against Hindus) that affect Bangladesh (Figure 10). In many cases, these informative posts address Bangladeshi expats directly and ask for their support in order to circulate news in non-Asian countries. Some posts published by participants, indeed, start with invitation messages such as: ‘Do you know what is happening in Bangladesh?’ or ‘If you are outside Bangladesh, I am requesting you to repost this!’. The act of resharing content produced in and concerning Bangladesh is part of a support activity in which expats use their new European circles of followers to make foreign local news go viral abroad.

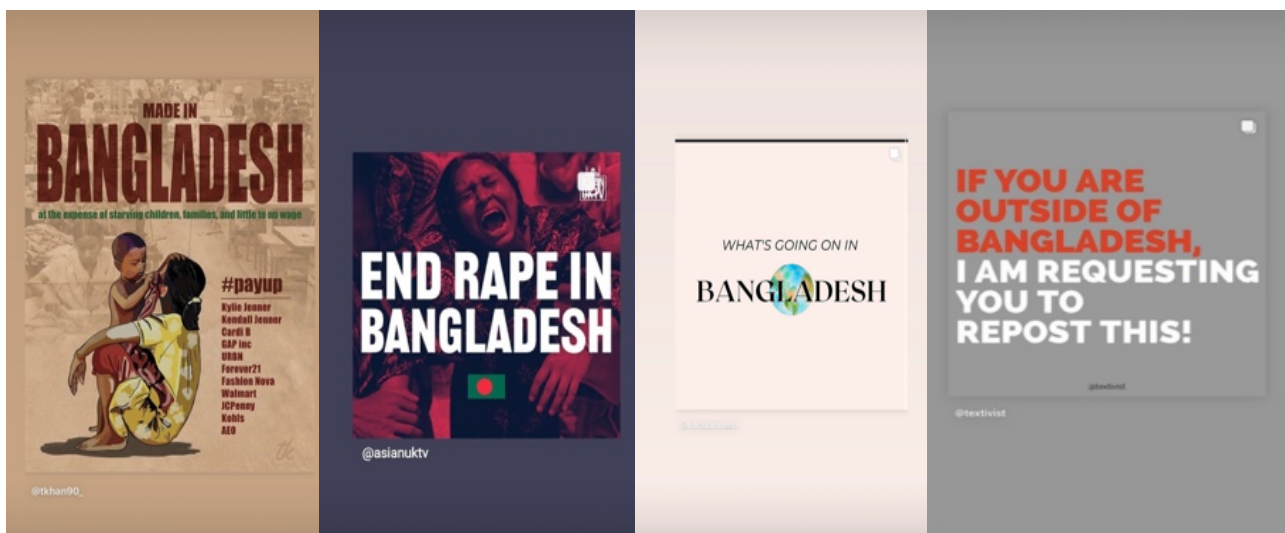


Figure 10. Online activism and Bangladesh

Available at : <https://www.instagram.com/tkhan90/>, <https://www.instagram.com/asianuktv/>, <https://www.instagram.com/haraaamdes/>, <https://www.instagram.com/textivist/>

In addition to posts specifically related to Bangladesh, however, participants demonstrate their involvement in struggles affecting the broader community composed of Asian people. Multiple stories shared and analysed come from online media platforms associated with the Asian continent (e.g. Asianuktv; Annoyed.asian, Asianfeed, Asian.actiivist) that produce content mainly related to issues affecting diverse Asian countries. Even though participants criticise the monolithic Eurocentric

representation of Asia and Asians, as discussed above, the sense of empathy and commitment arises from the acknowledgment of shared common struggles. This is clearly evoked in an Instagram story published by Minati that reports on a Tweet written by Padma Lakshmi (Lakshmi, n.d.), an Indian-American author, activist, and model, who claims:

‘Asians are not a monolith. The continent includes around 48 countries and 3 territories, all with unique cultures, food customs, and traditions. But a racist attack against one of us is an attack against all of us #StopAsianHate.’ (n.p.)

This tweet refers to the violent attacks against Asian Americans and Asian Europeans as a consequence of the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Participants took part in the global condemnation of unjustifiable violence against Chinese and Asians through the publication of news, messages, and memes. Captions such as ‘Stop Asian hate’, ‘Covid-19 is not an excuse for your racism’, ‘The hate we Asians get is unreal, and for what? End violence against Asians’, and ‘Stand against anti-Asian racism and violence’ were detected daily on the SNPs analysed during the pandemic period (Figure 11). In this case, participants’ identification as part of a broad community of Asians is a response to stereotypes and forms of racism that indiscriminately target people belonging to diverse Asian minorities.

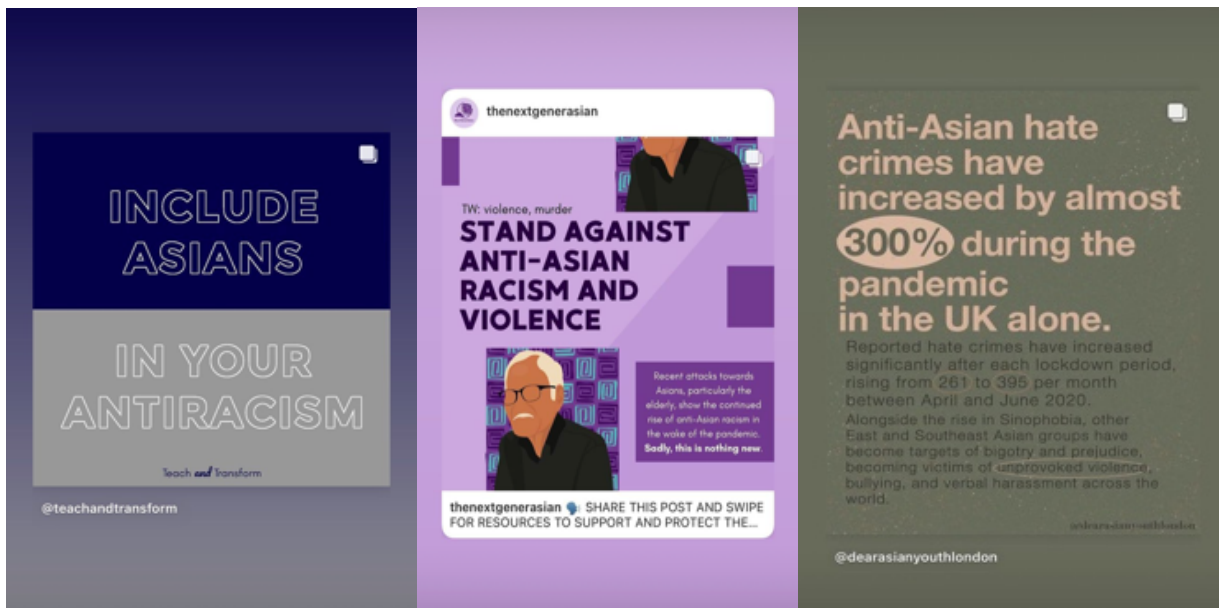


Figure 11. Online activism and Asia

Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/teachandtransform/>,
<https://www.instagram.com/thenextgeneration/>, <https://www.instagram.com/dearasianyouthlondon/>

Furthermore, another relevant example that mobilised the majority of participants was the defence of Islamic minorities. In particular, two popular cases that emerged during the period of analysis were the persecution of Muslim Uyghurs in China and the persistent Israeli occupation of Palestine (Figure 12). In this case, too young women counted on Muslim Instagram pages to be informed of groups such as Doasmuslims, Muslim.daily, Halalquotes, Muslimsoftheworld, Being.a.muslim, and Allah_deen_media, among others. In addition to reporting on news and updates about daily cases of violence against Muslim minorities, these two specific events triggered a broader criticism of European media's silence about issues that concern ethnic and/or religious minorities. Many participants shared Instagram stories reporting on violence against Uyghur Muslims in concentration camps in China along with captions such as: 'Why is no one talking about this?', 'A genocide is happening and we are silent', or 'Why every news is silent about what's happening to Uyghur Muslims in China?'.

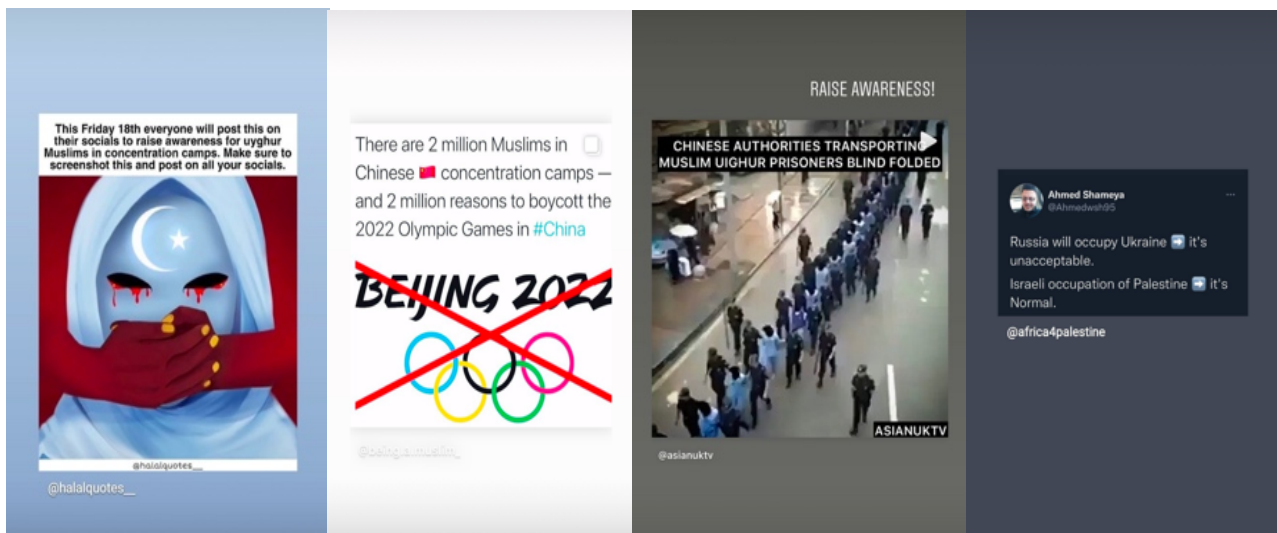


Figure 12. Online activism and Muslims

Available at: https://www.instagram.com/halalquotes_/,
https://www.instagram.com/being.a.muslim_/, <https://www.instagram.com/asianuktv/>,
<https://www.instagram.com/africa4palestine/>

The use of the hashtag #saveuyghur and the request to boycott the 2022 Winter Olympic Games in China, in addition, have been adopted as a means of making the news global, mobilising users, and taking action. Likewise, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is another circumstance that moved the young women into action. Here as well, in addition to reporting on violent Israeli attacks against Palestinian civilians, they strongly condemned the unbalanced way in which European media and public opinion evaluated cases of forced occupation in different geographical locations. The biggest criticism, in particular, arose from various online platforms the precise moment at which Russia attacked Ukraine in February 2022. Messages such as ‘Russia occupies Ukraine, it’s unacceptable. Israeli occupation of Palestine, it’s normal’ or ‘When Ukrainian civilians pick up weapons to defend their land from invaders, Western media calls them heroes; when Palestinians do it, they call them terrorists’ regularly appeared on participants’ SNPs during this period. Some young women took further action by taking part in street protests or supporting the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) Palestinian-led movement against Israel. Minati, for instance, published live footage portraying

herself acting in favour of Palestine in Ancona (Italy) with the caption ‘Today Ancona screamed Palestine ❤️’. Dhara supported the BDS movement by sharing on her Instagram account all the information about its objectives and encouraging her followers not to buy products from companies profiting from Israel’s crimes, such as Starbucks, Burger King, Coca Cola, Philip Morris etc. The same translation from online to offline mobilisation and activism was detected in participants’ support of other global protests such as Black Lives Matter. Yuvati, for instance, took part in a BLM public demonstration in Milan (Italy) to fight against the racism and inequalities suffered by Black people. She also shared the schedule of protests in other Italian cities on her SNP to encourage her followers across Italy to join them. In these cases, transnational movements take the form of local activism, where global causes are projected into everyday social and political contexts. Outrage for discrimination against non-white citizens is considered in tandem with discrimination against migrants, which is embraced online through the publication of memes, news, and images aimed at blaming acts of violence against migrants, instances of unequal treatment of non-white citizens, xenophobic speeches of Italian or British far-right representatives or inappropriate European policies for the reception and integration of refugees. Yuvati, for instance, reported on a case of police violence against a Black Italian citizen that refused to share his documents in Vicenza (Italy) on her Instagram account, while Amira published an Instagram story that reported on a series of xenophobic comments (e.g. referring to a Black person as a chimpanzee) in the aftermath of a young Black Italian boy being beaten to death in a city close to Rome (Italy) during a fight with his peers.

These forms of online involvement in solidarity with diverse minority groups explain how participants look for a space to claim visibility, recognition, and participation online, where they have the chance to interact with and participate in networks and movements aimed at exchanging support for shared social and political struggles. The blogging and networking activities enacted online offer

users the chance to get involved in practices aimed at making their voices heard, which is often denied to minority groups. There is here the attempt to both condemn discriminatory events against Asian, Muslim, Black, and migrant minorities and fight for them to be entitled to the same rights as more privileged European, Christian, and white communities. Second-generation women prove to be interested in negotiating and enhancing their membership of European societies (Tsagarousianou, 2012) through their online activity. The minority groups with which participants identify, indeed, are historically excluded or marginalised in European media coverage as well as political and public debates. The criticisms levelled against the unbalanced representation of and attitude towards non-European and non-white citizens reflect participants' role as 'Others' within the societies in which they grew up and live. Practices of exclusion experienced in everyday life, therefore, trigger online processes precisely aimed at 'the recognition of particularity and difference' (Hardt & Negri, 2011, p. 330). The digitally networked movements in which participants get involved bring together users of diverse backgrounds who reclaim the right to be included and recognised in European societies whilst maintaining their ethnic, cultural, and religious differences. In doing so, mobilisation is not restricted only to local or national levels but also incorporates transnational causes in which the binding element is represented by participants shared subordinate position in physical spaces and the collective attempt to use digital platforms as spaces of encounter and resistance (Arda, 2015). The news, causes, and protests participants engage with activate effective responses and collective connections with imagined users as a form of solidarity (see Gerbaudo, 2014; Gerbaudo and Trerè, 2015; Kavada, 2015; Melucci, 1996; Milan, 2015). The online practices enacted by young women might be seen as an attempt to give rise to new expressions of sociality and solidarity to respond to power imbalances and structural inequalities experienced in everyday life contexts, and as a means of reclaiming citizenship, inclusiveness and direct participation (Kavada, 2015). These 'acts of citizenship' are here interpreted as women's attempt to 'enact their political subjectivity by

challenging the roles allocated by them' (Lewicki & O'Toole, 2017, p. 156) by authoritative European social and political institutions and dominant discourses. In this case, SNSs become borderless arenas for reclaiming recognition, enabling sociality, and enacting citizenship beyond geographical closure and cultural specificity (see Hall, 2017). Participants' online activity might be seen as a means to challenge the reduction of the responsibility for structural inequalities to the personal level (Scharff et al., 2018) by drawing attention to marginalised themes and creating forms of collective resistance. These results confirm early research on digital protests (e.g. Gerbaudo, 2014; Gerbaudo & Trerè, 2015; Highfield, 2016) and their role to re-establish the ground for grassroots movements that recognise and seek to fight against ongoing inequalities and discriminations.

5.4 Negotiating gendered domestic norms

All participants grew up in Bangladeshi families, households, and diasporic communities. Even though Italy is their country of birth and/or the country in which they spent their childhood, the Bangladeshi community (both that in Bangladesh and the diasporic one in Europe) remains a strong and influential social group for the sample. The communities in Rome (Italy) and London (United Kingdom) are both settled in specific areas of the cities – Torpignattara and Tower Hamlets respectively – which gradually came to be known as 'Banglatowns'. In these urban districts, the Bangladeshi diasporic presence has given rise to new social, economic, and cultural networks as well as a strong local life associated with Bangladeshi restaurants, shops, feasts, markets, mosques and prayer rooms (Broccolini & Padiglione, 2017; Caragiuli, 2013; Eade & Garbin, 2006). This helps to explain how the majority of participants grew up in a social and cultural environment in which Bangladesh was reproduced not only privately, in the domestic space, but also publicly, in the neighbourhood. As introduced in Chapter 1, in addition, the Bangladeshi ethnic group is characterised by a strong form of collectivism that takes the form of intra-familial social networks and

interdependence (Akter, 2013; Bhopal, 2000; Shariff, 2009). Data collected through questionnaires and the online ethnography highlight how Bangladeshi cultural (e.g. food, language, ways of dressing, celebrations, religion) and media (e.g. movies, music, news, TV series) practices are part of young women's daily lives. Many of them, despite their place of birth and residence, claim to know, respect, embrace, and preserve Bangladeshi culture. On her Instagram profile, Minati, for instance, regularly publishes videos of herself performing Bangladeshi and Indian classical dances while wearing sarees embellished with jewels. Other participants, in addition, regularly share Bangladeshi recipes or videos of themselves preparing their favourite Bangladeshi dishes or celebrating Bangladeshi holidays and festivals with family and community members. All the sampled young women are, even though of varying levels, bound to and influenced by their 'original culture', as defined by Aysha, which has been taught by family and community members from a young age. In her interview, Asmita, for instance, claims that even though she feels Italian, inside she is still Bangladeshi as 'one's roots and origins cannot be erased' (Asmita, Interview, 20/01/21). Within the intra-ethnic collectivity in Rome, one of the social and cultural needs that emerges is the transmission and assimilation of Bangladeshi symbolic capital and cultural values, which are passed down to the younger generations within the household but also through the religious and cultural associations established in the neighbourhood (Bisio, 2013). Likewise, those young women who now live in the United Kingdom emphasise how one of the reasons behind the choice to move is the stronger and more authentic sense of culture that can be experienced. Aysha suggests that the larger size and firmer unity of the community in London 'recreates that unique atmosphere of Bangladesh' (Aysha, Interview, 14/02/21), while Yuvati claims that people of Bangladeshi origin in London 'can make community and feel like [they are] at home' (Yuvati, Interview, 23/07/20). During the teenage and adult years, however, the process of bonding, based on the preservation of community norms and the maintenance of intra-community ties, gradually weakens concurrently with the reinforcement of the process of bridging, based on the

loosening of community norms and the establishment of inter-community ties. Data collected under Code 5 (South Asian femininity and gendered norms) and Code 6 (Bangladeshi culture), demonstrates that young women question, negotiate, and challenge the community's normative values, practices, and expectations with ability to critically evaluate their social conditions and the willingness to resist and/or subvert them. This is the breaking point at which young women's sense of belonging to the Bangladeshi community begins to be constrained by two main obstacles: the first is the pressure exerted and/or exclusion perpetuated by older members of the community, who do not consider people belonging to the new generation to be 'true' Bangladeshis, and the second is the critical attitude that young women themselves develop towards the community's social practices and moral values. In the following sub-section, therefore, I further examine the ways in which Italian-Bangladeshi young women are positioned within their domestic and communitarian spaces and how they react to gender norms and expectations through the use of SNSs.

5.4.1 Being European in the Bangladeshi community

In the discourses retrieved from the online ethnography and collected through interviews, participants claim that their Italian identity (impacted by and/or adapted to Italian lifestyles) is the main reason for their conflict with and/or exclusion from the Bangladeshi ethnic group. Many young women find that the community's bonds and control, linked to compliance with regulatory cultural and moral codes of conduct, constrain their individual choices concerning their social lives. Dhara, for instance, claims that she has experienced racism at the hands of her parents and friends' parents 'especially from the moment they noticed [she had] become able to adapt to both cultures and [was] in control of choosing [her] life and career' (Dhara, Interview, 05/02/21). Dhara's experience helps to explain how adult Bangladeshis – not only parents but also those close to the families – tend to direct young women towards the embracement of a specific set of values, norms, and life choices that, if broken

or revised, may entail marginalisation and stigma. What emerges, in particular, is that young women's membership of the Bangladeshi ethnic group depends on the 'correct' performance of gender attributes (see Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1983). In her interview, Avya explains what 'being a girl' means within her domestic environment:

'Girls are still considered as the maids of the house, where they have to constantly help their parents in all aspects of their lives negatively affecting their mental health, while boys are considered as the angels of the house – they are allowed to do anything they want without suffering the consequences (...) Girls feel the constant pressure of representing the family. You have to behave and dress in a certain way or the 'Aunties' will judge you or gossip about you even though their daughters behave the same way.'

(Avya, Interview, 26/01/21)

Avya's personal experience offers three main insights: the definition of gender roles within the Bangladeshi community, the pressure to conform to specific gendered norms, and the harmful effects that social expectations may have on women's individuality. First of all, Avya reveals how the definition of women's and men's roles underlies the sexual division of labour within the family, where daughters are expected to support parents and contribute to the household as well as being compelled to represent the family. Such gender obligations indicate how, despite the significant shifts in terms of female education and independence among the new generation, normative gendered expectations and performances tend to be perpetuated within diasporic families and communities. This point is also supported by scholars investigating the Bangladeshi ethnic group in Italy and the United Kingdom (see Akter, 2013; Carnà & Rossetti, 2018) who talk about the maintenance of 'patriarchal culture and family centric values' (Akter, 2013, p. 55). What emerges from Avya's disclosure, in particular, is the male-dominated structure of the family where sons are considered as privileged members with less responsibilities and greater freedom of action. Women's individuality,

on the contrary, is perceived to be bounded to and thus restricted by the demands and expectations of older members of the community. This feeling of being constrained by socially determined norms is a significant aspect of participants' daily lives, as shared and discussed in multiple posts collected during the period of analysis. Nasima, for instance, published an animated video on her Facebook page, along with an emoji of a broken heart (Figure 13), which reported on some of the basic principles that are taught by parents to daughters at different stages of their lives in order to be considered as a good, respectable, and decent women. The captions of the video were as follows:

‘This is not a sport for girls. SHAME!’, ‘What are you doing outside at this hour? SHAME!’, ‘Is this how a girl dresses? SHAME!’, ‘Decent women stay at home. SHAME!’, ‘It’s your fault. SHAME!’, ‘How dare you choose a man for yourself? SHAME!’ (Nasima, Facebook, 02/09/18)

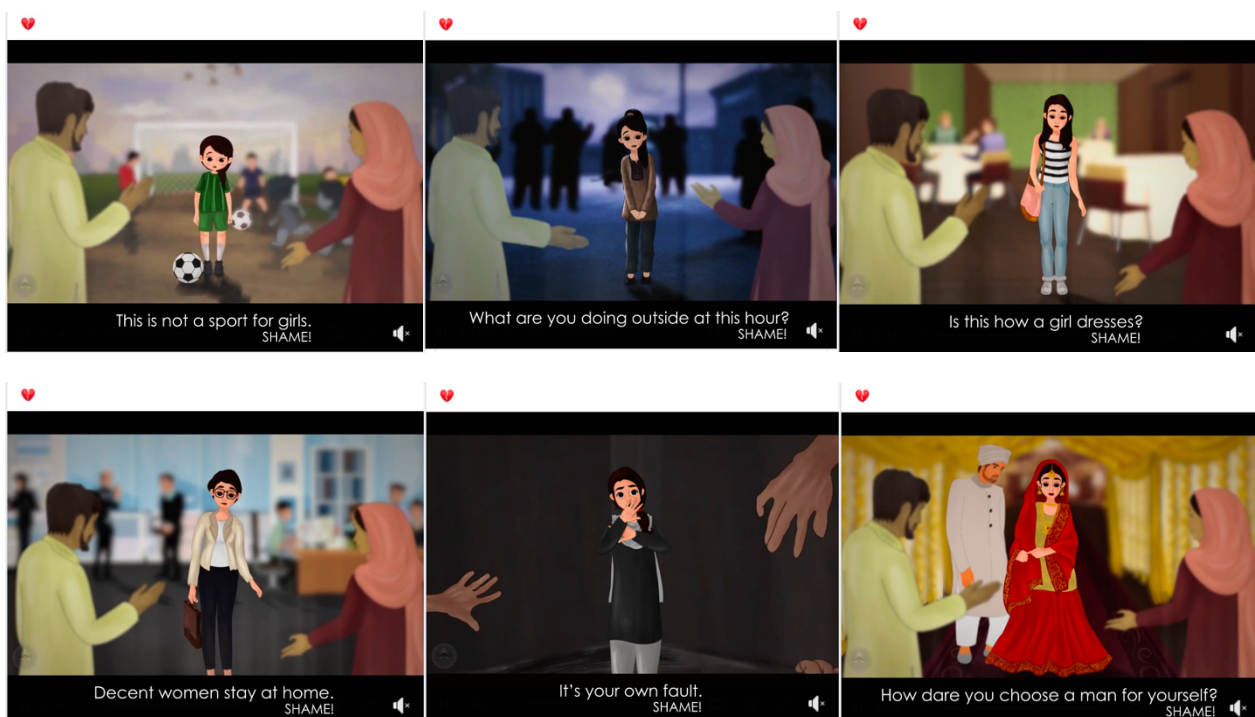


Figure 13. Gendered domestic norms

Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/AwaamiOfficial/videos/403040100176496>

Quotes reported in the videoclip do not only suggest that the significance of femininity is constructed through the ‘correct’ performance of gendered practices within a specific cultural context, but also that lack of compliance with them may lead to women being blamed, as suggested by the capitalised word ‘shame’. Moreover, Deshna shared an Instagram post of Thatdesifeminist’s Instagram account (Deshna, Instagram, 08/02/21) along with the caption: ‘Ohhhhhhhh this, the accuracy hurts’ (Figure 14).

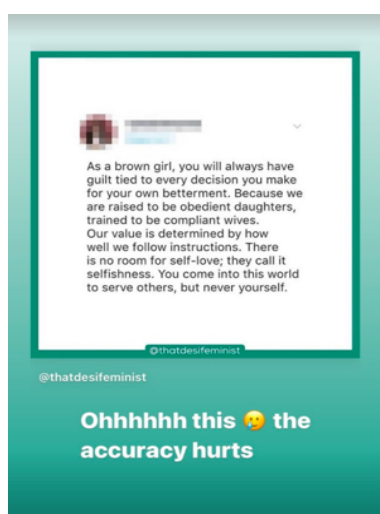


Figure 14. Gendered roles

Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/thatdesifeminist/>

The post criticises Desi women’s lack of space for individuality. It is reported how women ‘are raised to be obedient daughters’ and ‘trained to be compliant wives’ and so how female value is ‘determined by how well [they] follow instructions.’ This explains that ‘brown’ women are constantly subjected to adults’ wills. In order to understand the impact that gender roles and expectations within the Bangladeshi community have on young women’s life choices and prospects, social opinion and control need to be taken into account. This is the second main insight that arises from Avya’s disclosure, which points towards the judgement and gossip that comes from her aunties.

From the discourses shared by participants on SNSs, it emerges that one of the main enemies within the community is represented by the so-called ‘toxic Aunties’, namely older female members who are very close to their families. Aysha, for instance, shared an Instagram post disclosing personal feelings towards members of her community, and aunties in particular:

‘I just want to say that sometimes it’s hard to have patience when there are certain toxic people in your life that don’t know how to mind their own business and can only spread negativity. Especially in our Asian community, there are so many Aunties that clearly don’t do anything for us (...) but yet they think they have any entitlement to judge other kids.’ (Aysha, Instagram, 09/03/21)

Carnà and Rossetti (2018), in their book on the Bangladeshi community in Rome, explain how young women experience a kind of encirclement from members belonging to the first generation who control their actions and gossip about them with their families. These forms of surveillance are mainly related to young women’s social practices – such as smoking, drinking alcohol, or wearing ‘sexy’ clothing – which are socially forbidden but nonetheless detected in participants’ self-representations, as discussed in Chapter 4. This is clearly explained by Amira during her interview:

‘I don’t like prejudice at all, not even that that comes from Bangladeshis. If they see me smoking, for instance, I’m immediately labelled as a bad girl, a loose girl. For them it’s like if I had lost my value, do you understand? Or if I wear a low-cut shirt, they say my boobs are exposed (...) I’ve been hearing this sort of thing since I was a teenager. They keep saying that I have moved forward, that I have changed, that I have become Italian.’ (Amira, Interview, 27/02/20)

The cultural conflicts mentioned by Amira emerge as a consequence of the comparison between constraining and normative Bangladeshi cultural codes and the alleged egalitarian and liberal

achievements attributed to European female emancipation. Indeed, Bisio (2013) recognises within the Bangladeshi collectivity in Rome two main prototypes of women: the good Muslim wife, who respects cultural and religious norms and takes care of the household and sons, and the deviant woman, who rejects her origin and assimilates Italian culture. Farida, like many of her peers, published an Instagram story in which she vented her frustration with people who apparently gossip about and judge her way of dressing. As she wrote: ‘Still people talking about how you should dress up, ridiculous. Using the name of religion does not change your bitchy inner self, babe’ (Farida, Instagram, 28/07/20). Other participants too, directly or indirectly, recall the burden of the community that surrounds them. In a Facebook post, Rahima claims that ‘Bangladeshis judge even if you just breathe’ to point at the opinions she receives from ‘people pretending to give “parental” advice’ (Rahima, Facebook, 14/08/18). In her case, the warnings include that she should be more religious, keep her private life actually private, and not expose herself publicly. In addition, in her interview, Shakila discloses how ‘gossip and speculations tend to pass across the community up to the smallest detail’ (Shakila, Interview, 16/02/21) to explain how adult members ‘keep tabs’ of her daily actions. This practice, common in those groups and shaped around close community ties, is based on adults’ sense of control, which aims to preserve a respectable reputation for their daughters but also for their families in the eyes of the rest of the community (Akter, 2003, p. 54). Moral principles of female decency, respectability, and honour are the main reasons behind the obligations to be followed in order to be socially accepted by the Bangladeshi collectivity. The failure to comply with such gender expectations implies the attribution of fault, shame, and dishonour, as also suggested by Nasima’s video, mentioned above. This is also clear in a Southasianqueens post republished by Minati that reports: ‘Asian parents be like “how dare you make decisions based on what’s best for your own happiness?? What about the opinions of your extended family and complete strangers?!!’ (Minati, Instagram, 23/01/21). What is criticised, in particular, is the subjugation of parents to shared social

norms and interventions in order to avoid negative judgements and maintain a good reputation within their collectivity at the expense of their daughters' needs and desires.

This leads to the third significant point that emerges in Avya's interview, which is related to the negative consequences that family expectations and pressures have for young women's daily lives and future prospects. Avya argues that female social roles (e.g. supporting parents or representing the family) and codes of behaviour (e.g. dressing in a certain way) have negative consequences for her. In some cases, practices of monitoring and enforcement may reveal their most severe effects when they affect daughters' mental health and freedom of choice and expression. Nasima published a Facebook post retrieved from a Twitter account that disclosed the reasons for and outcomes of family regulations. It is reported:

'Seen too many Asian kids sacrifice their mental health for their parents' pride & dignity. Being forced into marriages/careers they have no interest in just so their parents can show face to the community. Subhanallah, these parents need to stop focusing on strangers' opinions.' (Nasima, Facebook, 09/06/2018)

These young women find themselves at the crossroads between developing greater individualism and observing communitarian norms and values for the sake of maintaining a respectable face within the collectivity. In response to the normative character of the Bangladeshi communitarian system, a series of strategies are put into practice by the younger generation in order to understand, question, and react to taken-for-granted regulatory practices. On the basis of newly acquired knowledge, resources, and self-reflexivity, young women demonstrate the ability to critically consider their social condition and a willingness to resist and/or subvert it. In the process, SNSs play a significant role by providing them with venues where they can perform alternative expressions of gendered self against community

constraints, as well as share and exchange personal stories, experiences, and struggles with other (South Asian) female users, which gives life to processes of awareness, support, and collective change.

5.4.2 *Tactical use of SNSs*

The structure of SNSs enables users to gain and maintain total control of their account. Creating a personal profile on Instagram or Facebook implies specific choices, in terms of privacy and layout settings as well as the amount and type of content shared, which reflect the specific goal and online image that users want to convey to their public. The ways in which young women set up and manage their SNPs may be seen as a tactical approach to avoid parental and communitarian control and express and expose themselves online with reduced constraints. In order to prevent the risk of being found and monitored by potentially dangerous accounts (e.g. older members of their social circle), young women put in place a series of strategies: set up private profiles, publish specific posts in private mode, block suspicious accounts, open a supplementary account with no identification data, or diversify their accounts in terms of content and friend lists. The first key insight that emerged from the online ethnography was that the majority of participants own multiple accounts on different online platforms. First of all, while all participants have at least one Instagram account, not all of them have a Facebook account. The Facebook accounts analysed are private, with only limited and basic information about users (e.g. name, city of residence, profile picture) publicly shown. Overall, participants seem to be passive users of this platform as their Facebook profiles neither present a wide variety of posts nor regular updates, which conversely have been detected on their Instagram profiles. Content shared on Facebook, in addition, is mainly based on pictures that portray participants as being involved in Bangladeshi celebrations (e.g. weddings, Eid), family portraits, community events, and a few personal pictures. Notwithstanding the greater popularity of Instagram among the young

generation of users nowadays, one of the main reasons why participants do not engage with their Facebook accounts is the presence of adult members of their community. Facebook, indeed, is perceived by participants as an outdated platform, easier to use, and so also inhabited by old people. For old people, participants refer to parents, adult relatives (e.g. mothers-in-law, fathers-in-law, uncles, aunts), and more generally Bangladeshis belonging to the older generation. Data about social media demographics published by Khoros, an award-winning customer engagement platform that works with global brands, confirms these contemporary trends on SNS usage according to age group. 86% of people aged 18-29 use Facebook and 51% of people aged 50-65 use Facebook. Instagram users, on the contrary, are relatively younger. 67% of people aged 18-29 use Instagram and only 23% of those aged 50-65 use Instagram. Dipika, for instance, may be considered as an aspiring beauty and make-up influencer on Instagram, where she manages a public account followed by more than 2,000 users. On the contrary, on Facebook, she set up two diverse accounts: a personal one for friends where she proposes the same pictures published on Instagram, and a restricted one specifically for relatives. At the top of the page of the latter, she reports: ‘This profile is for relatives only. DO NOT ADD ME IF YOU AREN’T A RELATIVE PLEASE. THANK YOU!’. Dipika’s choice highlights how diverse accounts are set up and managed differently according to the presence of adults, as Minati also clearly explained during her interview:

‘To be honest, I don’t care about posting what I want, at least on Instagram as the majority of my followers are friends, cousins, or young people in general. On Facebook, on the contrary, I’ve adult people (relatives or family friends) in my friend list, but I rarely use it so I’m not really concerned about what they could see.’ (Minati, Interview, 02/02/21)

In stark contrast to Facebook, which is considered as a potentially unsafe environment for the presence of adult users, Instagram is a platform where participants are extremely active with a daily

publication of personal images and stories, as shown in Chapter 4. In the management of Instagram accounts too, however, there is a widespread concern about anonymity and privacy that, albeit being related to the general threats and risks of the Web, in this case is specifically linked to generational conflicts within the community itself. Privacy concerns and tactics are debated among young users through the exchange of suggestions and recommendations, as revealed by some Instagram stories in which users explain how they identify, report, and block fake or suspicious accounts. Dipika, for instance, shared a story, reporting that: ‘I decided to block all the fake accounts. I am so sorry because my followers will drop, but for my safety I cannot accept accounts with no posts or no profile picture’ (Dipika, Instagram, 28/02/21). Dipika is very committed to protecting her privacy and suggests some tips that her followers should follow, such as:

‘I make an example of this account. At first it seems a fake one, but then if you look at its profile you can notice it has 320 followers and 1067 following. Therefore, I can decide to keep it among my followers as it will not be harmful. Probably, the person does not want to appear on IG for private reasons. But what about this one? Absolutely to be blocked (0 followers and 47 following)!’ (Dipika, Instagram, 28/02/21)

The young women put in place a series of strategies on Instagram in order to publish personal pictures and recount their lives online without the danger of being monitored by suspicious accounts. First of all, while all participants have at least one personal account on Instagram, some of them also have a supplementary one that is usually marked by a specific (restricted) friend list or a specific theme/goal (e.g. make-up, fashion, cooking, Islam). Avya, for instance, in addition to her personal private account, has a second public profile on Instagram where she shares her creativity through the publication of artistic pictures and drawings. She declares that she is not worried about the exposure that comes from the latter profile as her ‘face is not in there’, her ‘personal life is not displayed’ (Avya, Interview, 26/01/21), and therefore there is no possibility that users can trace it back to her.

Shakila, likewise, set up a second private account with a selected and restricted circle of followers that mainly included family and adult community members. On this account, she is not very active and does not publish incriminating content, such as personal portrayals or pictures with her friends, but rather more impersonal content, such as landscapes, views of London, books or food. In addition to opening multiple and diversified accounts, participants adopt additional tactics related to the management of privacy settings. Jannatul, for instance, does not use a complementary profile but regularly blocks specific accounts. As she recounts: 'I block every auntie or uncle in the community to avoid getting caught' (Jannatul, Interview, 23/02/21) for the purpose of surveillance. Nishad, moreover, activates the privacy function only on specific posts, often related to personal matters that she prefers not to share with selected accounts. Finally, Tara logs out from her Instagram account every time she has finished using it. She explains that this habit is a preventative action that blocks access to her family members even though she feels quite safe as her parents do not even know she has social media accounts.

These tactics demonstrate how participants think about what, how, and to whom to disclose or conceal their personal information, private matters, and self-representations on their SNPs. While on Facebook participants are at risk of running into adult members of the community and therefore restrict and control their exposure, Instagram is considered a safer place precisely because adult members have no or limited access. By implementing tactics of self-presentation and self-exposure online, these young women create multiple subject positions across various media platforms. In each of these cases, they disclose a specific and selected part of their self and life according to the audience. In particular, while on Facebook they present an image of themselves more in line with Muslim-Bangladeshi cultural and religious expectations (as exemplified in pictures of community celebrations, religious festivities or family portrayals), on Instagram they tend to present a more

diversified self-image through the publication of alternative or additional aspects of their self that are more in line with contemporary imageries of femininity, as discussed in Chapter 4. The life aspects that are hidden from adult members, indeed, mainly include those that do not match Bangladeshi gender prescriptions and expectations such as attractive selfies or images of carefree social time spent with friends. In that way, users actively seek to prevent conflicting social and cultural collisions by strategically tailoring their accounts and the shared content according to their audiences and an evaluation of the risk of being surveilled.

5.4.3 *Online female confessions*

The previous sub-sections brought to light the Bangladeshi collectivity as a strong social institution in which young women's roles and life prospects are determined. However, the online ethnography also revealed that participants do not receive and accept gender norms and expectations passively but, on the contrary, are used to self-reflexively questioning and negotiating them also through online dialogues and exchanges with young female users. Participants get involved in online debates on the condition of South Asian women through the act of sharing personal experiences as well as consuming and exchanging content produced by Instagram users and/or accounts managed by and addressed to South Asian and/or brown women, such as Southasianqueens, Thatdesifeminist, Lord.desi, Brownbritishbantz. The majority of these Instagram accounts include the words South Asian, Desi (a term that identifies a person who is native to the Indian Subcontinent), and brown (that makes reference to skin colour) in their names. The objective of their online activity is to create a virtual community of South Asian women and empower them through practices of exchange and support. The targeted audience is predominantly composed of first- and second-generation young women of South Asian origin who are connected through their shared conditions and issues within their family units and communities. The lack of a specific focus on Bangladesh, in particular, denotes

participants' self-identification with a broader community of contemporary women in need of sharing and encouraging others to understand their plight. Southasianqueens, for instance, counts almost 140,000 followers and has the aim of 'empowering 1st-gen South-Asian women' through posts that 'incite meaningful conversations', as reported on the bibliographic section of the Instagram page (Southasianqueens, n.d., n.p.). The founder of the page, who is a 27-year-old South Asian woman living in Canada, also hosts a podcast called 'South Asian Queens' where she talks 'about everything from intergenerational trauma to internalized misogyny' (Anchor, n.d., n.p.). As the founder explains in the bibliographic section of her podcast, she is a proud daughter of immigrants and the oldest and only daughter in her family, and that is one of the reasons that prompted her to open meaningful digital conversations with like-minded female users. Being a South Asian migrant and daughter makes her, and the proposed topics, relatable and valuable especially for diasporic women whose origins are in diverse countries of the South Asian subcontinent. In addition, Thatdesifeminist, an Instagram page followed by 198,000 followers, is described as a public service focused on intersectional feminism, as reported in the description of the page (Thatdesifeminist, n.d.). The topics discussed on the page are all related to Indian gender roles and expectations, ranging from brown parents to stories of oppression faced by mothers and grandmothers, from sex shame to female orgasm myths, and men's role in the toxic behaviours normalised in Desi culture. These two examples reveal, first of all, how participants identify with and are linked to an imagery of femininity that is shared by young women coming from diverse South Asian countries due to comparable and relatable gendered practices and struggles. In the context of the social conditions experienced within their communities, as discussed above, online platforms become significant, safe, and unobserved places where acts of sharing, comparing, and exchanging personal experiences and troubles may build awareness, support, and collective change (Caldeira et al., 2020). Hence, I refer to online confessions as all those practices enacted on SNSs in which young female users open up publicly (or with their groups of followers) to

denounce the gender abuses, discriminations, and injustices suffered within their family and/or community of origin. What is more remarkable, in addition, is the demonstrated collective willingness and attempt to not only denounce but also understand the reasons behind and find new constructive responses to the perpetuation of strict gendered regulations, especially for new and future generations of women.

‘Confessions of a Brown Girl’ (Figure 15) is the title of an Instagram post reshared by multiple participants on their SNPs. It was first published by Amrin Khalil, a 22-year-old Indian writer and medicine student. This young Instagrammer manages a public account, followed by 11 million users, where she shares ‘truth threads and poetry’ mainly based on the social condition of ‘South-Asian, brown, and Muslim’ women as reported on the bibliographic section (Amrinkhalilpoetry, n.d., n.p.). This particular post went viral across participants’ personal profiles during the period of analysis and the fact that it has been reshared and endorsed by many young women involved in the project suggests its relevance in terms of the information disclosed. The post is composed of a series of nine images, each of which reveals a truth about the role of young brown women in the South Asian community and within their family of origin. The images disclose, first of all, significant insights on the definition and role of daughters within the South Asian domestic space, which confirm those previously analysed: prescribed and shared female codes of conduct (‘Before we were taught alphabets, we were taught how to sit like a girl’); external expectations and pressure (‘We’re subjected to body shaming and character assassination our whole lives’); division of gender roles (‘Our brothers are just “like kids” when they need to do chores but are “grown men” when decisions need to be taken’); and restricted female individuality and choice (‘You can do that after you’re married’). The final image of the post reports that: ‘All this shit, it ends with us.’

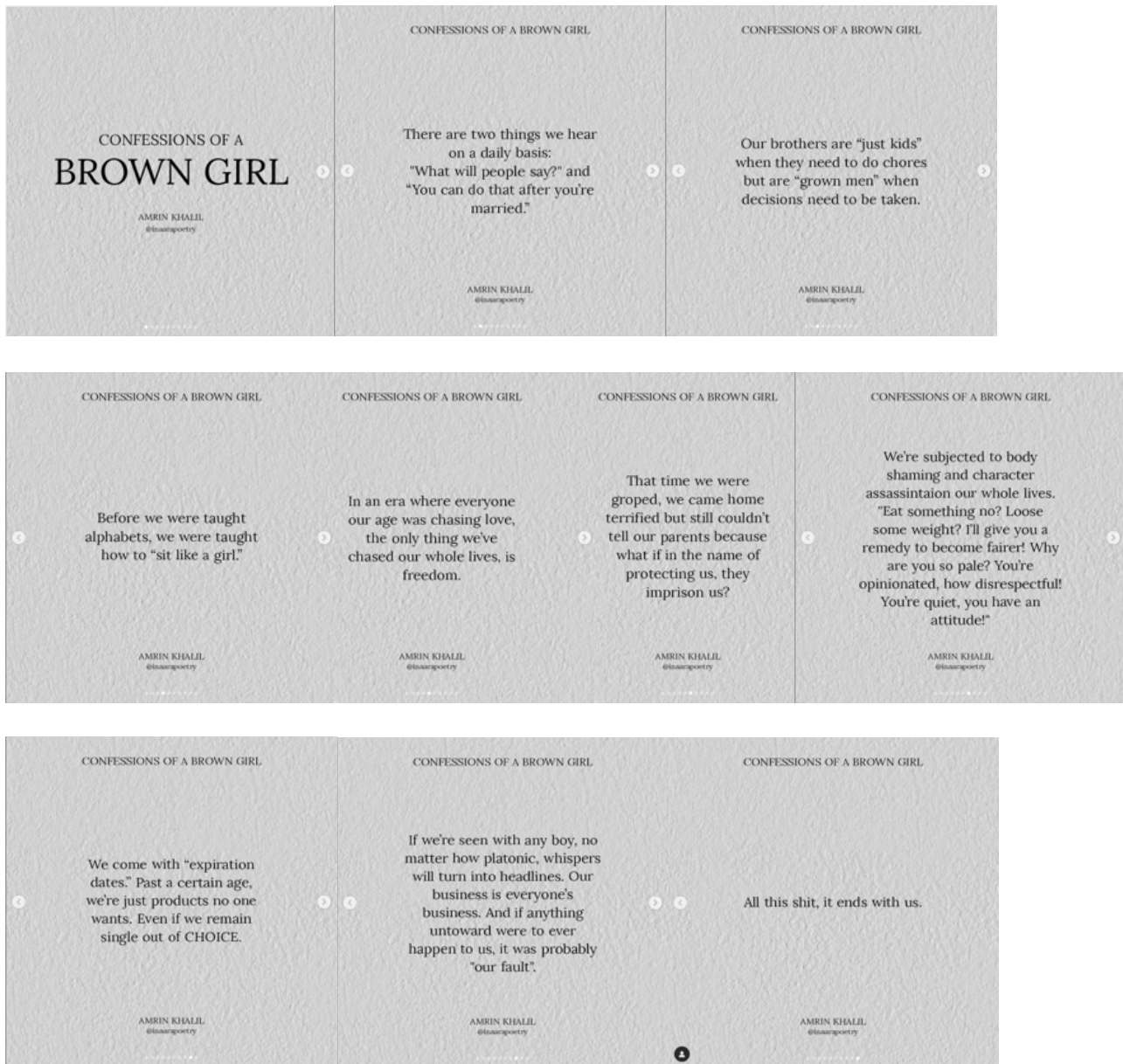


Figure 15. Confessions of a brown girl
Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/amrinkhalilpoetry/>

The confessions shared by this young Instagrammer resonated across communities of young South Asian women, united by the same experiences in their domestic context, who expressed feelings of empathy in relation to the meaningful and relatable insights shared. Some of the comments under the original post, for instance, report: 'I needed every word of this, thank you'; 'OMG YOU NAILED IT! It's so relatable'; 'That shit is so accurate it hurts'; and 'This is amazing! You have explained so

many of our struggles in a beautiful wording! Powerful!’. This example reveals how social media provide committed users with a place to speak up and build solidarity with other women suffering the same domestic forms of imposition and restriction through personalised stories that become collective struggles.

In addition to relating to other users’ posts, some participants are actively involved in this process of self-disclosure. For instance, in her Instagram story, Afrin shared with her followers the first sexual harassment incident she suffered in the United Kingdom. This is particularly relevant because Afrin’s online confession, as in the case of the #MeToo hashtag launched by the actress Alyssa Milano in 2007 (Nau et al. 2022), has encouraged other female users to share their personal experiences and trauma through comments and messages. In addition, it has also triggered a deeper collective discussion about the perpetuation of cultural and moral values within Bangladeshi families. In particular, three main topics embedded within such a debate help to explain how young women receive, understand, and react to dominant normative discourses on femininity and so to the perpetuation of constraining gender dynamics: the limited or lack of dialogue with parents, the gap between old and new generations in terms of resources and choices, and the collective commitment to change. Afrin is a young woman, born in Bangladesh and raised in Italy, who moved to London at the age of 18. In her Instagram story, she, first of all, talks about the struggles of being a female teenager going through the transition to London’s city life and establishing social relations within a new environment. As she recounts: ‘Just taking the bus to go to the right destination required a bit (actually A LOT) of stress’ or ‘Being able to ask for directions was a big deal’ (Afrin, Instagram, 11/03/21). Afrin explains this was due to her shyness (‘I used to talk less and always hoped for not having to interact with anyone outside’) and the relatively small and protected environment she was used to before moving to the United Kingdom from Italy (‘I always had my dad’s car or other family

friends' parents dropping us off to places (...) life was peaceful, nobody ever hurt us'). It is within the new chaotic life of London that she experienced a sexual assault on a public bus that she has never talked about to anyone. The first insight that emerges from Afrin's online disclosure is the lack of dialogue with her parents due to feelings of guilt surrounding the incident. Other young female users, by commenting on Afrin's Instagram story, reinforce this point and explain how sexual abuse is a 'taboo' within South Asian communities since it may entail a disgrace for the family. One reader of Afrin's post, for instance, writes: 'When I wanted to be protected by my own parents, I had to be silent as it would have been an embarrassment for the family' (External User, Instagram, 11/03/21). Afrin further claims that sexual topics are never discussed within the family, and this is why she did not feel comfortable in sharing the experience suffered with them. The lack of dialogue with and/or support from parents is an issue shared by multiple participants on their SNPs. Deshna, for instance, published an Instagram story that reported: 'You don't know how painful it is when you're trying to achieve your dreams and are given zero support from your loved ones' (Deshna, Instagram, 20/03/21), while Satviki published a Facebook update reporting: 'I grew up without sharing my problems to my parents' (Satviki, Facebook, 15/01, 21). The discussion around forbidden topics and/or private issues often takes place online mainly with trusted (female) users, who are able to offer listening and advice, or through web searches. Jannatul, in her interview, explains how she cannot discuss topics that matter to her within her household, for reasons related to taboo or embarrassment. Hence, she prefers using her laptop and looking for information on her own rather than 'not receiving adequate answers from [her] family or being seen as weird and a fool just for being curious' (Jannatul, Interview, 23/02/21). Other participants suggest that topics that cannot be discussed within the domestic sphere are primarily those related to youth issues (e.g. depression, use of social media) and sexual issues (e.g. love and sexual relationships).

Jannatul's experience, and her feeling of being judged as weird and a fool by her family, highlights the second insight that emerges from Afrin's disclosure, which is represented by the gap between the new and the old generation of women in terms of possibility and ability to discuss culturally forbidden matters and to break taboos. By exchanging messages and comments under Afrin's Instagram story, young female users debate amongst themselves about the reasons why this happens in their families. 'Who's to be blamed?' they ask. The online discussion focuses on the unquestioned acceptance of gender roles and norms within the Bangladeshi collectivity, which is perpetuated by male but also older female members. It is their parents' dominant way of thinking that comes under scrutiny and is defined as 'toxic' because adult members feel 'blindfolded and afraid of [the] community's judgements'. It is said that Bangla mothers feel ashamed of talking about feminine and sexual topics with their daughters and the example of the menstrual period, which is still a taboo within some families, is provided. Participants, therefore, recognise how women belonging to the older generations are bound to fixed gender norms and roles with no means to question and change them. One user commented on Afrin's story by writing: 'Even most of our mothers back in time grew up like that, always being silent because "guys are like this"' (External User, Instagram, 11/03/21). In sexual harassment episodes, for instance, adult women themselves condemn inappropriate female conduct and so perpetuate gender normative practices. One user reinforces this point:

'The majority of women are the first who blame the victims by saying "it's your fault because you got out", "if you are harassed, it's your fault because you have male friends", "your clothes are not appropriate."' (External User, Instagram, 11/03/21)

One of the main reasons behind uncontested gender norms is the preservation of family respectability and honour, or 'izzat' (Ghuman, 2003), which is interpreted as the reputation of oneself and one's family within the group of reference. As highlighted by Bhopal (2000), the pressure that comes from

the community is significant and determines its members' compliance with shared dynamics in order to be internally accepted and rewarded. As introduced above, families of South Asian origin are close-knit and cohesive units where family loyalties are very strong (Bisit, 1997b), and this helps to explain how the interests of the group come prior to those of its individual members. While these shared restrictive social practices are criticised on the basis that they restrict women's autonomy and choice, it must be recognised that, in many cases, the role of adults as 'watchdogs' is aimed towards the protection of their daughters and the avoidance of stigma and discrimination against them across the community. Carnà and Rossetti (2018), indeed, highlight how the community, in some cases, may also assume a benevolent and protective role for its youngest members. All the participants in this research distance themselves from the community's dynamics and recognise significant differences between their generation and that of their parents in terms of cultural and social experiences. For instance, Dipika, in her interview, claims that Bangladeshi parents have a 'closed mindset' (Dipika, Interview, 04/03/21) precisely because they were raised in a strict cultural environment that prevented them from understanding their daughters' needs and perspectives. Not all participants have a conflicting relationship with their parents, but even those who have a good one recognise it as an exception. As Fatema claims: 'Compared to other Bangladeshi families, [my parents] have always been a great support and very open-minded' (Fatema, Interview, 02/03/21). Young women criticise the restrictions that are perpetuated within the community but also acknowledge the sociocultural factors that prevent their parents from overcoming them. In many cases, therefore, there is not a direct blame and/or condemnation of their community of origin but, on the contrary, of the rooted cultural system underlying it. For instance, in her interview, Amena justifies the older generation's inflexibility through the general tendency to 'mix culture and religion' and the 'lack of formal and moral education' (Amena, Interview, 20/01/21). She also recognises how, with the passage of time

and with the commitment of children to explaining their views and needs, Bangladeshi parents become more flexible and willing to understand the new generation.

Amena's commitment to explaining her needs to her parents leads to the third significant insight embedded in Afrin's Instagram story, which is related to young women's will and effort to resist and/or negotiate regulatory discourses reproduced in the domestic and communitarian space. To conclude the debate that emerged from her confession online, Afrin writes: 'Our parents grew up in a rigid system, we are creative thinkers. It's our job to be able to start conversations and create stimuli' (Afrin, Instagram, 11/03/21). The process of change is a task assigned to the young members of the community, who are determined to break fixed barriers and achieve more individual freedom and gender equality for them and their future children. As Lima claims during her interview:

'My generation tends to be much more critical and defend their rights at all costs, for the sake of experiencing that feeling of freedom that is often denied to us by our parents for the simple reason that it seems to be wrong in their eyes as they never tasted it.' (Lima, Interview, 27/01/21)

All participants are part of a new generation of European women of Bangladeshi descent who have had the chance to pursue their academic career and broaden their cultural experience and, in doing so, increase their social status. They recognise that they have new means that enable them to review the entrenched system on which their community's values are based. For instance, in her interview, Avya mentions three main instruments of resistance: the media, which enables practices of meaning-making, self-experimentation, and social exchange; resources, such as education, that provide the ability to develop a critical attitude; and experiences, such as living in multiple countries and establishing extra-community relationships, which provide the opportunity to explore alternative

social and cultural practices. Participants' online confessions highlight how SNSs might become valuable spaces where the act of sharing and exchanging personal stories and struggles contributes towards increasing individual awareness of as well as collective commitment to change. The feeling of not being alone and having a safe environment to discuss key concerns leads to acts of resistance that seek to address forms of hostility experienced and gendered norms enforced within domestic and communitarian spaces. While in the previous case (Chapter 5.3.2) scattered users were held together by the common request for recognition and visibility within European societies, here young women are joined by a sense of affective solidarity, internal cohesion, and collaborative commitment. Interactions shared on SNSs engender a process of collective mobilisation aimed towards challenging restrictive sociocultural practices and shedding light on new cultural codes and forms of reciprocal identification. In line with existing studies on women's online solidarity and mobilisation against conservative and oppressive communities (e.g. Arda & Akdemir, 2021; Baer, 2012; Hirji, 2021; Lewicki & O'Toole, 2017), the results of my analysis show that SNSs can enable the expression of unvoiced interests and a capacity to take action. Through the exchange of personal experiences and common struggles, these young women sought to establish the grounds for more collective forms of engagement and action directed to social change. Hence, digital feminist collectives have the potential to challenge neoliberal sensibilities by bringing the focus back to shared social structures and mitigating the risk of reducing the political to the personal (Scharff et al., 2018). In contrast with new forms of feminism entrenched in a neoliberal rationality and imperialist logic (Baer, 2012; Fraser, 2013; McRobbie, 2015; Rottenberg, 2014, 2019) and concerned to gendered inequalities affecting privileged women (e.g. work-family balance), the emerging form of feminism endorsed by diasporic women recognise the socio-cultural forces behind the forms of discrimination experienced as well as the inability to fully tackle them individually and self-responsibly.

5.5 Conclusion: Ethnicised femininities and forms of online resistance

In this chapter, by following an intersectional approach to the study of subjectivity, I examined participants' sense of being woman in relation to their condition of being simultaneously migrant, South Asian, and European. My interest, in particular, was in going beyond the unattainable postfeminist promises of female equality and empowerment, to further investigate how the positionings, roles, and perspectives of young European women belonging to ethnic minorities are determined specifically by the intersection of gender with other social identity categories. In this section, in particular, I took into account ethnicity, race, and nationality. The analysis of participants' subject positions in the diverse national and ethnic communities they simultaneously inhabit brings to light two main insights. The first one reveals the systems of power and the resulting practices of social exclusion and subordination that emerge from the intersection of diverse identity categories both in wider European society and within the Bangladeshi community of origin. The second one highlights that in order to fully comprehend the formation of feminine subjectivities, both sites of oppression and sites of resistance must be identified and explored. In particular, I was interested in the agentic practices enabled and enacted by SNSs.

First of all, the investigation of young women's moving subject positions brings to light the fact that ethnic and national identifications are related to the embodiment of specific racial features as well as the 'correct' performance of gendered attributes. These results suggest an ethnicisation and racialisation of femininity both in European and South Asian communities where gender roles, norms, and expectations are bound to specific ethno-cultural groups and dominant discourses. The act of moving across borders does not only imply multiple and contradictory subject positions around which the process of self-definition takes place but also, more significantly, the competing regulatory discourses embedded in the bounded socio-political places simultaneously inhabited. The European

hegemonic categorisation of young women of Bangladeshi origin as a monolithic group of ‘Others’ entails the definition of gender in essentialised ethnic and racial terms. Likewise, the perpetuation of Bangladeshi gendered norms reproduces femininity in restricted and restrictive terms. The stories shared during interviews and online on SNSs do not only challenge the status of European societies as democratic and egalitarian or dismantle the neoliberal postfeminist promise that structural inequalities might be addressed through individual responsibility and autonomy, but also reveal how racial, ethnic, and national identifications lead to the diverse forms of symbolic and physical violence and exclusion suffered by specific groups of women. In particular, clashes between being both Italian and Bangladeshi arise primarily from the incompatibility of social and cultural practices as well as the ideological values that characterise and distinguish the two ethnic groups. At the micro-level of everyday life, participants struggle to achieve a self-definition that responds, but at the same time contrasts with, the competing discourses in which they are simultaneously positioned (Budgeon, 2001, p. 20). One participant, Manali, clearly recognises how people linked to two cultures can ‘experience discrimination for not knowing well any of the two’ and that ‘conflicts might arise as a consequence of contrasts of culture’ (Manali, Interview, 22/01/21). At the root of the discriminations experienced is the lack of in-depth knowledge of, and thus a refusal to conform adequately and simultaneously to, the prescribed shared cultural and gendered features that are symbolically and historically grounded in specific bounded spaces. As a consequence, young women’s position across borders implies a double exclusion, as they neither fit into the European (Italian and British) dominant discourses nor the South Asian (Bangladeshi) ones.

However, notwithstanding the recognition and relevance of competing disciplinary discourses on the formation of feminine subjectivities, I focused on everyday mediated practices enacted by participants as forms of resistance, where social media might be seen as potential sites of struggle

and agency. In particular, I was interested in understanding the complex negotiation process related to questions of ethnicity, race, and difference within the digital space. The first section revealed how the position of ‘Other’ assigned to South Asian migrant women by European society and dominant Eurocentric dominant triggers forms of online solidarity and activism with diverse minority groups claiming visibility and participation. SNSs emerge as spaces to get involved in collective networks and movements aimed at reclaiming recognition, enabling sociality, and enacting citizenship. The second section disclosed how Bangladeshi domestic gendered norms and expectations are not passively received by young women but, conversely, questioned, negotiated, and challenged through online practices such as the strategic use of social media and online confessions of South Asian female users. SNSs, in this case, reveal their potential to not only avoid parental and communitarian control and experiment with alternative interpretations of femininity, but also enact a sense of female affective solidarity, internal cohesion, and collaborative commitment to change.

These results reveal how media culture, in addition to promoting standardised and restricted female beauty and lifestyle canons and fostering processes of self-surveillance and self-regulation, as discussed in Chapter 3 and analysed in Chapter 4, might also enable processes of individual and collective reflexivity through the action of sharing and exchanging. By following Kim’s (2011) account of Giddens’ (1991) work, I interpret reflexivity as ‘the routine incorporation of new information or knowledge into environments of action that are thereby reconstituted and reorganised’ (Kim, 2011, p. 1). The analysis developed in this chapter highlights how the act of physical and mediated mobility opens up new possibilities to potentially transform and subvert competing ethnicised interpretations of femininity. In particular, through online narratives and practices, young women mobilise against both racialised Eurocentric discourses and Bangladeshi conservative norms and, in so doing, seek to address the forms of oppression and power imbalances in which they are

entangled. Digital platforms provide them with avenues to both resist the dominant discourses in which they are placed, propose alternative ones, and reconfigure the symbolic boundaries to express and perform what being an Italian, Bangladeshi, and migrant woman means. Participants seek to forge their subjectivity by not only integrating the multiple cultural resources available to them but also transcending the expectations imposed by competing ethnicised discourses. In doing so, a diasporic female agency is revealed. The young women demonstrate the creative ability and autonomy to move across borders and enact the ‘doing’ and ‘undoing’ of social norms (Lewicki & O’Toole, 2017, p. 157). In the process, they appropriate, refuse, negotiate and/or reshape the competing discourses that bind and restrict them. Notwithstanding the fact that the young women embrace girl power stances and undertake individual processes of empowerment under neoliberal forces, as discussed in Chapter 4, they take for granted neither gender nor racial equality. Xenophobic and Islamophobic discriminations as well as gender disparities they have experienced in the sociocultural contexts they inhabit have led them to demand equal rights. Such a demand does not only take the form of isolated voices but is also a collective call. Through online advocacy, participants mobilise against both racialised and Islamophobic Eurocentric discourses and Bangladeshi conservative norms and, in so doing, seek to address the forms of oppression and power imbalances in which they are entangled. They seek to question and negotiate their multiple positionings, and digital platforms provide them with the avenues to enact their political subjectivities and reformulate the roles allocated to them (Lewicki & O’Toole, 2017, p. 156). The recognition that such a process takes the form of collective solidarity and action discloses the potential of online activism to challenge postfeminist and neoliberal sensibilities and mitigate the reduction of feminism as an ‘individualistic enterprise’ (Baer, 2016, p. 22), by reactivating shared feminine struggles and reclaiming the need of structural changes. Young women prove to be fully aware of the social and cultural factors underlying the forms of discrimination experienced across the social groups inhabited

as well as committed to pursue collective processes of change directed to social justice for present and future generations of women.

6 DIGITALISATION AND FEMINISATION OF ISLAM

6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter analysed the multiple and conflicting subject positions resulting from the intersection of gender and other social identity categories such as ethnicity, race, and nationality. I identified both the sites of oppression and subordination as well as those of struggle and agency resulting from the young women's movement across national borders and dominant discourses. In this chapter, I further investigate participants' feminine subjectivities in relation to religion, which emerges as another relevant axis of categorisation and additional layer of discrimination within the sample. In line with the previous chapter, therefore, my objective is to reveal participants' sense of being woman in relation to their condition of being simultaneously not only Italian-Bangladeshi but also Muslim in European societies. Notwithstanding the varying ways in which religion is understood, professed, and performed within the sample, all the young women who took part in this research project come from a Muslim Bangladeshi community. The online ethnography highlights how social media overall provide a significant venue for participants to explore, consume, produce, reclaim, and perform Islam. As such, religion becomes a constitutive aspect of the process of self-definition and self-presentation enacted online. In particular, I investigated how Italian-Bangladeshi Muslim young women experience and manifest their faith online, both individually and collectively, and how they respond to and negotiate multiple and competing interpretations of Muslim femininity rooted both in European and Islamic dominant discourses. In particular, the first section presents the diverse approaches participants adopt in the consumption and production of Islamic knowledge online. Results suggest that the individualistic and self-reflexive approach to religion that SNSs favour, through the greater knowledge accessibility and more fragmented representations of religious authority they afford, serves to challenge historically established Islamic binary norms in relation to gender. The second section identifies the multiple and contrasting representations of Muslim

femininity enacted online, which contribute to the questioning of essentialist Neo-Orientalist discourses on Islam and the Muslim woman. I ultimately suggest that SNSs, and the emergence of Muslim digital media culture, provide young Muslim women with new means and premises to mould alternative interpretations and performances of both religion and femininity. However, despite simultaneously questioning official Islamic practices and stereotypical European imageries of Islamic femininity, these tend to reproduce a postfeminist and neoliberal logic through the emergence of the pious entrepreneurial subject, which joins religious observation with a secular interpretation of female success.

6.2 Islamic digital culture

The first striking result that arises from the analysis of Code 8 (Islam) is the wide range of Islamic social media accounts (e.g. Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter) that the young women follow and interact with on a daily basis. Despite the diversity in terms of author, content, and popularity, these platforms are mainly used to practise Da'wah (Islamic proselytisation) and spread Islamic teachings in order to direct followers towards being competent and virtuous Muslims. Such a scenario reflects the increasing academic interest in the relationship between Islam and technology, which is focused both on how digital media have been adapted to meet Islamic cultures and how Islamic practices have been transformed by digital media and information (see Lengauer, 2018; Nugraha et al., 2020; Qayyum & Mahmood, 2015; Slama, 2018; Zaid et al., 2022). In particular, Islamic digital popular culture has increased religious premises, formats, and contents but also led to a significant expansion of official and non-official religious actors who adopt media and communication technologies to create, share, and exchange Islamic precepts with audiences of believers. In this section, therefore, I further investigate young women's practices related to Islamic consumption and production enacted online with a specific focus on Muslim female speakers, bloggers, and

worshippers. Results suggest that the individualistic and self-reflexive approach to religion that SNSs favour – by virtue of the greater knowledge accessibility and more fragmented and diversified representations of religious authority they afford – serve to challenge historically established Islamic binary gender norms, mainly based on gender divisions and/or female exclusion from sacred public spaces (Bhimji, 2009; Lengauer, 2019; Nyhagen, 2019) and the exclusiveness of male institutional leadership (Darwin, 2018; Nyhagen, 2019).

6.2.1 Consuming Islam online: Digital preachers

The online ethnography conducted on 45 participants' SNPs reveals that social media are a significant means through which young Muslim women interact with and exchange Islamic precepts on a daily basis. This reflects an multivocal Islamic popular cultural field, which is increasingly composed of digitally-mediated Islamic teachings, pillars, reminders, and codes of conduct that are first of all spread by Islamic preachers, scholars and intellectuals through digital platforms but increasingly by Islamic Instagram accounts managed by common worshippers. The combination of religious activity and creative media culture has given rise to new forms of religious formats (e.g. Online Da'wah) to practise faith digitally, both individually, through the practice of consumption, and collectively, through the acts of sharing and exchanging. Young participants are active in following and engaging with SNSs (e.g. YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook) of official Islamic scholars and preachers. Some of the Islamic speakers most followed by the sample are, for instance, Mufti Menk (Islamic scholar and motivational speaker from Zimbabwe), Shaykh Azhar Nasser (Islamic scholar and co-founder of the Tasneem Institute from the United States), Wisam Sharieff (Imam and Islamic scholar from the United States), Omar Suleiman (Islamic scholar and civil rights leader from the United States), Mohamed Hoblos (motivational speaker from Australia), and Asim Khan (Imam and writer from the United Kingdom), among others. The online popularity of these influential Islamic actors

seems to reflect longstanding male domination within places of worship (Darwin, 2018), where religious knowledge was retained and disseminated by Islamic male authorities. Still nowadays, mosques in Muslim and non-Muslim countries are ruled by male-dominated boards and the highest leadership role is held by the male Imam (Nyhagen, 2019, p. 9). Despite the homogeneity in terms of gender, however, these online institutional figures come from different Muslim and non-Muslim countries, thus suggesting how participants experience religion as detached from their original culture or the culture of their family, and follow it as a universal faith with no ethnic background. In particular, through the activity of daily posting on their SNSs, Islamic preachers position themselves across religious communities and establish translocal connections among Muslims in an easy and effective way. Indeed, they are often invited as speakers for Islamic lectures, TV shows, radio programmes or podcasts. This success lies mainly in their form of communication, which is simple, fast, accessible, and often interactive. Common content released includes lectures and discussions on the Holy Quran, words on the life of the Prophet Muhammad, Islamic pillars and codes of conduct, but also passionate and emotional speeches and reminders of topics regarding Muslims of today, especially the younger generation.

Mufti Menk, for instance, is one of the Islamic scholars most followed by the sampled young women, and his multimedia content is frequently reshared on the SNPs analysed. Menk was born and raised in Zimbabwe, studied Shariah in Madinah (Saudi Arabia) and got a Doctorate of Social Guidance at Aldersgate University (Philippines). He is recognised as an influential Islamic motivational speaker who, in 2019, published a book entitled 'Motivational Moments'. His popularity, especially among young audiences, can be related to a form of communication focused on Islamic lectures – e.g. Sunnah (sayings and practices of the Prophet Muhammad) or Salah (prayers performed by Muslims daily) – which are explained in an easy, informal, and comprehensible way. This intent is evident in his last

book published in 2021 entitled ‘The Simple Seerah. The Story of Prophet Muhammad’ whose objective is to ‘make it easy for the young generations of Muslim today to understand and learn from the life of the Prophet’ (Menk, n.d., n.p.). In addition, he holds public online debates on contemporary topics that concern how one should live a religious life, which engage young believers through daily insights, suggestions, and incitements. Aysha, for instance, published an Instagram post with a Mufti Menk quote:

‘Focus on what matters. Choose positivity always. Negativity is not the vibe you want. If you allow it, negativity can sap your energy & leave you feeling drained. It can kill your inner peace. Recognize these symptoms & learn to make better choice. Leave the outside noise out!’ (Aysha, Instagram, 18/02/21)

In a similar vein to Aysha’s post, many of the recommendations proposed by digital scholars and/or preachers involve broad guidance about how to pursue life positively and proactively without making specific references to religious laws. As such, they often assume the role of motivators and life coaches who deal with issues that may affect a wide variety of followers around the world. Another example is a post shared by Satviki that reports on another speech of Mufti Menk:

‘Don’t worry about how people act. That’s on them not you. Always choose kindness, that’s under your control. Spread it far and wide, whichever way you can, even if it means giving a smile or a word of encouragement. Never underestimate how contagious being kind can be!’ (Satviki, Instagram, 15/01/21)

What is clear from these digital Islamic messages is that they introduce novel elements, not only in terms of their format and delivery but also in terms of their content. In addition to being confident in the teachings of the Holy Quran and the sayings of Prophet Muhammad, contemporary young

Muslims are invited to and/or seek to acquire practical lessons and guidelines on how to approach everyday life and hardship by applying Islamic values and morals. This communication reflects the transformations and needs of the younger generation of Muslims, who make sense of religion in a cultural and urban context that differs from that of the older generations. The need to combine the Islamic religion with the incitements that come from youth circles, metropolitan cities, and the consumer and digital cultures that young women experience on a daily basis seem to be answered by online networks where technology, youth-oriented communication, and Islam join together in new and more accessible formats. Online platforms, therefore, acquire a new and more relevant role for communities of young Muslims who are looking for answers and solutions, which are not easily found in offline Islamic institutional venues. Another reason why Mufti Menk is popular among audiences of Muslim women is his involvement in youth female matters. As such, he can be considered as a ‘Muslim progressive thinker’ (Lengauer, 2018, p. 9), who combines Islamic values with scientific and rational thought. For instance, Samiha shared a Mufti Menk post that encourages his followers not to ask private questions to women such as those related to marriage or motherhood. The message reports:

‘Stop asking people probing personal questions. Why someone is not yet married or not having children is seriously not your business. Such is the struggle many are going through. Be kind. Be compassionate. And if you can’t be those, be quiet!’ (Samiha, Instagram, 14/01/21)

The above invitation does not only challenge Islamic gendered norms that tend to assign women the domestic and childbearing role (Nyhagen, 2019) but also addresses, in a colloquial and direct way, the social expectations and pressures that might be experienced by young Muslim women. This is a tendency also observed in other Islamic male speakers, who demonstrate an understanding of and

moderate positions on issues faced by the younger female generation. Halima, for instance, published a post of Shaykh Azhar Nasser – a Florida-based lecturer known for his humour, especially on social media (Khalaf, 2017) – in which he encourages Muslim parents to teach children about gender equality. As he writes:

‘Teach your daughter economic independence so in the future she can have a partner, not a master. Teach your son to do housework so in the future he can have a partner, not a servant.’ (Halima, Instagram, 27/07/21)

Furthermore, in addition to SNSs managed by institutional and recognised actors, the young women interact with a high number of Instagram pages run by common worshippers that assume the role of non-official disseminators keen to take part in the digital spread of the Islamic faith. Some of the most followed Instagram accounts within the sample are, for instance, Daily_hadiths, Being.a.muslim_, _Servant_of_allah, Islam.for.us, Path_of_allah1, _Quransunnah_, Dailyremindersislam.20, Quran_makes_me_smile, Pearlsforummah, Worshiper_of_allah, Path2paradise, and Muslim_daily, among many others. The design of these pages is based on a combination of original posts, which usually report on Quran verses and Ahadith (prophetic sayings) translated into Italian/English, inspirational quotes signed by the account administrators, and posts recovered from other official Islamic speakers’ accounts, such as those mentioned above. The introduction of grassroots digital Islamic production has led to a transformation of official Islamic knowledge, which is increasingly interpreted, adapted, and revised by a multitude of common worshippers in the acts of online reproduction and exchange. The fragmentation of Islamic authority and the digitalisation of content, mainly produced by the youngest generation of Muslims, help to explain how young women understand and experience religion in a softer, more dispersed, and secular way. As suggested by Nugraha et al. (2020), contemporary Islamic Da’wah does not only discuss Islam but all aspects of

human life. The final objective for Muslim followers is to receive the wisdom and to put it into practice to become qualified, respectful, and virtuous human beings and not only good Muslims. Religion, therefore, is pursued as a life guide that helps them to interpret their daily actions and behave conscientiously in relation to God but also themselves and others. This goal is clear in an Islam_speranza post shared by Anika that reports:

‘Being Muslim is not just about praying, fasting, wearing the veil...it’s also about being good to others, communicating good words, forgiving, doing good (silently), not offending anyone Muslim and non-Muslim, and having a heart.’ (Anika, Instagram, 08/04/21)

Such an approach suggests that religion guides young women, who often find themselves at a crossroads, navigating a cultural conflict between norms and expectations, which come from multiple social groups, as demonstrated in Chapter 5, and a sense of increased autonomy, as exemplified by the fundamental and universal morals and conducts they are increasingly told to pursue. As suggested by Butler (1999), Islam is understood as ‘a tool to question traditional culture’ (p. 147). As such, it provides answers (p. 149) and helps young women to mediate between being Bangladeshis and Italians through a process of cultural redefinition, still based on following Islamic principles. Afrin, for instance, publishes an Instagram story in which she highlights that Allah is the only pure and eternal guide amongst different and competing suggested directions:

‘Mothers will tell you motherhood completes you. Married women will tell you a loving husband and a companion completes you. Single women will tell you independence and money complete you (...) Only Allah completes you and will be by your side always. Everything and everyone else are temporary.’ (Afrin, Instagram, 16/03/21)

By offering the chance to navigate platforms, formats, disseminators, and messages daily, SNSs represent a relevant space that offers multiple and stimulating orientations and models in the process of faith-based development. In these online venues, religious teachings and practices can be explored, compared, appropriated but also contested due to the fragmentation of religious authority and the agency gained by common users.

6.2.2 Muslim female speakers and bloggers

The digitalisation of Islamic culture has enabled the expansion of Muslim participants and followers as well as producers. In addition to digital male preachers, participants follow Muslim female content makers who debate a variety of Islamic and non-Islamic topics that deal with feminine issues. Hence, Muslim women are increasingly emerging as agents in the moulding of Islamic popular culture (Baulch & Pramiyanti, 2018), actively involved in the production, circulation, and exchange of content by women for women. The inclusion and visibility of women within both official and non-official places of worship is a phenomenon recognised within contemporary Muslim communities. In her study of Muslims in France and Germany, Jouili (2015) identifies a growing trend characterised by the ‘feminisation of the Islamic institutional landscape’ (p. 24), which has seen a rise of women’s activism, women-focused and women-led activities within and beyond the mosque (Nyhagen, 2019). In particular, new technologies have given young Muslims additional places and means to reach out, connect, search and find not only institutional information, standardised forms of Da’wah, formal Islamic lectures, and official male preachers, but also content produced by female authors, speakers, bloggers, influencers, and common users. Some popular Muslim women followed by participants include, for instance, Yasmin Mogahed (Egyptian-American motivational speaker), Shereen Sharief (author of ‘My First Quran with Pictures’), Dalia Mogahed (Egyptian-American researcher and consultant), Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan (British Muslim writer), and Amal Kassir (American poet),

among others. All of them are second-generation women who live in European or North American countries and therefore speak the language of contemporary, urban, and educated young Muslim women.

The work of Yasmin Mogahed, for instance, was followed and shared by many young participants during the period of analysis. She is an American psychologist, motivational speaker, and specialist in spirituality, psychology, and personal development. In addition to her Instagram account, she manages a personal website where she posts articles and a YouTube page where she uploads lectures, classes, and seminars she gives as a guest speaker. She covers a variety of topics predominantly focused on youth and female matters, and her form of communication is oriented towards educating young women through teachings, reflections, and stories that motivate, inspire, and lead them towards their personal path of growth and way to Allah. Messages are delivered in the form of inspirational sources to be appropriated and practised individually and never as mandatory precepts to be executed uniformly. In addition, Mogahed is committed to understanding and supporting the needs, struggles, and aspirations of the young generation of women. Some of the posts shared on her personal website (Mogahed, n.d. a, n.p.), for instance, are entitled: ‘The search for love’, ‘Emotional bullying and being a “loser” in marriage’, ‘On treating broken hearts’, ‘The lifetime of a hardship’, ‘Marriage is a place of tranquillity’, ‘The purpose of the journey is not to be perfect’, and so on. In particular, personal experiences and positive examples shared online become forms of counselling and create a supportive environment for women to get closer to religion as a form of self-enhancement. What is recurrent in the posts analysed is the incitement to deal with and overcome hardship in order to enable a sense of graciousness and personal accomplishment. Some of the short speeches published on her YouTube channel (Mogahed, n.d. b, n.p.), for instance, are entitled: ‘The right way to deal with pain’, ‘What is the source of self-worth?’, ‘The storm cannot destroy you if He is your sail. Find joy today in your

faith and love’, ‘When will the help of Allah come?’, ‘Place your resilience in Allah’, and so on. The work of Yasmin Mogahed, along with the proliferation of SNSs managed by female users, addresses the specific goal to offer Muslim women support, guidelines, and encouragement by following insights that come from Islamic teachings.

Furthermore, participants follow a great number of public Instagram accounts managed by Muslim women and content providers who are overtly dedicated to female audiences. Some of the most popular ones are: Princess_ofjannah, Themuslimahclub, The_muslimlady, Nerdy_muslimah, Muslimahapparelthings, Muslimah_reminder, Muslimgirl, Modestinfluence, and Muslima_coaching, among others. These pages differ from other Islamic accounts in terms of their overall aesthetic, which is marked by the use of soft colours, delicate fonts, and female-related content. Princess_OfJannah (Princess_OfParadise), for instance, is a public Instagram page with 147,000 followers, whose content was repeatedly shared by participants during the period of analysis. Its author is unknown and the bibliographic section of the page only reports on the Basmala (the Islamic phrase ‘In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful’) and the word ‘believer’, along with a heart emoji (Princess_ofjannah, n.d., n.p.). The highlights (collections of Instagram stories) saved at the top of the page well represent the main topics proposed by the author, which can be divided into two main categories: religious topics (e.g. Ramadan, Prophets, Dua, Salah, hijab, Quran, Jummah, prayers, Mufti Menk, reminders) and topics more relevant to a female audience (e.g. marriage, success, men, temptations, showing off, jewellery, love, daughters, friends, kindness). In addition, the account is regularly updated with new posts, signed by the author Princess_ofJannah, with daily reminders and motivational mottos. The majority of them specifically address female audiences. These include: ‘Ya Rabb, grant every girl a beautiful future’, ‘Beauty is not in the face, beauty is a light in the heart’, ‘Ya Allah, save us from a marriage that destroys our inner peace’, ‘A

woman's beauty always lies in her modesty', and 'You're a queen if you have deen'. The striking feature that defines this Instagram account is the overall refined aesthetic through which Islamic messages are delivered. Authors' quotes are accompanied by eye-catching images and icons that recall a mainstream feminine imaginary such as luxury dresses, sparkling jewellery, elegant interior design, glamorous locations, and heterosexual couples (Figure 16). What emerges here is a new form of feminised Da'wah through which Muslim women are invited to embrace Islam and Allah's teachings in an aesthetically pleasant and fashionable way by connecting the religious practice with consumer and influencer cultures.

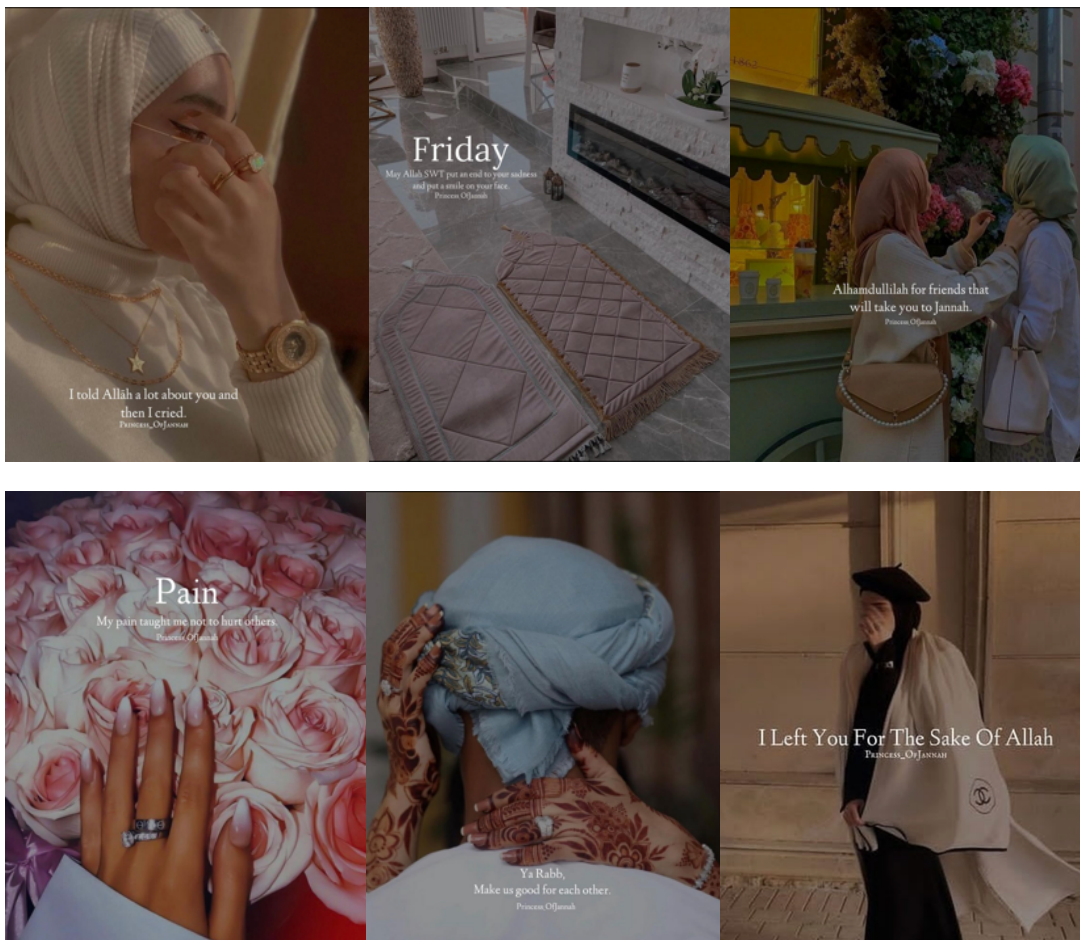


Figure 16. Princess_ofJannah Instagram account
Available at: https://www.instagram.com/princess_ofjannah/

Weng (2018) talks about the ‘beautification’ (p. 63) of Da’wah to refer to new formats of social media that favour sensation and aesthetics for the dissemination of religious messages. In so doing, these accounts, their female creators and followers, contribute to the shaping of an Islamic aesthetic for contemporary Muslim women by connecting religious reminders with elements of mainstream femininity. Overall, the narratives and representations spread online present Muslim women as pious subjects, confident in Islamic morals, observant of the Islamic pillars, and eager to do good deeds, but also as fashionable and proactive subjects, attentive to aesthetics, inspired, and self-driven. Gökariksel and McLarney (2010) suggest that what it means to be a contemporary Muslim woman is increasingly mediated and constructed by combining Islamic teachings and practices with notions of empowerment, beauty, fashion, consumption, motherhood, and having a career. In line with the data analysed in Chapter 4, young Muslim women are being subjected to increasing demands pertaining to religious observation as well as more secular expectations related to female success. Notwithstanding offering a new and more progressive understanding of religion and the participation of more balanced range of worshippers, the emergence of Muslim digital culture specifically addressed to women tends to reproduce postfeminist and neoliberal ideals through a religious perspective on self-determination and self-enhancement. This implies, as will be further investigated below, that contemporary European Muslims are invited to become better versions of themselves both as women and as believers. This process reveals how the neoliberal paradigm increasingly pervades all areas of a person’s life, as also highlighted by Guardiola-Rivera (2010) when he defines neoliberalism as ‘an emphasis on the potential expansion of the viewpoint of commercial exchanges to nearly every other sphere of society from motherhood and reproduction to international relations’ (p. 6).

6.2.3 *Producing Islam online*

In addition to reading, watching, liking, commenting on, and sharing content of preferred Islamic accounts, young participants are actively committed to producing and sharing their own content online. This usually includes pictures of moments of prayer or religious celebrations (e.g. Ramadan, Eid), insights on Islamic messages and teachings, and open discussions with followers around religious topics. Some participants clearly affirm their use of social media as a means to profess and share their religious faith with followers. Aysha, for instance, explains that she tries ‘to use social networks to remind brothers and sisters of [her] own religion’ (Aysha, Interview, 14/02/21), while Lekha recognises the usefulness of Instagram stories ‘to spread motivation, empowerment, and religious beliefs’ (Lekha, Interview, 09/02/21). The ways in which these proselytising practices are pursued vary within the sample, but overall the act of sharing individual spiritual journeys is aimed towards not only presenting themselves as pious subjects but also motivating other users to embrace Islam as an act of goodness.

The first common content published by young women on their SNPs is the act of prayer. This includes Instagram pictures and/or stories portraying the Holy Quran open, suggesting the act of reading, and the prayer mat and beads, suggesting the act of performing daily prayers (Figure 17). Such representations are often accompanied by captions such as ‘Pray more and worry less’ or ‘Only with Allah you can filter the taste of happiness in your heart’, as well as heart emojis. Moreover, Islamic rituals and/or celebrations are significant events that participants often shared online with their followers. In particular, during the month of Ramadan, a large number of messages, quotes, memes, and pictures were circulated and exchanged among users with the aim of spreading joy, faith, hope, and encouragement.

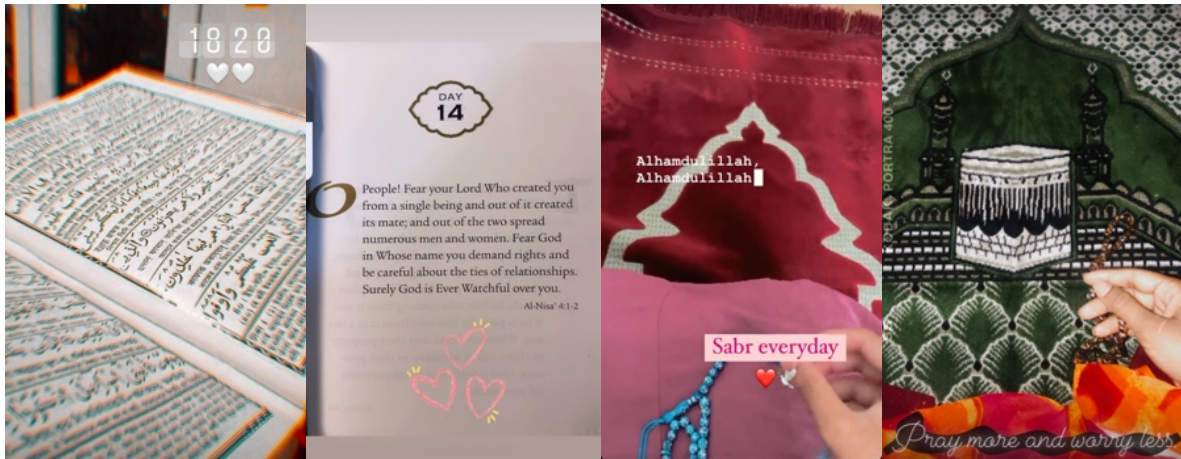


Figure 17. Moments of prayer

Anika, for instance, posted daily Instagram stories of her Iftar (evening meal with which Muslims end their daily Ramadan fast at sunset), portraying her family dinner table laden with abundant food. As one of the five pillars of Islam and the holiest month of the year within Islamic culture, Ramadan is a time for spiritual reflection and growth. It is common that participants, as a sign of their personal commitment to the Muslim community, publish insights on Ramadan's meaning and value. The goal is not only to demonstrate compliance with fasting activities, as in the case of Anika, but also to inspire others to follow Ramadan with sincere intentions and correct procedures. Samiha uploaded a series of Instagram stories called 'Ramadan Tips', where she shared daily a specific Islamic recommendation followed by a detailed explanation, such as: 'Foods to avoid during Iftar', 'What to eat for Iftar', 'Food to avoid during Suhoor', 'What to eat for Suhoor' etc. In other cases, suggestions were addressed specifically to female audiences. Gopika, for instance, shared a post from Servant_of_allah's Instagram page with her followers that advised female worshippers on the 'things a Woman can do on her menses during Ramadan' (Gopika, Instagram 02/04/22). In addition to acting as a means to share and exchange official Islamic prescriptions, however, SNSs also become informal and friendly venues where young users can debate Islamic topics, share personal experiences, and ask for suggestions. Shakila, for instance, published an Instagram story asking her

followers what the hardest aspect of Ramadan fasting was. The different answers provided by her followers (e.g. ‘I get dizzy but never hungry’, ‘I get headaches when I don’t eat and since I can’t take pills (cuz of fasting) it gets worse’, ‘I used to get dizzy & faint because of lack of iron’, and ‘Lack of water’) open up a common debate about Ramadan norms and the permission or prohibition to practise specific activities during the holy month (e.g. listening to music). Moreover, educative content is also exchanged in relation to other Islamic activities, such as Jumu’ah (Friday prayer) or Deeds (pure intentions), which are presented in easy, enjoyable, playful, and catchy visual forms (Figure 18).

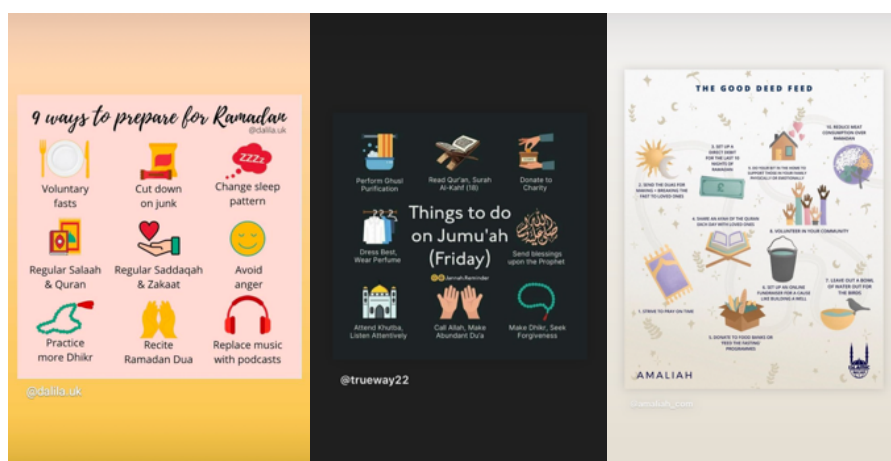


Figure 18. Online Islamic teachings

Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/dalila.uk/>, <https://www.instagram.com/trueway22/>, https://www.instagram.com/amaliah_com/

These posts are usually retrieved from official Muslim accounts, even though some participants try to get involved in the action of proselytism through the production of their own content. Amena, for instance, published a series of stories entitled ‘Dua’ (a prayer of invocation, supplication or request to God) on her Instagram account, where she illustrated the very essence of worship. Every story had a specific topic (e.g. ‘Intention for fasting’, ‘Breaking the fasting’, ‘For parents’, ‘Visiting the sick’, ‘Before sleeping’) and was composed of supplications and/or promises written in Arabic, Bangladeshi and English. ‘Intention for fasting’, for example, was followed by the promise: ‘I intend

to keep fast today for the month of Ramadan' (Figure 19). These practices, in addition to showing young women as Muslims with good intentions and religious commitment, reveal how even common users follow the overall trend of the feminisation of Islamic digital content and practices. Amena's Instagram stories about 'Dua' are produced with a refined design that includes floral decorations, the colour of the font matching that of the flowers.



Figure 19. Online Dua

Moreover, Islamic holidays such as Ramadan, as memorable times of the year awaited by Muslim communities, are often celebrated by young women by putting up glamorous decorations in the home and wearing dresses for special occasions, taking inspiration from Muslim influencers and bloggers. Yuvati, for instance, published an Instagram video retrieved from an Instagram account titled Imene_interior_design (a Muslim interior designer) that offers tips and inspiration for decorating and embellishing rooms and food tables for Ramadan. All the pictures present stylish and luxury objects of design, which have been carefully selected and matched to create an exclusive experience (Figure 20).



Figure 20. Imene_interior_design Instagram account
Available at: https://www.instagram.com/imene_interior_design/

Finally, on the occasions of Eid al-Adha and Eid al-Fitr (the two official Islamic holidays), young participants regularly post portraits or selfies of themselves posing with glamorous holiday dresses, jewellery, make-up, decorations often shot before or during celebrative activities, followed by hashtags such as #eidvibes, #eidlook or #eidoutfit (Figure 21).

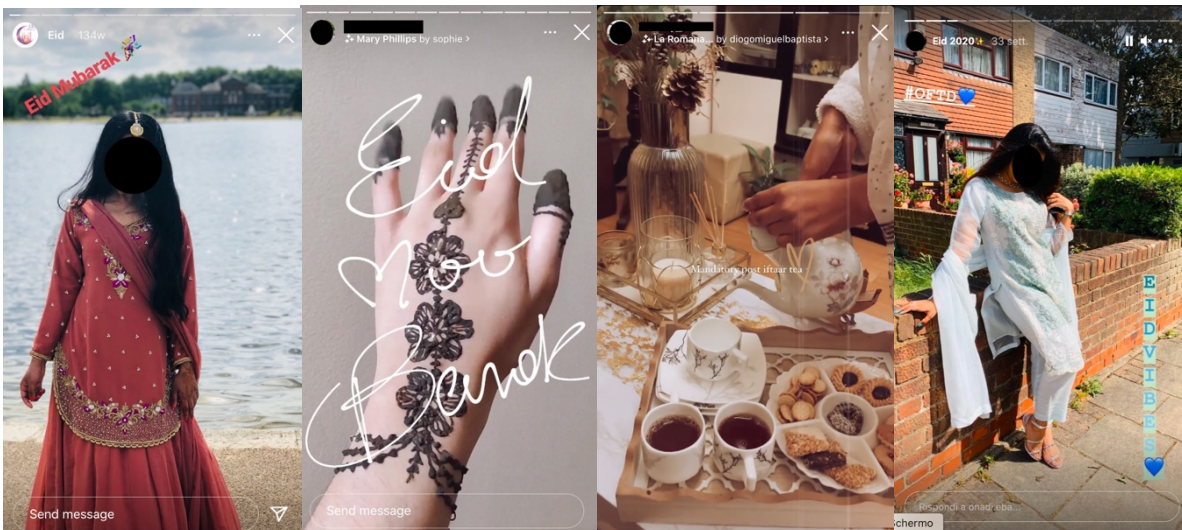


Figure 21. Islamic holidays

Overall, the practice of sharing daily religious practices, Islamic celebrations and reminders, along with the consumption and exhibition of material goods, positions participants within the digital community of global Muslimahs (Muslim women) in which Islamic faith is increasingly associated with fashion trends, consumer practices, and glamorous lifestyles (Gökariksel & McLarney, 2010; Kiliçbay & Binark, 2002). Through SNSs, young Muslim women are invited to explore, deepen, and question Islam in a more femininised and aestheticised format that responds to the needs of contemporary Muslim women (Fayaz, 2020; Kiliçbay & Binark, 2002; Weng, 2018).

6.2.4 Individualistic approach to religion

The practices related to the production and consumption of the Islamic religion examined above suggest that SNSs are key sites where young Muslim women orient themselves to develop their Islamic consciousness and construct their personal religious and life journey. The ability to move across, consult, interpret, appropriate and/or refuse multiple and diverse sources of knowledge suggests an individualistic approach to religion (Nyhagen, 2019) through which young women self-reflexively mould their own pious subjectivities. Through Islamic digital media content, drawn from manifold platforms and producers, Islamic users are invited to engage with Islamic sources in a personalised, soft, and entertaining way. These practices of individual knowledge acquisition support earlier findings based on the recognition that women seek autonomy and empowerment through multiple routes to knowledge, including their own reading of religious texts (Lengauer, 2018). As suggested by multiple authors (see Dessing, 2012; Jouili & Amir-Moazami 2006; Mahmood, 2005), such a transformation within Islamic popular culture entails a greater sense of autonomy through which a woman can ideally become her own religious authority by going beyond official religious institutions. I suggest that such an individualistic approach to religion, increasingly fostered by digital media, questions two main Islamic gender norms, historically and culturally determined within

Muslim societies: the gender segregation in Islamic places of worship and the exclusiveness of male leading roles in Islamic institutions.

Historically, in Muslim societies, including South Asian ones, institutional places of worship were male-dominated spaces (Bhimji, 2009, p. 366; Lengauer, 2018, p. 16) marked by an exclusion of women in the majority of mosque-based practices and rituals. Gender divisions in sacred public spaces are still observed in non-Muslim countries, such as those in which the participants live. For instance, the East London Mosque – the biggest mosque in the United Kingdom, situated in the area where the British-Bangladeshi community historically settled in the 1970s – includes separate prayer facilities for men and women (East London Mosque, n.d.); while the worship rooms in the Bangladeshi neighbourhood in Rome are usually attended by men while women perform prayers at home (Carnà & Rossetti, 2018). However, in line with contemporary developments in female participation inside and outside the mosque both in Muslim and non-Muslim countries (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2002; Nyhagen, 2019), the emergence of new, more inclusive and interactive, online spaces of religious practice put a strain on the physical limitations often imposed on women in official places of worship. As demonstrated above, young women claim their own participation within Muslim online communities as audiences/followers but increasingly as producers with no authorised leadership status but nevertheless with widespread social recognition. Therefore, the marginalisation of female worshippers in public institutional spaces is challenged online by the open access they offer to Islamic digital content, the increasing participation in gender equal digital platforms, and the creation of female-dominated communities specifically addressed towards female audiences.

Moreover, the introduction of Muslim women who have gained visibility and popularity within the digital space, through their acts of proselytism, challenges the exclusiveness of male leading roles in

Islamic institutions. Historically, in Muslim societies, including South Asian countries, the mosque was governed by male authorities (Imams) who occupied the main position of religious leadership. The proliferation and adoption of new media reconfigures social life (Lengauer, 2018, p. 9) in contemporary Muslim and non-Muslim societies in ways that result in the fragmentation of religious authority, which is ‘more dialogically constructed’ (Slama, 2018, p. 63). Despite additional implications, which will be examined below, the results that emerge from practices of production and consumption suggest that SNSs constitute new, accessible, and more gender-balanced venues that young Muslim women can inhabit as a means of exploring, consuming, but also producing Islamic content. In addition to the rise of new Islamic premises, methods, and tools, the Internet has provoked the expansion and diversification of Islamic actors through the greater accessibility and visibility of female speakers, YouTubers, influencers, and common worshippers. Mediated activities not only challenge longstanding male domination within Muslim places of worship, but also enable women to exert increasing agency in customising their own forms of Islam, influenced by practices of aestheticisation where the spiritual and the feminine spheres intersect in new and alternative interpretations of institutional Islamic religion and Muslim femininity, as will be examined in depth in the following section.

6.3 Muslim femininity performed online

The previous sub-section explored the impact of digital media in the transformation of practices related to the consumption and production of Islamic knowledge, which has led to greater female inclusion and visibility within historically male-dominated venues and practices. This section brings the analysis forward by investigating how this knowledge is appropriated, negotiated, and performed by young Muslim women through an investigation of self-narratives and self-representations shared on their SNPs. From the analysis, two main results emerged. The first is that the interpretation and

practice of Islam, in the context of daily life, vary within the sample, with participants expressing strong, moderate, weak and/or uncertain involvement in the Islamic faith. The declared levels of piousness, in addition, do not follow a uniform private and public performance but are expressed in manifold, and sometimes contradictory, ways. Such a customised form of religious expression, I suggest, challenges the Eurocentric understanding of Islam as a rigid and absolutist religion that oppresses its female worshippers (Ahmad, 2016; Giolfo & Sinatora, 2018; Kerboua, 2016; Macdonald, 2006). The second result is based on the analysis of aspiring and popular Muslim influencers and reveals a new interpretation of the postfeminist and neoliberal paradigm, which is pursued religiously to achieve a successful and rewarding life on personal, academic, and religious levels. The multi-faceted and dynamic representations of Muslim femininity that are emerging, and are shaped and disseminated online, serve to question essentialist Neo-Orientalist discourses based on the dichotomy between Muslim and non-Muslim women, rooted in dominant European discourses (Cooke, 2007; Macdonald, 2006; McRobbie, 2009; Scharff, 2011a); yet, they conceal new traps related to the questions of diversity and visibility in digital culture.

6.3.1 Multiple interpretations and performances of Muslim femininity

All the young women who took part in the research are of Bangladeshi descent. Bangladesh is a Muslim majority country where, according to the 2013 government census, Sunni Muslims constitute 89% and Hindus 10% of the population (Office of International Religious Freedom, 2021). Out of 45 participants, 35 identify themselves as Muslim, 6 express uncertainty about their faith and/or partial involvement in the Islamic religion, 1 participant feels closer to the Hindu religion, another one describes herself as agnostic, while 2 participants prefer not to say. Even though the vast majority of the young women sampled described themselves as Muslims, the individual understanding and performance of religion varied considerably within this group of Muslimahs. First of all, among those

who identify themselves as Muslims, just eight cover their head regularly while two young women wear the hijab occasionally in the representations published online. It is immediately clear that the dominant and longstanding identification of Muslim women with their clothing practices (Macdonald, 2006) is not reflected in this group of Italian-Bangladeshi Muslim young women. On the contrary, what emerges is a discrepancy between the online and offline image that some of them provide. While some participants are very active in producing and spreading Islamic content on their personal accounts, as discussed above, others tend not to share their religious faith online. For some, the religious affiliation is apparent in the analysis of their SNPs, for others, conversely, their religious identification was confirmed only during the interviews. In the latter case, these young women identify themselves as Muslim whilst they are not visibly Muslim, since their online self-representations neither provide any evident clues about their religious faith nor match the image of the 'idealised' Muslim woman (e.g. wearing the hijab or following a modest way of dressing and living).

Ira, for instance, is a 21-year-old young woman born in Italy (Milan) who now lives in the United Kingdom (Manchester) and works as an event coordinator. Her Instagram profile, also analysed in Chapter 4, is composed of a collection of selfies and pictures of herself posing in sexy dresses (e.g. backless and short dresses, skinny trousers, high heels) and seductive poses (e.g. hand through her hair, finger in her mouth, eyes down, hands on hips). The online self-representation that Ira proposes does not match that of the stereotypical Muslim woman, often idealised in non-Muslim countries as covered and oppressed. Despite her aesthetical appearance, however, during the interview Ira claims to have a strong belief in Allah and that she reads verses of the Quran on a daily basis. Conversely, Pratima is a 29-year-old woman and mother of Bangladeshi descent who was born and raised in Italy (Rome). Her online self-representation is shaped around an ordinary and quiet family life spent within

the Bangladeshi neighbourhood of Rome with her baby, husband, and relatives. The image that Pratima proposes differs starkly from that of Ira as she does not offer personal pictures and, in cases where she does, she wears modest and discreet clothing. Despite this, however, in her interview Pratima declares that she does not practise Islam according to prescribed and standardised guidelines. According to her viewpoint, Islam is a very codified religion and this is the reason why she tries to put into practice Islamic good teachings and values in her daily life rather than strictly following Islamic norms (e.g. daily prayers, fasting). These two examples suggest a multi-faceted and dynamic interpretation and application of the Islamic faith that, in turn, challenges the European representation of Islam as a rigid and absolutist religion that oppresses its female worshippers (Ahmad, 2016; Giolfo & Sinatora, 2018; Kerboua, 2016; Macdonald, 2006). On the contrary, as was also discussed above, participants tend to appropriate and apply religious precepts in an individualised way that better conforms to their lifestyle and life choices. Such a customised form of religious expression questions the understanding of Islam as a codified dogma and introduces novel elements based on personal choice. In particular, it challenges the binary opposition between Muslim women as pious, modest, and oppressed subjects and non-Muslim women as secular, modern, and empowered subjects (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Cooke, 2007; Macdonald, 2006; McRobbie, 2009).

Furthermore, the individual appropriation of Islam is a common tendency observed also in the group of participants who show uncertainty about their faith and/or declare themselves not to be completely Muslim. What is missing when they say they are not 100% Muslim, some of them explain, is not their faith in Allah but rather their rigour in practising Islam. The distance that some young women perceive themselves to be from 'authentic' Islam reflects the transformations and needs of the younger generation of Muslims, who make sense of religion in an urban, cultural, and digital context that differs from that of the older generations. Raima, for instance, in order to measure her level of

piousness, compares her Islamic practices with those of her father who, unlike her, is rigorous in following Islamic precepts and prayers on a daily basis. Shakila, likewise, does not consider herself to be completely Muslim because she does not follow the Islamic prescriptions literally, in contrast to her parents. What becomes clear is that some young women tend to make a clear distinction between a form of normative and authentic Islam – that practised by the older generation of Muslims through rigorous daily activities – and a form of non-normative and revised Islam – as experienced by the younger generation through customised practices. In this case, the uncertain or incomplete involvement in the Islamic religion is not due to a lack of faith but, conversely, to a non-identification with a set of shared prescribed norms that are still largely widespread among adult Muslims. In other cases, scepticism towards Islam comes from bad past experiences and/or new enlightening ones. Dhara, for instance, expresses a conflicting relationship with Islam, and with religions more generally, due to an unpleasant experience she had at a young age with her Islamic teacher and his very strict teaching methods. Moreover, Bharati claims to have become agnostic after having undertaken her academic career in natural science. She explains that her studies led her to question Islamic dogma and presented her with the conflict between science and religion, which she is still not able to fully reconcile. Finally, even those young women who declare that they are very committed to the practice of Islam express their religious faith differently. In her interview, Toshani claims that she tries to reach her full potential as a Muslim, by striving to respect the right codes of conduct daily. Despite this, she decides not to wear the hijab as she considers it as a free choice, and she does not believe that a piece of clothing should be representative of her level of piousness. Aysha and Swati, whose stories will be presented in detail below, are two young, veiled women, both of whom are very active online and involved in the practice of online Da'wah. Their case studies, in particular, reveal how multi-layered, and seemingly contrasting, self-representations can exist in the mediated and lived

experiences of young European Muslim women, thus providing alternative interpretations of both the Islamic religion and postfeminist subjectivities.

6.3.2 *The fashionable and pious Muslimah: The case of Aysha*

Chapter 4 illustrated how aesthetic attractiveness, personal confidence, and consumer power are three main trends that overall mark the young women's performance of femininity online. In the following sub-section, I seek to demonstrate how representations of fashion and beauty intersect with those of piousness and modesty by introducing the case study of Aysha, an aspiring Muslim fashion influencer. This case study, in particular, highlights how a young European Muslim woman gives birth to an alternative performance of the postfeminist subject by appropriating some of the key elements of the postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007) on a religious level. Aysha is a 19-year-old woman born in Italy (Prato) to a Bangladeshi family and who moved to the United Kingdom (London) when she was 14. She is an A-level student from a college in East London and works part-time as a tuition centre teacher. Aysha manages a public personal Instagram account, followed by 14,100 followers, where she publishes mixed content mainly focused on Islam (her religion) and fashion (her passion). The description that Aysha provides at the top of her Instagram account represents herself and the goal of her Instagram account. She introduces herself with her age and three flag emojis (Bangladeshi, Italian, and United Kingdom) to represent her dual nationality and country of residence. The content of the page, in her biographic section, is described in three words (modesty, lifestyle, fashion), followed by two closing lines: 'My success is only through Allah Swt [glory to him]' and 'Alhamdulillah for everything'. Overall, Aysha stands as an Islamic knowledge spreader by virtue of the approach she adopts in the design of her Instagram account, which follows the model of online Da'wah investigated above. Indeed, while on the one hand she republishes content retrieved from other Islamic digital accounts, on the other hand she produces her own content and form of

communication. One of the main objectives of her online activity is to invite Muslim users to understand and/or deepen the real meaning of Islam and embrace the journey leading to Allah. As she explains in her interview: 'I also try to use my social networks to remind my brothers and sisters of my own religion and the important things in Islam that we should follow' (Aysha, Interview, 14/02/21). In addition to suggesting readings from the Quran and the words of the Prophet Mohammed, the account calls for an individual spiritual growth pathway. One of her Instagram stories reports that: 'As you grow old, there are some roads you need to take alone. No friends, no family, no partner. Just you & God' (Aysha, Instagram, 14/02/21). In this example, union with God is described as the unique source of protection, growth, and peace. This is why religion, for Aysha, is not so much about theoretical knowledge, but conversely involves a more attentive interpretation of the Islamic teachings that should be applied to daily behaviours and actions. This includes, for example, having good manners and genuine intentions, being humble and having a beautiful soul, learning from experience, and dealing with hardship and pain. These are also the parameters adopted for evaluating the meaning of female beauty in Islam. One topic often discussed on her Instagram account, which mainly addresses young Muslim women, indeed, is the relationship between religion and women. According to her interpretation, women's worth and purity are reflected in the principle of modesty, which is one of the three words Aysha has chosen to describe the content of her profile. As she explains in her interview, modesty is a way of conceiving female beauty as an interior (spiritual) quality and not an exterior (physical) one. Such a concept is acknowledged in many posts published on her Instagram account, such as 'Beauty is in the way you hold yourself. It's how you treat people. The way you love. It's self-acceptance. Beauty is in your soul' (Aysha, Instagram, 21/04/21) or 'A person becomes 10 times more attractive not by her look but by her acts of kindness, love, respect, honesty, and loyalty she shows' (Aysha, Instagram, 18/07/21). The self-narratives and self-representations proposed by Aysha reflect the dominant perception of Muslim women rooted in

European discourses: she wears the hijab, choses a modest way of dressing, and embraces a pious way of living. The dissemination of Islamic teachings, messages, and precepts defines Aysha as a proud and strongly committed young Muslim woman, who uses the means available to her to participate in the activity of online proselytisation as a good deed.

Along with the presentation of her religious faith, however, Aysha simultaneously offers an image of herself in line with recognised fashion influencers/bloggers who participate in micro-celebrity and consumer culture. Aysha, indeed, is followed by more than 14,000 users. In her interview, she claims:

‘As time has passed, the number of followers I have on social media has increased a lot and now I have more than 14,000 followers on Instagram. Like can you believe that? 14,000 people that watch me every day and see what I am up to!’ (Aysha, Interview, 14/02/21)

While her Instagram stories contain mainly educative Islamic contents, the images uploaded on her main page, conversely, are predominantly selfies and pictures of herself. In all these (close-up or full-body) portrayals, Aysha wear the hijab, which is usually complemented by long dresses. In contrast to other participants who also wear attractive and/or sexy clothing, Aysha does not expose her body but follows a modest and discreet way of dressing. According to her viewpoint, however, the choice to cover her body also gives her the chance to beautify it. Indeed, Nusrat’s great passion is fashion. In the interview, she recounts that her parents owned a clothing business in Italy, which inspired her love for dresses. She creatively uses fashion items to express her distinctiveness. As she recounts: ‘In all the pictures that I have posted, you can also see many different types of outfits and clothing that you don’t usually see every day and that’s because I always try to be unique in the way that I dress’ (Aysha, Interview, 14/02/21). In the pictures published, Aysha shows a particular attention to detail

and a combination of outfits often embellished with sophisticated decorations, stones, flowers, and fabrics. Moreover, she regularly publishes pictures of herself imitating a runaway show, wearing make-up, or selfies at the opening of a new fashion store (Figure 22). In particular, for close-up selfies, Aysha uses Instagram filters that smooth the skin, apply make-up, change the colour of the eyes, and add embellishments like glitter to her face in order to look more appealing. In these portrayals, she poses by assuming bodily positions (e.g. hands on her hip), gaze orientations (e.g. looking at the camera) and facial expressions (e.g. smirks) that remind one of those of professional influencers or fashion models.



Figure 22. Aysha Instagram account

Furthermore, despite her choice to cover her body, Aysha shows a commitment to physical improvement by following an intense workout. In their Instagram highlights, she proposes a collection of selfies at the gym, where she reports on her daily exercises and achievements, mentioning the calories lost as well as her future goals. Through a combination of content that includes fashion, make-up, physical exercise, and religion, Aysha has become an effective emerging influencer, as demonstrated by the number of followers and the commercial potential that, even if at a low level, her Instagram account represents. As she declares:

‘Now that the number of my followers has increased, a lot of brands have asked me to promote for them certain products and that actually allows me to earn money as well. I have never thought in a million years that trying to inspire others to become a better person would lead me to actually earn money as well LOL.’ (Aysha, Interview, 14/02/21)

Aysha’s goal to be an inspiring model is based on a form of communication that encourages young Muslim women to become a better version of themselves. Striving to follow Allah’s teachings and become a virtuous Muslim is part of the overall mission that also includes working to improve personal aesthetics and body shape as a means of becoming a confident and unique woman while remaining publicly modest. Even though Aysha’s commitment to displaying her aesthetic uniqueness (through sophisticated fashion styles) and improving her body shape (through gym sessions) apparently contrasts with the idealised image of a modest and committed Muslim woman, through her online activity she demonstrates how being fashionable and being pious are no longer mutually exclusive as the final objective is to empower the self and be successful in different areas of one’s social life. The multi-faceted representations offered online are reflected in the double goal of her Instagram account. As she explains:

‘Fashion is something that I am purely and truly passionate about and I try my best to put the best outlooks of clothing on my page. Simultaneously, as I am a young Muslim woman, I love to also post inspiration via religious verses of the Quran that allow my Muslim brothers and sisters to be more inspired by Islam and become better versions of themselves.’ (Aysha, Interview, 14/02/21)

As such, she proposes a new interpretation of postfeminism, which follows the principle of modesty and reclaims the right to interpret and express fashion and beauty according to Islamic principles. At the same time, she also offers a new interpretation of Islam, which is presented as a religious faith that recognises the value of women, their sense of agency and ability to choose.

6.3.3 *The empowered and pious Muslimah: The case of Swati*

Chapter 4 also illustrated another main trend within the sample: the representation of youthful femininity in terms of women's academic and/or professional success. In the following sub-section, I aim to demonstrate how neoliberal and girl power discourses intersect with those of piousness and modesty, by introducing the case study of Swati, an aspiring Muslim motivational speaker. This case study, in particular, highlights how a young European Muslim woman gives birth to an alternative performance of the neoliberal subject, by appropriating elements of self-reliance and self-discipline on a religious level. Swati is a 22-year-old woman born in Italy (Rome) to a Bangladeshi family, who moved to the United Kingdom (London) when she was 11. She graduated with a First Class Honours in Law LLB from the University of Westminster, and she then started working in a Legal Practice Course (LPC) at City University, London. Swati has a personal public Instagram account, which has gained almost 2,300 followers, and a YouTube channel with 11,120 members. On her Instagram account, she publishes a mixture of content mainly focused on food and travel tours (her passion), tips on personal and academic growth (her goal), and Islam (her religion). Her YouTube channel, conversely, is exclusively used to upload homemade videos on academia, productivity, personal development, and self-growth.

The introduction that Swati provides at the top of her Instagram account describes herself and the goal of her page. The first line includes a description of her career and goal (1st class LLB grad-LLM student spreading love and positivity) followed by a woman with a headscarf emoji and two flag emojis (Bangladeshi and Italian) to point towards her dual nationality. The second line reports on her passion (travels and food) followed by a flag emoji (UK) to point at her country of residence, while the third one explains her side job (YouTuber-academia self-growth vlogs). Overall, Swati presents herself as a woman who has succeeded both in academic and personal life. Through determination

and hard work, she managed to reach her goals: she got a First-Class Honours degree and recovered from social anxiety. The objective of her online platforms, therefore, is to motivate and support her followers to overcome their limits and reach their fullest potential. In particular, the content that Swati shares fits into four main categories: travel/food, self-growth, academic success, and Islam. First of all, Swati describes herself as a food and travel lover. As such, she regularly updates her Instagram profile with short video tours suggesting places (e.g. Richmond Park, Southend-On-Sea, Now Gallery, Greenwich market, Marylebone florists) and bars/restaurants (e.g. Blu Ivy Café, Las Iguanas, The Halal Guys, Walkmisu) to visit in London, the city where she lives. These short videos are always published along with catchy presentations (e.g. ‘The most aesthetic cake in London’, ‘The most romantic park in London’) and a personal detailed review, which includes location, atmosphere, food service, public transport etc. Her choice to include promotional videos on her account is not related to commercial and promotional activities but rather their therapeutic value. In one of her Instagram stories, Swati explains how her great passion for traveling and discovering new places is the result of a long period of shyness, introversion, and social anxiety that prevented her from leaving her house and socialising. Walking around the city has gradually helped her to gain confidence, overcome her limits, and open up to the world, as expressed in an Instagram story in which she recaps her personal journey and expresses her pride for the work she has done on herself (Figure 23). The growth pathway she went through inspired her to motivate, support, and advise her followers. As she claims during her interview: ‘I use social media to inspire others to become the best version of themselves and accept and love themselves unconditionally’ (Swati, Interview, 09/09/21). This objective, in particular, is pursued through two main perspectives that reflect the two digital platforms used: Instagram, where she motivates followers to achieve self-worth and self-love, and YouTube, where she provides advice on academic success.

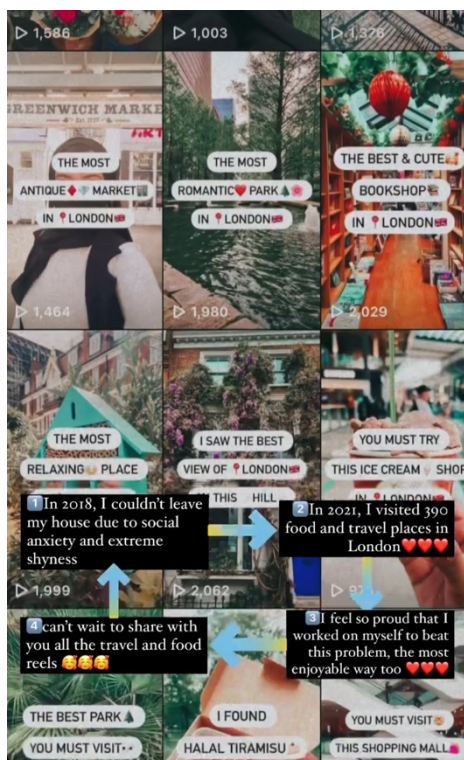


Figure 23. Swati Instagram account

On Instagram, Swati regularly publishes a series of short (1-minute) videos or written reminders. In the videos, she presents herself, portrayed in half-length figure, in her bedroom. Swati, in a similar way to Aysha, wears the hijab in all the images and videos published, and often embellishes herself with make-up and jewellery. Swati's videos are short and concise and she talks in a confident and direct way in front of the camera. Every video has a specific topic (e.g. 'Insecurities', 'Not everyone has to like you', 'Self-discipline', 'One trick to self-love' etc.). She does not talk as an expert, but as a common person who gives advice on the basis of her experiences, issues and resolutions, in order to spread motivation and wisdom. Her speeches, indeed, may easily resonate with young audiences of users who share the same struggles related to social anxiety and low self-esteem. In addition to short videos, she also publishes a different format of counselling composed of images, which follow the same aesthetic with colourful floral decorations, and reminders signed by herself (Figure 24). In this case, the goal is twofold. On the one hand, she motivates users to enhance themselves (e.g. 'Keep

going and growing’, ‘Actions taken at present reflect the future’) while, on the other hand, she persuades to put themselves first (e.g. ‘Self-care is not selfish, it’s a form of self-respect’; ‘Never feel guilty putting yourself first, you weren’t born to fix anyone except yourself’). Despite the multiple and diverse topics covered, the common solution she proposes is to work upon the self both at physical, psychological, and academic levels, which is in line with the forms of monitoring, discipline, and remodelling promoted by postfeminist and neoliberal cultures, thus consolidating the key findings of Chapter 4.



Figure 24. Swati reminders

On her YouTube channel, conversely, every week she publishes longer and more detailed videos on productivity and self-growth in academia. The home-made footages published on the page offers practical lessons on how to develop and achieve recognisable results in academia (e.g. ‘The ultimate university room organisation guide’, ‘5 secret habits to get 1st class’, ‘How I overcame decision fatigue’, ‘Secret tips to get 9 in English literature’ etc.) and tips on how to take care of oneself during stressful times (e.g. ‘How to take care of your mind, soul, and body’; ‘How to instantly manage your stress’; ‘How to balance sleep, studies and health in Ramadan’ etc.).

In addition to presenting herself as a motivational speaker and counsellor, Swati is a young Muslim woman. Along with suggestions aimed at empowering her followers, she also publishes content related to her religious life. She shares Islamic knowledge in the form of Instagram stories saved under a specific folder of Instagram highlights named 'Dailyquaran', where on a daily basis she posts a picture of a page/verse of the Quran. Religion is a key resource for Swati that enables her to come into contact with her followers. As she explains:

'I feel that the more I practise and express my religion on social media, more people are willing to seek my help because they feel that I can understand their issues and problems better due to my wise nature.' (Swati, Interview, 09/09/21)

In a similar way to Aysha's case, Swati demonstrates how Islam is not only interpreted as theoretical knowledge but also as a practical guideline to see and act consciously in the world on a daily basis. That explains how Islam influences and inspires Swati's work to motivate the younger generation, especially Muslim women. She does not only provide practical tips on how to succeed on the personal and academic journey, but also how to grow on the individual and spiritual one. She adopts Islamic values of humbleness, respect, honesty, commitment, discipline, and confidence as key instruments to strive towards having a rewarded life as a student, as a woman, and as a Muslim. For instance, in one video published on YouTube, she discusses what being attractive means. She makes a distinction between looking and being attractive, and embraces the principle of modesty, also endorsed by Aysha, which favours inner rather than outer qualities. In her interview, indeed, she claims that nowadays women, especially on social media, 'are not represented by their talents or personalities' but conversely through 'beauty, wealth, and status' (Swati, Interview, 09/09/21). In all her motivational speeches, she encourages women to be confident, to 'embrace [their] personality and authentic self, and show it off to the world boldly' (Swati, Interview, 09/09/21). This is what she also

does in her Instagram profile when she posts pictures and/or videos that portray herself publicly in a confident way. One of her Instagram highlights folders, also analysed in Chapter 4 (Figure 5), is named 'Walks' and the cover picture features a high heel shoe. In this collection of short videos, Swati walks the catwalk in aesthetically pleasing outfits (hijab and long dresses paired with heels and jewellery), emulating professional fashion models (hands on her hips, twirling at the end of the walk, and a fierce gaze that looks at the camera). Through her online representations and discourses, Swati demonstrates how being Muslim and modest also means being confident and successful. As she emphatically claims during her interview: 'It is time for girls to be ambitious, driven, and purposeful!' (Swati, Interview, 09/09/21). As such, she proposes a new interpretation of postfeminism, which follows the principle of modesty and piety and reclaims the right to be a strong, motivated, and autonomous woman. At the same time, she also offers a new interpretation of Islam which is presented as a religious faith that inspires, drives, and motivates young women to constantly enhance themselves and succeed in life.

The case studies of Aysha and Swati demonstrate how multiple, and historically contrasting, feminine narratives can and do coexist in young Muslim women's self-definitions and self-representations. These aspiring influencers present an image of themselves as pious, fashionable, and motivated young women, and they both adopt Islamic beliefs and teachings as the driving force of their individual enhancement. Specific sets of disciplinary procedures and motivational sources are mentioned as tools for achieving a successful and rewarding life at personal, academic, and religious levels. In this way, the individual self is put at the centre of the investment through which Muslim young women may aspire to become the best version of themselves. What emerges here is a new interpretation of neoliberal and postfeminist discourses of female individualisation fed by Islam. Atia (2012) conceptualises the melding of religion and neoliberalism as 'pious neoliberalism' (p. 809). She uses

this term to refer to Islamic development organisations and demonstrate how they promote investment and entrepreneurship as key components of religion. In this case, neoliberal practices – based on self-reliance, self-improvement, and self-entrepreneurship – are pursued by young women under the Islamic impulse. These pious subjects see Islam ‘as a necessary component of self-actualization’ (Atia, 2012, p. 811) and are driven by the belief that Islamic values, morals, and conducts will be rewarded as material success in the present life (by being confident, purposeful, empowered women) and spiritual success in the afterlife (by being judged positively on how they lived their earthly lives according to Islamic principles).

6.3.4 Veiled women: Digital narratives and hidden traps

Despite the diverse ways in which young women interpret and express the Islamic faith in their everyday lives, overall, they adopt an individualised approach to religion. The online ethnography and interviews reveal how all participants share a sense of belonging with and/or commitment to a religious minority group in Europe that, especially over the last number of decades, has been under scrutiny: Muslim veiled women. In this last section, I investigate how participants deal with European (Italian and British) popular and media discourses about the role and image of women in Islam and how they seek to use online platforms to spread information, reclaim freedom of choice, and propose alternative discourses on Muslim femininity that, despite challenging dominant interpretations based on the opposition between Muslim and non-Muslim women, hide new potential traps related to questions of diversity and visibility in digital media culture. Data collected through interviews confirm findings of other research that sheds light on how Muslim audiences are dissatisfied with mainstream media production (Poole, 2002; Tsagarousianou, 2012). The majority of interviewees believe that Islam is misrepresented in Italian and British political debates and public imageries. In particular, they claim that Islam is socially regarded ‘as a religion that oppresses its believers’ (Charvi,

Interview, 27/07/20) ‘and subjugated women’ (Amena, Interview, 20/01/21), ‘as an extreme and violent religion’ (Taslina, Interview, 21/01/21), ‘as a religion that spreads hate’ (Nasima, Interview, 20/01/21) and ‘as something we should all be afraid of’ (Deshna, Interview, 13/01/21). Some participants directly blame the EU and US media for spreading misconceptions about and prejudices against Islam and Muslim women. The use of accusatory tones, according to their viewpoint, has sharpened after the 9/11 terrorist attack and the so co-called ‘war on terror’ launched by the United States. As argued by Lima:

‘[Islam] is criticized and often defined as a “religion of terrorists” while, on the contrary, no religion can incite to violence. It is also seen as the religion of ignorant people or patriarchal families where women have to be subjected to men. Actually, this is not true at all. I can attest to that: I am a young Muslim woman and I’ve never suffered violence or prevarication from my father.’ (Lima, Interview, 27/01/21)

What is particularly criticised by these young women is the media’s common choice to report on, and associate Islam solely with, extremist worshippers and factions that do not represent the ‘authentic’ meaning of their religion. Participants demonstrate an acute awareness of the Neo-Orientalist representations of Muslim (veiled) women as symbols of terror, subjugation, and subservience (Ahmad, 2016; Khiabany & Williamson, 2008), which are widespread in the countries where they grew up and live. According to many of them, one of the main reasons behind the misleading reading of Islam and women in Europe is precisely the inappropriate combination of religion and culture that, conversely, should be interpreted as two distinct aspects of Muslim communities. As also mentioned above, what is reiterated in the interviews conducted and the online narratives collected is a stark distinction made between Bangladeshi culture, which is seen as accountable by virtue of being tied to rigid social and gender structures, and the Islamic religion, considered as a moderate faith that recognises equality and the rights of women. Aysha, for instance, shares a post of Bintmeetsworld

(an Instagram page managed by two African Muslim women) that reports: ‘Islam gave women rights. Culture took them away. Don’t confuse the two’ (Aysha, Instagram, 04/08/21), while, in one of her Instagram stories, Oditi reminds us that ‘CULTURE ≠ ISLAM – Forced marriage isn’t a part of our religion, it’s culture not Islam. Forced marriage is HARAM [forbidden]’ (Oditi, Instagram, 20/08/21). These results confirm Butler’s (1999) analysis of second-generation Asian Muslim women in Britain, in which a strong identification with being Muslim accompanies a disidentification with being Bangladeshi due to a criticism of Asian cultural norms that, in some cases, go against Islamic laws. Amena believes that violence against and oppression of women in some Muslim countries ‘have nothing to do with religion’ (Amena, Interview, 20/01/21) and are indeed related to traditional customs. Through social and cultural experiences that differ from those of their parents, these young women have become more confident in their faith and also capable of distinguishing between religious and cultural practices (Ahmad, 2016) and tailoring their own understanding of both religion and culture. Such an awareness leads them to feel the urgent need to use the means available to them to spread correct information through official and non-official sources, as well as through their own individual knowledge and experience. Notably, in connection with Muslim-related news and/or events with international resonance (e.g. the Uyghur genocide in China, halal chicken ban in France, Islamic face covering ban in Switzerland, or Islamophobic incidents worldwide), a greater circulation of news, messages, pictures, and memes is detected on participants’ SNPs, as they seek to raise awareness of and stand up for a religious minority often under attack. All participants involve themselves in the defence of veiled women, in particular, regardless of their choice to actively practise Islam and/or wear modest clothing, suggesting a sense of collective solidarity with and support for reclaiming freedom of religion and expression.

Among multiple topics related to forms of Islamophobia, in their online activities, participants in particular debate the form that is levelled against Muslim women. Even though just a minority of the sample embraces the choice to cover the head, the majority stands up for veiled women and their right to choose how to wear and publicly expose themselves. In particular, participants recognise the unequal evaluation and judgement of women, widespread in Europe, based on their aesthetic appearance, and wonder about the meaning of freedom in relation to dressing choices. The shared belief is that Muslim women are criticised and labelled as oppressed and domesticated if they choose to wear the hijab while, conversely, non-Muslim women are considered emancipated and empowered for their freedom to undress. The opposition between Muslim and non-Muslim women, as McRobbie (2009) suggests, is frequently coded in terms of gender and sexual freedom. Jannatul, for instance, in her interview claims:

‘I think that overall there is such a belief that showing off means having high self-esteem and being considered as a free and modern woman. Hence, those who opt to be more modest are seen as bigoted women or anyway linked to old-fashioned traditions.’
(Jannatul, Interview, 23/02/21)

Participants strongly condemn the monolithic perception of women and Islam, and feel constrained within such reductive evaluations that do not in any way consider the diversity within communities of Muslimahs and the religious, cultural and/or personal reasons behind the choice not to expose the body publicly. In this respect, the Internet is seen as a potentially empowering instrument to spread not only information but also alternative representations of Muslim femininity. Amena, for instance, believes that ‘thanks to social media, such women [those who cover themselves and wear modestly] can show and talk, and explain that if a woman is free to show her body, therefore she should be free to cover it too’ (Amena, Interview, 20/01/21). Through the sharing of content retrieved from Muslim

female users (e.g. Milanpyramid, Leila.belmoh, Alitasnim, Ibtihajmuhammad) and accounts (e.g. Muslimgirl, Muslimsisterhood, Hijabfashion, Modestinfluence, Hijaboutfits_, Hijabi_majesty), participants get involved in a collective mission to challenge stereotypes that affect the whole community of Muslim women. The overall contempt for the Muslim way of dressing, and the resulting politicisation of the hijab in Europe, is one of the main reasons that young women want their voices to be heard online. For instance, the 2021 announcement of the hijab ban in public spaces for women under 18 years old in France drew heated criticism, expressed through mottos and hashtags such as ‘My hijab, my choice’ or #Handsoffmyhijab, which were circulated internationally and encouraged people to join Muslim (and non-Muslim) women worldwide who were reclaiming their freedom of expression. In addition, other participants are actively committed to using social media to inform audiences about topics related to Islam and the veil to destroy false beliefs and doubts. Yuvati, for instance, published an Instagram post of Degreeintea (an activist hub led by 17 teens who share stories and rethink traditional media) (Degreeintea, n.d.) that discusses the media and political discourses that have turned the veil into a symbol of national menace. Lavit shared a post of Rae_blogs (a Muslim fashion blogger and writer) entitled ‘What is happening to Muslims in France?’ (Lavit, Instagram, 27/10/20) that explains the politicisation of the hijab in France. Moreover, Umme published an Instagram post of Leila Belhadj (a Tunisian-Italian human rights advocate and feminist activist) who, on the occasion of World Hijab Day, clarified some key questions about the veil in Islam, such as: ‘What’s a hijab? Is it compulsory in Islam? Why do women wear it? Is the hijab in the Qur’an?’ (Umme, Instagram, 02/02/21), and so on. As in the case of online citizenship practices, discussed in Chapter 5, Muslim young women seek to respond to power imbalances and structural inequalities experienced in everyday life by claiming recognition and participation in European societies.

Furthermore, in addition to spreading correct knowledge about Islam, online platforms seek to show in practice that a woman can wear the hijab while at the same time being fashionable and empowered, as expressed by an Instagram story published by Farida (Figure 25).



Figure 25. Empowered woman

Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CHOAFekB8Bz/>

This image is retrieved from the official Instagram account of Lainey Molnar, an artist who creates comics about self-acceptance, freedom of choice, and female power. The cartoon compares one veiled woman, dressed with a long tunic and a veil around her head, to a non-veiled woman, dressed with a short top and skirt. The marked difference between these two female representations is the level of body exposure. Despite this, however, they are represented as having an equal sense of female empowerment, which is evoked by bold bodily movements and a fashionable style (e.g. high heels, trendy bags, fashionable sunglasses). The contemporary tendency to explain Muslim women's freedom through a combination of aesthetic means and consumer practices has found its validation in Muslim influencers. This phenomenon reflects the overall aestheticisation and homogenisation of

the interpretation and performance of femininity, as also discussed in Chapter 4. Aya Mohamed (known as Milanpyramid) and Tasmin Ali (known as Alitasnim), for instance, are two veiled Muslim influencers whose posts are often reshared by participants on their SNPs. Both of them achieved popularity, especially within the Italian influencer sector, through an attentive combination of religion (Islam and the hijab), fashion (commercial sponsorships, glamorous outfits, participation in fashion shows) and social commitment (public speeches, interviews, books). Aya Mohamed took part in an interview with Freeda Media, a media brand that ‘spreads real stories to inspire positive change’ (Freeda Media, n.d., n.p.), and sponsored by Gucci luxury brand (Figure 26). In the video interview, Aya, wearing a look completely designed by Gucci, including the veil, recounts the meaning of the hijab through discourses around female freedom and empowerment.

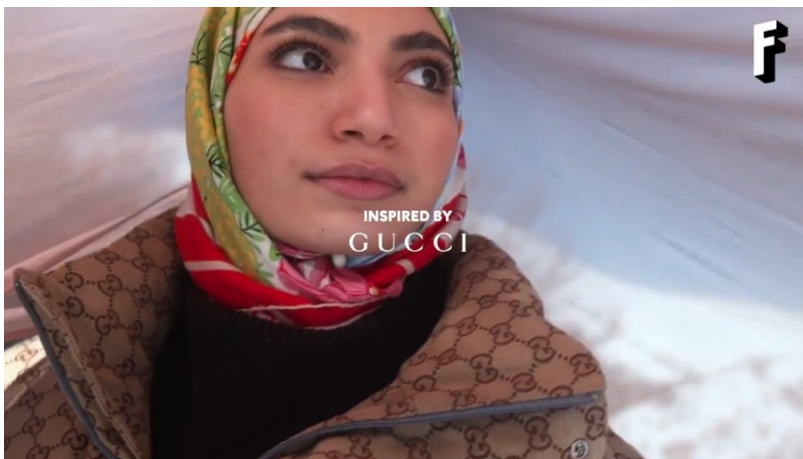


Figure 26. Milanpyramid interview

Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oeHncGDKxcs>

Furthermore, Tasmin wrote a book entitled ‘VeLo Spiego’ (an Italian play on words that means ‘I explain the veil’), which she advertises through public events across Italy. This young Muslim influencer disseminates knowledge about Islam and femininity by simultaneously being involved in the fashion industry. On her Instagram page, she publishes pictures promoting beauty and fashion

products, attending the Coachella Music Festival in California, or participating in Milan Fashion week (Figure 27).



Figure 27. Alitasnim Instagram account
Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/alitasnim/>

Throughout her self-representations, she wears the veil and matches it with luxury and glamorous pieces of clothing that reflect the latest fashion trends. As also detected in Aysha's and Swati's case studies, one of the most effective means to undermine reductive interpretations of the veil and the principle of modesty seems to be the dissemination of media representations in which dynamic and changing narratives are connected to give rise to alternative readings of Muslim femininity. In particular, female Muslim content creators and followers are contributing to the shaping of an Islamic aesthetic for contemporary Muslimahs by connecting the Islamic religion to consumer and brand cultures (Ahmad, 2016; Baulch and Pramiyanti, 2018; Fayaz, 2020) through practices of self-promotion. The multi-faceted representations proposed online suggest that these young women seek to prove that Islam might be compatible with European contemporary and secular values and, in this way, they begin to dismantle the historical opposition between Muslim and non-Muslim women and the stereotypical depictions of Islamic femininity in political and media discourses rooted in the Global North. Tsagarousianou (2012) claims that, by finding themselves at the intersection between

European mainstream political and intellectual elites and Muslim radical and traditionalist circles, European Muslim women are often ‘unable to become audible and to articulate and publicize their own self-representations’ (p. 286). Notwithstanding the fact that the data confirms the multiple and competing dominant discourses in which young women are constrained, social media affordances enable them to produce and disseminate self-productions among Muslim and non-Muslim online circles. In doing so, they demonstrate both their ability to gain agency in the interpretation of Islam and to exert control over their representations as European Muslim women. The fact that such increasing visibility is recognised within the wider society, and does not remain restricted to minority media production, suggests its potential to challenge existing power structures. These results contribute to challenge the postfeminist premise of female empowerment constructed in opposition to those women who are seen to be disempowered. As discussed in Chapter 2, Gill (2016) and Scharff (2011a), for instance, claim that the empowered representation of women, confident in navigating gender inequalities self-responsibly, is based in contrast to ‘other’, notably Muslim, women who, conversely, are perceived as victims of patriarchal oppression and still in need of feminism. The self-representations analysed, conversely, disclose how Neo-Orientalist discourses are contested through multi-faceted and dynamic self-representations in which longstanding dichotomies between secular, modern, and empowered non-Muslim women and pious, modest, and oppressed Muslim women (Abu-Lughod 2002; Ahmad, 2016; Cooke, 2007; Macdonald, 2006; McRobbie, 2009; Scharff, 2011a) no longer find their validation. In particular, participants demonstrate the creative ability to move across borders and appropriate, negotiate and/or reshape dominant gendered discourses and performances that are historically considered antithetical and, in so doing, promote counter-narratives on Muslim femininity.

However, the ‘beautification’ of online Da’wah (Weng, 2018, p. 63), the case studies of Swati and Aysha, and the examples of popular Muslim influencers such as Aya Mohamed and Tasmin Ali, reflect the main postfeminist and neoliberal tendencies identified in Chapter 4, marked by an increasing homogenisation of femininities in contemporary digital culture. The aestheticisation of Islamic practices and subjects, through the display of consumer and networking power, suggests that the liberation and visibility of Muslim women is strictly related to the appropriation of dominant ideals proposed by the consumer, beauty, and fashion industries. As such, the social recognition and acceptance of veiled women, in wider European society, turns out to be bound to a reduction of diversity, where the only modern and liberated Muslim women are those who position themselves in line with the contemporary postfeminist empowered subject. These results confirm Baulch and Pramiyanti’s (2018) analysis of Hijabers on Instagram, as efforts to emulate role models and be part of successful circles ‘validate the idea that the ideal woman is a consuming woman’ (p. 2). Gökariksel and McLarney (2010), likewise, in analysing Muslim women as a new market niche within the Islamic culture industry, argue that ‘contemporary Muslim femininities are increasingly mediated through the market forces of consumer capitalism’ (p. 2). Digital culture offers objects, narratives, and representations for moulding a lifestyle for contemporary, urban, and affluent Muslim women, which becomes the distinctive feature of acquired agency and empowerment. As such, Muslim women’s gender politics are characterised by two distinct trends. The first is marked by an emerging feminised Muslim digital culture where Neo-Orientalist representations of Islamic femininity are contested through multi-faceted and dynamic self-representations of Muslim women, and where longstanding dichotomies between empowered and fashionable non-Muslim women and submissive and modest Muslim women no longer find their validation. The second trend emphasises an increasingly diverse and inclusive media culture that, however, is driven by the global trends of the market economy (Kiliçbay & Binark, 2002). As highlighted by multiple scholars (e.g. Banet-Weiser,

2018; Fayaz, 2020; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Lewis, 2013), contemporary urban Muslim women are increasingly represented in consumer and brand cultures as entrepreneurial subjects by appropriating and reproducing postfeminist and neoliberal narratives of female individuality and empowerment. Therefore, the increasing visibility of Muslim (veiled) women in different spheres of contemporary social life risks exacerbating the hierarchical classification between women. In particular, it serves to trace a new demarcation line between women who can and do access consumer and networking power, and so go beyond stereotypical depictions and embrace values of empowerment; and those who refuse to and/or cannot do so, who remain entangled in rooted narratives that depict them as backward and subjugated women, and therefore excluded from contemporary female circuits. In particular, the longstanding European desires to ‘unveil alien cultures’ (Macdonald, 2006, p. 9) and to ‘master, control, reshape the body of the subjects by making them visible’ (Yegenoglu, 1998, p. 12) gain new expressions in contemporary digital culture through practices of aestheticisation and consumption and the homogenisation of femininities.

6.4 Conclusion: Changing discourses on Islam and femininity

In this chapter, by following an intersectional approach to the study of subjectivity, I examined participants’ sense of being woman in relation to their condition of being Muslim. My interest, in line with Chapter 5, was to go beyond the unattainable postfeminist promises of global female equality and empowerment, and further investigate how young women’s positionings, roles, and perspectives are determined specifically by the intersection of gender with other social identity categories. In the first section, in particular, I took into account religion and analysed how young Muslim women explore, consume, produce, and perform their Islamic faith through the venues and means offered by digital media. The first result that emerges from this chapter is the complex and diverse approaches through which participants understand and express religion, which highlights the impossibility of

talking about a homogeneous group of believers connected by equal identity features. Notwithstanding such a recognition, however, two broad tendencies have been identified through the examination of the young participants' lived and mediated experiences in relation to Islam. The first one reveals a multivocal Islamic digital culture, from which young Muslim women draw to customise their own interpretations and performances of Islam. Digital media do not only introduce novel elements in the format and delivery of religious precepts, but also expand the circle of official and non-official actors entitled to produce and spread Islamic knowledge. In particular, the participation and increasing visibility of female Muslim speakers, authors, bloggers, influencers, and common worshippers is altering the ways in which religion is understood and performed by the youngest generation. The digitalisation of content and fragmentation of Islamic authority offers multiple and stimulating orientations and models for the process of faith-based development. The second tendency is represented by the overall feminisation and aestheticisation of Islam that gives life to an emerging imagery composed of a global community of contemporary, fashionable, urban, educated Muslim women. The online narratives consumed and produced by participants depict Muslim women as pious subjects, confident about Islamic morals, and eager to do good deeds, but also as fashionable and proactive subjects, attentive to aesthetics, inspired, and self-driven.

As discussed in Chapter 2, I adopt Neo-Orientalism as a critical theoretical concept that seeks to explain the European construction of Muslim women in contemporary cultural and media discourses as a reproduction of the Orientalist rhetoric and practice (Boehmer, 1998; Giolfo & Sinatora, 2018; Kerboua, 2016). Islam has been historically regarded as incompatible with European cultures and values (Goodwin, 2015), and it is on this premise that binary categories (e.g. Islam versus modernity, Muslim woman versus European woman) have arisen and largely spread across Europe with the effect of stigmatising Muslim women and stripping them of spaces where they can speak for themselves.

Results suggest that the production and dissemination of multi-faceted and dynamic self-representations of Islamic femininity contribute to undermining longstanding depictions of Muslim women as domesticated and silenced subjects (Cooke, 2007; Richardson, 2004) and demonstrate how, on the contrary, seemingly incompatible values and lifestyles can and do coexist in the mediated and lived experiences of these young women. The increasing visibility of veiled women within influencer culture (Ahmad, 2016) and consumer and brand culture (Fayaz, 2020) contribute to the production of counter-narratives that question both dominant Neo-Orientalist and (post)feminist ones based on the distinction between empowered women and those to be empowered.

At the same time, however, I identified potential new traps concealed within these celebrated contemporary digital narratives. In their attempt to contrast their experiences with Neo-Orientalist discourses, young Muslim women produce attractive and desirable self-representations that both respond to consumer capitalism and reflect a postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007). The case studies analysed in this chapter suggest that the inclusion of Muslim women in digital culture turns out to be bound to a reduction of diversity, where the successful ones are those who appropriate the ideals and satisfy the demands of the consumer, influencer, and fashion-beauty industries. The social recognition of women belonging to historically marginalised groups is assessed on the basis of their compliance with the ‘ideal’ postfeminist subject, which embodies notions of female attractiveness, personal confidence, and economic capacity, as also revealed in Chapter 4. Duffy and Hund (2015) explain that ‘what is especially problematic about digital expressions of postfeminist self-brands is the extent to which visibility get articulated through normative feminine discourses and practices, including those anchored in the consumer marketplace’ (p. 3). In that way, digital culture and media practices strengthen rather than challenge postfeminism, and produce additional hierarchical classifications between Muslim women based on consumer and networking power.

7 POSTFEMINIST SUBJECTIVITIES ACROSS BORDERS

7.1 Introduction

This research project has been impacted by two major circumstances: the COVID-19 pandemic, which unexpectedly brought me closer to a group of second-generation Bangladeshi Muslim women living in Italy and the United Kingdom, and an increasing personal interest in postfeminist media culture, which prompted me to question its relevance, evolution and/or decline in a social context marked by changes and challenges. In particular, I have been concerned with the contradictions of contemporary Europe, where discourses of female empowerment and agency coexist with the widening of social inequalities on multiple levels. In her article ‘The affective, cultural and psychic life of postfeminism: A postfeminist sensibility 10 years on’, Gill (2017) discusses how a resurgent interest in feminism has been accompanied by an increasing interest in phenomena such as nationalism, racism, homophobia, and misogyny. Among these changes, two major events that have occurred in Europe over the last number of decades – the financial crisis and the increase of large-scale migratory flows – have led to social, political, and economic rearrangements. The phenomenon of onward migration from Italy to the United Kingdom, for instance, has been fostered by the Italian economic recession, resulting in a rise in unemployment and social exclusion. The United Kingdom, likewise, has reinforced austerity measures, notably welfare cuts, over the last decade, under the directive of conservative governments. The welfare crisis and the politics of austerity have impacted the population unequally by attacking primarily working-class and minority groups, and their female members in particular (McRobbie, 2020). Behind encouraging narratives about transnational mobility and multiculturalism in Europe, therefore, social injustice as well as gender, racial, and class discrimination still largely affect the European scenario. At the same time, postfeminism and neoliberalism have deepened their relevance to the point that they have become ‘the new normal’ (Gill, 2017, p. 609), acting as a taken-for-granted organising ethics of contemporary society. As

highlighted throughout the thesis, they are driven by an exacerbated individualism and a meritocratic approach to competition with an emphasis on choice and agency. Within such a cultural landscape, women especially are subjected to harsh demands that are increasingly met individually through processes of self-surveillance, self-regulation, and self-improvement.

By connecting these premises, my interest was in deepening the understanding of a specific group of women that find themselves in the midst of intersecting positions and expectations. They are European, and so subjected to postfeminist and neoliberal forces, but are also part of an ethnic and religious minority, and so more vulnerable to social and economic forms of discrimination. My focus on an understudied group of Italian-Bangladeshi Muslim young women living in Europe, therefore, aimed to investigate how they appropriate and/or resist multiple and competing gendered discourses in the process of self-definition and self-representation. By employing an intersectional approach to the study of subjectivity, I took into account the diverse subject positions by which these young women are simultaneously positioned, and position themselves, through an investigation of identity categories such as gender, ethnicity, race, nationality, class, and religion. The act of mobility, both physical and symbolic, becomes central for participants as both their lived experiences and mediated encounters are never fixed and stable but, on the contrary, marked by an ongoing movement between multiple geographical, social, and cultural borders. In Chapter 4, I investigated how participants interpret and perform their sense of femininity in terms of appearance, lifestyle, and career through the self-representations shared on their SNPs. I suggested that Italian-Bangladeshi Muslim young women might be considered the new ‘ideal subjects’ (McRobbie, 2007, p. 718) in postfeminist and postracial European societies, as they are invited and they seek to navigate self-responsibly not only personal but also structural constraints to re-write their individual biographies. In Chapters 6 and 7, I further explored how the empowered and successful self-representations shared online could clash

with and/or be negotiated through the condition of being simultaneously South Asians, Europeans, and Muslims. I sought to bring to light the nuances and contradictions of feminine subjectivities generated by the multiple and competing positions these young women move across both in the sociocultural contexts they inhabit and the dominant discourses they consume.

7.2 Key findings and discussion

In this concluding chapter, I summarise the key findings that emerged from the critical interpretation of collected data and thus the most relevant insights enclosed in the three main chapters (4, 5, and 6) of the analysis. I structure my discussion around three main arguments. I start by debating the need to think about and critically investigate postfeminism across borders, thus paving the way for a transnational and intersectional approach to the study of feminine subjectivities that recognises the multiple and mutable positions of the subject. In the second and third arguments, I focus on my specific sample of young European women belonging to the Bangladeshi-Muslim minority and examine how, in the process of their self-representations online, they simultaneously do and undo postfeminism. I explore both sides of these contemporary dynamics. On the one hand, I explore how the reproduction of the postfeminist and neoliberal sensibility intersects with the question of diversity and examine under what conditions and at what costs historically marginalised women gain visibility in dominant contemporary Eurocentric discourses. On the other hand, I recognise how, in the process of appropriating and pursuing postfeminist and neoliberal values of empowerment, resilience, and entrepreneurship, second-generation young women reformulate its pillars by disrupting some of the binary logics and fixed categories on which it is built. In particular, I suggest that axes of categorisation and layers of discrimination (gender, race, ethnicity, class, and religion) offer insights into how young women negotiate postfeminist and neoliberal demands as well as systemic inequities in their process of subjectivity formation.

7.2.1 Exploring feminine subjectivities across borders

My thesis was motivated by two main critical stances on postfeminism. The first was based on the recognition that existing scholarship on postfeminism favours white, middle-class, heterosexual, and able-bodied young women (Bae, 2011; Butler, 2013; Dosekun, 2015; Gill, 2007), thus promoting a limited version of femininity as well as offering a single model of the postfeminist subject. The second is related to the simplistic and celebratory assumption that contemporary society is multicultural, postracial and postfeminist, where both racial difference and gender discrimination are no longer salient (Banet-Weiser, 2007). Indeed, the ideological construction of postfeminism builds on the acknowledgment that feminism is outdated and thus repudiated (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004). By following Butler's (2013) and Dosekun's (2015) critical studies on postfeminism, my objective was to examine 'the ways in which postfeminism provides space for others within its discursive boundaries' (Butler, 2013, p. 49) and so how European women belonging to an ethnic and religion minority could adopt, reproduce, reinforce, negotiate and/or challenge dominant postfeminist conceptions of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and religion. This is made possible precisely because postfeminism is by definition an ambivalent concept (Gill, 2008a; Projansky, 2001), which might manifest itself in new trends and expressions within the contemporary sociocultural landscape marked by changes and contradictions. Butler (2013) suggests that, as 'a versatile and pervasive cultural discourse', postfeminism 'can travel through complex social terrains, deftly adapting to cultural, economic, and political shifts while maintaining its core characteristics' (p. 45). Thinking across borders, therefore, was the analytical and methodological means I used to investigate gendered cultural discourses by taking into account the diverse and changing positionings and constitutive social categories of subjectivity formation. Results emerging from my analysis confirm that postfeminism is not only transnational (Dosekun, 2015) but increasingly hegemonic (Gill, 2017) as it is consumed, produced, and enacted by those women originally excluded by the fashion, beauty,

and consumer industries as well as education and job systems as a taken-for-granted principle of contemporary femininity. However, my results suggest that while, on the one hand, participants reproduce and perform postfeminism, on the other hand, they adapt and transform it through the introduction of novel elements that are strictly related to the specific social, economic, political, and cultural conditions of their subjectivity formation. As also suggested by Dosekun (2015), thinking across borders means that we must think ‘across multiple intersections, forms, and sites of difference’ (p. 11), and thus examine how postfeminist representations, sensibilities, and practices may cross existing boundaries.

7.2.2 Doing postfeminism and the question of diversity

In the analysis conducted in Chapter 4, I suggested that Italian-Bangladeshi Muslim young women may be considered as the new ‘ideal subjects’ (McRobbie, 2007, p. 718) of female liberation and empowerment within allegedly postracial and postfeminist European societies. Participants tend to edit a successful image of themselves as attractive, confident, affluent, and ambitious young women in line with the ideals and performances of femininity promoted by postfeminist media and popular culture. The attempt to aestheticise and/or mask their femininities online, through beautification practices and consumer choices, might be seen as a response to the homogenisation of feminine standards and ideals in popular and media culture, which invite them to pursue processes of transformation in order to participate in contemporary female circles successfully. Moreover, participants shape and perform their feminine subjectivities online not only through the presentation of attractive self-portraits and glamorous lifestyles but also through discourses on autonomous and empowered femininity. Under neoliberal forces, second-generation young women are encouraged to re-write their biographies in order to credibly take part in different sectors of social life (e.g. the consumer market, influencer sector, education and job systems). Overall, they embrace an

individualistic project of the self that involves not only their physical selves but also the psychological and professional spheres. The London dream/myth is particularly relevant because the recent phenomenon of onward migration that marks the Bangladeshi community in Italy is an effect of the neoliberal turn, which promotes the myth of meritocracy and competitiveness and so urges women from unprivileged backgrounds to become entrepreneurs of themselves as a new normative way of being. This journey is chiefly pursued to redeem themselves from the stereotypical Italian interpretation of South Asian and Muslim women as having limited capacity and no chance of social mobility, thereby positioning themselves as ‘privileged subjects of social change’ (McRobbie, 2007, p. 722) in a new country perceived as cosmopolitan, inclusive, and meritocratic. Through this process, they embody the image of what I refer to as the self-made liberated woman who strives to emerge against structural constraints and regardless of the hardships the process may entail (see Budgeon, 2001; Harris, 2004; McRobbie, 2007; Walkerdine et al., 2001). Strength, fearlessness, and resilience become new personal abilities, increasingly sold as compulsory by life coaches, motivational speakers, positivity influencers, and self-help programmes, which seek to validate young women’s role in contemporary society. My analysis highlights a shared attempt to go beyond narratives of victimhood and exclusion to portray a new life scenario based on acquired wellness, pleasure, and achievement reached through ambition, motivation, and hard work. By regarding social inequalities as personal issues (Scharff, 2011a) in the process of ‘applying individualised postfeminist sensibilities to address collective subordination’ (Ahl & Marlow, 2021, p. 63), those who succeed become exemplary cases of self-governing subjects. In my analysis I suggested that, while young women proved to be seduced by fashion and beauty practices and desirous of a wealthy life and rewarded career (with no noticeable difference with other European women), it is by looking at their positionalities and resulting forms of discrimination and inequality that we can understand how diasporic women respond to postfeminist and neoliberal demands to be empowered. In particular, in

a capitalist society where neoliberalism operates as a form of self-governance and where values of competition and meritocracy reward ‘individual exceptionalism’ (Idriss, 2022, p. 807), these women found themselves in a particularly vulnerable position, with little recourse to institutional support and severe demands for self-government and self-promotion. This implies that women from historically marginalized groups are subjected to more punitive and pervasive forms of regulation to challenge systemic inequalities autonomously and gain visibility and recognition. Through their online self-representations and life stories, participants prove that they have appropriated the postfeminist motto that women can be anything and do anything they want with their skills and abilities despite the strength of structural disparities and cultural forces.

My analysis overall highlights the increasing visibility and participation of historically marginalised women in different sectors of social life, including media culture, as well as the education field. However, what needs to be further examined, my results suggest, is how postfeminist and neoliberal forces intertwine with questions of power, diversity, and inequality. In line with the position of existing scholars (e.g. Banet-Wiser et al., 2020; Butler, 2013), I suggest that the inclusion of ‘Other’ women in contemporary social fields takes place under specific conditions and at specific costs. In particular, I identified two potential traps concealed within contemporary narratives that celebrate diversity and imply the overcoming of racial and gender discriminations. The first is related to the homogenisation of femininities in contemporary digital culture, and the second is based on a neoliberal individualistic approach to change. First of all, by analysing the common strategies employed to represent the female body, appearance, and lifestyle, my analysis suggests that young women draw from a narrow and standardised visual repertoire (based on physical attractiveness, female confidence, economic wealth, and career success) to successfully take part in online female circles. Participants’ self-exposure on SNSs reflects the dominant models, imaginaries, and standards

offered by contemporary media and consumer cultures, which determine the socially accepted and rewarded expressions of femininity in contemporary times. The young European women who took part in my project – notwithstanding the fact that their ethnic, religious, and class background differs from that of extensively studied European, white, and middle-class young women – tend to conform to normative Eurocentric definitions and performances of femininity. The aestheticisation of Bangladeshi and Muslim styles, as analysed in Chapters 4 and 6, is a recurrent practice through which identifying and exclusionary markers (e.g. brown skin) and items (e.g. hijabs and sarees) become glamorous when combined with elements of mainstream femininity within new body positivity movements and/or ethnic-chic fashion trends. Participants' self-representations and the case studies of aspiring influencers suggest an overall homogenisation of femininities in contemporary digital culture. In this context, diversity is masked behind a combination of aesthetic means and consumer practices that contribute to reproducing and reinforcing an ideal monolithic prototype of contemporary successful woman that reflects Eurocentric, consumerist and postfeminist concerns. Although I recognised the agentic choice available to young women when performing their sense of femininity online, I suggest that the inclusion and visibility of diverse ethnic features (e.g. brown skin), bodies (e.g. flawed), fashion styles (e.g. hijabs and sarees) is constrained by the fact that diversity needs to conform or be adapted to contemporary ideals mainly fuelled by the consumer market, as also discussed by various scholars (e.g. Banet-Weiser, 2018; Baulch & Pramiyanti, 2018; Gökariksel & McLarney, 2010; Kassam, 2011). Under such conditions, the increasing visibility of veiled and/or non-white women risks exacerbating hierarchical classifications between women. In particular, it serves to trace a new demarcation line between women who can and do access consumer and networking power, and so go beyond stereotypical depictions and embrace values of empowerment; and those who refuse to and/or cannot do so, who remain entangled in rooted

narratives that depict them as backward and subjugated women, and therefore excluded from contemporary female circuits.

Furthermore, my analysis also discloses that an increasing number of young women belonging to ethnic and religious minorities and coming from working-class families, are enrolled in prestigious universities, and are determined to build successful business careers. The journey to London, in particular, is pursued as a form of investment to upgrade young women's social status in a new sociocultural context where it is believed that there is equal space and opportunity for everyone to stand out. Behind the self-narratives the young women shared online was their desire to demonstrate their capability and determination to go beyond stereotypical depictions and position themselves as 'privileged subjects of social change' (McRobbie, 2007, p. 722). The responsibility for such a change, however, is entirely on themselves. Participants recall the rationale of determination, perseverance, and hard work to achieve recognisable goals, in terms of economic independence and social respectability, which becomes a form of self-regulation and self-discipline that trains female subjects to become the only ones responsible for their future. Under such conditions, persisting gender-based, racialised, and class-based disparities and constraints are disguised as personal issues (Scharff, 2011a) and not political responsibilities, and therefore the impossibility of achieving a respectable job position and of affording a recognisable lifestyle is configured as an individual fault and not as a social condition. This implies that women coming from minority ethnic groups and/or disadvantaged backgrounds are subjected to more punitive forms of self-discipline and self-regulation as their individual efforts become the only route available to gain visibility and recognition. In line with Deliofsky (2008), my results suggest that the increasing participation of South Asian and Muslim women in media culture as well as the education system can be read as an invitation with conditions, which takes place within a narrow set of circumstances (in compliance with the values promoted by

postfeminist and consumer culture) and at specific costs (self-responsibility). Thereby, the mere presence of ‘Other’ women in different spheres of social life not only fails to challenge the structure that supports systems of power, but also generates additional layers of discrimination and exclusion based on the ability/possibility to access capitalist consumption, build networking power, achieve cultural visibility, and perform individual success.

7.2.3 Undoing postfeminism and disruptive elements

My thesis confirms the view put forward by a number of scholars that postfeminist culture increasingly circulates across borders, addresses diverse groups of women, and is enacted also by those historically excluded from postfeminist discourses and representations; in this way, postfeminism can be considered as ‘the new normal, a taken-for-granted common sense’ (Gill, 2017, p. 609). Such results reinforce the need to go beyond the formulation that postfeminism is for white and middle-class women only (Butler 2013; Dosekun, 2015; Tasker & Negra, 2007) and further highlight how it intersects with additional axes of categorisation. Indeed, the intersectional investigation of feminine subjectivities conducted in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 discloses how participants, in the processes of appropriation and reproduction, seek to revise and question postfeminism by disrupting some of the binary logics and fixed categories on which it is built, through the introduction of novel articulations.

First of all, one of the basic assumptions on which postfeminism is constructed is that female empowerment and equality have been achieved in contemporary society (Butler, 2013; Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004), thus implying that gender and racial politics are no longer necessary. The over-emphasis on individualism, choice, and agency has led to the belittlement and even repudiation of feminism as a collective political movement (McRobbie, 2009). The investigation conducted on the

different positionings of women as Europeans, South Asians, and Muslims discloses an attempt to reactivate grassroots anti-racist and feminist protests and collective forms of resistance as a new and potentially influential political force (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p. 16). Notwithstanding the fact that the young women are invited to and embrace girl power stances and undertake individual processes of empowerment, as discussed above, they take for granted neither gender nor racial equality. Xenophobic and Islamophobic discriminations as well as gender disparities they have experienced in the sociocultural contexts they inhabit have led them to demand equal rights. Such a demand does not only take the form of isolated voices but is also a collective call. Two main examples can be discussed in this regard. First of all, the sampled young women actively take part in forms of participatory activism for the local/global condemnation of diverse forms of injustice suffered by the minority groups with which they identify (South Asian, black, migrant, Muslim). They participate in online (and sometimes offline) movements and protests aimed at giving visibility to issues often under or misrepresented in dominant European discourses and offering each other support for common political and social struggles. For instance, the commitment of all participants, regardless of their choice to actively practise Islam and/or wear the hijab, to advocate for veiled women suggests a collective sense of solidarity and determination to fight to reclaim freedom of religion and expression. Online mobilisation is fuelled by users' shared subordinate position in physical spaces and collective attempt to use digital platforms to demand the right to be recognised in European societies whilst maintaining their ethnic, cultural, and religious differences. Second, through the act of sharing and exchanging personal experiences and struggles, young women create a virtual community of South Asian and/or Muslim women connected by the will to build awareness, exchange support, and activate processes of change within their families and/or communities of origin. I refer to those practices through which female members belonging to the new generation exchange emphatic support and constructive responses as online confessions. These confessions serve to contrast the perpetuation

of strict gendered regulations with the call for gender equality for present and future generations of women within their community of belonging. In my analysis, I suggested that digital platforms become spaces of both encounter and resistance. Through online advocacy, participants mobilise against both racialised and Islamophobic Eurocentric discourses and Bangladeshi conservative norms and, in so doing, seek to address the forms of oppression and power imbalances in which they are entangled. They serve to question and negotiate their multiple positionings, and digital platforms provide them with the avenues to enact their political subjectivities and reformulate the roles allocated to them (Lewicki & O'Toole, 2017, p. 156). The recognition that such a process takes the form of collective solidarity and action discloses the potential of online activism to challenge postfeminist and neoliberal sensibilities and mitigate the reduction of feminism as an 'individualistic enterprise' (Baer, 2016, p. 22), by reactivating shared feminine struggles and reclaiming the need of structural changes. The emerging form of feminism endorsed by diasporic women differs from that entrenched in a neoliberal rationality and imperialist logic (Baer, 2012; Fraser, 2013; McRobbie, 2015; Rottenberg, 2014, 2019) precisely because, notwithstanding pursuing individual processes of empowerment, participants simultaneously recognise the social, cultural, and economic forces behind the forms of discrimination experienced as well as the inability to fully tackle them self-responsibly.

Moreover, much of the debate on postfeminism has been constructed on the basis of the opposition between empowered women and those who still need to be empowered (Gill, 2016; Scharff, 2011a). As discussed throughout the thesis, racialised and gendered Eurocentric frameworks tend to reiterate the notion that South Asian Muslim women are 'objects of pity' who need to be rescued from bigoted families, violent Islam, and uncompromising cultural backgrounds (Ahmad, 2016). In particular, contemporary representations of empowered women, confident in navigating gender inequalities self-responsibly, are often constructed in contrast to 'other', notably Muslim, women who, conversely,

are perceived as victims of patriarchal oppression and still in need of feminism (Gill, 2016; Scharff, 2011a). The analysis conducted in Chapter 4 and Chapter 6 discloses how Neo-Orientalist discourses are contested through multi-faceted and dynamic self-representations in which longstanding dichotomies between secular, modern, and empowered non-Muslim women and pious, modest, and oppressed Muslim women (Abu-Lughod 2002; Ahmad, 2016; Cooke, 2007; Macdonald, 2006; McRobbie, 2009; Scharff, 2011a) no longer find their validation. Emerging figures – such as the fashionable veiled woman, the educated migrant woman, the beauty influencer brown woman or the motivational speaker Muslim woman – demonstrate how seemingly incompatible feminine performances can and do coexist and contribute to the reformulation of contemporary normative femininity with the introduction of novel appropriations and expressions. The discussion around the aestheticisation of Islamic digital culture, for instance, brings to light how young Muslim women embrace religion individually in an aesthetically pleasant and fashionable way by connecting the Islamic faith with fashion trends, consumer practices, and glamorous lifestyles. The narratives shared by participants overall present young women as pious subjects, confident in Islamic morals, observant of the Islamic pillars, eager to do good deeds, but also as fashionable and proactive subjects, attentive to aesthetics, educated, inspired, and self-driven. They demonstrate the creative ability to move across borders and appropriate, negotiate and/or reshape postfeminist discourses and performances with disruptive elements that are historically considered antithetical and, therefore, challenge the fixed categories on which postfeminism is built.

Finally, the postfeminist and neoliberal subject embraces self-governmental and self-entrepreneurial practices as a new way of being (Ahl & Marlow, 2021) as it is required to be fully responsible for its own life biography, regardless of the constraints and hardships the process may entail (Walkerdine et al., 2001). The analysis conducted in Chapter 6, which explores practices of Islamic consumption and

production enacted online, reveals that Islam is increasingly adopted by the young generation as a new driving force for female empowerment and individual enhancement. In particular, Islamic beliefs and teachings guide participants, who often find themselves at the crossroads of cultural conflicts between norms and expectations, and drive them towards fundamental and universal morals and conducts. Islamic inspirational sources and motivations are increasingly appropriated to pursue an individual path of growth, in which life hardships are overcome in order to achieve a successful and rewarding life on personal, academic, and religious levels. The emergence of Muslim digital culture specifically addressed to women tends to reproduce neoliberal ideals through a religious perspective of self-determination and self-actualisation. In so doing, entrepreneurial principles of commitment, discipline, and confidence intersect with religious values of humbleness, respect, and honesty, which are embraced as key instruments to strive towards a rewarding life as a student, as a woman, and as a Muslim. Through an individualistic approach to religion (Nyhagen, 2019) and a pious approach to neoliberalism, young Muslim women give life to a new interpretation of postfeminist discourses of self-confidence and self-improvements fed by Islam.

The revival of collective forms of feminist struggle, the performance of self-representations that challenge historical binary discourses, and the appropriation of neoliberal paradigms under the Islamic impulse may be considered as novel articulations that challenge the postfeminist sensibility. These findings show how, in the process of engaging with and reproducing postfeminist discourses and performances, female audiences and producers may reconfigure some of the dominant processes and definitions that mark postfeminism. They call binary logics and fixed categories into question and critically engage with dominant normative definitions of gender, ethnicity, race, and religion. In that way, by appropriating postfeminist and neoliberal pillars, participants also challenge some of the symbolic and discursive boundaries on which they are built. In particular, they reaffirm collective

forms of feminist engagement and action and promote alternative readings and performances of Muslim female empowerment. Hence, second-generation young women belonging to Bangladeshi-Muslim minority simultaneously do and undo postfeminism. These novel articulations of feminine subjectivity are contradictory, as are the positionings and expectations of these young women across borders. In particular, axes of categorisation and layers of discrimination offer insights into how young women negotiate postfeminist and neoliberal stances as well as structural constraints in their process of subjectivity formation. My results suggest that it is crucial to theorise and investigate popular and media culture through ambivalences rather than reductive binaries as it is precisely through contrasting forces that the reconfiguration of symbolic boundaries and the possibility of new combinations to articulate difference may emerge.

7.3 Limitations

The major limitations of my study are primarily methodological ones related to the challenges posed by the pandemic and the collection of data remotely, as well as my position as ‘outsider’. As stated in Chapter 3, my objective was to investigate how feminine subjectivities are discursively constructed and performed through lived and mediated experiences. In order to do so, I explored the ways in which diverse and contrasting discourses of femininity are consumed, understood, negotiated, and reproduced online and their effects on young women’s self-identification and self-presentation processes. By following McRobbie (1994), I adopted an ethnographic approach as the most appropriate method for understanding ‘the social conditions and experiences which play a role in constituting subjectivities and identities’ (p. 193). My ethnographic investigation, in particular, was conducted entirely online, and I identified three main limitations of the approach pursued.

The first shortcoming is based on the composition of my sample. Through a snowball sampling technique, I virtually met and engaged with young women who, in most cases, knew each other, as they were part of the same social context. This led to a low level of diversity, for instance, in terms of social class. The majority of participants came from working-class families that, through the migratory experience and enhanced working conditions, had moved into a more privileged middle class. Such uniformity of socio-economic background is highlighted, for example, in the lifestyle, purchasing capacity, and academic opportunities detected within the sample. Another aspect that did not receive adequate attention within my sample was the sexuality of my participants. For instance, including non-binary subjects in the study would have provided a more diverse and complex understanding of how femininity is experienced and performed. Despite this limitation, the random recruitment of participants suggests relevant social and economic transformations within the diasporic ethnic group even though results cannot be generalised to the whole community. By including a more diverse social group of women, future studies could shed further light on aspects of femininity that remain understudied.

Furthermore, data collected through the online ethnography and analysis of participants' SNPs has dictated the main topics discussed in the thesis. Such an approach implies that my analysis cannot be exhaustive as it is based on the common narratives and representations shared by the sampled young women. Some issues of interest could not have been investigated as they were not discussed with sufficient frequency online. Examples include marriage and sexuality which, despite being relevant aspects in the formation of feminine subjectivities, have not been included in the analysis because the data collected did not provide adequate information. To bring forward this study, it would be interesting to further explore the relationship between mediated representations (largely examined throughout my thesis) and lived experiences (only partially explored through online written

interviews). This would make it possible to acquire more specific and refined information about the contradictions that might arise between what women report online and experience in real life. I tried to fill this gap through online written interviews that undoubtedly provided me with valuable insights into participants' personal experiences, thoughts, and opinions. However, I recognise that, by establishing an offline and long-term relationship with participants, I could have deepened my understanding and reached a more detailed analysis and evaluation. Notwithstanding the methodological limitations, mainly caused by pandemic restrictions, the choice to conduct an online ethnography allowed me to establish a virtual relationship with participants on a daily basis. Hence, I managed to gain extensive knowledge of each young woman by following her daily activities, pictures, stories, and messages published online. After one year of online ethnography and passive observation, I had the feeling that I intimately knew my participants even though I had never met them in real life. These virtual connections surprisingly brought to light a vast amount of data that I did not expect to collect at the beginning of the research process, which revealed the complexity of feminine subjectivities and women's self-narratives.

Finally, the last ethical issue is related to my role as a researcher and as a white, middle-class woman of Italian nationality within a group of Italian women with intersecting Bangladeshi and Muslim identities. One of the primary obstacles that emerged at the beginning of data collection was related to my lack of knowledge of Bengali language that could have prevented me from properly engaging with written materials and obliged me to rely on a professional translator. Given that the sample of participants had been born and/or grown up in Italy, nearly all the data collected from the analysis of SNSs were in Italian and English, which are my native and secondary languages. Furthermore, the awareness of being in a 'privileged' position as researcher and as an 'outsider' within this ethnic-religious group of women led me to consider my own role during multiple research steps in order to

mitigate any imbalance of power as far as possible and any concern resulting from the ‘virtual’ relationship established with participants. As discussed in Chapter 3, I tried to reduce the risk of distancing and objectifying participants by involving them throughout the whole research process. I paid close attention to relevant historical and contemporary academic and non-academic literature to be informed as much as possible on the conditions of and questions about South Asian and Muslim women, also outside conventional Eurocentric scholarship. The work of Black, South Asian, and Muslim (feminist) scholars was a key part of my theoretical background, as it enabled me to probe the diverse, and sometimes contradictory, positions and grasp the complexities and nuances of feminine subjectivities.

7.4 Contributions and further directions

My research has sought to deepen our existing understanding of the relationship between digital media culture and feminine subjectivity formation within a postfeminist cultural context marked by contradictions. In particular, I questioned existing conceptualisations of postfeminism by taking into account the contemporary European cultural landscape, which in recent years has been marked by significant transformations due to changes in migratory flows and the increasing number of second- and third-generation migrants who were born and/or raised in Europe. My choice to focus on a group of young European women of Bangladeshi and Islamic descent was based on the need to recognise the diversity that constitutes the European population with a specific focus on female minorities and their struggles and responses. My research offers a novel contribution to the literature in four main ways.

First of all, my study demonstrates what it means to be a second-generation young woman in a context dominated by economic, social, and gender inequalities. With this in mind, I investigated

contemporary femininity as understood, experienced, and performed by young women belonging to an ethnic and religious minority in Europe. I followed the perspectives of Ahmad (2016) and Lazreg (1988) who criticise the feminist project of ‘privileging one (Western) social standard over another (non-Western)’ (Ahmad, 2016, p. 42), thus failing to capture, for instance, minority women’s agency and voice. This is why, in my thesis, I favoured participants’ stories as expressed and reported in their words and images, to examine how second-generation young women define and represent themselves on their own terms. I believe that shifting the point of view is a necessary action in order to go beyond the simplistic and stereotypical understanding of South Asian and/or Muslim women as often reproduced by Eurocentric discourses. As discussed in Chapter 1, while in the last decade there has been great academic interest in the ways in which people from minority groups have been reported on through the lens of xenophobic and exclusionary discourses, little has been explored concerning how the cultural construction of ‘Others’ is encountered and negotiated in diasporic people’s lived and mediated experiences. Indeed, by focusing my attention not only on dominant Eurocentric discourses but also on women’s mediated productions, I revealed the deep gap between how these young women are represented and represent themselves within both European and Bangladeshi-Muslim communities.

Second, I also revealed more precisely how postfeminist and neoliberal discourses profoundly impact young feminine subjectivities, acting as regulatory forces that, in the case of women belonging to minority groups, trigger profound processes of self-transformation as they are required to negotiate not only gendered but also classed and gendered constraints. As demonstrated in my analysis, second-generation young women are encouraged to detach themselves from the stereotypical imagery of South Asian and Muslim women as uneducated, backward, and subjugated by patriarchal families (Ahmad, 2001) and construct more positive narratives about independence, confidence, and success.

This became clear, for instance, in the phenomenon that I referred to as the London dream/myth. As self-entrepreneurs, they rely on their determination and resilience to subvert the stereotypical depictions in which they are entangled and credibly participate in everyday social contexts by taking full responsibility for this transformation process. The endless and tenacious work to which these women are invited to ‘achieve those landmarks that are linked to the perfect’ (McRobbie, 2020, p. 48) becomes a punitive form of self-regulation and self-discipline, which increasingly pervades all aspects of women’s lives. In particular, an interesting result of this research, worthy of further exploration, is the emergence of new pious postfeminist subjects, who increasingly adopt neoliberal stances of self-reliance and self-improvement to achieve accomplishments in earthly life and the afterlife.

Third, my research has also shown how participants actively deal with and negotiate unequal and contrasting positionings within gendered and racialised power structures through the resources available to them. In particular, I focused on the potential of digital platforms to become means to create collective forms of resistance and reduce the responsibility for structural inequalities to the personal level (Scharff et al., 2018) and, in so doing, challenge the postfeminist and neoliberal paradigm based on individual empowerment. Notwithstanding the struggles experienced and recounted by participants in the diverse sociocultural contexts inhabited, they demonstrate the will and ability to disrupt and reconfigure cultural discourses of femininity and deal with conflicts and disparities encountered in daily life. Indeed, one of the main contributions of my thesis is that it brings to light the mediated self-narratives the young women employ to challenge Neo-Orientalist hegemonic discourses that often deprive them of voice and agency. The stories and the representations shared by second-generation Bangladeshi Muslim young women offer a scenario that differs starkly from the European collective imagery built on weak, passive, submissive, and

domesticated subjects within patriarchal structures. On the contrary, they show these young women to be fashionable, driven, and educated whilst maintaining and/or adapting their ethnic, cultural, and religious ties. Through my analysis, I demonstrated that the roles of these young women are related to a more complex politics of positioning that incorporates power dynamics and structural inequalities but also forms of self-reflection and agency. Despite encouraging results that highlight grassroots forms of resistance and change, my project also reveals the relevance and the effects of the persistence of institutional discriminations and social discrepancies that, in seemingly postfeminist and postracial societies, are increasingly regarded as individual issues and not political responsibilities.

Finally, within the academic debate on the relevance, use, and adaptation of the term ‘postfeminism’ (Gill, 2017), I argue that it continues to be a valid framework for investigating gendered subjectivities in contemporary cultures but also emphasise the need to broaden its borders in order to more comprehensively investigate how it incorporates diversity and/or might be revised and contested in contemporary societies marked by multiple and contrasting cultural forces. In line with the work of Butler (2013) and Dosekun (2015), my research suggests that postfeminism is increasingly sold transnationally and consumed, produced, and enacted by those women originally excluded from postfeminist discourses. In particular, its intersection with a neoliberal rationality triggers pervasive processes of individualisation that tend to disarticulate systemic imbalances and structural inequalities. Furthermore, my analysis reveals that what is overlooked is how postfeminism deals with questions of diversity, inequality, and power and how it may be transformed and challenged in the process of appropriation and reproduction in specific cultural, social, economic, and political contexts. My thesis reveals that, by investigating gendered discourses and subjectivities across borders, contradictions and potentially new directions may arise. In particular, Italian-Bangladeshi Muslim young women reaffirm the need of collective forms of feminist engagement and action aimed

to undermine systemic inequalities and structural constraints as well as promote alternative readings and performances of Muslim female empowerment. I suggest that it is important to think about continuities and changes in order to explore postfeminism in relation to its potential reformulations and/or breaks as well new forms of feminism. The intersection of race, ethnicity, and religion, along with gender and sexuality, shape gendered cultural formations and feminine subjectivities in potentially new and unpredicted ways.

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Appendix a. List of participants

N°	Pseudonym	Country of birth	Age to IT	Age to UK	Country of residence	Age	Job	Religion	SNPs	Interview
1	Charvi	BD (Munshiganj)	3	15	UK (London)	21	Student QML graduate	Muslim	1 IG	Yes 27/07/20
2	Jannatul	IT (Rome)	/	/	IT (Rome)	20	Student Sapienza Rome	Muslim	1 IG 1 FB	Yes 23/02/21
3	Fatema	IT (Rome)	/	15	UK (London)	24	Student KCL Customer Service	Muslim	1 IG	Yes 02/03/21
4	Swati	IT (Rome)	/	11	UK (London)	22	Student LLB YouTuber	Muslim	1 IG	Yes 09/09/21
5	Taslina	BD (Shylet)	5	15	UK (London)	22	Student	Muslim	1 IG	Yes 21/01/21
6	Tania	BD	/	/	UK (Cardiff)	20	Student	Muslim	1 IG	No
7	Umme	BD (Comilla)	3	/	IT (Palermo)	23	Student	Muslim	1 IG	Yes 19/02/21
8	Dhara	IT (Rome)	/	/	UK (London)	22	Student	Muslim	1 IG 1 IG	Yes 05/02/21
9	Halima	IT	/	/	UK (Manchester)	23	Student	Muslim	1 IG	No

N°	Pseudonym	Country of birth	Age to IT	Age to UK	Country of residence	Age	Job	Religion	SNPs	Interview
10	Asmita	BD	/	7	IT (Brescia)	25	Office Worker	Muslim	1 IG 1 IG	Yes 20/02/21
11	Samiha	BD (Dhaka)	2	21	UK (London)	27	MSc Psychology Mental health coach	Muslim	1 IG 1 FB	Yes 08/03/21
12	Nasima	BD (Dhaka)	1	18	UK (London)	21	Student	Muslim	1 IG 1 FB	Yes 20/01/21
13	Jesmin	IT (Brescia)	/	15	UK (London)	20	Student	Muslim	1 IG	Yes 09/06/21
14	Rahima	IT	/	28	UK (London)	28	Housewife	Muslim	1 IG 1 FB	No
15	Amena	BD (Noakhali)	5	18	UK (London)	22	Student	Muslim	1 IG 1 FB	Yes 20/01/21
16	Lima	IT (Bologna)	/	/	IT (Bologna)	18	Student	Muslim	1 IG	Yes 27/01/21
17	Aysha	IT (Prato)	/	14	UK (London)	19	Student Tuition Centre Teacher	Muslim	1 IG 1 FB	Yes 14/02/21
18	Anika	IT (Rome)	/	/	UK (London)	22	Student	Muslim	1 IG 1 FB	No
19	Shakila	BD (Munshiganj)	8	/	IT (Bressanone)	22	Student	Muslim	1 IG	Yes 16/02/21
20	Afrin	BD (Kishreganj)	2	18	UK (London)	21	Student BA Architecture	Muslim	1 IG 1 IG 1 IG	Yes 07/03/21

N°	Pseudonym	Country of birth	Age to IT	Age to UK	Country of residence	Age	Job	Religion	SNPs	Interview
21	Farida	IT (Rome)	/	/	UK (London)	23	Student	Muslim	1 IG	Yes 18/05/20
22	Toshani	BD	4	/	IT (Rome)	18	Student	Muslim	1 IG	Yes 23/09/21
23	Dipika	BD (Narsingdi)	1	/	IT (Treviso)	/	Administrative employee	Muslim	1 IG 1 FB 1 FB	Yes 04/03/21
24	Manali	BD (Rajshahi)	7	/	IT (Rome)	19	Student	Muslim	1 IG	Yes 22/01/21
25	Pratima	IT (Rome)	/	/	IT (Rome)	29	Housewife	Muslim	1 IG 1 FB	Yes 22/01/21
26	Satviki	IT	/	/	IT (Rome)	19	Student Sapienza Rome	Hindu	1 IG 1 FB	No
27	Deshna	BD (Dhaka)	2	14	UK (Cardiff)	23	Student	Muslim	1 IG	Yes 13/01/21
28	Avya	IT (Bologna)	/	15	UK (London)	18	Student	Muslim	1 IG 1 IG	Yes 26/01/21
29	Dritika	BD	3	19	UK (London)	21	Barwoman	/	1 IG	Yes 26/03/21
30	Ira	IT (Milan)	/	21	UK (Manchester)	21	Event coordinator	Muslim	1 IG 1 FB	Yes 22/02/21
31	Minati	IT (Treviso)	/	/	IT (Treviso)	18	Student	Muslim	1 IG 1 IG	Yes 02/02/21

N°	Pseudonym	Country of birth	Age to IT	Age to UK	Country of residence	Age	Job	Religion	SNPs	Interview
32	Raima	BD (Dhaka)	5	17	UK (Manchester)	22	Student Law MMU	Muslim	1 IG 1 FB	Yes 14/02/21
33	Rifah	BD (Narsingdi)	1	16	UK (London)	22	NHS Receptionist	Muslim	1 IG 1 IG 1 FB	Yes 13/06/20
34	Nishad	BD (Dhaka)	2	18	UK (London)	25	Student Pharmacy Advisor	Muslim	1 IG 1 FB	Yes 04/02/21
35	Yuvati	IT	/	/	IT (Padova)	/	Student UniPD Model	/	1 IG	Yes 23/07/20
36	Bharati	IT (Sarno)	/	16	UK (London)	21	Student Natural Science Loughborough Uni	Agnostic	1 IG 1 FB	Yes 18/01/21
37	Anouka	BD (Khulna)	5	19	UK (Birmingham)	23	Student	Muslim	1 IG	Yes 23/01/21
38	Gopika	IT (Forli)	/	13	UK (London)	19	Student	Muslim	1 IG	Yes 05/03/21
39	Pundari	BD (Feni)	1	17	UK (London)	20	Student QMUL Accounting & management	Muslim	1 IG	Yes 10/02/21
40	Oditi	BD	/	/	UK (London)	18-23	Student Part-Time Worker	Muslim	1 IG 1 IG	No
41	Mutholi	BD	/	/	UK (London)	25	Student Biomed	Muslim	1 IG	No

N°	Pseudonym	Country of birth	Age to IT	Age to UK	Country of residence	Age	Job	Religion	SNPs	Interview
42	Lavit	BD (Palermo)	/	/	UK (London)	/	Student	Muslim	1 IG	No
43	Lekha	IT (Piombino)	/	14	UK (London)	/	/	Muslim	1 IG	Yes 09/02/21
44	Tara	BD (Narsingdi)	8	16	UK (London)	19	Student QMUL	Muslim	1 IG	Yes 15/02/21
45	Amira	BD (Dhaka)	17	/	IT (Rome)	28	Ex-student Worker in family shop	Muslim	1 IG 1 FB 1 FB	Yes 27/02/20

Appendix b. Interview template and consent form



RESEARCH: Womanhood across borders in the digital age:

Transnational migration, social media, and young women's subjectivities.

KCL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE N°: HR-19/20-14970

RESEARCHER: Maria Paola Pofi (Tel.: +44 7479874335 – Mail: maria_paola.pofi@kcl.ac.uk)

This research project aims to analyse the discursive construction of feminine subjectivity through online self-narratives and self-representations of young women of Bangladeshi origin living in Italy and the UK. The main interest is to explore the nuances of young women's interpretations and performances of femininity in relation to conflicting cultural and media discourses. The data collected will be kept in strict confidence and used to draft a PhD thesis at the Department of Culture, Media and Creative Industries, King's College London.

INTERVIEW

Below you will find a list of questions. Please take your time to answer them. You can reply in Italian and/or English. You can skip and/or deepen your response to questions according to your preference. Please get in touch if you have any question.

Name:

Age:

City of birth:

City where you live now:

Age when you moved to Italy:

Age when you moved to the UK:

Religion:

Job:

1. How would you describe yourself? Which community/ies do you feel you belong to?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of moving to a new country/ies?
3. In your opinion, how do Italian and British mainstream media represent Bangladesh and Islam?
4. In your opinion, how are women and the female body represented on social networking sites?
5. What do you think about women who show their body on social networking sites?
6. What are your feminine beauty ideals?
7. Why and how do you use social networks (Facebook and Instagram)?
8. How do you show yourself on your social network profiles? What content do you publish?
9. Are you swayed by other women's images on social networking sites?
10. How important is it for you to receive likes and positive comments on your posts?
11. Do you use social networking sites to be informed about or discuss topics you do not talk about with your parents? If so, what are they?
12. Are you concerned that your parents may look at your social networking sites? Are you interested in keeping your profiles private?
13. Do you use social networking sites to express and/or practise your religious belief? If so, how?

INFORMATION Please read the information about your participation reported below	CONSENT Please enter X in each box if you consent to this element of the study
The researcher explained to me the objectives of the research, and I had the chance to ask questions.	
I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study, and I declare to be at least 18 years old.	
I understand that I can withdraw from the study up until March 2021.	
I understand that all the information I have provided will be kept in strict confidence. Anonymity will be guaranteed and it will not be possible to identify me in any publication.	
I understand that the information I have provided may be subject to review by responsible individuals from the <i>King's College London</i> for monitoring and audit purposes.	
I consent to the processing of my personal data in accordance with the <i>General Data Protection Regulation 2016 (GDPR)</i>. If you would like more information please visit the website: https://www.kcl.ac.uk/research/support/rgei/research-ethics/kings-college-london-statement-on-use-of-personal-data-in-research.	
The researcher is interested in analysing participants' Facebook and Instagram accounts. The objective is to observe what type of content you share. All the information collected will be kept in strict confidence and anonymised in the final publication. If you consent to the analysis of your profiles, please write your contacts below: Facebook: Instagram:	

Date:

Participant's signature:

Thanks for taking part in this research project!

Appendix c. Concept map of user's SNP

