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Research Paper

The Complexity of Giving Voice: Intersectionality as Method in the Study of Instagram and Marginalised Identities

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ABSTRACT

Instagram is a key platform for expressions of identity. Yet it continues to uphold normative, Eurocentric ideals that further alienate marginalised groups. Drawing on a larger research project on Instagram, beauty, and religious identity, this paper considers articulations of intersectionality on Instagram and the value of feminist approaches in highlighting ethnic minority women's unique experiences. Religious women are persistently minimised in academic and media discourse surrounding representation. Existing scholarship largely centres on White women's experiences; conflates race with ethnicity; and defaults to generalised categories of religion. Through a detailed account of the research process, this study explores the use of intersectionality-as-method to address the limitations of previous research and resist colonial framings of identity. This paper discusses the opportunities and challenges of centring subjective experience in research while mitigating bias and maintaining criticality. The aim of giving voice is explored through the value of subjectivity; insider/outsider positioning; and the co-creation of knowledge. Ultimately, upholding an intersectional methodological approach adds nuance to existing categories of identity in research by highlighting specificities in racial identity, religious denomination, and the Instagram user experience. The paper concludes with recommendations for future applications of intersectionality-as-method in research on digital media.

Keywords: social media, representation, intersectional identities, feminist methodologies, subjectivity and meaning making

Instagram epitomises the fundamentally interactive, collaborative, and participatory nature of social media that allows users to create content that focuses on their own specific personal experiences and perspectives (Fuchs, 2021). The ease of self-representation on Instagram therefore creates opportunities for the construction of meaning and identity reflective of users' own priorities. Despite these opportunities for self-representation, groups that are already marginalised in the wider social context – such as religious, ethnic minority women – are further alienated by a persistent lack of varied, unconventional, and true-to-life representations of women of colour on Instagram (RBR-TVBR, 2015). This remains the case even though Instagram's main demographic is made up of ethnic minority groups (RBR-TVBR, 2015).

Due to its nature as a highly visual platform, a burgeoning body of research on Instagram centres on the platform's influence on beauty and appearance concerns (Mingoia et al., 2017; Rodgers et al., 2021). Yet most of this research approaches experiences of Instagram and beauty from a Western perspective, even when it aims to

engage with facets of identity like religion and ethnicity (Funari, 2023; Lev-Ari et al., 2014; Jacobson et al., 2013). This paper therefore draws on a larger research project on Instagram, beauty, and religious, ethnic identity. The project aimed to challenge assumptions in existing research in favour of an interdisciplinary, intersectional approach to considerations of Instagram, beauty and the experiences of marginalised groups. Specifically, the research aimed to challenge the conflation of race with ethnicity and broaden the parameters of definitions of beauty and religion.

With these aims in mind, this paper presents a narrative of the researcher's own experience of applying intersectionality-as-method and upholding the value of subjective, lived experience to give voice to identities persistently marginalised in research. In this paper, "intersectionality-as-method" is a methodological approach that aims to add specificity and nuance to categories of identity used in previous research. The research not only articulates identity in terms of interactions between gender, race, ethnicity, and religion, but further breaks down these identity markers in terms of participants' own criteria for identity, bringing in aspects such as denominational specificity or regional and cultural influences on race. Overall, the account considers the challenges and complexities of giving voice to multifaceted, marginalised identities in research and culminates in a discussion of how the insights gained in this particular study would benefit ongoing and future studies of digital media.

BEAUTY, IDENTITY AND REPRESENTATION

Despite being a key platform for self-representation, there remain barriers to the visibility of religious, ethnic minority women on Instagram, who are subject to stigma, stereotyping, and even erasure in favour of Western ideals (Mohammadi, 2020). The barriers to visibility on Instagram reflect the persistent colonial framing of ethnic minority and religious groups within other forms of media on and offline. Indeed, it is impossible to ignore the residual effects of colonialism and Eurocentrism on the persistent othering of religious, ethnic minority women.

Eurocentric ideals are widely viewed as representative of the norm or a reference point for what is right (Sharp, 2008). Similarly, Western knowledge is upheld as the standard way of knowing, which extends to subjects such as religion, science and even governance (Sharp, 2008). What is perhaps most problematic about Eurocentric thinking is the way it views, frames, and represents the rest of the world, projecting a single culture onto Asia and even some parts of Africa (Said, 2014). In this vein, a binary is created and upheld wherein Europe represents power, rationality, morality, and science, while Asia represents the defeated and distant opposite. Termed "Orientalism", this way of thinking is problematic not only in its treatment of all non-European cultures as homogeneous, but also in its added implications for women (Said, 2014).

Unfortunately, the effects of orientalist thinking are twofold and are apparent both within and outside of the research context. Not only are minority ethnic women subject to continued fetishisation and racialised objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Hooks, 2015a; Wong et al., 2017), but they are also persistently overlooked within research on the interactions between beauty, social media, and ethnicity. Specifically, existing research on these subjects demonstrates a predominantly Western provenance and upholds Western perspectives as the default to which to compare minority experiences (Lev-Ari, 2014). It is thus imperative to take advantage of feminist, intersectional methodologies to centre narratives from women beyond a Western context.

Religious identity also deserves far more emphasis in research, especially due to the stigma that religious groups continue to face today. A significant turning point in the treatment of religious groups can be traced to the devastating events of 9/11 and the implications that this event had on Muslims in particular (Brown, 2020). Yet even before 9/11, there have been several harrowing examples of the radicalisation of antisemitic views throughout history, such as the Crusading movement in the Middle Ages (Novikoff, 2010); Russian pogroms driven by political and popular resentment towards the Jews (Löwe, 2010); and, of course, the Holocaust.

Outside of the West, the crimes against humanity committed in attempts to suppress the Uighur population in China serve as only a small glimpse of widespread ethnic cleansing and displacement practices that occur globally (BBC, 2022). Hand in hand with religious stigma comes racism which, as a product of Western philosophical and religious thought, continues to be felt by the groups displaced by colonialism, such as the Asians and Arabs in Europe today (Shohat & Stam, 2013; Hooks, 2015b).

Religious identity is even subject to erasure within academia; the subject of religion has remained largely invisible within women's studies due to the assumption that religion has little to offer women (King, 1990). Religious women therefore remain in the margins of discussions in the world of scholarship and academic debate, even in dedicated university departments of religion (King, 2005). Furthermore, despite the preoccupation with veiling both in research and policy, religious women are rarely given space or a voice in both the academic and media discourse surrounding representation, even when such discussions aim to highlight a variety of racial and cultural backgrounds (King, 2005). This paper thus takes advantage of the opportunity to highlight an intersectional methodological approach that centres the experiences and narratives of religious

women, to explore how their racial, gender, religious, and cultural identities interact and influence conceptualisations of beauty, representation, and identity on Instagram.

The emphasis on beauty as a key facet of identity stems from the fact that, despite difficulty in establishing a clear definition for beauty, different cultures, time periods, and schools of thought agree that beauty is highly valuable, and it is a quality that remains sought after in present times (Sisti et al., 2021). In Western society, beauty is still largely understood in terms of physical appearance. Physical beauty is often used as a measure of social capital (Liebelt, 2019), with physical attractiveness being associated with positive characteristics like success, kindness, and happiness and even improved life outcomes (Sisti et al., 2021).

Conceptualisations of beauty in the Western context are also highly gendered. Despite awareness of beauty as "damaging" (Jeffreys, 2015, p. 6) and, even, a "sickness" (Engeln, 2017, p. 7), the view of beauty as synonymous with female identity persists to this day. Within the context of Instagram, the dissemination of Eurocentric standards of beauty has the insidious effect of upholding Whiteness as normal and neutral, leading to the alienation and othering of those who fail to conform to these standards. This paper thus emphasises the use of an intersectional methodological approach that highlights the subjective, lived experiences of religious, ethnic minority women. By centring experiences beyond Western perspectives and priorities, this methodological approach contributes to the resistance of normative, prescriptive categories of beauty and femininity.

THE CENTRALITY OF SOCIAL MEDIA

At this point, it is worth re-emphasising the centrality of social media representation and its implications on the perception of religious, ethnic minority identities. Despite contemporary media's contribution to the dissemination of varied cultures and faiths, it has not necessarily alleviated the stigma towards religious groups. Social media have become a source of anxiety for religious women who feel difficulty displaying their religious faith due to perceived backlash (Mohammadi, 2020). In fact, there are several detrimental effects of the pressures of Instagram for religious, ethnic minority women. Increased exposure to social media has been known to increase pressure to conform to persistently unattainable criteria and trends upheld as the mainstream beauty ideal (Baker et al., 2019).

But beyond beauty ideals, social media also has a complex relationship surrounding discussions and representations of race. Social media's impact has an insidious effect on the dissemination of Eurocentric views. Although they are used as a vehicle to highlight diversity and marginalised cultures, social media have also become an additional influence on the phenomenon known as Cultural Imperialism, which is the use of political and economic power to spread the ideas and values of a foreign culture – usually Western – on an indigenous culture (Sharp, 2008).

Social media also add complexity to issues of gender, largely due to the rise of "popular" feminisms, with "popular" pertaining to feminist discourses that are widely circulated in popular media; the quality of being widely admired; and the popular as a space for struggle and competing demands for power (Banet-Weiser, 2018). On one hand, the rise of feminist organising on publicly accessible social media, coupled with the distillation of feminist discourse into hashtag friendly terms has not only made feminism more internationally accessible, but also makes it easier for a variety of age groups to engage in discussions of feminist ideas (Alvares, 2018; Mahoney, 2020). Popular forms of feminism are, however, contentious, as they often fail to critique other inequities linked to race, sexuality, and class; instead, it is easily commodified forms of feminism that become most visible and widespread, while other feminisms are rendered less visible (Mahoney, 2020).

The key discussion in this paper is thus concerned with the complexity of articulating intersectional identities on Instagram, where religious women additionally juggle opportunities for religious community-building and fostering hybrid, alternative feminisms with the challenges of normative, Western liberal feminism and its rapid dissemination on the platform (Hess, 2013). Hybrid feminisms refer to movements that embrace the intersection of feminism and religion, such as in the case of Islamic feminism (MacDonald, 2006). Within Islamic feminism, ideas of choice and agency are reinterpreted to align with wearing the veil or hijab. Islamic feminists also promote a less traditional reading of the Quran that liberates and empowers women, while allowing them to resist Western ideology. By upholding a methodological approach that moves away from narrow, prescriptive categories of identity, the present research gives religious, ethnic minority women the space to define their own understanding of religious and feminist beliefs.

The role of the platform in structuring user behaviour also requires further interrogation. Social media platforms are "neither neutral nor value free constructs" (van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 3). Instead, they are programmed to organise interactions between users and optimise the commodification of user data among businesses and individuals (Srnicek, 2017; van Dijck et al., 2018). This practice is often referred to as platform capitalism, where platforms emerge as "key business models for extracting and controlling data" (Srnicek, 2017, p. 48). Platforms often make use of algorithms to automatically filter enormous amounts of data, which are subsequently used to connect users to content, services, and advertisements (van Dijck et al., 2018). Although

there is little transparency on exactly how each platform's algorithms work, it is apparent that algorithms are key tools for determining visibility (van Dijck et al., 2018). In this vein, algorithms serve to structure user behaviour and can serve as normative, disciplinary apparatus (Bucher, 2012; Cotter, 2019; O'Meara, 2019; Karayianni & Christou, 2020). Visibility thus becomes a form of social capital on platforms, where users "discern the participatory norms that algorithms 'reward with visibility'" (Cotter, 2019, p. 896).

In the context of Instagram, where Western cultural production still dominates, conforming to normative behaviour that increases visibility has especially damaging consequences to minority groups (Cotter, 2019). Religious, ethnic minority women are essentially forced to conform to desirable forms of participation on social media or risk becoming completely invisible on platforms like Instagram (Bucher, 2012). Unfortunately, this creates a paradox in which those who fall outside of these norms end up either perpetually stereotyped or othered in mainstream representations. It is within this context that it becomes essential to find and foster avenues to advocate for expressions of identity that challenge dominant, normative portrayals of women on Instagram.

CHALLENGING ASSUMPTIONS IN RESEARCH

Above all, a key motivation for the intersectional study of beauty, ethnicity, and representation on Instagram is to take advantage of the opportunity to examine issues of beauty, social media, religion, and representation beyond the predominantly Western context of existing research (Lev-Ari et al., 2014). For example, while research on beauty and social media highlights the detrimental effects of thin ideals and objectification, much of the research that addresses these phenomena in the context of ethnicity centres on comparisons between racial minorities and Caucasians in Western contexts (Andersen & Swami, 2021).

Even the theories used to guide much of the research on the links between beauty and the body are subject to criticism for their Western emphasis (Lev-Ari et al., 2014). One example is Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) Objectification Theory, widely referred to in research on Instagram and beauty, which suggests that women's bodies are socially constructed objects to be evaluated based on appearance. Because of this, women internalise thinking of their bodies from an observer's perspective and perceive themselves as objects to be looked at, in a process described as self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This knowledge is, however, rooted in research conducted in solely Western contexts (Lev-Ari et al., 2014).

Moreover, while minority ethnic women are still subject to Western beauty standards (Evans & McConnell, 2003), there are also specific criteria of beauty for these groups that remain understudied in favour of Western body image concerns (Vaughan et al., 2008; Marengo et al., 2018; Khamis & Dogbatse, 2025). One of the aims of the present study's methodological approach was therefore not only to widen the concept of beauty beyond the parameters of "body image", but also to make space for religious, ethnic minority women to describe their own criteria for beauty in depth and with reference to specific cultural influences.

Challenging the conflation of beauty with solely "body image" also allows for an interdisciplinary consideration of Instagram, beauty, and ethnicity. Body image research is largely situated in the fields of health and psychology (Andersen & Swami, 2021). However, discourse on the value of beauty extends to philosophy, aesthetics, and gender studies (Scruton, 2009; Eco 2010; Liebelt, 2019). While the present study of the Instagram context is broadly located within the domain of media studies, it is also informed by wider schools of thought on gender and feminism and even, when addressing issues of ethnicity, broader anthropological perspectives on culture and society. Fortunately, these interdisciplinary aims are complemented by methods of analysis, such as Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) that position themselves as "obviously interdisciplinary in nature" (Lazar, 2007, p. 142). These methods will be elaborated upon as this paper progresses.

Upholding intersectionality-as-method is also done in the aim of addressing the persistent homogenisation of identity within existing research. For example, existing research on minority ethnic women's experiences on Instagram tends to organise participants into larger categories of race (i.e. Asian) or limit the study of these groups to North American contexts (Grabe et al., 2006). This runs the risk of homogenising racial and ethnic groups and can make it difficult to gauge whether so-called universal concerns are still relevant in other geographical contexts or racial sub-groups.

The dominance of Western concerns and contexts is also apparent in existing research on religion. Much of the research concerning social media and religion centres on solely White Christian or Muslim samples (Lövheim, 2013; Sotsky, 2013). In these cases, much of the research is also limited to Western contexts and concerns, such as the connotations of the veil in largely secular contexts (Sotsky, 2013). It is thus imperative to conduct research that gives religious, ethnic minority women the space to express their own concerns and unique priorities, rather than simply comparing their experiences with a default Western experience.

Another belief upheld in existing research is that religious women need liberating. This is one that should be challenged altogether. This idea is advocated by Lila Abu-Lughod (2013, p. 39), who insists that, in the case of Muslim women, "veiling must not be confused with, or made to stand for, lack of agency". In the same vein,

religious women's social media usage should not only be viewed as positive if it is used as a tool of liberation, solidarity, and empowerment that exposes women to more globalised ideas and contexts (Ruspini et al., 2018). Social media should also be regarded in terms of the opportunities it creates for religious women's solidarity and pride in expressions of religious practice or signifiers (Rahbari, 2021). Ultimately, this paper leans into feminist approaches that uphold the value of intersectionality; subjective, lived experience; and the co-creation of knowledge, which present opportunities and challenges for the study of marginalised identities and their subsequent digital communities, to be expanded upon in the following section.

REFLECTIONS ON INTERSECTIONALITY-AS-METHOD

I would now like to turn to a more personal narrative of my experience researching Instagram, identity, and representation, placing specific emphasis on the advantages of feminist methodological approaches. The methodological approach taken to the overall research project (on the study of beauty, social media and religious, ethnic identity) was guided by my own positionality as a feminist researcher. Harding (2012, p. 11) asserts that "our research is more powerful when we can recognise how its questions and assumptions are shaped by our particular location in society and history". I recognise that personal context is crucial in shaping my research; not only do my interviewees' activities and lived experiences shape their understanding of the world, but my own positioning and experiences also affect my observations and interpretations (Harding, 2012). It is therefore important to highlight that the approach of intersectionality-as-method was shaped by my own experience and background.

Researcher as insider/outsider

I was largely motivated to study the intersections of religion, beauty, and social media by my own experiences in each sphere. I was born and raised in the Philippines and lived there for eighteen years. The Philippines is a country particularly affected by colonial ideals such as the valorisation of Whiteness (Glenn, 2008). This was apparent in my own exposure to Western media and consumer culture, as well as the widespread popularity of whitening advertisements and products. Having moved to the UK in 2014, I was also uniquely situated to study issues of immigration and acculturation that have emerged in previous research as key influences on the internalisation of Western beauty standards (Chaker et al., 2015).

My intent to study the intersections of race, religion, and culture aligned with my own intersectional experiences. I identify as Reform Jewish, which shaped my views on gender and women's place in society in a manner that largely contradicted the predominantly Catholic ideals disseminated in the Philippines (Bonifacio, 2018). I remain engaged in conversations with women of similar backgrounds – and women of colour in general – on Instagram. Specifically, beauty communities on Instagram have afforded me the opportunity to discuss beauty products, trends, and practices for enjoyment, while also remaining critical of exclusionary brand practices or the lack of diversity in beauty advertising (Childs, 2022).

As a feminist researcher, I am concerned with doing research with women primarily, and with the aim of giving voice to the groups previously marginalised or discredited within research (Stanley and Wise 2002). Specifically, I aim to give voice to – and make space for – religious, ethnic minority women who not only remain underrepresented within existing research (Akrawi et al., 2015; Hall & Boyatzis, 2016) but also face persistent stigma in the wider social context (Brown, 2020). As a feminist researcher, I also recognised the value of the positionality of both the researcher and researched in shaping understandings, observations, and interpretations of the world (Harding, 2012). Given my social positioning and the contexts that I occupy, I assumed the role of both insider and outsider in my research.

As Whiteman (2012, p. 112) cautions, "if the researcher stands too far from the researched contexts, they may fail to gain understanding. Stand too close and the academic gaze of the observer may be lost". On the other hand, Wacquant (2005) asserts that the insider position does not automatically make one an authority on knowledge produced in the group of which they are a member. My position as outsider therefore afforded me the distance required to maintain the "academic gaze" (Whiteman, 2012, p. 112) and challenge my assumptions about the group under study. The insider/outsider position emerged as a crucial guiding influence on the design of the research and created invaluable opportunities to highlight intersectionality and specificity of lived experiences.

The value of subjectivity in research

Feminist research also upholds the aim of "seeing reality differently" (Stanley & Wise, 2002, p. 43). For the present research project, the methodological implications of seeing reality differently meant moving away from dominant forms of knowledge and embracing lived, subjective experience as a valid form of knowledge production (Hesse-Biber, 2014). To place greater emphasis on subjectivity, the research design prioritised

qualitative, exploratory approaches that recognise and capture "multiple voices" (Barbour, 2007, p. 33), making them well suited to the exploration of the unique and multifaceted experiences of religious, ethnic minority women.

It is also important to note that feminist research has largely emancipatory aims, which Anindita Bhattacharya (2020) summarises in the following research principles:

> *(1) a focus on gender inequality, (2) valuing women's lived experiences as valid forms of knowledge, (3) use of reflexivity, (4) an emphasis on researcher-participant collaboration, and (5) conducting the study with a transformative and emancipatory agenda (Bhattacharya, 2020, p.3).*

These principles complement an explicitly political approach to the study of social media, representation, and intersectional identity by bringing to light issues of privilege and marginalisation that significantly shape the social contexts in which meanings are produced (Flick, 2007). They are also especially applicable to my choice to focus on religious, ethnic minority women who typically occupy the space of the "other" in gender, beauty, and social media discourse and existing research on these subjects.

Beyond giving voice to marginalised or discredited groups, the overall aim of the study in question was to challenge assumptions within the existing body of beauty and social media research. While existing research has prioritised quantitative approaches and correlational, statistical data (Grabe et al., 2008; Schaefer et al., 2017), prioritising qualitative, exploratory approaches that centre subjective, lived experience allow for an exploration of how established links between beauty and social media manifest in unique ways, depending on several, interacting markers of minority ethnic identity. This helps to frame the experiences of religious, ethnic minority women on social media as heterogeneous and complex in their own right, and not simply as a point of comparison to mainstream, Western experiences online.

Upholding intersectionality

Of course, intersectionality emerges as a key concept within feminist research approaches. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), intersectionality underscores the importance of analysing gender as intersecting with other forms of identity, such as class, race, and ethnicity. The term has since been used to challenge the idea that issues of gender identity are the most significant in women's lives, imploring researchers to consider other forms of inequality and identity markers that inform women's lived experiences (Bachmann et al., 2018). Theories of intersectionality are therefore crucial to making visible the various inequalities experienced by religious, ethnic minority women within my own research.

I placed great emphasis on the intersectionality of my participants' experiences throughout all stages of the research and endeavoured to highlight the synchronicity of gender with other aspects of identity like race, religion and culture. My research aims to build on the foundational work on intersectionality by emphasising the need for further specificity when defining markers of identity. The experiences and priorities of those with similar racial, religious and gender identities will still differ, for example, depending on geographical context and religious denomination. The result is an approach to articulating identity that highlights varied, nuanced experiences and gives religious, ethnic minority women space to discuss multifaceted identity in their own terms.

The intersectional endeavours of the research were first apparent during the recruitment and sampling stage. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling, to make sure that everyone who took part had specific characteristics that aligned with the research questions:

- Must have an Instagram account.
- Must be from a minority ethnic background (loosely defined by the terms Black, Asian, Middle Eastern/Arab or Mixed).
- Must identify with a monotheistic religion/belief system (Christianity, Islam, and Judaism).
- Must be female (and/or female-identifying).
- Must be between 18-60 years old.
- Must be fluent in English (speaking and comprehension).

Although these criteria included loose descriptors of race and ethnicity, I was careful not to impose any prescriptive criteria of gender or religiosity on my participants. Thus, people were able to take part in the research if they identified with a monotheistic religion to any extent. Those who expressed interest in participating in the research were also invited to complete a demographic questionnaire, where they were encouraged to describe and specify their ethnic background in more detail. During the data generation stages, participants were also encouraged to speak in more depth about their specific religious denominations and cultural and geographical backgrounds, which all influenced their experiences of beauty and expressions of multifaceted identity on Instagram.

The research process: Considerations of bias and positionality

The data generation process involved a combination of online focus groups and online, semi-structured, individual interviews. The decision to combine multiple qualitative methods was guided by the concept of triangulation, where multiple methods are used to open up the data to several perspectives and allows data generated from either method to be compared against each other to confirm results and provide more in-depth discussion (Barbour, 2007). The choice to begin with focus groups was guided by the need to create a pressure-free environment within which I could build rapport with my participants and approach more sensitive topics related to beauty and religious identity (Liamputtong, 2011).

Most importantly, beginning with focus groups mitigated some of the anticipated assumptions and biases tied to my insider positioning and instead allowed the participants to determine their own agendas and weigh up their priorities in relation to the subjects of beauty, religion, and Instagram (Barbour, 2007). Beginning with focus groups allowed me to recognise broader themes that were important to the participants (Ritchie & Ormston, 2014), which I was then able to probe further in the individual interview stage.

Using semi-structured, individual interviews, I was able to address participants' concerns in more depth, including gauging their agreement with dominant or outlier opinions that emerged in the focus groups. The opportunities for more depth in discussion and going off on tangents also allowed the participants to add more nuance and specificity to their religious identities and experiences, drawing on their unique social positioning and how this shaped their experiences of identity, community, and belonging on Instagram.

Furthermore, the use of an online setting, in which both focus groups and interviews were conducted via Zoom, helped move the research away from the dominant Western focus of existing research on the interactions between social media, ethnicity, and physical markers of identity such as beauty (Lev-Ari et al., 2014). The global scope of the research furthered the opportunities for emphasising multifaceted, intersectional identities, as it facilitated a comparison between ethnic minority subgroups and racial or religious subgroups rather than between White/Western participants and their minority "others". Participants were able to draw on multiple facets of their lived experiences as, for example, being both Muslim and Southeast Asian, or being Reform Jewish and biracial and residing in a Western context, which add nuance and depth to generalised categories of identity used in previous research (Jacobson et al., 2013).

The complexities of giving voice: Challenges and considerations

The opportunity to broaden the scope of the research to a global scale also aligns with the overarching aim of giving voice to marginalised groups within research. Nevertheless, the aim of emphasising intersectional experiences was not without its complications, especially when considering which voices to include and exclude within the research. One of the most significant complications was articulating the ethnic minority identity in research with a global context and sample. Despite the global context of the sample, I used the term "ethnic minority" largely with the context of representation on Instagram in mind. Research on social media and search engine algorithms demonstrates that Whiteness still heavily dominates cultural production and is largely treated as the norm (Noble, 2018). Thus, on a platform like Instagram where Western ideals and representations dominate, women of colour remain minoritised. As became clear in the focus group and interview discussions, the term "ethnic minority" ultimately reflected the language and experiences of the women involved in the research, especially when considering the added implications of acculturation and the dominance of Western media products in the interviewees' geographical contexts.

It is also worth noting that the participants' experiences similarly reflected the cultural marginalisation and relegation to the periphery (in terms of economic, political, and cultural development) encompassed by labels like "global south" or "global other" (Dados & Connell, 2012). Nevertheless, I maintained the use of "ethnic minority" for its emphasis on ethnicity, that encompasses racial, religious, and cultural identity and aligned with the research aim of centring and upholding intersectional experiences.

The use of feminist methodological approaches also presented unique challenges that required constant reflection to strike a balance between fair, open portrayals of participants' views while remaining critical as a researcher. It was, for example, important to find a balance between homogeneous and heterogeneous sample characteristics while still highlighting the interactions between multiple facets of identity. Although the focus groups and interviews provided enough depth and detail to address participants' specific racial backgrounds, cultural identities, and religious denominations, participants' socioeconomic backgrounds were constrained by the fact that they all needed to be fluent in English. This meant that participants largely shared the same class level and educational background, leaving little room to discuss how socioeconomic status influences visibility and agency on digital media.

Although the socioeconomic homogeneity of the sample could at first seem like a methodological limitation, the women's similar educational backgrounds and levels of media literacy ultimately created opportunities for

more critical discussion of social media's role in normative representation of beauty and femininity. In the context of makeup consumption and fashion, for example, participants highlighted how, despite their ability to purchase beauty products or participate in activities that connoted "luxury" online, physical markers of their race and religion continued to make them feel alienated and perceived as "less than" on Instagram.

Moreover, many of the women had shared experiences of having lived outside of the West and moving to the West for work or university. Participants often acknowledged how these shared experiences stemmed from their socioeconomic backgrounds. They could also, however, draw on these experiences to offer additional insight on how acculturation and immigration affected their perspectives on beauty and representations of ethnic identity.

There were also many instances when specific facets of identity took precedence in discussions of beauty, sexuality and femininity. This was most apparent in considerations of the "gaze" in the context of beauty and visibility on Instagram. Participants' religious values skewed the discussions towards heterosexual understandings of the gaze, with a tendency to default to a male audience that fetishises and objectifies the female body (Mulvey, 1975). In this case, ideas of gender were still very much conflated with normative ideals of femininity that conformed to traditional standards in Western society.

An additional challenge posed by the emphasis on intersectionality was addressing the limitations of previous research, where so-called intersectional studies of beauty and identity have only looked at the interactions between two factors, such as gender and race, or gender and religion (Mingoia et al., 2017). My role as researcher thus involved probing further about ethnic identities, making sure that participants not only elaborated on their levels of religiosity, but also their specific racial makeup and the cultural identity they aligned with.

A specific example of this is one of my interviewees, Aisyah[1], a Muslim woman of mixed ethnic background from the Northern Maluku region of Indonesia, who had experienced living in both Europe and Asia. Aisyah's unique mix of identity markers meant she had to contend with colourism due to her darker skin tone, discrimination due to the curly, "Afro" (her emphasis) texture of her hair, and stigmatisation for her choice to wear the hijab proudly online. These distinctions of identity – and the multiple marginalisations that religious, ethnic minority women are subject to – are ultimately lost in research that conflates race with ethnicity and favours generalised categories of identity (i.e., Asian) (Grabe & Hyde, 2006).

Furthermore, maintaining a critical position as a researcher also meant addressing outlier opinions that were not necessarily representative of group meanings. But this, too, helped to centre participants' unique, intersectional experiences of religion. To illustrate this point, a key area of tension in the discussions was the idea of "ethnoreligious Jews", which aligns with Zionist views that tend to portray Jewish-ness as ethnically neutral or White (Yadgar, 2011). By refusing to conflate Judaism with Zionism – yet still highlighting that this attitude existed for some participants – I contributed to a gap in existing research on Judaism, beauty, and social media that acknowledges denominational differences yet does not account for the nuances between Jewish and Zionist views in their samples (Akrawi et al., 2015; Geller et al., 2020). Nevertheless, reflecting on and justifying decisions to present facets of identity in this way involved constant conversation with my participants, in what became an iterative process of data generation and analysis.

Co-creating knowledge

The iterative approach to data generation and analysis involved a constant feedback loop with participants and an opportunity to view knowledge as co-created through collaboration between researcher and researched. The iterative approach allowed me to open up my interpretations and assumptions to comment from the participants (Pessoa et al., 2019). In doing so, I avoided treating participants as "means to an end" (Fujii, 2018, p. 6). My analytical approach to the data involved a combination of Lawless and Chen's (2019) Critical Thematic Analysis (CTA) and Lazar's (2007) Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), which emphasised inequalities and "making strange" ideologies that have become normalised in society (Bloor, 2013).

Within FCDA, transcription is also a crucial stage of analysis, as determining who to attribute ideas to and who speaks or is interrupted in a conversation are all ways of inscribing agency (Jørgensen & Philips, 2002). The iterative process to research thus involved sharing transcripts with participants and allowing them to comment on or challenge how their views were represented from the very first stage of analysis.

Upholding a collaborative research space allowed me to draw on my own experiences without undermining the "expert" (May & Perry, 2013, p.6) views of the religious, ethnic minority women under study. Taking advantage of the iterative approach not only helped to mitigate researcher bias but also helped make several aspects of the research align more closely with participants' priorities. From participants' feedback, for example, I moved the study of Instagram away from solely images to other content formats and reshaped my research questions according to participants' usage of the platform. The iterative approach was ultimately a form of allyship and agency-giving, which in itself is a form of resistance to the generalised, homogenising ways of

[1] Name has been changed.

studying religious groups' experiences on social media that persist to this day (Harriger et al., 2023; Johnson-Munguia et al., 2024).

Making space for unanticipated identities

Although this paper cannot address the full scope of the findings gleaned from the aforementioned methodological approach, it is worth noting that upholding intersectionality resulted in the emergence of unanticipated categories of identity. Notably, although the research was concerned with intersections of gender, multiple facets of ethnicity, and nuanced definitions of religiosity, the research was designed with an assumption of a largely unchanging user experience on Instagram. However, by giving participants the space to elaborate on facets of their identities in more depth, they were also able to establish specific "Instagram Identities" that sometimes took precedence over their ethnic or religious identities in their experiences online.

Two key Instagram user identities emerged from participants' discussions of their own experiences on the platform. The first was the casual scroller, perceived as addicted to Instagram and exhibiting time-wasting behaviours on the platform. Casual scrollers often conveyed awareness of the detrimental effects of Instagram, suggesting that their participation is not without critique of its role in hindering their productivity levels.

The second user identity was that of the content creator, which emphasised posting habits. Content creators' experiences of the platform were also framed by a business perspective, and they often referred to their Instagram pages as "portfolios". Notably, content creation was not seen as synonymous with being an influencer, which was viewed quite negatively.

Although there was some overlap in users' behaviours, the distinctions between the "casual scroller" and "content creator" identities are crucial to highlight, as each comes with its own perceived affordances, expectations, and effects. Compared to casual scrollers, who often described their experiences on Instagram as passive, "mindless", and centred on consumption, content creators viewed themselves as having an active responsibility to advocate for more varied ideals of beauty and femininity. Being more active users instilled a greater sense of agency in relation to their self-representations and self-perceptions and often led them to uphold portrayals of hybrid, religious identity that challenged mainstream, Western ideals.

The distinctions in responsibilities associated with "Instagram Identities" thus suggested that user experiences on Instagram should not be homogenised. These distinctions in user identities arguably extend to other forms of social media and should be taken into consideration in further intersectional studies of social media and identity. Indeed, participants grappled with the connotations of their "Instagram Identities" as much as they did their racial, religious, and cultural background when posting or engaging with content on the platform.

Yet, to this day, research on social media and diverse, marginalised identities considers factors such as age, gender, race, and geographical context while making little to no distinction between user experiences and affordances (Harriger et al. 2023; Johnson-Munguia et al.2024). This suggests that there are opportunities to address broader categories of identity when approaching digital and social media research with an intersectional lens.

CONCLUSION: FURTHER APPLICATIONS OF INTERSECTIONALITY-AS-METHOD

This paper served to contextualise the need for intersectional research on marginalised identities by presenting an account of intersectionality-as-method in the study of social media, representation, and multifaceted identity. Identity, within this research context, is significantly tied to the idea of beauty as a measure of women's social capital. The use of feminist, intersectional methods add nuance and specificity to a body of research that tends to generalise and homogenise racial and religious identities. These generalisations often result in narrow categories of identity that leave little room for specificity in terms of the complex racial makeup or denominational background of participants.

Through my own account of highlighting subjective, lived experience in research, I have highlighted the opportunities that intersectionality-as-method can create for adding nuance to expressions of identity within research and challenging prescriptive, Western-centric categories of identity in existing research. The emphasis on giving voice throughout the research allowed the participants in the study to develop their own criteria not only for beauty, but for articulations of religiosity and femininity that challenge both fundamentalist and feminist assumptions about religious women.

Within the findings that emerged from the use of intersectionality-as-method, participants emphasised the distinction between "more" and "better" representation. The latter pertained to types of representation that highlighted nuanced, true-to-life experiences that religious, ethnic minority women could see themselves in. The distinction between "more" and "better" also applies to categories of identity and how they should be approached in research.

In my own research design, I endeavoured to give voice to marginalised groups of women to develop their own criteria, such as in the case of beauty, or expand upon prescriptive categories used in previous research, such as in the frequent conflation of race and ethnicity or generalised categories of religion. Giving space to explore denominational differences; levels of religiosity; and specific sub-categories of race (i.e., Southeast Asian or Indonesian instead of just Asian) ensures that "better" representation is apparent even at the research design stage.

Ultimately, the methodological approach taken in this paper (and the broader study to which it refers) can and should be replicated within further research on the experiences of other marginalised identities online. While this paper has centred on racism, othering, and religious stigma, there are other forms of discrimination based on physical markers of identity – fatphobia, transphobia, ableism – that would equally benefit from methodological approaches that centre subjectivity and emphasise the intersectionality of lived experience. The value of the iterative, exploratory approach taken in the aforementioned study would also be worth applying to other social media platforms beyond Instagram, to explore their respective digital communities with a similarly intersectional and subjective lens.

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Author contributions

The author confirms sole responsibility for the conceptualisation, analysis, and writing of the research, as well as the preparation of the manuscript.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in the Stirling Online Research Repository (STORRE) at: http://hdl.handle.net/1893/37227

AI disclosure

N/A

Biographical sketch

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