AicE-Bs2025London

13th Asia-Pacific International Conference on Environment-Behaviour Studies
University of Westminster, London, UK, 29-31 Aug 2025

Taking Up Digital Space: Moroccan women and visual agency on Instagram

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Abstract
This article examines how young Moroccan women utilize visual self-framing on Instagram to assert agency, challenge patriarchal constraints, and resist orientalist narratives through everyday visual practices. Grounded in decolonial feminist theory and based on a content analysis of 30 Instagram posts set in public and semi-public settings, the paper explores how ordinary female users construct agency and disrupt patriarchal and orientalist discourses through gaze, posture, clothing, spatial presence, and composition. These visual strategies position Instagram as a digital public space where Moroccan women engage in subtle, nonverbal acts of feminist resistance and self-assertion.

Keywords: Visual Self-framing, Agency, Decolonial Feminist Theory, Digital Public Space

1.0 Introduction

In Morocco, women continue to face restrictions in public spaces due to cultural norms, safety concerns, and unequal power dynamics (Chafai, 2020). Harassment and social control often limit their mobility and visibility, thereby reinforcing male dominance in everyday life (Ouahid et al., 2023). Faced with these barriers, many young Moroccan women have turned to social media platforms, such as Instagram, to reclaim visibility and express themselves more freely (Atifi & Touati, 2020).

This article examines how ordinary Moroccan women — those without influencer status or commercial partnerships —utilize Instagram to engage in visual self-representation. The images analyzed in this study are set in public or semi-public spaces — streets, cafés, beaches, and parks — revealing women's presence in environments where they are policed. The act of posing in these spaces is in itself significant; yet, their decision to publicly share these images online raises essential questions about how visual strategies — how they pose, dress, look, and occupy space — reveal their ability to assert agency.

While much of feminist digital research has centered on verbal activism and influencer culture, less attention has been paid to nonverbal, everyday visual practices among non-influencer users. This study shifts the focus to these women and their use of visual strategies, including gaze, posture, clothing, composition, and setting, as tools that carry meaning beyond aesthetics.

Grounded in decolonial feminist theory and based on a content analysis of 30 posts, this study questions Instagram's capacity to enable women to construct agency and disrupt patriarchal constraints and Orientalist representations through visual self-framing, without relying on visual self-expression.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Morocco's gendered public space

In 2017, UN Women and Promundo-Us conducted research that found that over 60% of the women surveyed were experiencing sexual harassment in public spaces. This form of gender-based violence remains prevalent in Moroccan society, with Mixsell (2024) linking this behavior to the country's societal norms and weak legal framework, an opinion shared by Chafai (2020). She argues that this form of violence is normalized and sustained by a culture that tolerates male dominance and blames women for the abuse they suffer–an abuse justified by women's appearance, behaviors, and mere presence in public space (Chafai, 2020). Women are thus unwelcome in Moroccan streets, discouraged from reporting to authorities, and silenced by family, peers, and school (Chafai, 2020).

Tamunomiegbam and Arinze (2024) argue that most African societies are characterized by traditional gender norms that enforce a strict separation of male and female roles, thereby limiting women's access to public and economic life. Similarly, Ouahid and colleagues (2023) maintain that many women in Morocco are subject to mobility restrictions, unable to leave the house without their parents' or husband's permission or supervision. Women in Morocco thus struggle to exercise the same agency as men in a society where public space is deeply gendered, unsafe, and exclusionary. Faced with these restrictions, many women are turning to social media as a space to reclaim their visibility and exercise their agency.

2.2 Instagram as a site of feminist visibility and resistance

Tamunomiegbam and Arinze (2024) argue that digital platforms are spaces that challenge traditional gender norms by facilitating the dissemination of unconventional narratives, thereby creating new role models that can disrupt dominant roles. For Atifi and Touati (2020), social media permits North African women to reclaim public space. By showing their faces and sharing their stories, young women are breaking taboos through everyday online visibility (Atifi & Touati, 2020).

Instagram, in particular, empowers women to defy prescribed gender norms. El Idrissi Amiri and Ghourdou (2024) confirm that Instagram drives social and economic change through its capacity to enable personal branding. The platform becomes a space where Moroccan women are not only visible and in control of their online public presence, but, as Atifi and Touati (2020) assert, it functions as a resistance against patriarchal gender roles and the gendered nature of public life.

Nevertheless, Instagram has also proved to be a site where harassment is widespread, made easy by the anonymity of the abuser and visibility of the abused (Chadha et al., 2020). As a result, many women fear online backlash and remain within their expected gender roles (Rhomari & Mifdal, 2025). Even within these limitations, women's self-representation on Instagram remains meaningful.

2.3 Visual agency and the power of the gaze

Historically, visual culture has positioned women as passive subjects of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975). Women in media were sexualised and objectified to please men, a dynamic that persists across much of contemporary media (Mulvey, 1975). In response, the female gaze emerged as a form of resistance to the male gaze and a means of self-representation, enabling women to be seen and desired on their terms (Long, 2023).

Within this digital context, visual agency refers to the power to shape one's self-representation using visual strategies, despite restrictive norms. On Instagram, this extends beyond the gaze to encompass posture, clothing, facial expression, and angle, among other factors. Rhomari and Mifdal (2025) argue that Moroccan female influencers employ narrative modes (displaying actions such as traveling and helping others) and conceptual modes (exhibiting elegance and grace) to express their identity without relying on words. These practices enable women to reclaim their image, understand themselves, perform agency, and challenge patriarchal and orientalist discourse without relying on verbal expressions.

2.4 Theoretical Framing: Decolonial Feminism

To understand how Moroccan women navigate digital spaces and reclaim visual agency, this article adopts decolonial feminist theory as its guiding framework. Unlike mainstream Western feminism, which often centers white, middle-class experiences, decolonial feminism challenges Eurocentric narratives and emphasizes the voices and struggles of women from the Global South (Lugones, 2023). It recognizes that colonialism not only imposed patriarchal systems but also distorted representations of Muslim and African women as passive and oppressed (Abu-Lughod, 2015). In response, Moroccan women use platforms like Instagram to contest these portrayals and resist both local and global structures of domination.

Grounded in decolonial feminism, this study examines visual self-framing as a form of everyday resistance—a tool for asserting power and challenging both local patriarchy and global Orientalism. While feminist scholars have conducted extensive research on digital activism, the focus has primarily been on speech—hashtags, captions, and verbal activism—and has generally centered on influencers as its main subjects. Far less attention has been paid to non-verbal, soft activism, generally used in non-influencer circles. By centering women's visual self-representation—how they pose, dress, and occupy space—this article brings visibility to subtle acts of resistance. It extends feminist research beyond influencers and textual analysis.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research design and sampling

This study employs qualitative content analysis to examine how young Moroccan women visually assert agency on Instagram. The platform was chosen for its popularity among Moroccan youth and power to effect change. Indeed, 46.2% of adults aged 18 and above in Morocco use Instagram, with 46.6% of the platform's adult advertising audience in the country being female (Kemp, 2025).

The dataset comprises 30 publicly available posts, selected through purposive sampling to focus on self-representation practices within everyday contexts. The inclusion criteria target posts featuring non-celebrity Moroccan women in public or semi-public settings, where the subject is actively engaging in self-framing (e.g., posing for a photo). To exclude professionalized content, posts were limited to accounts with fewer than 15,000 followers as of June 30, 2025. The selected posts had no commercial activity to ensure the visibility of personal agency. This threshold aligns with distinctions between ordinary users with public accounts (also referred to as micro-influencers) and celebrities (macro-influencers) in social media research.

The sampling was conducted using three hashtags–#moroccanwomen, #marocaine, and #المغربيات–chosen to reflect diverse linguistic and identity-based dimensions of Moroccan womanhood, while ensuring relevance and cultural breadth.

Verbal elements such as captions and comments were deliberately excluded from the sample to focus solely on visual content. While the choice limits the analysis to one mode of expression, it is a deliberate decision that enables a focused examination of how agency is conveyed through nonverbal cues.

3.2 Ethical considerations
All posts were publicly available and featured subjects who appeared to be over 18; however, identifying details, including usernames and captions, were anonymized to preserve their privacy. Each post was assigned a numerical code (e.g., Image 1 to Image 30), and findings refer only to these codes.

3.3 Data collection and coding strategy
Images were manually collected by searching for the selected hashtags and identifying posts that met the inclusion criteria. Each image was then analysed using a visual analysis grid specifically designed for this article.

The grid includes five key variables:
Gaze: the direction of the subject's eyes (looking at the camera, away) and the intensity of the gaze (confrontational, shy, passive).
Body posture: stance, gestures, body confidence.
Clothing: levels of modesty (covered vs. revealing) and style (traditional vs. modern).
Spatial setting: whether the picture was taken in public (street, park, etc.) or semi-public (coffee shop, university, etc.) space.
Framing and composition: how the photo was taken (camera angle, cropping, layout).

Each image was analysed across these categories to maintain consistency. The coding grid, including all 30 images and coded variables, is available in the Annex.

3.4 Thematic structuring of findings
After completing the coding process, the data were grouped into four thematic categories that reflect the range of self-representation practices observed in the dataset. Rather than simply reporting isolated visual codes, the findings reveal how these codes interact to construct different levels of agency and visibility.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Assertive self-representation
A significant cluster of images (Images 1, 2, 5, 6, 8, 10, 13, 14, 15, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 24, 27, and 30) features women presenting themselves with confidence in public and semi-public spaces. These women adopt open body postures, hold direct gazes, stand with upright or relaxed stances, wear outfits that convey self-assurance, and frame themselves at eye level or in centered compositions.

Several images depict these women posing in urban streets (Images 1 and 10), claiming leisure spaces like beaches (Images 2 and 5), or appearing in public celebration spaces (Image 20). For instance, Image 20 shows a woman wearing a national football jersey while celebrating outdoors. In Image 14, a woman dressed in hiking shorts and sportswear stands confidently in a rugged, natural setting.

Fashion also contributes to this assertive self-representation. In Image 19, a woman wears a green bodycon dress, seated outdoors with a relaxed posture, while Image 30 shows a woman in a black cropped top, paired with a relaxed and smiling expression.

Many of these images are taken from eye-level and feature centered compositions with uncluttered backgrounds, which further draw attention to the subject's presence.

Overall, these images reflect a consistent pattern: direct gaze, clear occupation of public or semi-public spaces, and styling choices that emphasize confidence rather than compliance.

4.2 Modest self-representation
A second group of images (Images 3, 4, 11, 16, and 17) presents a more modest and composed self-representation. These women hold downward or side gazes, adopt relaxed and composed postures, and wear modest clothing, such as hijabs, long dresses, and generally muted colors.

The settings are public or semi-public spaces that appear quiet and uncrowded. While most of the images are centered, none of the women look directly at the camera. This lack of eye contact, combined with passive body language, contributes to a restrained and non-assertive self-representation.

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4.3 Sexualised self-representation

The third group of images (Image 7, 23, 25, and 28) features sexualised styling and body-revealing clothing, such as sleeveless tops, fitted dresses, exposed thighs, or cleavage. The clothing is generally tight or short, and the women often pose in ways that accentuate their bodies.

These images are taken in visible public locations. The women hold side gazes or downward gazes, and their postures range from relaxed to suggestive.

For instance, Image 25 depicts a woman seated in an outdoor café at night, wearing a short, low-cut white dress, her legs crossed, and her gaze directed downward. Image 28 features a woman standing, her back to the viewer, wearing a tight light blue dress and gazing calmly to the side.

Across these examples, the styling and body language adopt visual codes commonly associated with sexualization.

4.4 Hybrid self-representation

A final cluster of images (Images 8, 9, 12, 26, and 29) showcases a visual hybridity between tradition and modernity. These women combine traditional garments, such as caftans, niqabs, and headwraps, with modern elements, like sunglasses, untamed curly hair, and playful, confident poses.

For example, Image 12 shows a woman wearing a layered brown abaya with a niqab, accessorized with sunglasses and a confident, direct gaze. She poses with one hand to her head and her hips twisted to the side, directly facing the camera. Her styling merges religious anonymity with global fashion codes and visible confidence. Similarly, Image 26 features a woman in a pink headscarf and long dress, playfully kicking her foot up while smiling.

These images mix conservative modesty norms with confident self-expression, blending heritage with style to present a layered and culturally nuanced form of self-representation.

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Performing visual agency

The first and most significant cluster of images depicts ordinary Moroccan women claiming digital space by presenting themselves with confidence and self-assurance. By appearing in gendered public spaces (Chafai, 2020; Mixsell, 2024) and posting about it online, these women are challenging the visual codes of submission and objectification typically imposed on female bodies (Mulvey, 1975).

Instagram becomes a space to assert the visibility that they are often denied in real life. Their styling sits between socially accepted clothing and the limits of what is culturally permissible. While Rhomari and Mifdal (2025) argue that women remain passive online, posting within what is culturally acceptable, this cluster reflects a form of everyday feminism of subtle, intentional acts of self-assertion.

By being unapologetically present online, these images push back against local patriarchal control over women's appearance and movement, as well as global Orientalist narratives that portray Muslim and North African women as silent and repressed (Abu-Lughod, 2015). These women are thus effectively engaging in visual agency, asserting autonomy through their intentional use of visual strategies. As Atifi and Touati (2020) suggest, Instagram becomes a space where social change takes root.

5.2 Negotiating visibility through modesty

The modest cluster invites a nuanced reading of visual agency. These women appear demure–side gazes and traditional attire dominate the frame. While this may suggest submission or conformity to cultural norms, it often reflects personal belief and religious identity. Chadha and colleagues (2020) remind us that digital platforms are gendered spaces where women are constantly judged. In this context, modesty can serve as a form of protection, enabling women to be visible without facing backlash. It may also express a form of agency grounded in restraint, or simply reflect an alignment with their identity as modern yet religious women.

Visual resistance is minimal but present, as these women continue to shape their image within what is acceptable to them. These practices should not be dismissed as internalized oppression, as Western perspectives might assume. Instead, they should be understood as situated agency–rooted in cultural meaning, personal comfort, and strategic visibility (Lugones, 2023). These women are not rejecting the patriarchal society in which they live, but they remain present, legible, and in control.

5.3 Navigating sexualised visibility

The third cluster reflects a more contested form of visual agency. These women wear fitted clothing, expose parts of their bodies, and adopt suggestive poses. While these visuals align with the male gaze by framing the body as sexually appealing (Mulvey, 1975), they also reflect women's conscious choices. In this sense, they assert autonomy, visibility, and bodily confidence — hallmarks of what is a female gaze.

Following Tamunomiegbam and Arinze's (2024) argument that digital platforms enable new role models and disrupt dominant norms, these women — should they eventually gain a large following —could become role models who push against patriarchal expectations of modesty. However, they also reinforce orientalist stereotypes that portray Arab and Muslim women as seductive and available (Said, 1978). The interpretation of these images, therefore, remains open: they can be read as acts of empowerment or as reproductions of objectification. Visual agency in this cluster is ambiguous and negotiated, at once resisting, reinforcing, and reinterpreting dominant gazes.

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5.4 Mixing tradition with modernity
The hybrid cluster features women who blur the line between religious modesty and global fashion; their self-styling challenges dominant binaries: oppressed versus liberated, modern versus traditional, visible versus veiled. This hybridity reflects a deliberate act of cultural negotiation. As Abu-Lughod (2015) emphasizes the need to reconsider agency beyond Western frameworks and Lugones (2023) urges a decolonial understanding of identity and power, resisting orientalist and colonial narratives requires more than reversing the gaze; it demands that women redefine how they express their visibility and agency. These women are not seeking to fit Western ideals of empowerment. Instead, they are crafting new visual codes grounded in Moroccan aesthetics, global influences, and personal expression. In doing so, they push against both local patriarchal surveillance and Western feminist assumptions. Their self-framing expands visual agency by rewriting, rather than rejecting, the norms that shape them.

These four forms of visual practices (assertive, modest, sexualised and hybrid) position Instagram as a platform capable of shaping local norms and global perceptions. Regardless of the type of visual agency employed, these women are resisting and negotiating their visibility in a gendered digital context. Instagram thus offers novel insights into how digital platforms enable marginalized communities to challenge dominant narratives and reach agency and empowerment.

6.0 Conclusion& Recommendations
This article demonstrates how Instagram actively promotes Moroccan women's reclaiming of their visibility and agency through visual self-representation. These women are not simply displaying themselves; they are crafting meaning, asserting presence, and negotiating power through their gaze, posture, clothing, composition, and setting.

Whether their self-representation is confident, modest, sexualised, or hybrid, it reflects an ongoing negotiation of identity, culture, and agency. This visibility is not accidental; it emerges in response to the constraints of a society that often marginalizes women's presence in physical public spaces, and of global narratives that continue to depict Arab and Muslim women as oppressed and invisible (Chafai, 2020; Abu-loghod, 2015). Visual agency, in this context, is a complex and context-dependent concept. It is not always loud or confrontational, but often strategic, relational, and deeply personal. Instagram becomes a space where agency is performed and made visible on women's terms.

It is important to note, however, that this study has a limited scope. It analyses a small sample of 30 posts on a single platform and excludes captions, comments, and other forms of verbal expression. These choices, while deliberate, leave out how meaning is co-constructed through text and audience interaction. Future research should therefore broaden the dataset, include multiple platforms, and consider how viewers — men and women — perceive and respond to such self-representations. Audience reception could provide deeper insights into how people interpret visual agency, whether it is supported or contested across gender lines.

Ultimately, this study encourages educators, activists, and policymakers to develop and implement digital literacy programs that empower young women to navigate and express themselves online confidently. It also calls on social media platforms to strengthen protective measures against harassment, ensuring that online spaces remain inclusive and supportive of women's visibility and voice, without fear.

Acknowledgement

Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study
This paper contributes to feminist media and cultural studies by examining how ordinary Moroccan women engage in visual self-representation on Instagram through nonverbal practices. It shifts attention away from influencer culture and verbal activism, offering a grounded analysis of how visual self-framing in digital spaces may challenge patriarchal norms, gendered public spaces, and orientalist discourse. By adopting a decolonial feminist lens, the study expands the scope of research on feminist digital activism. It provides a context-specific understanding of how young women in the Global South navigate and resist intersecting systems of control through everyday visual acts.

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Annex

Image ID	Hashtag used to retrieve post	Gaze	Body Posture	Clothing	Spatial Setting	Framing/ Composition
Image 1	#marocaine	Direct, smiling, confident	Upright, hands to hair, comfortable stance	Colorful, patterned dress, sleeveless, summer style	Empty urban road, public street	Centered, eye-level, full-body
Image 2	#marocaine	Intense side gaze, accentuated with bold kohl-lined eyes	Confident, slight hip shift	White fitted T-shirt, denim skirt	Beach, public leisure space	Medium shot, centered
Image 3	#marocaine	Looking away, smiling	Upright, posed with a handbag	Loose hijab, stylish two-tone shirt, jeans	Urban wall, neutral space	Centered, vertical composition
Image 4	#marocaine	Side gaze, smiling	Upright, relaxed	Cream/golden traditional dress with hijab	Semi-public space	Close-up, slightly off-center
Image 5	#marocaine	Side gaze, smiling	Standing, hands on low wall, open posture	Colorful floral blouse, short skirt, playful patterned tights	Coastal promenade	Medium shot, eye-level
Image 6	#marocaine	Direct gaze, smiling	Standing, relaxed, hand to chin	Fitted white top, green midi skirt	Countryside, natural backdrop	Medium shot, slightly off-center
Image 7	#marocaine	Looking down, smiling	Bent posture, playful	Fitted beige knit dress	Urban minimalist wall	Medium shot, centered
Image 8	#marocaine	Direct gaze, smiling	Upright, hands clasped modestly	Bright pink traditional caftan	Garden	Full-body, eye-level
Image 9	#marocaine	Side gaze, serious	Upright, calm stance	Richly patterned, colorful caftan and natural curly hair	Urban architecture	Full-body, slightly off-center
Image 10	#marocaine	Direct gaze, smiling	Seated, relaxed	Black T-shirt, light sweatpants	Blue-painted public stairs (Chefchaouen)	Medium shot, centered

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Image 11	المغربيات#	Downward gaze, reflective	Upright, one hand at her collar	Pink top, beige pants, neutral hijab, long coat	Café/indoor public space	Vertical, centered
Image 12	المغربيات#	Direct gaze through niqab	Upright, arm raised	Brown layered abaya with black corset, niqab, sunglasses	Stone urban wall	Full-body, vertical
Image 13	المغربيات#	Broad smile, direct gaze	Upright, peace hand sign	Casual denim jacket, light hijab, sporty pants	Marina, a public outdoor	Medium shot, vertical
Image 14	المغربيات#	Downward gaze	confident	Hiking shorts, technical backpack, sportswear	Mountain trail	Full-body, natural light
Image 15	المغربيات#	Soft smile, direct gaze	Upright, relaxed	Bold print dress, belted waist	Beachfront, promenade	Medium shot, vertical
Image 16	المغربيات#	Side gaze, soft smile	Seated, composed	Black-and-white print hijab, pleated skirt	Forest picnic area, public park	Medium shot, vertical
Image 17	المغربيات#	Side gaze, smiling	Seated, relaxed, legs out	Baseball cap, black turtleneck, wide-leg jeans	Forest	Medium shot, vertical
Image 18	المغربيات#	Direct gaze, playful facial expression	Leaning forward, chin on hands	Black t-shirt, bright lipstick	Urban outdoor café	Close-up, vertical
Image 19	المغربيات#	Direct gaze, smiling	Upright, hand on chin	Modern green fitted dress	Sunset Hill viewpoint, public	Medium shot, vertical
Image 20	المغربيات#	Direct gaze, smiling	Standing, one arm raised with the Moroccan flag	National football shirt, jeans	City street, public event	Full-body, vertical
Image 21	#moroccangirl	Soft smile, direct gaze	Upright, relaxed	Cropped top, jeans	Cliffside rock background	Vertical, centered
Image 22	#moroccangirl	Direct gaze, composed	Upright, arms crossed	Orange button-up shirt, neutral hijab	Indoor studio/café	Medium shot, vertical
Image 23	#moroccangirl	Looking down, smiling	Hands adjusting sunglasses	One-piece pastel swimsuit, necklace	Beach/public	Medium shot, vertical

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Image 24	#moroccangirl	Direct gaze, smiling	Upright, hands in pockets	Neutral jacket, jeans	Beach with city in the background	Full-body, vertical
Image 25	#moroccangirl	Looking down, seductive expression	Seated, legs crossed, exposing thigh and cleavage	White sleeveless low-cut dress	Outdoor café/night	Vertical, centered
Image 26	#moroccangirl	Side gaze, smiling	Upright, playful leg kick	Full-length jilbab	Beach promenade	Full-body, vertical
Image 27	#moroccangirl	Direct gaze, big smile	Upright, relaxed	Printed blue jacket, white pants	Coastal nature backdrop	Medium shot, vertical
Image 28	#moroccangirl	Side gaze	Upright, calm	Fitted blue dress, baseball cap	Public space	Medium shot, vertical
Image 29	#moroccangirl	Direct gaze, small smile	Upright, composed	blue desert-style headscarf, sunglasses	natural background	Medium shot, vertical
Image 30	#moroccangirl	Direct gaze, gentle smile	Upright, one arm lifted	Black cropped top, glasses, headscarf bow	Urban green area	Medium shot, vertical