

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

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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). Unable to fully occupy these spaces, many women turn to social media to craft alternative forms of visibility, simultaneously pushing back against gendered norms (Atifi & Touati, 2020). Instagram, in particular, has become a popular site for young women to express themselves more freely (Rhomari & Mifdal, 2025).

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 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, revealing women's presence in environments where they are policed.

Grounded in decolonial feminist theory and based on a content analysis of 30 posts, this study aims to explore how ordinary Moroccan women employ Instagram to assert visual agency, challenge patriarchy, and resist Orientalist discourses. To do so, it analyzes the visual strategies employed in everyday posts as tools that convey meaning beyond aesthetics, thereby identifying the cues through which agency is expressed and patriarchal and Orientalist discourses are challenged.

2.0 Literature Review

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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).

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 Ghouddou (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 also functions as a form of 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.

While previous studies have emphasized influencers and textual or hashtag activism, this study departs by examining the nonverbal practices of ordinary women, thereby addressing a gap in feminist digital research. Two key issues emerge from the literature. First, Moroccan women's presence in public spaces remains contested. Second, digital platforms provide new opportunities but remain under-researched in terms of visual, nonverbal resistance. This study, therefore, examines how Instagram empowers ordinary Moroccan women to assert visual agency, challenge patriarchy, and resist Orientalist discourses.

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 its 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 #المغريبات—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 concentrate solely on visual content. While the choice limits the analysis to one mode of expression, it is a deliberate decision that enables a targeted examination of how agency is conveyed through nonverbal cues. This focus also allows the study to center on ordinary women's practices, which remain under-researched compared to influencers.

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).

To enhance reliability, the coding process was guided by inter-code reflexivity, as each image was analysed across these categories to maintain consistency. A sample of the coding grid for three images is presented below.

Table 1. Sample coding grid (3 images)

Image ID	Hashtag used to retrieve post	Gaze	Body Posture	Clothing	Spatial Setting	Framing/ Composition
Image 1	#marocaine	Direct, confident	Upright, hands to hair, comfortable stance	Colorful, patterned dress	Empty urban road	Centered, eye-level, full-body
Image 11	#المغريبات	Downward gaze	Upright, one hand at her collar	Beige pants, neutral hijab, long coat	Café	Vertical, centered

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. For instance, Image 20 shows a woman wearing a national football jersey while celebrating outdoors. Overall, these images reflect a consistent pattern: direct gaze, clear occupation of space, and styling choices that emphasize assertive agency 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 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 which in contrast to the previous cluster frames agency through controlled visibility rather than confrontation.

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 women often pose in ways that accentuate their bodies while their gazes remain downward. 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. Across these examples, the styling and body language adopt visual codes commonly associated with sexualization which unlike modest or assertive clusters create an ambiguous agency that can resist norms but also reproduces objectification.

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, 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. The hybrid cluster bridges the others by combining conservative modesty norms with confident self-expressions, blending heritage with style to present a layered and culturally nuanced form of agency that defies fixed categories.

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.

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.

These findings thus contribute to the ongoing discourse on media literacy and online empowerment. By showing how women negotiate visibility online, this study informs discussions on digital rights in North Africa and, by extension, the Global South. It is also transferable research, offering a framework for examining how women in gendered communities navigate between local norms and visibility.

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-lughod, 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. However, they remain necessary to restrict generalizability and allow for a focused analysis of visual practices.

Future research should broaden the dataset, include multiple platforms, and consider how viewers perceive and respond to such self-representations. The use of mixed methods or comparative analysis of other North African and Middle Eastern contexts could provide deeper insights into how visual agency is interpreted across genders, platforms, and cultural settings. Using these methods, future studies could examine emerging dynamics such as TikTok's algorithmic visibility, shadow-banning of content, and AI filters shaping women's agency.

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

Cadi Ayyad University, Marrakech, Morocco, funded this study.

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. The research fills a gap by shifting attention away from influencer culture and verbal activism to non-verbal activism by ordinary users. This offers a grounded analysis of how visual self-framing in digital spaces challenges 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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