Forming the South Asian Diaspora: The Use of Instagram as an Identity and Community Building Platform

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Abstract

As social media becomes increasingly embedded in our lives, this thesis focuses on a specific niche within the expansive and ever-evolving social media landscape. Through digital ethnographic research and semi-structured interviews with participants, the study examines how South Asian diasporic leftist activists in Canada and the United States strive to build community and identity on Instagram. By creating a space on the platform to express what they describe as their authentic selves, these activists, primarily women from regions they identify as either South Asian or SWANA (South West Asian and North African), share their artistic endeavors, whether through photography, curated to achieve aesthetic appeal or captured by themselves, as well as written works and other forms of creative expression. Their work is deeply intertwined with their identities; as women of color and feminists, they leverage their platforms to address issues that impact them and their communities, fostering a space that elevates marginalized voices through online techniques. In Chapter One, I examine how Instagram has developed and evolved into its current form, focusing on the role of users, other key stakeholders, and competition from other social media platforms in capturing engagement and attention. In Chapter Two, I explore how activists present themselves on this platform, create communities through activism, and challenge stereotypes and Islamophobia. Additionally, I analyze the backlash these activists face and how it serves as a tool to contest narratives surrounding their own identities. Finally, using the ongoing war in Gaza in 2023 as a case study, I investigate how these activists mobilized discussions around this genocide and the challenges they encountered in striving to be seen as virtuous advocates. I will conclude this thesis by discussing the intricacies of conducting research online, including its benefits and the potential negative impacts on users, particularly researchers.

À mesure que les réseaux sociaux deviennent de plus en plus ancrés dans nos vies, cette thèse se concentre sur une niche spécifique dans le paysage expansif et en constante évolution des médias sociaux. Au moyen d'une recherche ethnographique numérique et d'entretiens semi-structurés avec les participant·e·s, l'étude examine comment les militants de gauche de la diaspora sud-asiatique au Canada et aux États-Unis s'efforcent de construire une communauté et une identité sur Instagram. En créant un espace sur la plateforme pour exprimer ce qu'ils décrivent comme leur « moi authentique », ces militants, principalement des femmes originaires de régions qu'ils identifient comme étant soit sud-asiatiques, soit SWANA (South West Asian and North African), partagent leurs efforts artistiques, que ce soit par le biais de la photographie, conçue pour atteindre un attrait esthétique ou capturée par eux-mêmes, ainsi que des œuvres écrites et d'autres formes d'expression créative. Leur travail est profondément lié à leurs identités ; en tant que femmes racisées et féministes, elles utilisent leurs plateformes pour aborder des enjeux qui les concernent elles-mêmes et leurs communautés, créant un espace qui valorise les voix marginalisées grâce à des pratiques en ligne. Dans le premier chapitre, j'examine comment Instagram s'est développé et transformé jusqu'à sa forme actuelle, en me concentrant sur le rôle des utilisateur·rice·s, d'autres acteurs clés, ainsi que sur la concurrence d'autres plateformes sociales dans la captation de l'engagement et de l'attention. Dans le deuxième chapitre, j'explore comment les activistes se présentent sur cette plateforme, créent des communautés d'activisme, et remettent en question les stéréotypes et l'islamophobie. J'analyse également les réactions négatives auxquelles ces activistes sont confrontées, et comment ces retours deviennent des outils leur permettant de contester les récits entourant leurs propres identités. Enfin, en utilisant la guerre en cours à Gaza en 2023 comme étude de cas, j'examine comment ces activistes ont mobilisé des discussions autour de ce génocide et les défis auxquels elles ont été confrontées dans leur quête pour être perçues comme des défenseures légitimes. Je conclurai cette thèse en discutant des subtilités de la recherche en

ligne, y compris ses avantages et les impacts potentiellement négatifs sur les utilisateur·rice·s, en particulier les chercheur·e·s.

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Introduction

For my 12th birthday, my dad got me an iPod touch. With this handheld computer under my control, I now had access to what seemed like the world. With pretty much unsupervised access to it, I indulged in anything that I could. 2012 was in the early years of the big social media giants. Instagram, which had been founded in 2010, would be bought by Facebook, now Meta, that year. A photo and short-form video sharing social networking service, development proceeded with the feedback and engagement with users, motivated by competition with other social media platforms, alongside of the requirements of various governmental and non-governmental agencies, and its new owner (Frier 2021). This became the place I spent most of my time. Moderation back then relied on a small team of developers (Frier 2021), allowing all sorts of content to remain up which today would be reported by users and detected by automated moderation tools (Are 2023). On Instagram, I was influenced by other girls to indulge in content that was deemed inappropriate in my conservative household, which led me to being a fangirl for the boy band One Direction, and to finding books and movies that had sex scenes in them, learning through other girls on Instagram how to download them off the internet. The people whose accounts I interacted with on a daily basis showcased an alternative way of living, outside of what I was taught was the "right" way to live.

Sitting down with the content creator/activist/writer/filmmaker/actor Negine Jasmine, we bonded over our love for the early days of social media. Negine said that when she first made an Instagram account, she used it to express herself through her interests by communicating to people through the medium of photography. "It was photos of my shoes in fall leaves and stockings. Sometimes it was just random photos, which sometimes weren't even aesthetically pleasing but were just there to communicate something and bond with other people." She used Instagram not only to express her love for the art of photography by sharing photos she had personally taken or found inspiring but to also

connect with her immediate community. “I was very involved in theatre, and you know when I was in theatre, a lot of my fellow thespians were very involved in Instagram; on posting about a show, posting each other and inside jokes.” Her personal interests in theatre, in acting, in film, and the people who shared similar interests to her were reflected here on her Instagram page. Her username was not under her own name like it is today.

> *“My first Instagram name was @somethingscosmic and it is a title of a song from my favourite artist…it was very later that I changed it to my name. Instagram didn’t feel like this place you needed to be recognized as an individual in a way, it felt more like a reflection of what you liked and what you did, and when I compare it to now, it is a full expression of who you are as a person and what you’re up to and what you’re doing.”*

The song “Some things Cosmic” by Angel Olsen, a song about a cosmic force that causes two people to gravitate towards one another—no matter how far apart they may be, there will always be this connection between them—was the inspiration for her username that represented her page.

While for a lot of other people, Instagram was for friends and families, there were people like Negine and I who were using Instagram as a place to reflect “what you liked and what you did.” When I was listening to her tell me this over the recorded transcript, I had this vision in my head, of a young girl, sitting in her room, her face lit up by the glow from her computer screen, trying to stay quiet to not wake anyone up, creating accounts on social media, clicking through posts to find and engage with ones that pique her interest, beginning with a simple “like,” following an account that posts something that triggers curiosity. I was that girl. I am currently that girl. That cosmic force that connected me to others on social media was initially through being a fan girl. I was, however, soon confronted with a darker side.

As a young woman, exploring social media and creating content based on my interests, this process was not separate from my positionality as a South Asian woman. I was starting to become conscious, through my active creation and cultivation of spaces on the internet based on my creative

interests, from music and film to politics and activism, of, one, the lack of representation and, two, if there was representation, that this person would face hate. I noticed the way Zayn, in comparison to the other One Direction boys, was always getting press in the media that centered on his identity as a South Asian British man ("Bill Maher Accused" 2015). And I noticed that in the height of the Black Lives Matter protests in 2016, Harry Styles (a white former member of One Direction), who often picks up and waves pride flags thrown on stage by fans, did not pick up or give attention to a Black Lives Matter flag, causing discontent within the fandom (Tiffany 2022). Allies of the Black Lives Matter movement, specifically other racially marginalized fans called Harry out, saying he is "morally responsible as a person with a high public profile" to publicly support the movement. Predominately white fans would say they were expecting too much from him and "a concert is not a protest" (Tiffany 2022, 4).

Following my curiosity, trying to both understand myself in relation to the world as a South Asian Canadian, alongside following the waves of activism that took place on social media, I was on Instagram. This thesis looks at one of the South Asian, diasporic, activist spaces on the platform. Specifically, through digital ethnographic research and semi-structured interviews with content creators, I explore how second and third generation diasporic artist and activists from the United States and Canada have cultivated a space on Instagram, building communities and building their identities. By creating a space on the platform to express what they call their authentic selves, these activists, primarily women from regions they identify as either South Asian or SWANA (South West Asian and North African), share their artistic endeavors, whether through photography, curated to achieve aesthetic appeal, or captured by themselves, as well as written works and other forms of creative expression. Their work is deeply intertwined with their identities; as women of color and feminists, they leverage their platforms to address issues that impact them and their communities, fostering a space that elevates marginalized voices through online techniques.

My research participants consist of eight Instagram users who create content and engage with others on themes of activism and other forms of creative expression within the South Asian or SWANA (South West Asian North African) diaspora. The participants are as follows: Mina, a Canadian activist and writer/journalist; Madina, a social worker, writer, activist, and cultural advisor from Los Angeles, California; Negine, a filmmaker, director, writer, and actor based in Los Angeles; Shamayel, an American artist, activist, jewelry designer, and business owner; Hiba, an American student, writer, and activist; Mirriam, an American lawyer, writer, and cook; and two additional South Asian participants who are activists and artists wishing to remain anonymous. The overwhelming majority of my participants are American, which is reflective of the content creators in this space on Instagram. Additionally, my participants are roughly between the ages of 20 and 35 at the time of this research.

One of the challenges I encountered while researching this topic was in gathering participants willing to be part of the study. The individuals I interviewed were gracious enough to share their experiences as content creators on Instagram within the activist space, but many of them were not included in my original thesis proposal for various reasons. The activist space on Instagram is quite contentious, often putting people's safety at risk, particularly at the hands of users with opposing views. In discussions surrounding identity politics, any statement can quickly become personal, and conflicting beliefs about identity can easily feel like attacks on the opposing viewpoint. This dynamic intensifies the heated debates seen in Instagram stories or within the comment sections of the main-feed posts.

Many activists, primarily women of color on the left, have highlighted their experiences of doxing and the immense, ongoing hate directed at them. This hate manifests in various ways, targeting everything from their physical appearance and religious beliefs to their artistic and creative choices. They also face criticism regarding the educational material shared on their Instagram stories, along with

various forms of discrimination, including ethnic or caste-based discrimination, Islamophobia, and general racism.

Many individuals expressed fear or had second thoughts about participating in interviews for the study due to concerns about facing further backlash or being identified. Others simply wanted to move on from their negative experiences and felt unable to discuss them for the sake of their mental health. I assured participants that their anonymity would be preserved and, outlining the ethical measures I would take to ensure their safety in this research, I emphasized that they had the absolute right to refuse or withdraw from the study at any time.[1]

These social media spaces are rooted in what Karsgaard (2023, 83) calls "corporate and mainstream agendas," and have an "ability to colonize and commodify all aspects of everyday life" using "state oppression marketing tactics, and corporate-driven politics and practices" which have only intensified under "surveillance capitalism." They can nonetheless, as Karsgaard also notes, be appropriated to confront the "neoliberal modes of commodification, privatization and anti-intellectualism" (ibid). This opens an avenue to becoming a "progressive force for democracy" and providing educational tools "for making it possible to sustain such progress" (ibid). Political and educational dimensions of these activist spaces underline the importance in researching public pedagogical capabilities on social media and their subversive potentials. Through the conceptual framework of public pedagogy and counter-hegemonic publics discussed by Karsgaard (2023), I will examine the ways in which these activists build pedagogical spaces through their activist labour of creating infographics and curating pages that work to challenge mainstream assumptions regarding their own positionalities.

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Stuart Hall argues that "cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. However, like everything historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous play of history, culture, and power" (Hall 1990, 225). Our identities are the names "we give to the different ways we are positioned by and position ourselves within the narratives of the past" (Hall 1990, 225). Adding to Edward Said's work in *Orientalism*, in a discussion of the powerful regimes in crafted knowledge categories by the 'West,' he states that the 'West' "had the power to make us see and experience ourselves as 'Other'" (Hall 1990, 225). Furthermore, as Foucault "reminds us," Hall states (1990, 226), "every regime of representation is a regime of power formed by the fatal couplet power/knowledge." He adds that it is one thing to subject a group of people to the "Other of a dominant discourse," but it is another thing to subject them to that knowledge (ibid). With Hall's words as a guiding framework, I work to understand online spaces as an environment where cultural identity is constantly shaped, unfixed, and reformed. While broader structures of mass media and institutions of knowledge participate in Othering and producing representations of the South Asian diaspora from Orientalist understanding, my work looks at agency in shaping one's identity by looking to understand the mutually constitutive relationship between Instagram as a platform to form, exert, and shape community and identity.

In Chapter One, I examine how Instagram has developed and evolved into its current form, focusing on the role of users, other key stakeholders, and competition from other social media platforms in capturing engagement and attention. I also look at how these activists came to Instagram and look at the ways in which activism and visual aesthetics converge. In Chapter Two, I explore how activists present themselves on this platform, create communities through activism, and challenge stereotypes and Islamophobia. Additionally, I analyze the backlash these activists face and how it serves as a tool to contest narratives surrounding their own identities. Finally, using the ongoing war in Gaza in 2023 as a

case study, I investigate how these activists mobilized discussions around this genocide and the challenges they encountered in striving to be seen as virtuous activists. I conclude this thesis by discussing the intricacies of conducting research online, including its benefits and the potential negative impacts on users, particularly researchers.

Chapter One: Instagram became a place for activism

Instagram, a photo and video sharing application, is currently one of the most popular social networking sites. The application hit the milestone of 1 billion users around 2018 and according to reports published by Meta, by 2022 it had reached around 2 billion active monthly users (Boy and Uitermark 2023, 4). Instagram was officially launched October 6, 2010, by Kevin Systrom and Mike Kriger, as a free iPhone application where users could share photos with their friends. Today, Instagram's user base skews young, with over 60 percent of their users being between the ages of 18-35 (Lucas, 2024). According to the Pew Research Center, 62% of teens state they use Instagram as of 2023 (ibid). The number of young users has been on the rise since the establishment of the application.

One of the reasons for Instagram's growing numbers in the youth demographic is that the app is constantly in a state of motion, evolving with new trends initiated and popularized by other social media sites and/or the users themselves, in efforts to fulfill the goal of increasing user engagement from their most important demographic. This success in piquing and maintaining the interest of a younger population was one of the main reasons why Meta bought it. Nonetheless, with the rise of popularity of apps like TikTok, a short-form video creating, streaming, and sharing service, Instagram has faced challenges in remaining one of the top and most engaged with applications amongst its most important demographic (Frier 2021).

In this chapter, I explore the history of Instagram, tracing its evolution into the platform on which I did my research. I examine how developers adapt the app to align with current trends and popular posting methods used on competing platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (now X, although I will refer to by the name is use during the time of which I am writing), Snapchat, and TikTok. This discussion focuses on how developers engage with user activity trends within Instagram, as well as the preferences of younger demographics on other social media platforms. Additionally, I highlight the

continuous development of Instagram's features and the changing ways in which users interact with the application. With this groundwork laid, I then trace how the activists I worked with have created spaces for themselves on the platform and how they participate in activism on the app.

Introduction to Instagram

As articulated by Lachlan Macdowall and Kylie Budge (2022), Instagram in the beginning was predominantly experienced "in two registers: as a record of 'the unfolding now' and as an enormous trailing archive of photographs" (2). The term "album" was used by some to describe Instagram in its early stages, but with people building spaces and building on ways of communicating with each other, Instagram became much more (ibid). The app is primarily centered on visual communication. In-app photo-taking facilities, photo-editing features like filters and liking and sharing and its geolocative features is what distinguished this app with any other application at the start. Instagram was a place people could post photos they took on their phone with ease in comparison to other social media platforms.

The first thing you see when you open up Instagram is the main feed. In the beginning, the main feed was ordered chronologically, displaying the posts of the users you follow which you can stroll through vertically. Naming the home of Instagram "feed" suggests this appetite to be fulfilled through the consumption of art and other content (Macdowall and Budge, 2022). You got your 'feed in' by scrolling through all the visual content, consuming it. The main or home feed was "designed to appear as a near-frictionless stream and to show a sliver of the next image, generating the impression of an endless stream of images"(Macdowall and Budge 2022, 2). The images posted on Instagram appear in square boxes with a caption beneath, resembling the captions beneath or on the side of art at museums and

galleries (ibid). The tiny font of the caption showcases how the app makes the visual content posted the main focus. Swiping up would refresh the feed to show you the newest posts.

In the very initial stages of the creation of the app, Kevin Systrom developed a prototype web application called Burbn, an online space where he could express his interest in whiskeys and bourbon (Gilliard et al. 1, 2023). The application would let users "check in, post their plans and share photos" (ibid). Not only that, Burbn was designed primarily as a geolocating app, linking locations on the map to the photos posted of the best bourbon places (Leaver et al. 2020). After receiving funding from venture capitalists, Kevin Systrom and Mike Kriger revaluated the application, focusing on creating an app for photo sharing, liking and commenting, with geolocative features, but no longer centered on a single niche interest. Inspired by Hipstamtic, a retro style photo-based app popular in 2009-2010, they set out to create a similar photo-sharing app (Gilliard et al. 2023). In creating Instagram, they built it on the features of photo-taking and editing capabilities of Hipstamtic and joined these with the photo-sharing and social media capabilities, such as commenting and liking, found on Facebook (Leaver et al., 2020). Maps and locations are also primary features on Instagram, where users can tag a location on their posts, giving the ability for users to think about their own location and engage with a map on the application to see the tagged location in relation to theirs, all working to bring physical places to the digital space (Leaver et al., 2020). In combination, these features, with maps and location, are intrinsic to the app and content produced on it. Physical spaces—destinations—manifested through these features, coupled with photography as a practice tied to tourism and traveling, sparked and made an avenue for users to post aesthetically pleasing photos of destinations and their travels (Garrod 2009).

This geo-locative feature also plays an important role for activists, who have built around this feature. The location of protests and current events taking place around the world are almost always tagged with the photos posted. Aesthetically pleasing photos not only draw attention to the post but after

the change to Instagram's algorithm in 2015, from a chronological algorithm to a curation or ranking algorithm, photos of environments which on first glace can be a tourist destination are pushed to front pages because of the fact they fit into these aesthetic categories (Cotter 2019). I will discuss these algorithms later on, elaborating more on how activists, to survive on a platform where success is determined by engagement and the number of eyes seeing your content, playing the visibility game becomes a crucial part of their activism and informs how they interact with the space.

On top of having filters and square frames encouraging users to post their photography within a specific retro aesthetic, the founders of Instagram hired those whom they considered good photographers to carefully set the foundation for their application (Frier 2021, 25).[2] The photographers they chose were designers with large followings on Twitter, aiming for the first users of Instagram to "help set the right artistic tone, creating good content for everyone else to look at, in what was essentially the first-ever Instagram influencer campaign" (Frier 2021, 25). Each of these steps played a significant role in shaping Instagram's foundations and early usage. Instagram's initial affordances and orchestrated posting campaign "made millions of people armed with nothing more than an iPhone feel like they were crafting photographs that suggested professionalism of paid photographers" (Leaver et al., 2020, 25).

Instagram gained rapid success after its public release, attracting millions of downloads within months. In 2012, co-founder Kevin Systrom rejected a $500 million stock offer from Twitter co-founder Jack Dorsey (Leaver et al. 2020). Later, Facebook, led by Mark Zuckerberg, offered $1 billion in cash

[2] The first icon for the Instagram application was very similar to the IOS icon for the application Hipstamtic, a vintage camera, highlighting its focus on photography. However, the developers' initial intention in designing around the features of a mobile camera was to have "users share photos with friends" (Caliandro Graham, 2020, 2). The name 'Instagram' is a combination of the words "instant" and "telegram," a further indication of their intention to focus on sharing photos with friends and to differentiate their app from Hipstamtic. One of Instagram's most important and prominent features in the beginning was its filters and the square frames. The intention in creating these filters was to encourage users to post photos with specific aesthetics. The designer of these filters, Cole Rise, was a photographer himself and the founders of Instagram specifically worked with him for his vision (Frier 2021). The filters were constructed to channel a film camera aesthetic, via filters on the pictures taken with an iPhone. Cole Rise digitally manipulated the photos by adding more "light leak in" or he "added more texture of feeling to make them more nostalgic," ultimately inspired by the photos taken from vintage cameras like the Hasselblad, "a variant of camera [that]…only took pictures in square format" (Frier 2021 23).

and stock, ensuring Instagram would remain independently managed. The deal was finalized in September 2012. Following the acquisition announcement, many users expressed concerns that Instagram would change and become an extension of Facebook. In response, Facebook reassured users that its goal was to help Instagram grow, promising to keep its developers as employees (Leaver et al. 2020).

Facebook's interest in Instagram was partly driven by its desire to establish a monopoly over the majority of social media applications in the United States. This intent was evident as Facebook made offers to both Snapchat and Twitter as those platforms began to gain traction (Frier 2021). Additionally, the perception of Facebook shifted over time, making it less popular among younger audiences who favored platforms like Instagram.

After my aunts and uncles joined Facebook, I found myself logging off the platform. For me, social media served as an escape from my family life, and once they could access my posts and offer critiques on my selfies or my artistic choices in amateur photography, I decided to shift my focus to other social media apps that older relatives were less familiar with. In the mid 2010s, that meant spending most of my time on Instagram and Twitter. I was not alone in this transition; among Gen Z, young users aged 16 to 25, it is widely recognized that Facebook is geared more toward older audiences (Kahlert 2024). A few of my participants remarked on this trend, expressing a preference for posting primarily on Instagram. Madina even pointed out the ongoing joke that social media that Facebook is now solely for the “uncles and aunties of the world.” Meta was fully aware of this trend and aimed to capitalize on the gains of younger social media platforms like Instagram to remain relevant amid shifting tides.

Over time, Instagram has added various features to its platform, including website profiles, new designs, colourful icons, advertisements, Direct Messaging, and Stories. Instagram relies heavily on user

feedback, which can be gathered directly from users' practices and trends in content creation or indirectly through analytics and user engagement. Additionally, the platform monitors trends in the broader social media landscape to inform its updates and changes, and its features are routinely improved and updated. The development of new features is influenced by the wider social networking space, and I will briefly elaborate on those additions which were most significant for my interlocutors.

Snapchat, an instant messaging application created for smartphones in 2011, was built on ephemerality, so that textual and visual communication disappeared either immediately after viewing or within 24 hours.[3] Success in its early years lead to the development of ephemeral content on Instagram through the now-popular function, Insta-Stories (Leaver et al. 2020). TikTok, famous for its short-form video with an intuitive interface and algorithm-driven content discovery facilities, informed the creation of Instagram Reels; I return to TikTok later in the chapter.

Given that Instagram numbers in user engagement and screen time were on a decline as Snapchat was rising, Meta made some changes. One example of the decline that was evident and discussed amongst my participants indirectly was the rise of multiple Instagram accounts, each focused on one particular theme or aspect of their identity. People started creating "Finstas" to challenge the perfectionism associated with Instagram. The term "Finsta" refers to fake Instagram profiles where users share "real" or "candid" photos (Frier 2021). Primarily created and used by young people, these small accounts, usually with a few followers, often feature content like memes or inappropriate posts that

[3] Young people in the US and Canada flocked to Snapchat because of its appeal as an ephemeral content platform. Although traces of information shared on the web can remain (screenshotting is allowed), the concept of ephemerality changed the way they perceived and engaged with social media (Bayer, 2016). In addition to the novelty of ephemerality, they felt that this way of communication facilitated conversations (Leaver et al., 2020). Users interact with one another through the posts they share, relying heavily on memory to maintain the flow of their conversations and relationships, while Instagram, during that time, served more as an archive (Leaver et al., 2020). Another advantage of ephemeral content (for an app)_is that it encourages constant engagement, thereby increasing user interaction and popularity, and ultimately facilitating data collection from this prized demographic.

contrast sharply with the polished aesthetic of their main accounts (Leaver 2020, 53). Negine spoke about the fatigue this type of content production bred.

> *If we were just fully ourselves and not making ten other accounts for separate things [more people would have gone on the app]. I don't get that, and I hate doing it. I hate having a photo account [or] an account for embroidery. I have made them and they exist, but I get bored of them.*

She discussed this in the context of her current Instagram account, which uses her name @neginejasmine. Now, it is filled with everything she loves and showcases all sides of her personality. This contrasts with her previous approach of having separate accounts for different interests.

As Negine's experience illustrates, Instagram's initial decline was largely attributed to the pressure users feel to post perfect "Insta-Worthy" photos that match their curated aesthetic (MacDowall and Budge, 2022). To address this issue and boost engagement, Instagram introduced ephemeral content, similar to Snapchat, to encourage users to stay active. Indeed, Meta had offered to buy Snapchat, for 3 billion dollars (Leaver et al., 2020). The CEO, Evan Spiegel, had rejected the all-cash transaction, believing that their company would be worth more than the offer (Welch 2013). Instagram, after this, began to incorporate elements of ephemerality built into Snapchat into its own application.

In 2013, Instagram launched "Instagram Direct," a private messaging feature positioned in the top right corner of user profiles to compete with Snapchat. This functionality permits users to share photos and videos with up to 15 friends, facilitating discussions through comments and likes and promoting conversations around shared experiences (Frier and Barinka 2013). Stories were officially developed and incorporated into Instagram in 2016, again modelled on Snapchat. To incorporate this feature, Instagram changed its layout and some of the most intrinsic features, namely, adding Stories at the top of the main feed.[4]

[4] With these modifications, Instagram Stories surpassed Snapchat Stories in popularity, attracting over 400 million daily users and outpacing Snapchat's user base (Kurt, 2018).

Another important update to the platform included the introduction of advertisements around 2015, which coincided with the shift to an algorithmic ranking system that prioritized posts based on what it believed users wanted to see (Leaver et al. 2020). Over time, this evolution has led to the inclusion of posts from accounts that users do not follow, suggested based on user analytics. In 2017, the carousel post feature was introduced, allowing users to share multiple photos, up to 10 at that time (as of 2024, this has increased to 20), in a single post that viewers can swipe through horizontally. My interlocutors used this feature to post infographics, their main method of producing and sharing information on Instagram. Other important features include the ability to repost content to Stories, added in 2018, and the launch of broadcast channels in 2023. Broadcast channels allow creators to send direct messages to their followers in a one-to-many format. These features have become essential tools for artists and activists on Instagram, enabling them to share their content to many people in an organized forum.

Activism on Instagram

If I have dwelt at length on the evolution of Instagram's technical features, it is because activism on the platform is enacted and performed through specific techniques which rely on their affordances. Activists utilize tools on Instagram to spread their messages in order to disrupt and reach wider audiences to bring attention to issues. As underlined by Carrie Karsgaard in "Instagram as Public Pedagogy" (2023, 9-10), "users share subversive and resistant aesthetics and visual discourses on Instagram and appropriate the platform for individual purposes and agendas." Karsgaard observes that Instagram is embedded in mobile devices and technology "contributes to the dailiness, casualness, temporality, and locatedness of the platform" compared to other applications. Furthermore, she states:

> As Instagram is materially embedded in everyday life, the "online and offline, the digital and the embodied, are able to be hybridized in performative assemblages" of special events, issues and

> controversies. As a result, it provides material, personal, located and creative space for public pedagogical expression around issues like the Trans Mountain pipeline.

Because Instagram is so embedded with the dailiness of Instagram users' lives, available on a mobile device and with features structured to encourage daily engagement with ephemeral and more stable content, and trends which form around them, Instagram becomes a place where people post and talk about the issues that affect daily life. This includes politics that affect minorities and disadvantaged groups.

According to Minji Li (2022), as Instagram rose in importance as a social networking platform, with millions of active daily users in America, it also rose in importance as a place for users to spread information and news (719). According to a study done by Reuters Institute in 2020, "Instagram as a visual media sharing app, emerged as a news distribution platform and would surpass Twitter as a source for news;" indeed, the "number of people that were consuming news through Instagram […] doubled since 2018" (Li 2022, 719). During times of political turmoil, civil unrest is now expressed throughout social media, benefiting social media platforms like Instagram that are so ingrained and embedded in the daily lives of its users. In the months before the 2020 American presidential election with candidates Donald Trump and Joe Biden, civil unrest was apparent both online and offline. That summer of 2020, "during the Black Lives Matter movement amid the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, Instagram usage skyrocketed, especially in the intersected realms of activism, journalism, and communication" (Li 2022, 719). According to the 2020 Reuters Institute study, using Instagram for news is especially popular among younger users (ibid). The study found that one out of four Americans between the ages of 18 and 24 reported that they had "recently used Instagram to retrieve news," while only 17% had received information through newspapers (Li 2022, 719).

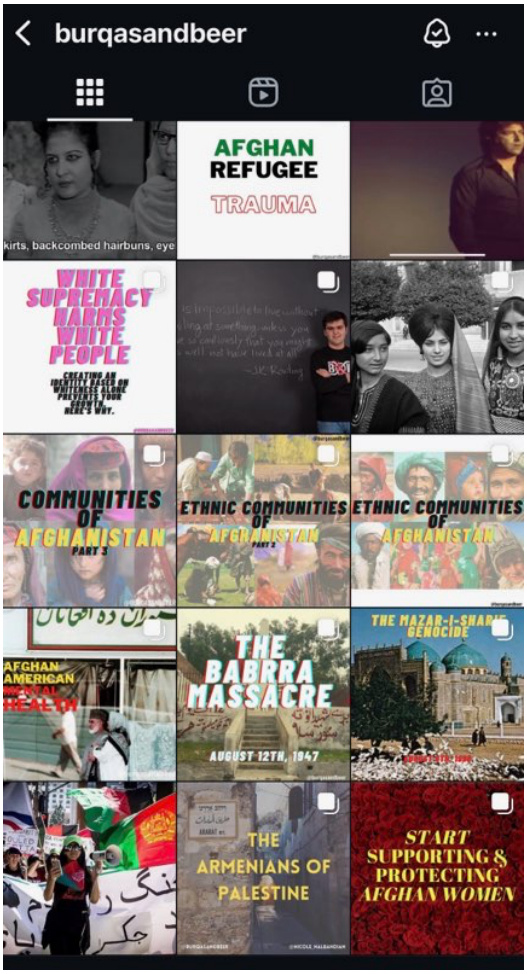
The fact that Instagram was designed as an application for mobile devices has played a huge role in the way online activism on the platform takes place (Palmer et al. 2020, 313). An iPhone/ Smartphone

allows users to always stay connected; it is “easy to carry around and thus creates differently structured opportunities for activists" (Palmer et al. 2020, 313). Cameras embedded in mobile devices open up new opportunities for activists to take and share photos. On the ground, they can report live, take videos and photographs and with internet connection, upload to social media for people to see and for their posts to spread (Palmer et al. 2020, 313). This synergy of platform and practice was in evidence as the Israeli war on Gaza began, following Hamas attacks on October 7th, 2023. Activism took over what I saw from my perch amidst feminist South Asian and SWANA activists, who shared images from journalists and activists in Gaza as they filmed and reported on the war (this will be discussed in more detail in chapter three).

The processes and activities involved in spreading images, however, merit their own attention. Utilizing affordances like hashtags, which aggregate photographic evidence and other sources, can aid the spreading of information collected on mobile devices (Palmer et al. 2020). The infographic format is one of the most popular and successful ways activists spread information on Instagram about issues they deem important and worthy of public awareness.

Infographics are visually oriented graphic posts shared on Instagram with a specific message often intended to inform or engage with current events or any social, political, historical concept. They are an important feature of online activism, used to provide information to "raise

Figure 1: Wardak, Madina. (@burqasandbeer).Screenshot of Madina's Gallery. Instagram, 2023.



awareness or used as a catalyst for action" (Burrows 2023, 30). They are often created through the carousel format, which allows users to post a dump of photos or visual content within one singular post on their account and share it through Instagram Stories. A term often used to describe this practice is slideshow activism (Dumitrica and Hockin-Boyers 2022, 1). Figure 1 presents a screenshot of Madina's gallery of infographics; some titled "White Supremacy Harms White People" or "the Babrra massacre" or "the Armenians of Palestine." Each infographic has an alluring cover with bolded letters, almost like "PowerPoint presentations on a given issue or cause," purposefully designed visual template for accessibility and 'spreadability' (Dumitrica and Hockin-Boyers 2022).

Infographics can include photos from protests or world events with written commentary on the post itself and in the caption. Typically, there will be sources at the end but not always because this specific activist template has also become utilized for users to give their own commentaries on events or issues, not directly relying on external sources for information. These infographic posts are crafted to fit the aesthetic of the account holder and/or to bring attention to their post. They will often include screenshots of tweets or other posts on social media, news articles from online news platforms, or excerpts from books or journal articles, to help them outline, fill in, and inform the bulk of the concept or topic of their post. Given the format of these posts and these snippets' short-form content, complex issues and concepts are sometimes over-simplified. Some, but not all, combat this tendency by giving more sources. The onus is largely on the viewer to critically engage with the content. Talking to Hiba about her process behind making these infographics, she states that while they are pretty and she enjoys graphic design,

> *I feel like with infographics, as helpful as they are, people don't really read the sources, or they don't really do any external sources so they really only have like a birds eye view, like a broad understanding of what is happening and I have always wanted there to be an action item in what I say, I will link it to a fundraiser or I will start fundraiser, I will specifically link my sources or even movies to watch.*

She underlines that these infographics she and other activists within this space make are not meant to be the end all, be all of information on any given topic. Participating in curation of the public pedagogical spaces as an activist (Karsgaard 2023), there is only so much she can do. She engages in this activist labour by making the post as accessible as possible, providing sources as a starting point for one to dive into the topic more, and providing information on fundraisers. These action-oriented aspects of her infographics contrast, as she implies, with infographics that do not have action items in them and simply relay information in bullet point form without providing sources.

Despite the currency of infographics in corporate messaging, and the use of commercial platforms to make and distribute these materials, my interlocutors told me that their infographics represent a continuation of the zine tradition, which has a rich history rooted in politically motivated education. Majority of my interlocutors are writers, some of which have published work on online zines. Negine and Hiba specifically brought this up in their interviews with me. Zines, short for fan magazines, are self-published works that convey political ideas and have played a significant role in activism throughout the 20th century, particularly within feminist and socialist movements (Baker and Cantillon 2022). They serve as a fusion of political pamphlets and artistic expression, aimed at informing and engaging communities (Matich 2024). Today, this tradition thrives within the South Asian/SWANA diaspora, where online zines and infographics are meshed into one, and creating these artistic educational materials through online tools resonates with the anti-capitalist and feminist ideals of their predecessors. Many creators actively resist mainstream media, leveraging zines/infographics to share their voices and creativity. The visual aesthetics, in some ways, reflect the traditional zine aesthetic, blending curated photographs with written content and quotes from various activists and scholars, painting an image of resistance to swipe through.

One of the digital tools used to create these infographics is the platform Canva. Canva is a graphic design tool with a free tier (as well as paid plans) that is very popular for online creation. Activists have cultivated a combination of research and graphic design skills to create public pedagogical spaces. They use the templates provided by Canva, even though short-form content meant for reachability and crafted for virality is problematic in the way Hiba described, these data visualizations are nonetheless a learning tool. Data visualization is a visual representation of data, "created to amplify the cognitive processing of data as well as to facilitate its social application" (Shahin 2021, 2). In an environment that is "grounded in visuality and aesthetic visual communication like Instagram," processes like data visualization develop and grow (ibid). Infographics developed and showcased in carousel posts are the main vehicle in which data visualizations are delivered and engaged with on Instagram. These posts are interactive, explicitly telling and encouraging the users to stay on that post longer and to keep swiping to reveal all the information present in the infographics (Shahin 2021, 8).

Many of the activists within this space used the carousel function to not only create infographics but also to share their written works as writers. Looking at the Instagram accounts of these diasporic activists, I found that they predominately refer to themselves as writers, either in their bios (short for "biography," a section right below the username on a profile, limited to 150 characters, where Instagram users typically leave a summary of themselves or their profiles purpose) or they link to a blog on an external platform through posts on their profile, typically where they wrote before Instagram. What is interesting about the bio feature is that it was so common for users to promote or display external sources that Instagram adapted its platform to facilitate such purposes. Before this adaptation, users had to use an external service. The most common one was Linktree, created in 2016, which specifically

helps users organize and place multiple links in their bios because many social media applications did not originally accommodate a feature that let them leave the platforms. Due to popular demand, Instagram added the function in spring of 2023 ("How To" 2023).

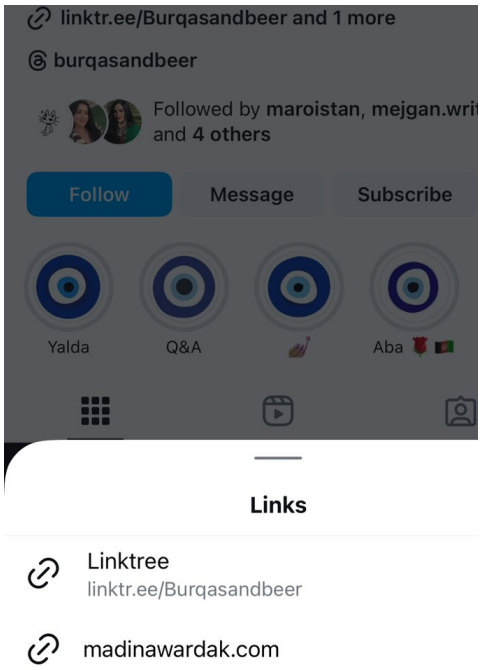


Figure 2: Wardak, Madina (@burqasandbeer). Screenshot of the link in bios. Instagram, 2023.

In South Asian diaspora activist spaces on Instagram, links in bios are important practice of spreading information. The common phrase "link in bio" is standard all over social media to redirect people to their swipe or click to their profiles for other resources and more information. Specifically, many activists use this feature to link their blogs (or more commonly now, their Substack), information on small business (if they have them or the ones they want their audience/followers to support), charities, and educational materials like books (Figure 3). Before Instagram inputted the ability for users to include up to 5 links in their bios, they had to find ways to get around this limitation and Linktree was not the only way (and can be confusing for some). The Stories function, despite only being active 24 hours, allows users to save their Stories and make them accessible by adding them to their profile page, under the "highlights" feature (Figure 2). Including links was much easier through one's Stories, since there was a function that allowed users to do it, illustrating another way users bypassed Instagram's infrastructural shortcomings.

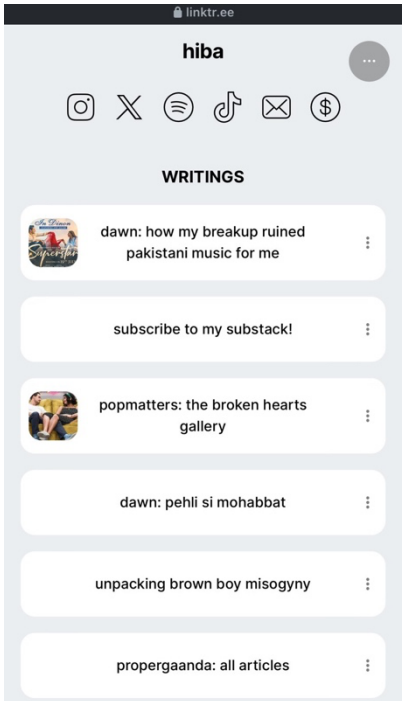


Figure 3: Sohail, Hiba (@imaancipation). Screenshot of Hiba's Linktree. Instagram, 2024.

Against the backdrop of over-pollution of short-form content, long-form content has been on the rise, evident through increased

discourse around subscribing to newsletters written by content creators/writers (Follett 2024). Content creators have been promoting their Substacks and posting excerpts of their work on Instagram, either in their Stories or piled up in a carousel post, ending the post with a direction to the link in their bio. Substack is an online platform where users can publish written works like newsletters and add a subscription service, giving writers the option to make their pages monetizable. The platform allows for much more control over one's work and a direct connection to one's audience because those who sign up will be notified through email. This means the author is no longer relying on playing the algorithm game, something that is so fundamental to being seen or recognized on social media, to push their content and connect with their following (Cotter 2019).

According to Marta Biino (2024) for *Business Insider*, one of the contributing factors for this rise in blogging and long-form content on platforms like Substack, is the fear that content creators have around a potential TikTok ban. The possible banning of TikTok in the United States arises over concerns that TikTok, owned by the Chinese company ByteDance, could be giving the Chinese government sensitive user data. This led to the U.S. government passing legislation that would ban the social media platform "unless it is sold to a government-approved buyer" (Maheshwari and Holpuch, 2024), then a temporary reprieve by executive order. This back-and-forth surfaced feelings for content creators around how shaky the foundations of their careers are on social media (Biino 2024). Branching out and offering content in multiple formats is not only good for influencer business, in terms of expanding creative outputs for their audience to consume, but also as alternative streams of income (Biino 2024). According to the writer Nina Miyashita for *Vogue Australia* (2023, 4), "subscribing to a newsletter brings a sense of intimacy to our reading habits, almost pen pal-eqsue in its style and the way it regularly lands in our inbox."

Hiba, @imaancipation on Instagram, told me:

> *I know people make money off of it, but I really wanted to just share my writing. At first, my blog was on Wix but Wix is Israeli owned and this was last year, and I just thought this reminded me too much of high school me and I want this erased from the internet. It is kind of like a low stakes blog. It is really an email newsletter; people can subscribe to your Substack. My goal was once every month, but now it is once every few months. People get it in their emails once I publish it, so they don't even need an Substack account, so they don't even need that or even the app. You can personalize the fonts or the colours. I find it very low maintenance.*

The site gives the users all the tools they need in order to make their newsletter/blog, to be able to customize their own pages to their liking to appeal to themselves and their readers. Not just any blog-making website would have worked for Hiba though. As a feminist and activist, within a leftist activist space on Instagram, using a platform whose policies and practices did not align with her own would be problematic (within an already politically contentious space for one's own platform and brand). This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter three, when I turn to the ethical demands activists face when working via companies that do not align with their principles.

The line from blogger to Instagram or another social media platform is consistently found in this space. According to Abidin and Ots (2016), commercial bloggers are the predecessors of the content creators called "Influencers." The intention of those who use Instagram or any social media to grow their image, or their careers is to promote their work to reach a larger audience and increase engagement and notice (Abidin and Ots 2016).

Feeling limited by what Twitter and Facebook was offering them in terms of affordances, moving to Instagram was the best option for Madina and Mina. Both still use X (formerly Twitter), while their Instagram's largely support their written work. Mina, a journalist, detailed her experiences while living in Afghanistan for the diaspora to understand life in Afghanistan.

> *I realized that people were not saying the most obvious things about what was going on in Afghanistan, and it ended up with me getting a pretty decent following on Twitter which was not something I strived for, around 30,000 followers. I was not just stating very personal information about myself, I was stating very obvious things. These disparities, that some groups were facing than others, we weren't just seeing them so that just, to me, I am an Aquarius, that is just what we do, we kind of just state the obvious, information sharing, so that was Twitter. Then I came to*

> *Instagram, I felt like it was a place I could be or meant to be a place that you could be more personal and candid and giving a little bit more nuance to something then what Twitter was allowing me to do. So, sharing a photo really helped people connect to what I was saying. So, I would just go through a memory that I would know [and post about it].*

She believed there to be a discrepancy between the way Afghanistan is portrayed in the news and that of actual Afghans' lived experiences prior to the collapse of the government and the takeover by the Taliban in August of 2021. Her writing about her own experiences as a journalist living in the country actively challenged common conceptions about a whole people and a region, for which she garnered thousands of followers, showcasing the desire or pull towards such information and news. Her profile, an affordance of the platform, as I will discuss below, presents a gently and tastefully curated collage of photos, a collage viewers can scroll through or dive into by tapping on those single squares. Mina uses Instagram as a medium where she can post a photo, couple it with her descriptive written work in the caption, and thus engage her followers more deeply.

Capturing visual attention while writing longer pieces seemed more "do-able" on Instagram than on X for these activists. Negine, writer, filmmaker, and actor based in Los Angeles spoke to this.

> *I really gravitated towards and speaking about what I believed in because of the visual elements of it. I am an extremally visual person, whether it was for my embroideries or my photography. And what I was capturing, that paired with a caption felt so much more like, I don't know, connected. And I know you can share images on Twitter, but you know, you can write only so many words.*

The character count of X is 280 at the time of writing; under owner Elon Musk, users can write more but it is paywalled under a premium subscription. Since its time as Twitter, however, threads have been a way that users have worked to bypass the platform's character limit. Threads are a sequence of connected tweets, allowing users to either tell stories more seamlessly, share more details and information on the topic at hand, or develop arguments throughout multiple posts ("What is a Twitter Thread 2022"). Instagram, on the other hand, has a character limit of 2800 for the captions beneath the main feed posts, coupled with the photo of primary focus. Centrally, however, it is the impact and pull

of photography or other visual content that takes center stage for the activists. Feeling a connection to what was being posted, and making it transmittable to the viewers, according to both Negine and Mina, was more effective with both photography and writing. Beyond the limitation of the character count of X, they value being able to be more personal by cultivating a visual experience alongside of the written work—beyond, as Mina puts it, "just sharing information"—and through that, forming connections with others.

As can be inferred from above, Instagram's visual affordances place aesthetics and style in high regard. Self-expression through visual art is deeply embedded on the platform and is an intrinsic way folks communicate on it. The types of visual content posted specifically within the South Asian diaspora on Instagram differs depending on a multitude of things, informed by the poster's interests and trends. In the next chapter, I show and discuss consistent patterns in Instagram's leftist spaces among activists creating and publishing visually stimulating content

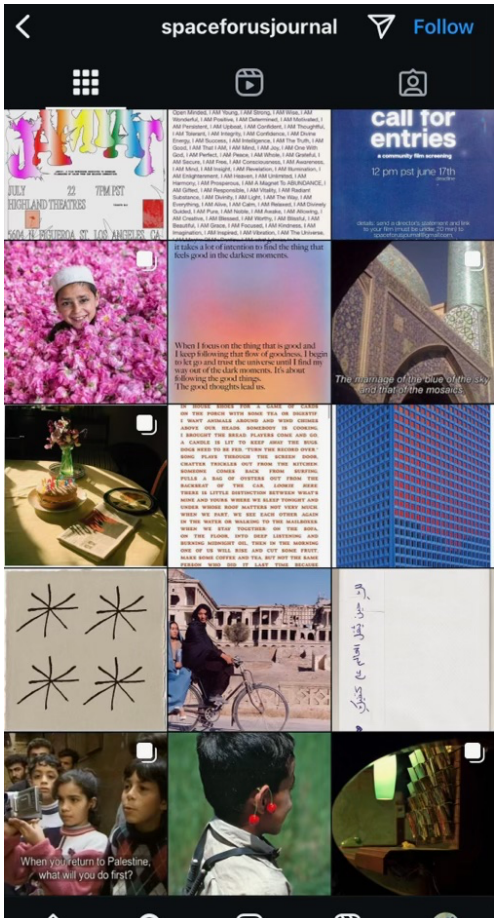


Figure 4: Jasmine, Negine, (@Spaceforusjournal). "Screenshot of page" Instagram, (2023-2024).

Curating Instagram: Visual Aesthetics

The etymology of curate is "to cure," to heal, in Latin, or to guard as the *curateur* did for souls in Old French (Oxford English Dictionary). Gayatri Gopinath observes (2018, 4) that there is a "connection between 'curation' and 'caring for,' thus we must think of curation "not only as selection, design, and interpretation, but as care-taking, as a kind of intimate, intersubjective, interrelational obligation," an obligation to "deal with the past." Queer scholars have shown the ways in which "queer art, scholarship, and activism have always evinced a

sense of obligation to document, analyze, archive, and value the small, the inconsequential and the ephemeral, so much of which make up the messy beauty and drama of queer life-worlds" (ibid). Like these scholars, the activists I studied work to highlight through curation what has been deemed insignificant by dominant powers. In addition to beautiful photos of themselves, there is a careful or mindful curation of other aesthetically pleasing photos. They use vibrant colours that in some cases seem to correlate with each other, alongside written word displayed with photographic content that can but does not always belong to them. This is why I use the word curating, as this presentation involves a process of searching, or finding photos either on social media or other platforms to then post on Instagram with a purpose in mind.

Sometimes, my Instagram activists use their own photos, since many are artistically inclined in photography. Often, however, the process of "excavating" for photos to repost is complicated and diverse. Many of my participants use sites like Tumblr or Pinterest, Instagram and TikTok, or other social media platforms that are also photo-centric from which they screengrab images that inspire them. Most of the time, if the source is clear, they give credit to its owner in the caption. The screenshots largely comprise professional photography of the SWANA region published in magazines or books from a wide range of years, but usually from the 1950s and 1960s through the present day. Other posts are of film stills and documentaries that have a revolutionary undertone or intention woven into them.
Such aesthetics aim, in most cases, to be "subversive and resistant" in that the narratives they paint are inherently political (Karsgaard 2023, 10). For example, take my experience of a collection of photos posted by Negine on one of her Instagram pages (Figure 5). A screenshot of a carousel post shows four

film stills. They depict the beautiful architecture of buildings in the city of Isfahan in the short film *Plaisir d'amour en Iran* (The Pleasure of Love in Iran) (1976) by Agnés Varda. The tiles and the architectural details of the buildings, largely spiritual/religious centers, come to the fore. Inspired by the post, I researched the film and found that it is not, in fact, an Iranian film.

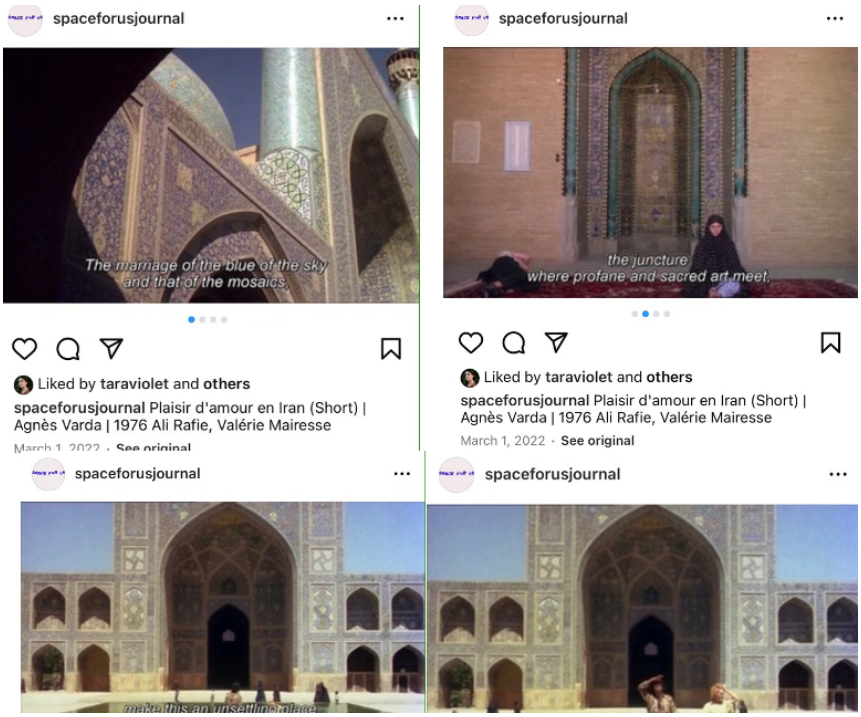


Figure 5: Jasmine, Negine, (@spaceforusjournal)"a screenshot of Filmstills of Plaisir d'amour en Iran by Agnés Varda 1976" Instagram, 2022-2024.

Rather, it's a French film about French travellers being in Iran, specifically lovers, interacting with the environment playfully and affectionately. The captions are subtitles translating the narration, erotically associating these buildings—described as "the juncture where the profane and the sacred meet"—and their love, which can be both sacred and profane. The film works to reflect these people through the architecture they are surrounded by. They are not simply beautiful photos; these are images from a film that works to humanize and bring beauty and love to buildings in a city in Iran. Iran is a country in the Middle East about which countries like France (specifically given the fact that this movie was made by the French for the French), UK, Canada and American and other imperial powers, have a specific narrative. The initial intentions of the film director are not always relevant or reflective of exactly what these films or their stills are being used for in these spaces. The film made in 1976 was not made to

combat narratives born out of wars that happened after that date. Yet, in curation, the filmmaker's intention may be carried on or appropriated, brought to a different context. Negine pointed out that she "believes in the power of art and spreading awareness through it, and I think Instagram became such an amazing platform and one that I really gravitated towards and speaking about what I believed in because of the visual elements of it."

Figure 6: Wardak Madina (@burqasandbeer). Screenshot of post of the ABC interview with Ghassan Kanafani. Instagram, 2023.

Other types of film stills included are often of revolutionary figures in documentaries on the SWANA region, who were interviewed during the de-colonial period of the 1950s to the 1980s. Posted by Madina (Figure 6), one carousel of stills was from an interview with Ghassan Kanafari in a documentary with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). An author, activist and spokesman for the PFLP (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine), Kanafani corrected Australian journalist Richard Carlton's use of the words 'conflict' and 'civil war' to describe the war in Israel, Jordon, Lebanon and Palestine (Shafik 2023). He stated, "it's not a civil war, it's a people defending their selves, it's a liberation movement fighting 28usticee" ("ABC's Richard Carleton" 2024). This is one of many such snippets that circulate in this space. During the time of my research and writing, war and tragedy were a heightened presence, from the forced evictions in Sheikh Jarrah to the war on Instagram, and photos of revolutionary figures were frequently circulated amongst the photos coming out of these regions by journalists and other civilians.

Photos of the material culture from many specific regions and ethnic groups get brought under the SWANA umbrella on Instagram. Intricate patterns on rugs/carpets, tapestries and stitching on dresses and other pieces of clothing deemed traditional, and heavy jewelry showcasing the works of filigree and embossing with precious metals and stones, are shared in these spaces. Beyond the aesthetic

appeal of these pictures, they are captioned or curated in a series of posts that discusses the humanity of the people from this region. This is visual storytelling, narrative making that underlines the point that aesthetics are political (Gopinath 2018). On an app grounded in visuality and aesthetic visual communication, the aesthetics on posters' pages are political: it is their politics. Their aesthetics, in some ways, is their form of resistance. They are resisting dominate, hegemonic notions of this region by not only showcasing the beauty of the art created by its people but also, in the process, displaying who they are. These ways of challenging narratives through activism will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

Putting in this work of sharing materials to teach and "make aware" their followers and others who come across these posts, asks, ultimately, why we should care. Why should we care about people who on the surface level are (or are made to seem like they are) different from us? This is not done entirely for the people these posts are talking about. A post is not just for Palestinians in Palestine or for Afghans in Afghanistan or women in Iran or Kashmiris in Kashmir or Dalits or other religious or ethnic minorities in India. This activism may be considered to be for those represented in the sense that it calls attention to what they are experiencing, especially during heightened political and social turmoil and conflicts and war. That being said, the posts are in English, communicated in simple language, posted in clean, pretty fonts and colours. They are digestible, utilizing affordances like the carousel function and Stories to compile information in an easily spreadable format, for Americans, for Canadians, for the diaspora who are like me, disconnected and unaware of what is happening because of the fact that most of my family lives abroad. They are for those who do not actively go to online news organizations' platforms, but also for others who have experienced the harms of imperial and capitalistic powers, to ultimately understand that while the social, political, historical, cultural, and economic contexts differ, there are linkages between the harms these people are experiencing.

One theoretical framework that helps conceptualize the art created or largely curated by these content creators is found in the book *Unruly Visions: Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora* by Gayatri Gopinath (2018). Gopinath explores shared queer visual aesthetic practices that mobilize new ways of seeing both regions and archives, specifically focusing on visuality in various artistic forms, including video, photography, and painting. She rejects dominant cartographies that privilege the nation-state or render invisible the spaces and gender and sexual formations deemed without value within the framework of global capitalism. Her work outlines the "transnational influence and confluence among colonized people, transcending a colonial cartographic imagination" (Gopinath 2018, 6). This south-to-south relationality across the diaspora is evident in the work of those she studied, who predominantly use the term SWANA. Often, when an issue affects other marginalized groups, they emphasize that these oppressive systems harm us all, asserting that no one is free until everyone is free. Gopinath emphasizes, too, that diasporic movements result largely from empire, connecting marginalized people through war, colonialism, imperialism, and cultural erasure. This shared experience communicated in the art they create, in turn, creates an activist space defined by collective struggle and solidarity.

For my interlocutor, Madina, this space was first Instagram, then Instagram.[5]

> *My generation was mainly on Instagram…and it started to become a place that you would see articles and was being more political versus more personal…it was kind of around the time of Trump started his campaign and Israel and Palestinian news in 2015…this was the climate for me at that time. So, I would write these very long rants on Instagram, and I always received positive feedback.*

[5] While Facebook had created the Newsfeed in 2006, and people were posting news articles and discussing current events on the site for years, Facebook had a major update where it launched FB Newswire in 2014 and Instant Articles in 2015 (Leaver et al., 2021). FB Newswire a feature that was made in collaboration with the News Corp-owned Storyful, a social media intelligence agency, to organize and verify news sources to deem it "newsworthy" to help journalist in professionally breaking stories (Etherington 2014). With FB Newswire, Facebook now would determine what they consider to be newsworthy content, assisting journalists in finding and classifying news as verified. Instant articles created in 2015 facilitated the ability for collaborating news and content publishers to select articles and post them to appear on Instant articles, a feature that facilitated the ability for people browsing the app to see entire articles within the Facebook app ("Introducing Instant Articles" 2015). It should be noted that Instant Articles was removed from Facebook because of underusage in 2022, meaning people were not accessing their news on Facebook as much anymore in comparison to the past (Houstin 2022). This was the backdrop of Facebook during the time Madina became more political active on Facebook.

Black Lives Matter protests, alongside Donald Trump's first presidential campaign, were all over social media spaces that focused on American politics.

Madina expanded her creative work through writing in the form of a blog, ultimately wanting to "have one website where people can go to read my opinions on these things." This was the initial stages of her online presence as @BurqasandBeer.

> *I would have burqasandbeer with all these political posts and my opinions on the Trump election and things happening with Israel/Palestine…So, around this time Instagram was started to be used more so it made the most sense for me to have my blog and my Instagram mirror each other. Initially had a personal one but the more I was known for burqasandbeer, the more Instagram became the space for it.*

To expand her audience beyond her blog, the next step was to create an Instagram page. When she says, "Instagram became the space for it," she highlights how Instagram was increasingly popular for politically focused posts and discussions, while also serving as a platform to showcase personal work. This trend of promoting blog content on Instagram was common, as many content creators would share previews of their written work accompanied by eye-catching photos and other visual elements in carousel posts. This strategy helped attract more attention to their work on a platform that fostered greater engagement. Therefore, being both a blogger and an Instagram user often went hand in hand. Through aesthetically pleasing photos of film stills about revolution, activism and diasporic identity, or selfies of various kinds, excerpts from poems and other literature that have the revolutionary activist spirit engrained in them, coupled with a heartfelt, passionate and/or descriptive reporting of recent events with sources linked, Madina has cultivated a rich following of tens of thousands of people interested in her work (Figure 7).

This trajectory was consistent amongst the majority of my participants. Encouragement from her community and other folks on social media space who interacted with her content motivated Madina to pursue the hobby more deeply. Madina has created a new website where she offers information on the workshops she holds, contact information on acquiring her services as a cultural advisor (she is a consultant to the entertainment industry on making sure the portrayals of minorities are not problematic), social services consulting (she is a practicing social worker), and general background on the work she does as an activist. There, she states,

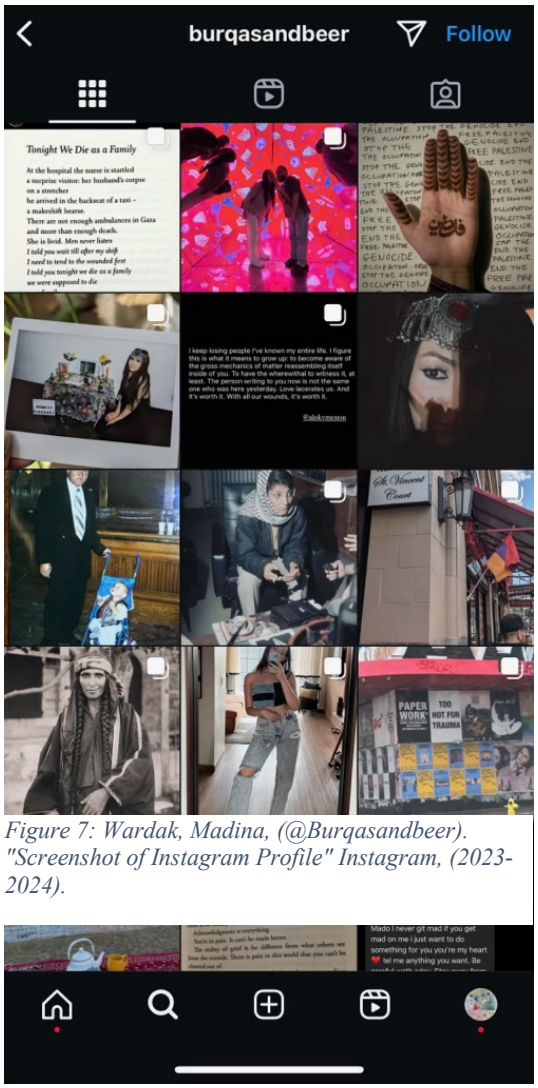


Figure 7: Wardak, Madina, (@Burqasandbeer). "Screenshot of Instagram Profile" Instagram, (2023-2024).

> Writing has been the medium I've used to foster connections. I began my platform @burqasandbeer back in 2015 by blogging. I called it "social commentary from a brown girl's perspective." Writing has allowed me to get vulnerable and raw with my Instagram community, which has grown so much over the years! (Wardak 2023).

Hiba, on the other hand, represents a new trend in blog writing and creating within this space. She is a writer pursuing journalistic aspirations by writing articles for different zines and magazines on the internet on South Asian identity, misogyny and general pop culture, and she started a Substack to write more on her own terms.

> *At first it was my Instagram account, but I had always been more leaning towards activism and politics even when it was a private account for me and my friends. It became a lot more politically and social justice centered when I published "brown boy misogyny." I had my blog, and I would always link it to my Instagram and be like "Hey, I made this blog post if you want to read something."*

Her written piece titled "Brown Boy misogyny," discussing the sex assault cases within the diaspora, garnered a lot of attention within the South Asian diaspora in America and Canada, specifically in New

York City, depicted in the piece. She promoted her work on her Instagram which, as an outspoken feminist, centered on activism and politics.

> *It was the summer of 2020 in July and a lot of South Asian girls in New York City, specifically the Queens area, which was where I grew up, were coming out with these stories of sexual assault by brown boys that I didn't know personally but we were all in the same circle. It was a friend of a friend of a friend and that made me anger.*

She then adds that a lot of the discussion surrounding these cases was being shared through main feed posts and Stories on Instagram. She found that other boys would post in support of the boys who were accused of sexual assault, posting, according to Hiba, "doctored screenshots" and statements like "I have known him since he was 7 and he would never do this." This motivated her to write her piece, taking up some of the space within in the South Asian community discussing these cases on Instagram to defend the girls.

> *I got really anger because no one was standing up for them and I wrote this really angry essay thinking no one would read it and I published it on my blog. But this was the first time I made my account (on Instagram) public and posted it because I wanted these girls to know that someone was speaking for them, so they could share it. So many brown girls were rightfully angry at how everyone was treating all the stories that were coming out.*

As mentioned earlier, this post received significant attention. It was presented as a carousel post, allowing users to swipe through and read the entire article, which was presented in the form of an infographic with snapshots for accessibility and easy digestion. This format of spreading written content through carousel posts existed prior to 2020 and was especially used by bloggers on the platform trying to spread their written work to a larger audience, as stated above, to garner more attention towards their creative written works. In 2020, however, the summer prior to the US election and where, amid the Covid-19 pandemic, protestors took to the streets in major cities in the United States and around the world for Black Lives Matter, carousels became more popular. Political activism in the name of uplifting marginalized voices and bringing light to issues that were shrouded in darkness (not covered in mainstream media) took place all over Instagram that summer (Chang et al. 2022). The Black Lives

Matter movement, alongside the work accomplished by the #MeToo movement, encouraged women and minorities in America and Canada, such as the South Asian diaspora, to speak up more confidently about their feminist aspirations, building digital public pedagogical tools in the process (Karsgaard 2023).

Of course, these conversations were also happening outside of social media within feminist and activist centered spaces. I observed, though, that the tremendous political movements taking place in the summer of 2020—right before the Trump versus Biden election in the fall—had a huge impact on the way people interacted with one another, specifically stimulating political activist practices on Instagram. Hiba's experience is representative of the kind of success that could happen in such a moment. After receiving lots of recognition for her piece, she put more focus on her written works. She began routinely sharing her writing on Instagram through carousel posts, which she also features in her stories. Her content encompasses a variety of topics that she is interested in, including pop culture, romantic comedies, South Asian films, and political issues surrounding Kashmir and the diaspora in America. And she has built a notable following, with women in the diaspora knowing her as the one who stood up for girls when they were being silenced and dismissed during this #MeToo movement within this space.

In outlining Instagram's development, I showcased how Instagram development was influenced by competition in the social media space and its end goal of getting as much engagement and activity onto their social media as possible. I also introduced how activism takes place on Instagram and how my participants, as bloggers/writers/artists, cultivated a space on Instagram dedicated to activism. Their pages are curated in many ways to bring attention to their creative endeavours, which include larger issues that affect the South Asian diaspora.

Despite efforts to create a strong community founded in solidarity and support, many of these activists experience hate and are often the target of silencing misogynist campaigns. In the next chapter,

I discuss how these activists deal with hate in their efforts to challenge mainstream narratives regarding their own positionalities.

Chapter Two: Challenging Narratives Through Navigating Online Hate

While sitting with Madina, @burqasandbeer on Instagram, I asked her about her experiences with hate on Instagram, particularly following her post about the fall of the Afghan government and the subsequent takeover by the Taliban, a militant terrorist organization. The post went viral, receiving tens of thousands of likes and over a thousand comments, which resulted in more than 30,000 new followers. As both a researcher within this space and a participant, as I have followed these accounts for quite some time now, I wanted to know more about what I saw in the comment sections, the doxing, slut-shaming and objectifying remarks made to these feminist activists, in efforts made to silence them. I had noticed a pattern: after a moment of virality, many activists would take a moment and shift gears by taking a break from posting politically centered content. Madina responded:

> *Marwa Jan (sweetheart), I will tell you, that was the worst time of my life with the Afghan community where I was so close to never fucking with the community ever again…because I am a Pashtun they came after me. As far as pictures of my parents posted, as far as my address being doxed. I don't even talk about it online cause I didn't want it to be "look at what I am going through." All of it was giving me the 'ick' and just didn't even want to touch it. I caved in and made this statement distancing myself from my cousin, I didn't even name her and what I said was that "I don't support or condone any rhetoric that sympathizes with the Taliban" everyone knew who I was talking about. I regret that moment of weakness so much because I was pressured. It ruined my cousins and I's relationship; we don't speak anymore. This is the struggle of existing as a woman within this digital space. When you are a public figure, people are either idolizing you or bashing you, it is both de-humanizing. People trust me and feel close to me, I am still human. When you exist on this platform with this large space, you become less human to these people you become like an 'idea,' I represent something to different people; one, "she is a badass talking about all these things and is so cool," while others would say she's such a slut, why is she drinking and calling herself Muslim, she has all these tattoos she's Afghan why is she saying that." For Americans is like "look I follow this Afghan girl and I learn a lot." In all these relationships I am seen as Other, I am Othered, you know what I mean? That's the struggle, social media is so powerful and legit put a strain between me and my family. I was one of the first Afghan women to go online, it was the climate, not because I am so badass, but I was savvy with the digital space and I had something to offer so I was able to grow because I am Afghan, I am popular within the community. I put a lot of my personal life, the death of my partner, the struggle of losing him and my family and all that. When you have a social media account, you are giving a part of your soul, I truly believe that. It is a choice that you make, this is the choice I made, and I can always decide to go off the grid, but to me the positives out way the negative and if I can support people who need the support, I can do it.*

The discrimination and prejudice she faced as a Pashtun woman who did not fit the standards of what a "good Afghan girl" is, which, amidst hurting relations with her family, led her to being doxed, pictures of her family being posted, and opened her up to increased hatred fueled by sexist and misogynistic rhetoric. Despite its detrimental effects on her life, she felt that the positives of her activist work outweigh the negatives.

In this chapter, I discuss the ways in which South Asian and SWANA Instagram activists experience hate as a consequence of their activism, which challenges common narratives about their positionalities through creative works and uses Instagram to reach a wider audience for such work, toward dismantling those narratives. In interviews with activists and in their creative works, they discuss how religion is used to justify, validate, and give weight to any criticism directed towards women such as themselves. They work to dismantle these framings while also challenging Islamophobic and misogynist narratives embedded in both South Asian diaspora and mainstream narratives. Building on Karsgaard's scholarship on public pedagogy on Instagram (2023), I argue and show how Instagram's digital space has been utilized by activists to expand on the political and educational outreach of their activist work, all while creating a platform for themselves.

The study of public pedagogy examines and poses questions such as, "Under what conditions is knowledge produced? What values are affirmed? How are affective investments engaged, and how are subject positions negotiated, accepted, or rejected?" (Karsgaard 2023, 77). The sites of everyday life, including social media, become "spaces for critical inquiry, particularly as they shape key discourses, agencies, and the relationships between private life and public concerns" (Karsgaard 2023, 77). This chapter examines how these activists use their platforms to provide direct and indirect educational content regarding identity and community as South Asians, creating a subversive counter-hegemonic public (Karsgaard 2023).

A Second #MeToo Movement

One thing that ties these accounts and their positive users together is the feminist sociality behind them. Hiba was urged to use her platform to speak up and stand by the South Asian girls in New York who were telling their stories of sexual assault. The comradery and unabridged support system the boys had in defending each other in the face of the rising sexual assault cases triggered Hiba and many others within this space on social media.

On Instagram, Hiba's username, @imaancipation, sounded out like emancipation but with *imaan* instead of "eman" reflects her intentions and her activism as expressed in her written piece "Brown Boy Misogyny." In Arabic, "imaan" is the word for faith, belief, or conviction. It is usually referred to as conviction or belief in God in Islam but can generally be used in other contexts that refer to faith and belief in overcoming a struggle. In her piece, Hiba highlights the hypocritical practices that she sees in her South Asian diasporic community, particularly how certain practices and rhetoric perpetuate patriarchy and misogyny. She discusses how cultural taboos shield young men from the rising number of sexual assault allegations. Additionally, she examines how individuals within the community manipulate religion to serve their own agendas. The use of religion as a tool for subjugation is a pervasive topic within these feminist spaces. In their political work, activists detail their experiences of misogyny within their communities, while presenting the historical, political and social context that feeds into and builds those experiences. They outline that religion is ultimately co-opted by right wing conservative/traditionalists who wish to not challenge the status quo that gives them privilege. Hiba starts her viral piece by stating;

> The diaspora in New York City represents a microcosm of South Asia—its vibrancy, its colorful culture, but it rears the ugly head too often, whether it be divisions of religions, nationalism, or of course, a very carefully constructed misogyny. It doesn't come from Islam, and yet religion is used as a defense from accountability. It doesn't come from Hinduism, and yet tradition is used as a facade to get away with it. Stop using God as your security blanket to justify your

> suppression of women. It has stretched from our homelands that are desperately trying to reform to no avail (Sohail 2020, 1).

Many of the women I spoke to identify as spiritual, and many come from a Muslim background, with certain aspects of the religion remaining significant in their lives. However, they made a clear distinction between their personal understanding of religion and the interpretations they encountered in the comment sections of their posts. Any form of proselytizing or what is referred to as "haram-policing"—a common method of silencing and attacking them—is immediately disregarded and unwelcome in their space. Haram-policing is a term used by Muslims to describe the tendency of some Muslims to judge others' religiosity based on their own interpretations of the faith (Peterson 2022). Much of their activist work involves both showcasing the diversity of Muslim identities through discussions about their own experiences and challenging prevalent stereotypes directed at Muslims. Furthermore, simply existing as someone who identifies as Muslim and does not fit conventional narratives about Muslims is in itself a powerful spectacle of narrative-challenging activism. This constitutes a significant part of their activist efforts on their social media pages.

In her essay, Hiba outlines the ways in which these men will justify their actions and support each other, while often placing the blame on the victims of the sexual violence. As stated above, she and thousands of other folks stood by these girls. Their pages were places where women could anonymously send their stories of the sexual assault to bring awareness to these issues and hold the men accountable for their actions. Primarily on Instagram, folks would repost on their Stories screenshots of other Stories, creating a chain of screenshots of victims' experiences. Hiba outlines that while this is good, and that there has been some action taking place in "#MeToo" form by "@ing" the schools of these boys and seeing some sort of justice for the victims (although that action is, in turn, a contested, morally-gray area) more needs to be done (Barry 2021).

> In classic brown culture style, we have men and even women, deflecting the issue, but let's be honest, did we expect anything else? Instead of cutting ties with known rapists, these people are insisting that somehow it is still the girl's fault. She was drunk. She was showing skin. She was hanging out with a guy late at night. "It's haram," they say. But what about forcing yourself onto someone? Is that not haram too? Prophet Muhammad (SAW) swiftly punished a rapist when a woman came to him. He did not try to convince her otherwise, he did not blame her—so who are you to gaslight a survivor? There is no link between rape and sexual desire. Don't tell us to dress better—become better men (Sohail 2020, 4).

As argued by Kristin M. Peterson in their book *Unruly Souls: The Digital Activism of Muslim and Christian Feminists* (2022), just as there is a growing trend in conservative and traditionalist religious political rhetoric on social media, there is also growing activism within digital spaces by Muslim and Christian feminists who work to dismantle issues within their communities. Peterson outlines that these feminist activists raise concerns about the ways "discourses around purity and modesty reinforce misogynistic and racial ideals" and point to how "this narrow view of piety also inflicts spiritual harm" (2022, 2). Many of the individuals engaged in this form of activism are young people, specifically young women and members of the queer community (ibid). They often come from religious backgrounds that rarely provided opportunities for marginalized perspectives to be acknowledged (Peterson 2022). Digital media has become one of the few available spaces for these activists to address injustices, offer support to victims of harassment and abuse, and do collective work towards reforms (Peterson 2022). According to Sarah Banet-Weiser in *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny,* "men rights activism is not new to the contemporary moment, but it is precisely digital media sites like Reddit that allow for men's rights activists to flourish and widen their reach" (2018, 117). This is important to acknowledge because although men's rights organizations have flourished outside of social media, "digital media has been a crucial element in an economy of visibility in the coalescing of men's rights activism, as the Internet allows for a connection of scattered groups, a more coherent 'public' sphere, and, again, what is referred to as the 'manosphere,'" (Banet-Weiser 2019, 116). The manosphere is made up of "hundreds of websites and social media platforms, [that] are dedicated to opining, training, and expressing the

urgency of the ‘alpha male’ in a landscape apparently emasculated by feminism in particular and by women” (Banet-Weiser 2018, 116). The issues that are discussed and take center stage within these spaces in the Manosphere are expansive, ranging from

> the more moderate, such as support for father’s rights and custody rights, doubts over the prevalence of domestic violence, and reflexive support of the military, to the more extreme, such as normalizing rape and sexual violence, manipulating and controlling women into sex, and making death threats against a vast number of people (mostly women) who disagree with these view (Banet-Weiser 2018, 116-117).

While Banet-Weiser outlines that the manosphere is in some respects a retaliation against the growing feminist discourses on social media, specifically in the 2010s, showcasing this battle for visibility and popularity, she underlines the importance in understanding that the manosphere is not specific units or groups, but rather should be understood as “interconnected nodes in a network of misogynistic discourse and practices” (Banet-Weiser 2018, 118). In this context, the retaliation from men in support of themselves and their “boys” in the face of sexual assault allegations that Hiba and hundreds of other feminist activists within the South Asian diaspora on Instagram were addressing, can be seen as an example of how the manosphere operates. I cannot say that all of these boys are actively and directly involved in the manosphere or acting as its soldiers. However, their confidently denying allegations and advocating for the perpetrators of the violence in a very public arena is an achievement of what Banet-Weiser (2018) calls “popular misogyny.”

Much of this work, as Sarah Banet-Weiser underlines, is a battle for popularity. The discourses of visibility and invisibility within these differing activist spaces is a major theme on Instagram. Popular, as argued by Sturt Hall, is a “terrain of struggle, a space where competing demands for power battle it out” (Banet-Weiser 2018, 1). Popular culture, according to Hall, is “one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged…it is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partially where hegemony arises, and where it is secured” (Jenkins 2018, 14). Different kinds of

feminism circulate on social media, some are more visible than others. Media friendly and spectacular expressions of feminism like "celebrity feminism and corporate feminism achieve more visibility and expression" than the forms of feminism that work to "critique patriarchal structures and systems of racism and violence" (Banet-Weiser 2018, 4).

I see in these spaces which prioritize the affordances of reachability and engagement that it becomes a form of activism to disrupt and call attention to issues by working towards going viral. The voices of women, particular marginalized women, are scarcely heard and recognized, yet it is "revisionary or counterhegemonic spaces that redefine exclusionary conceptualizations" of race and belonging in America and Canada (Fadda 2022, 164). Part of Instagram users' feminist praxis is creating spaces that respond to and problematize "racial stereotyping, blanket labeling, discriminatory profiling by insisting on complex representations" (Fadda 2022, 164) and addressing the diversity of beliefs within these communities. Nonetheless, Crystal Abidin (2021) has argued that many influencers on social media practice both hyper-visibility and under-visibility to avoid threatening detection that could hurt the overall future of their accounts (getting banned or shadow banned) or their own lives (getting doxed). This will be discussed more in depth through the case study of activism after October 7 and the subsequent intensified war on Gaza in the following chapter.

Hiba's work can be related to the activist projects described by Peterson (2022), in that her initial spark to write about acts of injustice was how girls' experiences were being undermined by men in the name of cultural taboos, and the manipulation of religious texts and belief systems that work to uphold the patriarchy. In a moment when women's experiences were being silenced, social media was used as a tool to talk about deeply rooted problems within the South Asian community, in what she called a "second #MeToo." Much as Peterson writes, not only were these activists pointing to how "discourses around purity and modesty reinforce misogynistic and racial ideals," they also underlined and worked to

acknowledge how this “narrow view of piety also inflicts spiritual harm” (2022, 2). In her blog post, Hiba addresses the Prophet Muhammad’s response to rapists to counter the argument made by some boys who claim it is the girls' fault for participating in "haram" (forbidden in Islam) activities such as drinking and partying. While the "haram-ness" of these activities is debated in some activist circles, Hiba implies that, within the hierarchy of sins, rape has always been considered far worse, questioning their sanctimonious accusations and their behavior.

She underscores this particular double standard in section highlighting hypocrisy within the South Asian community. Boys engage in what is deemed sinful behaviors like partying and drinking, and far worse, committing serious offences like sexually assaulting people, and yet their actions are rarely held to scrutiny as harsh as what girls face. The narrative often shifts to blame the victim, suggesting that it is a woman's fault for being in an environment that enables these acts. The burden of responsibility disproportionately falls on women, based on how their presence and actions are perceived by others. Phrases such as “she was wearing revealing clothes; she asked for it” perpetuate this harmful mindset. The onus is always on women and this struggle is communicated through a multitude of ways and examples by activists within this space. Their activism shines a light on issues that are otherwise swept under the rug by posting and sharing about them on Instagram.

The Sangeen Girl

In interviews, Negine and Shams both brought up the term *Sangeen*. *Sangeen* in Farsi is a behaviour, a way of being, specifically used for girls. Depending on who you are talking to though, the word holds different meanings. For some, it stems from the English word “sanguine” meaning cheerfully optimistic, almost to a fault, “to being complacent, oblivious, and naïve” (Oxford English Dictionary 2024). For others, *sangeen* refers to being solemn, stone-like, since *sang* in Farsi means

stone. A girl who is *sangeen*, sits with her legs crossed, does not laugh out loud, especially not around men, does not wear revealing clothing and keeps to herself. Her opinions are never broadcasted, and she only speaks when spoken to. Joining both understandings, *sangeen* is a demure, docile person, who pretends or genuinely does not care to know about politics, who simply accepts her role in society as the daughter, sister, and wife, and dresses and acts modestly. A girl who is an activist on social media, broadcasting her opinions about everything and actively creating spaces that talk about cultural taboos, experiences of discrimination within the South Asian/Muslim community and outside of it, and global events and injustices, is definitely not "*sangeen*."

Negine in our interview spoke about how her art based on Muslim women was criticized by the wider Muslim community, specifically Afghans. Under the name Burqa Babes, Negine embroiders scenes with burqas. Women are depicted:

> *doing things like smoking a cigarette or drinking a coca cola, being women, being human. And it was very important for me to showcase that behind these burqas are real life women, just doing their thing. And whether or not they decide to wear the burqa, we must be mindful of the person under it. I was interested in having conversations about that and creating this 'story.' I don't think it is something I will do today, or that it has aged well, based off of where Afghanistan is now, and how women are treated currently. Women have always, in Afghanistan for a very long time, have seen a lot of oppression, so for me creating the Burqa Babe series was to say they are babes, they are women, and they are bad-ass and I want to talk about them and see them as human and bring light to them and that was something that was very controversial. Like very religious people…or people who claimed to be Muslim but then like practiced Islam in a way that is not necessarily talked about in the Quran when it comes to how women should be treated, just being "this is haram to do, this is haram to portray a woman in this kind of way," like "a woman should be sangeen." What does this mean, sangeen,, like a rock. A woman should not be viewed in these kinds of ways, and it's funny, I would get these kinds of comments from people in Canada and in America and it was weird.*

Depicting these women in burqas, "being women, being human," led to a lot of controversy within these spaces on Instagram. For me, this underscores her activism: her art retaliates against the perception of Afghan women in the media as women who need to be saved, women who are represented as one-dimensional.

Anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod writes in her book *Do Muslim Women Need Saving*? that in laying out “women’s dreams, desires, anger and disappointments, in their own words,” she hopes “to lay to rest some stereotypes” (2013, 5). The content creators on Instagram whom I interviewed share these intentions. “Saving” narratives are based on the presumption that "because Muslim women dress in a certain way, they are not agentic individuals or cannot speak for themselves" (Abu-Lughod 2013, 9). Abu-Lughod emphasises, like the feminists I talked to, that her interlocutors are not "ignoring the abuses the women suffer; to the contrary, they are suggesting we ought to talk to them to find out what problems they face rather than treating them as mute garbage bags"(9). Similarly, Negine does not deny the challenges Afghan women are experiencing. She acknowledged that in the news coming out of Afghanistan the current government, under the Taliban regime, is “deliberately depriving” girls of schooling, and has made head coverings, like the Burqa, mandatory for all women (Al Jazeera 2024; Hadid 2022). Yet she points out through her art on Instagram these women are heterogenous and underlines the importance in challenging mainstream media’s representation of these people as either pious women, with no depth beyond their religiosity, or passive women who are actively subjugated by the men in their communities. Her activism and feminism relate to that of Hiba’s within this same space. Through their own activities—their own practices of speaking out and creating art to call out injustices and cultural taboos— they not only open up new avenues for more people to engage in what being South Asian means, cultivating a space to discuss identity, but they protest common misconceptions; their very existence as vocal, loud, politically active women is contradictory to what the status quo is for the “good girl.” Their creatives works exemplify what Karsgaard referred to as the public pedagogical potentials in these “counter-hegemonic” publics on Instagram.

Challenging Islamophobia as non-religious, culturally Muslim activists

In her essay "Mobilizing the politics of invisibility," Amira Jarmakani recalls discussing Arab feminism with her barista in the early 2000s. The barista said that it seemed like an oxymoron to her. Jarmakani writes that, in the face of "popular misinformation" about them, SWANA American women seek to "simultaneously…define our realities as well as obscure the issues we consider to be pressing" (2022, 103). The perception that the feminism of Arabs (commonly used to refer to not just Arabs, but people from the SWANA region and all Muslims generally) is oxymoronic "gains credibility against the back group of the US official discourse about the 'war on terror' which appropriates feminist logic in order to justify militarism and neoliberal imperialism" (ibid). The idea that Arab feminists could not possibly exist, specifically within the context of the early 2000s, was an idea that was ultimately "framed and bolstered by the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, cast[ed] by the Bush administration as a project of liberation meant to save Afghan women from the oppression of the Taliban" (Jarmakani 2022, 104). This context is important to acknowledge because not only are feminist activists tasked with dealing with it, which they try to do by asserting their agency on social media and taking control over their own representation for an American audience, thus deconstructing the mainstream narrative; but they also challenge the real resistance to their feminism that exists in their own communities, coming from many directions. Negine called "weird" the fact that much of the retaliation against her artwork came from those in the diaspora, not those in South Asia. As I will describe in Chapter 3, the majority of the hate within their communities also came from the diaspora.

Her and other interlocutors' feminist project, as outlined here, is de-colonial in the context of American imperialism justifying invasion into Afghanistan in the name of women, as a kind of civilizing mission which "capitalizes on the image of exotic, oppressed women who must be saved from their indigenous (hyper) patriarchy" (Jarmakani 2022, 104). These activists deconstruct this narrative by, one,

being Muslim women who are active in the construction of their image by cultivating a space on social media for themselves and, two, taking part in a process of educational labour. They challenge the appropriation of feminist logic which would make this geopolitical conflict the "white woman's burden," or that the American burden is to save these women. As women from these regions, my participants actively discuss, as showcased above, the misogyny prevalent in their community that seeps into their comment sections. That being said, they also deconstruct these monolithic typified generalizations of the "Arab world" or the "Muslim world" (Jarmakani 2022), and their very commentary—in their arguments—the disagreement and clashing is also a spectacle for outsiders that enacts the diversity of opinions.

I return again to the point that most of my participants underscored the important and foundational role their spirituality plays in their lives in the interviews. When asked about identity and community, they discussed concepts of religion and spirituality. Religious practices and understandings of the world are part of their beliefs. Talking about and practicing religion became a form of activism in and of itself for many of them. To be a Muslim woman, while presenting as someone who directly contradicts mainstream stereotypes of Muslim women by having a loud, confident, activist voice, being well read, a creative, and living however she wants as whoever she wants to be, is a form of resistance in itself.

Once her post on brown boy misogyny went viral, Hiba thought that she could finally pursue her goal of being a writer and writing about movies and dramas.

> *There is not a lot of Pakistani writers out there who focus on the Pakistani entertainment industry (in English) or the music industry and I thought 'well know I finally have a chance to like show everyone what I know and learn from this and collaborate with people.' Then after that, my second post, which was not very smart of me, was a historical timeline of Kashmir and how the genocide started and how the occupation started. And I got doxed by a Hindu Nationalist, which again, they leaked my old address, I don't live in New York anymore so it was a nice try. That one I could not really tolerate, I got so angry and would read all the comments and archived the post a few months ago because I was still getting weird dm's about it.*

This post on the occupation of Kashmir, now archived, pieced together much of the commentary of a subgroup of left-leaning activists. Their rhetoric and information focus on how India has actively occupied the state of Kashmir and is a colonizing entity (Kanjwal 2023). The expansion of Indian territorial sovereignty in Kashmir and the denial of Kashmir self-determination, plus the fact that Kashmir, a Muslim majority state, is ultimately disputed between India and Pakistan, has increasingly heightened religious tensions (Kanjwal 2023). These commenters identify as Muslim or culturally Muslims (coming from Muslim families but not necessarily practicing the religion), which is important in the context of these participants actively naming Hindu-Nationalists for the hate they receive, especially in speaking about Kashmir. Her viral post on brown boy misogyny had put her on this radar, and she perceived that making a politically contentious post discussing Kashmir right after that one added more fuel to the fire. Hindu-nationalists used the fact that she was Kashmiri and a woman to discredit her, Hiba told me, positioning her as someone who is "by-nature" inferior, and therefore wrong. She laughed off these statements, but she followed this by saying that she took some time off. Since then, much of her infographic work, while still politically centered, is more action oriented, like fundraising for charities, and she spends the rest of her time talking pop culture.

The way my mommy does it: authenticity and food

When asked about who predominates amongst those hating on their accounts, my participants replied that, while men took the number spot for one comment-section haters and account lurkers, specifically men within the diaspora, women within the diaspora seemed to rank second place. I was initially surprised to find out that much of the hate was coming from the diaspora. Before doing this study, I assumed that it would be non-South Asian / SWANA folks or those living in those countries "back home," or if there was hate coming from the diaspora, it would be from the older generation. A majority

of my participants stated that this was not the case, however, that, in fact, much of this hate was coming from their peers within the diaspora.

Mirriam is an Afghan-American writer, lawyer, and Afghan cook with more than 100,000 followers on Instagram, runs a page dedicated to cooking Afghan food for a largely English-speaking young diaspora audience to help them get in touch with their culinary heritage. She told me that while growing her social media account, food, which she saw as a means to foster community and connection, began to spark discontent and division instead. What used to serve as, in the words of Dhrupadi Chattopadhyay and Samrita Sengupta Sinha (2025, 1), "adhesive for community building" and help shape "slippery identities" became a source of conflict. She said that in the process of growing her account on social media, she noticed her comment sections becoming a food and identity-based battleground, which—in keeping with her comments below—she related to a "mindset of scarcity."

Within the Afghan community, specifically in the diaspora, everyone has a different take on every dish, which often led to people debating the authenticity of her dish in the comments section because it was different from the way their moms made it. In an interview she commented:

> *So yesterday, I made a video on Shir Chai (milk tea). I'm not gonna claim this as Afghan Shir Chai. This is how I make it in my house for my mommy and my daddy. This is what we do. Because this idea that there is only one way to make chai feeds into that same mindset of, that there is only room for one. There is only room for two Afghan cookbooks, that there is no room for you. If you do things differently, there is no room for you.*

Her page is filled with recipe videos for foods from Afghanistan and some other South Asian countries. These videos are structured in a very specific way. She does a voice-over about what she is making, which the video depicts. She does not provide a detailed description of what she is doing in the video, although the recipe is in the caption. The voice-over, in her words "is about whatever story we are telling and the food is just used as a vehicle." She has gained thousands of followers in the process of this short-form video making (30 seconds to 2 minutes) on Instagram and TikTok. In the interview, she

tells me that her mission behind this page, after some introspection and analysis of the creative work she and her team (family/friends) did in the process, "had nothing to do with food. The purpose of this channel is to create an environment that helps people reconnect to their own history and their own culture and re-write and reclaim their own narrative." She works to challenge the idea that making food the way you want takes away its authenticity in relation to where we are from.

> *I think that has, number one, put Afghanistan in the position that it is in where we are closing things off, shutting things down and fighting about the detail of the dumbest shit ever. You know? Someone wrote on my thing, and I feel the need to respond, "your onions are cut too big." And I say well fuck you mother fucker I'm not cooking for you. I get offended by that, and then I have to remember like, that is a really closed mindset. It comes from a place where they have decided that there is only one way. And I get it to a certain extent. If all you have left is the food, and if someone altered that, they basically altered who you are, which, in my opinion, it is okay. I think Afghans would do so much better if we allowed ourselves to accept the fact there are other Afghans who do things differently from us and they are still just as Afghan as we are…And how shameful is that your identity rest on the one way to make Chai. Your own identity, who you are, rests on how to make a certain dish one way, the way your family did it. You don't have 7 ways to make it. The Italians have 9000 ways to make pasta, you only have one way to make sheer chai and no wonder your…you have nothing, that's it, if you don't do it that way it's not correct. We don't have a cuisine, a methodology, we don't have a system, we just have the way my mom did it and that's the only way it should be done. And if you do it differently, you're wrong.*

To the people in the comment section, each ingredient in a dish holds much importance. Prior to this interview, I had not considered the way in which one's identity could rest on the way food is cooked. Yet, as outlined by Nadia Seremetakis (2019, 2), the "senses are entangled with history, memory, forgetfulness, narrative and silence." Food, as experienced, "carries the embodied memory of a shared cultural and social history of a particular community" and in these embodied memories "follows people, practices, and cultures as they migrate around the globe" (Grgic and Höglund 2024, 294). To eat in a certain way "becomes a way to preserve, negotiate, or forsake the tastes and relationships of a certain culture, and thus to ascertain or abandon the validity of this culture" (Grgic and Höglund 2024, 294). Through the nostalgia induced by a peach in Greece that she can no longer find or experience, Seremetakis writes that the younger generation hears stories of food from the older generation and the

food of the homeland, of the past, is "digested through memory and language" (2019, 2). Food, in this way, becomes a spatial-temporal site where sensations produced through a food, whether it be a fruit or a dish, can be "concocted to generate replicable experiential nostalgia (Chattopadhyay and Sinha 2024, 2). If the food does not fit that narrative, then its authenticity it put into question and challenged. One's memories and the experience of one's own personal history is, in a way, challenged. The social media environment in which this confrontation takes place is one where everyone's page is crafted by themselves and uplifted by the affordances of the platform to reflect personal interests. This context perhaps intensifies how hard it can be to consume and digest seeing things that challenge our perceptions and views on the world and ourselves. In a way, Mirriam is gaining from this, as more engagement—good or bad—is, in a way, good. Engagement tells the algorithm to push her video to other users, reaching more people. Furthermore, hate comments reflects some interest in the discussion. Interest in the topic leads users to comment. Thus, as Mirriam pointed out, when one's identity is closely tied to the way one thinks a certain food is prepared, it is understandable why some might react negatively when they see alternative methods showcased on social media, especially when these posts receive a lot of views and likes in the face of little representation or presence of one's culture.

Shamayel, an American artist and activist, also mentioned the importance of food in our interview. She spoke about how to be positive in the face of power structures that work to marginalize, specifically feeling proud to be where you are from despite that being a war-torn region that is consistently painted by imperialistic powers as "barbarian and backwards." She states:

> *There are problems in government, there has never been problems with the people. Never a problem with our land, look at our food, the quality of our food, that is the indication of something, I think. That our land is pure, that there is something very beautiful happening in our land. Cause Fruit doesn't taste like that anywhere else in the world, I have never seen that, that is something divine."*

To believe that there is "something divine" in food could mean that to "change" it would be sacrilegious. Food is like a conversation with past generations, with ourselves. But as Mirriam points out, it is always

changing. These conversations and discussions led her to do some research, some "in-depth going over" the ingredients that make up "Afghan cooking."

> *It required me to figure out where we get tomatoes, how did tomatoes get to Afghanistan. And in order to know that you have to research the history of Afghanistan and who came through…where did they come from? I had no idea we had governors in Kandahar that were from Georgia, not the state of Georgia because that didn't exist then. There we also had ones that were Portuguese, and they went all over specifically from the New World, and it is from the New World we got tomatoes. This is why we have romi (tomato). Romi is like the essence of Afghan food. When I put a romi in my korma, people in other places go crazy, saying we don't do that, but that is the essence of our korma. Why, because there were Portuguese people running around in Afghanistan in the 1600. My mind, my borders got so much bigger, it just got bigger, and my identity got bigger, it encompasses so much more.*

Here, she points to the fact that tomatoes, an ingredient now intrinsically tied to Afghan cuisine, is not even indigenous to the land. Yet, it is authentically a staple in almost every dish. She challenges stagnant and reductionist perspectives of identity tied to cuisine and food practices, arguing that food is never made in isolation and always has a larger, social, political, economic, and environmental context. In the case of tomatoes, there are direct ties to trade relations, colonization, and imperialism. Showcasing on her page how food is made and eaten, and that this is always changing, is her activism. The work put forth by Mirriam on Instagram is always taking into consideration the criticism coming from the comment sections or other replies. She persists in showing the way she makes food can be different from what others within the diaspora claim and this does not take away its authenticity. This is how recipe videos challenge common conceptions about ourselves and our relation to the world. She is reframing authenticity, through her engagement with the hate.

Recipes aside, factors like ethnicity can influence perceptions of who is considered more authentic. Ethnic group and caste-based discrimination is so common, especially in comment sections, that I came to see it as an intrinsic and defining quality of these Instagram spaces, not least because racist, classist, and caste-based hatred built was also actively challenged there. Mirriam's positionality as an ethnically Pashtun woman was used in the comment sections to discredit her. The fact she has an

American accent and is in the diaspora was also made out to be unauthentic, by others in the diaspora. This idea of authenticity is tied to how close you are to the homeland, how thick your accent is, even what ethnic group you are a part of. She felt this disparagement deeply. It was something she had personally experienced repeatedly, as she ranted in our interview:

> *What bothers me; people think that just because I am a Pashtun woman I am stupid… or that you are a part of the diaspora and that you don't know anything about Afghanistan or Afghan cooking. It's like that is all we eat. Literally all we eat, so I don't understand why you say we don't know anything about it. And just because I don't have an accent, they take that away from it. You get that from your own people too, it's bad enough you get it from white people…and then there's the people who are the Khorasan people, "we are not Afghan, we are Persian, we are Khorasan." I'm 13% Persian don't come for my Persian-hood.*

This ethnicity-based bigotry, belittling her for being ethnically Pashtun and hitting her with stereotypes of Pashtun women being uneducated and stupid, is persistent throughout the Afghan diaspora. Doing this research, I became aware that it was referred to as "*quam bazi*" in Farsi. The literal definition is "tribal play," but the term is used in the same way as "ethnic-fascism," to describe ethnicity-based discrimination and divisions within the region. The prejudice behind Pashtun women being uneducated is multifaceted but it is tied to the Taliban being mostly Pashtun and recruiting in predominately Pashtun regions of Afghanistan. The Taliban's policies on women's education is reflected in and fuels this prejudice in the diaspora against the whole ethnic group. Further stigmatization comes from the fact that they tend to live in regions that are rural and, destabilized by decades of conflict and war, with very little infrastructure; the infrastructural investment that has happened, such as building roads, has indirectly aided criminalized activities such as opium production (Wigton-Jones 2021). Mirriam is referring to comments predominately coming from "Persian speaking" or Farsi/Dari-speaking Afghans, who tend to be ethnically Tajik (although not always). The "Khorasan people" she brought up is a specific group of people who reject Afghanistan today and relate their identity to Khorasan, the name for the historical region of part of the Iranian plateau that encompasses northeastern parts of Iran, some of the southern

parts of Central Asian countries and most of what is considered modern day Afghanistan.[6] Khorasan, in Persian, is often translated as "there where the sun rises," and is a term used in the history of antiquity in classifying archeological remains of the region, referring to the eastern provinces of the Persian Empire in a time prior to Islamic/Arab colonization when it was inhabited and ruled by Iranian peoples (Marsden 2024, 2).

Mirriam's "Persian comment" also refers to the fact that many Farsi speakers will try to distance themselves from what Afghanistan is today by calling themselves Persian, another word for people who are categorized as ethnically Tajik. This rhetoric is in direct conversation and retaliation against the dominant stereotype and representations of Afghans, which has become internalized. 'Persian' is often used to exotify and glamourize the region that is in some ways already shrouded in mystery, but also to distance oneself from the terrorism and war that takes place there. Furthermore, it is used to separate from Islam, to bring nostalgia and romanticise a pre-Islamic/Arabic conquest of the region and to distance oneself from the ways this region is portrayed in mainstream media and discourses, where Islam equals to barbarism and savagery and terrorism. Mirriam is thus pointing to the islamophobia she experiences. The "haters" internalized islamophobia is often coupled with a desire for authentic, relatable representation. Constantly aware of the way others are perceiving them, they want to change narratives, although they are, to all appearances, unaware of the ways in which they are actively engaging in those same narratives.

The work the activists do—their public pedagogical work—challenges this insensibility. The hate they face is, ironically, fueled by their detractors' care and frustration with a lack of recognition. The love and care one has for the food eaten growing up is intrinsically tied to who one is. Specific food

[6] This is my own understandings as someone who is from the community. See also https://theconversation.com/khorasan-why-many-afghanistan-citizens-are-pushing-back-against-the-terms-association-with-terrorism-231985

dishes function as “doing, behaving and showing” or in other words, performing, “typical signifiers of ethnic identity” (Dalal 2024, 298). Authenticity, to the haters, is expressed as a replication and preservation of the past (ibid). Mirriam’s chai is not “Afghan tea” because it does not reflect the memories and practices they part take in, making what they consider “Afghan tea.” To Mirriam, diasporic authenticity is not through the preservation or replication of the past, “but through the constant recreation and reinvention” (Dalal 2024, 298). As Mirriam communicates on her page, authenticity is preserving culture by adding who you are today, leading her to make dishes like Afghan Mac and Cheese, Afghan Pizza, Pasta or Afghan Pancakes, all classic American dishes but with an “Afghan twist,” which can mean different spices or ingredients on hand. As Dalal (2024) states, “authenticity in diaspora is, therefore, unique and individual, and an embodiment of personal history” (298).

Stuart Hall discusses the importance of representation in media and the "unstable nature of cultural identities" (Clini 2021, 2). Specifically, Hall states, "we cannot speak for very long with an exactness about ‘one experience, one identity,’ without acknowledging its other side, the ruptures and discontinuities which constitute, precisely, the Caribbean's uniqueness. Cultural identity…is a matter of *becoming* as well as *being*; it belongs to the future as much as to the past" (Hall 1990, 225). Though written within the context of Caribbean Black British identity, one can apply this understanding to other BIPOC diasporic experiences. Hall argues that "cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. However, like everything historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous play of history, culture, and power" (Hall 1990, 225). Here he points to the fact that cultural identities and perceptions of one's history and self are constantly transformed, not informed, by a static linear past. Our identities are the names "we give to the different ways we are positioned by and position ourselves within the narratives of the past" (Hall 1990, 225). Mirriam's work exemplifies this with her recipes on @afghancooks. She questions the

concept of cultural authenticity and continues to assert that what she does, as a South Asian woman, is part of the South Asian diasporic identity, even if that means dipping her pizza into chutney.

The haters in Mirriam's comment sections position themselves as gatekeepers of the hall of acceptable representation for others to indulge in and consume as content. Critiquing how she prepares the food, whether it is actually "Afghan" enough since it is so different from the way their parents or grandparents made it, is a way to show that, one, they have an idea of what the dish looks like or how to make it, and, two, this content is not made for them. Their comments seem always to posit an external audience, another spectator constantly in mind who is non-Afghan. What will this other viewer, who knows very little about this particular region, think? If a video recipe does not reify everything they already think they know, the content is no longer valid. As came up multiple times in my interview with Mirriam, the idea of scarcity vibrates through the words and practices of the critics. In their words and actions, it is evident that they think there is a limited amount of space for acknowledgment and representation, and ultimately to be themselves. However, Mirriam challenges this notion and continues to pursue her passion for creating and cultivating a space for discussion and learning.

One theme that was consistent for all of my participants was the hate they got for being a woman on Instagram. Misogyny seeped in from hateful comments, criticisms, and attacks on them on their posts or in direct messages. Every now and then, they would post a screenshot on their stories. For Madina, just like Mirriam, much of the hate attacked her for her knowledge, questioning whether she was a reliable enough source. Upon further inspection, this was ultimately based on her positionality as a woman and a Pashtun woman. Negine expected hate and judgement and she spoke about how sometimes she would not post certain images in the hope of not drawing attention to herself. While much of the hate she received came from her extended family, conversations about the stigma and

taboos coming from the wider Afghan community fueled much of the hesitation behind posting more about herself and her creative work.

Creative production in and of itself, and the focus the creative work tends to take, play an important role in shaping these discussions (Fadda 2022, 164). Shamayel in our interview discussed that because of her art, she no longer has a relationship with much of her family.

> *Sometimes I have a little bit of resentment towards Afghan male artists in whatever capacity they are working in, and however they are positioned, and their positionality in the world. I found myself in the past few years, thinking about how I have lost family members over my art. My mother has stopped speaking to me for years at a time because of my art. I want to talk about the nuances of that within my own personal life. It's interesting that my mother, the person that lives in the US was so unsupportive against my father who was in Kabul who was "do everything, always"…It didn't matter who would disown me, it is a reality to Afghans in general but a lot more so for Afghan women. I am not the only woman in Afghanistan who paints nude women, I am not the first…there is more critique given to women, and it permeates into our personal life. It will affect the rest of my life, in a way that I don't know if all Afghan male artists can completely understand. I don't know if a male artist thinks about a statement they are making and think about if that will prevent them from getting a wife in the future. And I don't want to do colonized mentalities, that is a fact that goes on around the world regardless. That's one way that I see it.*

When she says colonized mentalities: she is referring to the ways Afghan women are victimized in the media to justify the invasion of Afghanistan, as I have described. She specifically says that this type of misogyny permeates "around the world," and does not want to fall into those specific stereotypes and repeat the same narratives. That being said, the problems that she faces, as a woman, is something a man within her field, from the same background, will never understand. The level of scrutiny she experiences—from her mom disowning her for making art that is deemed scandalous and to worrying about her future marriage prospects as a result—is central here. She then goes on to say that she will not change.

Chapter Three. War on Gaza and Self-Care

Throughout graduate school, I got in the practice of going on long walks in my neighbourhood, just off campus. A part of that walk was going to Starbucks to get a cold brew to motivate me and fuel me to keep going. The intensification of the war on Gaza after October 7, 2023, and the subsequent mobilization initiated by Pro-Palestinian activists calling for a boycott, divestment, and economic sanctions (BDS) of companies and organizations that aid Israel (which, in turn, carries out a war on Gaza) led to many people to consider the ways in which their countries, and the institutions and organizations they fund, participate in a war they are morally against.

The Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) for Palestine movement provides a list of what companies activists should boycott in solidarity to end Israel's oppression of Palestinian citizens. The BDS movement seeks to empower individuals to confront all forms of complicity in Israel's system of oppression, including corporate involvement ("Get Involved" 2024). Corporations that are implicated in international crimes, as identified by organizations like the International Court of Justice (ICJ), should be held accountable according to this movement (ibid). This accountability is primarily pursued—as the name suggests—through boycotts, divestment, and economic sanctions initiated by public mobilization. According to the BDS movement coalition, these organizations are complicit due to their connection to Israel's unlawful occupation, racial segregation, and apartheid regime against the Palestinian people, all feeding acts of genocide ("Get Involved" 2024). The BDS website states, "direct complicity includes providing military, security, technological, financial, logistical, or infrastructure support" ("Get Involved" 2024, para. 2).

Activists on Instagram that I engaged with for this research posted and reposted educational and informative content on both their main pages and Stories, detailing, in a concise and accessible format, how the American government, through citizens' tax dollars and institutions such as universities across

the world, aid and abet Israeli military operations. Some of these companies listed in these posts are McDonalds, SodaStream, the Disney+ streaming service, and Chevron.

As a researcher in this space, I knew that Starbucks is not directly apart of the official BDS list. An unofficial boycott was initiated, however, after Starbucks distanced itself from its union when they made a pro-Palestinian comment on X in the weeks after October 7. This moral boycott was encouraged for every pro-Palestinian leftist activist not on the BDS coalition website but on social media. Holding a Starbucks cup paints a clear image of one's personal politics. According to the TikTok Data Center, the hashtag #boycottstarbucks has been used to create tens of thousands of videos that have gained millions of views (Frau 2023). Almost every BDS-related infographic shared by participants either mentioned Starbucks or the effectiveness of boycotts for social and political change was discussed in relation to Starbucks in the comment section. Reposted on the stories of one of my participants, who wishes to remain anonymous, was a screenshot of a comment responding to someone writing "boycotts don't work." This commentor responded by stating "okay, why would you support a company that supports the systematic murder of children then?" That comment had over 2000 likes, while the former only had around 50. The Starbucks that I and many other students would frequent, just off campus, was visibly emptier than usual post-November 2023. In December of 2023, Starbucks had a lost nearly 12 billion US dollars in value, erasing 9.4 percent of company's earnings, and this was partly because of boycotts that were initiated and boosted by activists like those I studied (Stewart 2023).

In this chapter, I discuss the ethical dilemmas that arise out of being an activist on Instagram. Through the case study of the war on Gaza that took place after October 7, 2023, collecting data through interviews and digital ethnographic research within these activist spaces, I showcase how both content creators and their followings participated in activism for Palestinians, particularly through making what I call "virtue demands." I also discuss the concept of self-care and how it corresponds to being an

activist within this space, and how doing the "right thing" for these activists can go alongside their understanding of self-care.

Virtue Demands

An implicit question or underlying accusation in much of what I observed on Instagram was if someone was truly a righteous activist. For instance, were they sufficiently pro-Palestinian in the context of the horrific scenes coming out of the livestreamed war on Gaza, or were their activist posts for financial, social and cultural capital? Independent of the war on Gaza and the activism it garnered on Instagram, activists were always questioned for their authentic support for marginalized people. On the flip side, activists themselves used this same rhetoric in their process of continuously urging people to act justly "because it is the virtuous thing to do," whether that be to repost and share educational content, sign a petition, go to protests, or call and email representatives to hold governmental bodies accountable. These demands for virtuous action made by both the followers and the content creators defined much of the pro-Palestinian outreach.

I draw on Michel Foucault's four-fold analytic for examining ethical formation to conceptualize the virtue demands made by and of activists on Instagram.[7] Although Foucault did not use the term

[7] The anthropological work on virtue ethics has been rooted largely in the work of Alasdair Macintyre (Laidlaw 2014). His definition of virtue, as echoed by other anthropologists like Thomas Widlok is outlined as "an acquired human quality, the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods" (2012, 187-188). This definition creates a distinction between the intrinsic goods entailed in virtuous practice from specific goals, which MacIntyre calls "external goods" (Widlok 2012, 188). According to Widlok, there are different sets of virtues "arguably one for every subculture, or even for every thinker, religion, culture, time period, occupational group, political movement and so forth" (2012, 192). The reality of different virtues in the context of late capitalism "does not invalidate the more fundamental claim that virtues are constituted by intrinsic goods enshrined in practices" (ibid). The notion of virtue as explained by Thomas Widlok is that any given scenario is "one of constantly attuning one's attitude in reference to the ethical demands of changing situations and the possibility of deriving moral reflections from this engagement, potentially at all times but necessarily at any time" (196). Building on Macintyre's understanding, he suggests that while we cannot generalize about any particular situation, "we typically encounter people concerned with ethical concerns based on a link between ethical actions and intrinsic goods and with the virtuousness of the people around them" (197).
Cheryl Mattingly (2012) articulates two theoretical positions in the field of virtue ethics which are important in anthropology: a first-person humanist framework and a post-structuralist Foucauldian framework. Mattingly argues that in anthropological

virtue ethics himself, Jonathan Mair argues convincingly that this analytic helps anthropologists interested in how people shape their own malleability toward outcomes, some of which are "good (happy, virtuous) and others regrettable (vices)" (2023, 65). As I will elaborate below, this is a central concern for anti-racist activists of color on Instagram, for whom it is imperative to take a stand.

According to Foucault, there are four questions that arise in any project that concerns ethical cultivation, which he "regards as the four aspects that make up any reflective relationship with the self: 1) ethical substances, 2) mode of subjectivation, 3) work or ascesis and 4) telos or the final goal at which cultivation aims" (Mair 2023, 79). Ethical substance refers to that with which "the individual has to constitute this or that part of themselves…the prime material of their conduct" (Rabinow 1997, xxix). One might say that for the activist subjects of Instagram, this substance is predominately attention. With the abundance of information coupled with techniques designed into social media to manipulate attention through built-in digital distractions, ad-driven platforms, and addictive use patterns, attention has become a valuable commodity (Jablonsky et al. 2022). As argued by Rebecca Jablonsky, Tero Karppi, and Nick Seaver (2022), "information is used to lure, entice, and affect us, turning the body's capacity to be drawn into attention into both a resource and a problem" (235). In this landscape, utilizing attention-grabbing devices and creating your own (similar to how many have employed infographics and sharing techniques as discussed in Chapter 1) can enable one to focus on what one considers to be more

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work the two are often "muted or blended together," despite major differences in vocabulary, and sketches their overlap (2012, 178). Both posit that a "moral decision or action cannot be determined through some universal set of roles, procedures or reasoning processes…rather, the moral is always historical, always shaped by social contexts" (Mattingly 2012 164). Further, what is considered moral in "any society is dependent upon the cultivation of virtues that are developed in and through social practices" (ibid). They point to how (Mattingly 2012, 164): "[The] moral is centrally bound up with practices of self-care and self-cultivation; it is not captured by espoused beliefs but rather involves the emotions, the body, everyday activity. It is integral and pervasive aspect of social life…the moral is a communal enterprise; there are no persons here who are independent of the practical communities which shape the technologies of virtue and the aspirations about the good life to which individuals ascribe." These two post-enlightenment frameworks of virtue ethics reject moral traditions rooted in secular humanisms of the enlightenment like deontological or utilitarian thinking. Drawing on both, Mattingly (2012) outlines an ethical framing for anthropology that is situated within "practice, foregrounding practices necessary to develop practical wisdom and a virtuous character" (164).

important, like bearing witness to the war on Gaza. Further, being able to control where one dedicates one's time and attention, becomes a revolutionary act. One's attention is constantly brought to the forefront within the South Asian/SWANA diasporic activist space. To focus on the war, to bear witness to the photos of these atrocities in Gaza was to show that one truly cared and stood in solidarity with the oppressed and actively challenged the status quo that preserved the oppression. The shared basis of many of the demands made by and of activists was to give one's attention to the war.

The second category, mode of subjectivation, is described as "the way in which an individual establishes his relation to the rule and recognize himself as obligated to put it into practice" (Foucault 1990, 27). Mair (2023) focuses on how Foucault presents a given mode of subjectivation by asking the question: under what obligations does a person see themselves as a "result of being the kind of thing I am" (79). Subjectivation thus refers to how "subjects are formed in power relations including how the self-acts on and shapes itself" (Laidlaw 2014, 101). The question the second category asks is "what are the ways in which people position themselves in relation to their ideals or injunctions or rules?" (Laidlaw 2014, 104). The "mode of subjectivation" of these Instagram activists is shaped by their understanding of the space they occupy. They are self-proclaimed feminists representing marginalized individuals and have a history of advocating for other marginalized groups both on and off social media. A glance at their Instagram pages highlights this legacy of activism. By standing in solidarity and showing compassion for oppressed people everywhere, these feminists embody the belief that "we are not free until everyone is free." Everyone includes Gaza and to be silent would make them seem disingenuous altogether. This representation-of-compassion/representation-in-solidarity is the mode in which they train their attention and defines their mode of subjectivation.

The third category is ethical work, outlined as the practices that are employed to bring about the transformation of the subject, certain regimes of daily activity, for instance (Mair 2023, 83). The

cultivation of virtue focuses on, in many respects, the importance of reflection; of particular importance for the Instagram activists is the way in which this may “involve introspection, or it may be a case of producing an externalized account of one current state in the form of journal or confession” (Mair 2023, 83). Ethical work can also encompass a wide range of actions or the decision to refrain from action that are believed to contribute to the transformation of human beings (ibid). Many contemporary virtue ethicists emphasize virtue by adhering to the Aristotelian principle that "virtue is perfected through the practice of virtue" which ultimately suggests that there is "no real distinction" between what one does to achieve excellence "and the manifestation of that excellence" (Mair 2023, 83). The ethical efforts of the Instagram activists I studied encompass a range of such activities, including introspective work that involves educating themselves about the historical, political, social, and environmental context of the Israel/Palestine issue. They also challenge common misconceptions about the conflict in Gaza, particularly in response to criticisms regarding the discrepancies in media reporting (Jackson 2024). They share this educational content on Instagram in an accessible format that is friendly to online activism. Their efforts also include signing petitions and emailing representatives to advocate for international humanitarian rights, particularly in light of the ruling by the International Justice Court in 2024 (Fassin and Elliot 2025). These actions are encouraged by many of their followers and other content creators in this space. Engaging in this ethical work is expected if one considers themselves a "righteous activist" on the "right side of history," a phrase frequently mentioned by my interlocuters during interviews with me and on many others Instagram.

The fourth ethical construct is the *telos* or the final goal at which ethical cultivation aims. This category asks the question what kind of person the cultivator wants to be: “pure, commanding, free, master of itself, rational, immortal, or self-extinguishing?” (Laidlaw 2014, 104). The goal of these Instagram activists is to be “righteous activists.” Their posts showcase their commitment to the

oppressed around the world, and their experiences as marginalized individuals, woven into their content, enhances their credibility in discussing important issues. Being a righteous activist involves raising awareness about the war in Gaza, particularly against the backdrop of ongoing censorship and silencing campaigns (Fassin and Elliott 2025). Choosing silence and neglecting to address important topics on their platforms, which have garnered a substantial following due to their activist efforts, would reveal that they are not as they claim to be. It would suggest that their true intentions lie not in promoting awareness about global issues or platforming the voiceless, but rather in advancing their own careers by building an online presence.

These four categories positioned together work to "constitute an analytic ethical reasoning and practice" (Laidlaw 2014, 104), which in my research was undertaken in relation to a group of fellow activists and followers. The principal virtue demand made in this context was to take a stand, and during the time of my fieldwork, this meant a stand on Gaza. If one identified as an activist who stands for marginalized communities, if one considers oneself anti-racist and advocate for women and those affected by systems of oppression, then one must address the war on Gaza. This assumption underlay these activists' calls to action. Ethical work is performed and demanded by these activists, such as reposting, sharing, educating oneself, and taking that initiative to learn more about what affects oneself and others in the wider context of living under neoliberalism, dominated by American imperialism.

This activist enactment of south-to-south relationality (Gopinath 2018) and the dictum that "we are not free until everyone is free" is what I call a virtue demand and is made by both influencer activists and their activist followers. Instagram activists are required to take a stand by interacting with posts, sharing them, taking the time to engage with the content they put out there; otherwise, they face accusations that they do not truly care about the activism. In the context of making virtue demands, including their own calls for people to act as activists and take a stand by helping them share more

information through those online techniques in the face of censorship campaigns, they are faced with accusations (directly and indirectly) of being disingenuous. This came up in our interviews, when discussing finances and what they gain from these spaces. Users accuse them of riding on movements to gain "clout" or a larger following, which is translated into social and cultural capital (which can then turn into financial capital) (Bourdieu 1984, 1986).

As discussed in the book *The Influencer factory: a Marxist Theory of Corporate Personhood on YouTube* by Grant Bollmer and Katherine Guinness (2024), as an influencer, your value on the internet is ultimately determined through the "ability to gain and maintain attention, intimacy, and relatability, and in the social media environment, one's 'success' or 'failure' as an individual, as a person, as a worker is reduced to the instrumental measurement of attention given through metrics supplied by the platform" (1). When influencers focus on sharing, engaging, and interacting, followers are being encouraged to boost their profiles, whether it is educational, and activist-centered or not. When they gain thousands of followers in this context, many become suspicious of their true intentions. Activists explained, as I will go into more detail later in the chapter, how being leftist activists so publicly has hurt their careers within this space. This is a space where an individual's success is limited to "acting not as individuals but as if their existence is equivalent to that of a vertically integration corporation" in a "historical moment" that Bollmer and Guiness call the "Corpocene" (2024, 4).

BDS, activism and "virtue demands"

In late 2023, and throughout 2024, a major event began that completely eclipsed any other topic on my social media. On October 7, 2023, Hamas, a Palestinian militant group that has governed Gaza strip since 2007, crossed into the Israel-held Gaza envelope to kill over a thousand people and kidnap Israeli citizens. Then, Israel initiated its war on Gaza (Hawaleshka 2023). Videos were posted of Hamas

militants attacking Israelis and the violence and atrocities that took place. Israel attacked back, conducting intensive military operations in Gaza, pummelling the region, and killing, at the time of writing this, upwards of 40,000 Palestinian civilians (Al Jazeera 2024; "Human rights in Israel" 2024). According to Al Jazeera, close to 70% of those killed in the war on Gaza were women and children (ibid). 1.8 million of the 2.2 million Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip were displaced from their homes because of Israeli attacks ("Human Rights in Israel" 2024). Instagram, among other social media platforms, was consumed by these atrocities. Photographs and videos by journalist and civilians in Gaza, taken largely by mobile devices, filmed the destruction, the bloody bodies, the crying of mothers for their children, hospitals in utter chaos. Many of these videos were filmed by young Palestinians, between the ages of 18 and 25 (Arafat 2023).

Figure 9: Wardak, Madina (@burqasandbeer) a Story post reshared "US taxpapers funding Israel." Instagram 2023

Mobilization ensued all over the world but specifically from people in the diaspora from West Asia, Central Asia and South Asia in America and Canada. A lot of Instagram activists within this space became entangled with the events in Gaza and news coming out of Israel. Their pages were now deeply discussing this war on Gaza and the history of Palestine and Israel. Many would post on these issues, building off the work done by scholars in this field: Israeli historian Ilan Pappé, Palestinian American scholar Rashid

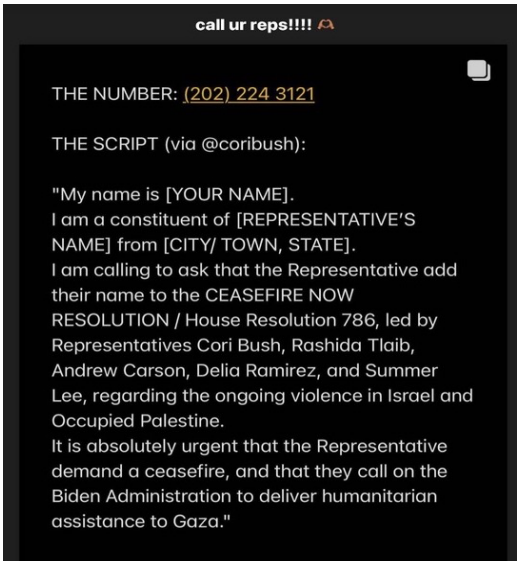

Figure 8: a Story Post reshared by multiple activists (original post by @safiamafia). "a script to read when talking to representatives." Instagram, 2023.

Khalidi, Edward Said, Angela Davis, Nora Erakat, and Sumaya Awad, just to name a few. Posts regarding Palestine captured my entire feed on Instagram. Many posts made and shared by the activists consisted of infographics about Palestine, using academic sources for information about the last 75 years. They also showed how to donate and provided outlines for emails to representatives and politicians to hold them accountable (Figure 9). Activists gave information about boycotting companies against a ceasefire and/or actively supporting Israel's war in Gaza, how to be safe protesting both online and in person, and protests and online security. They underscored the significance of mutually reposting each other's content, particularly that of young Palestinian journalists. This content often includes on-the-ground footage captured on their iPhones depicting the atrocities they witness. By sharing these stories on Instagram, those in Palestine aim to combat what Instagram activists perceive as a widespread censorship campaign. As mentioned earlier, a majority of these videos are produced by journalists and civilians aged approximately 18 to 25, such as Motaz Azaiza, Plestia Alaqad, and Hind Khoudary, who have each amassed millions of followers for their coverage on Instagram of the harrowing experiences they and their community face (Arafat 2023).

Figure 10: @afghancooks. a Story repost of an Infographic "All Out for Palestine," Instagram 2023.

The information these activists so diligently and in timely fashion shared on Instagram connected how Canadians and Americans were contributing to the war, despite living in a different country on the other side of the world. Linking BDS initiatives, the activists posted infographics on how these governments actively fund Israel, which in turn enacts a genocide. Figure 8 is just one example of the posts shared by activist making this connection. Reposted by Madina on her story, she writes "our complicity is astounding, BOYCOTTING is one of the best things we can do" (Wardak 2023). She

presents data from the Institute for Middle East Understanding (IMEU), a non-profit organization which was one of the many that provided fact sheets and infographics on Instagram to aid activists' efforts. This organization primarily works with journalists, offering quick access to information about Palestine and its people, connecting them with expert sources in both the United States and the Middle East (IMEU Policy Project 2024).

The sum of these efforts mobilized many people, especially students on campuses who demanded their universities withdraw from funding Israel or Israeli companies. This was the best known of the many demands made by activists to take action against atrocities happening in Gaza. The subtext of posts like the one shared by Madina is always a call for direct action. In the moral calculus of Instagram activism, to ignore these calls is complicity and there is a social cost to not engaging with such posts (cf. Cialdini 2007 on social costs). Posting infographics and other educational content on Stories during times of political and social turmoil, positions oneself for one's Instagram following.

As a researcher, I chose not to repost content while conducting my fieldwork. To maintain a clear boundary, I identified myself as a content consumer rather than a content creator or reproducer. However, since I was doing research during the conflict in Gaza, I faced expectations from my family and friends to repost information about the war. Previously, I had a habit of sharing infographics, especially those created or shared by my interlocutors. The silence on my Instagram page prompted a call from my cousin, who wanted to discuss the situation in Gaza and my insights in light of my silence. I also received direct messages from distant friends asking why I was viewing and liking their posts but not sharing them. They told me the importance of reposting content to increase visibility in the algorithm, especially during a time of widespread censorship.

The social cost of not posting on social media, especially when one maintains a social media presence as a known political activist, is significant. The posts in this space are filled with phrases like;

"Silence is political, silence is complicity, silence only benefits the oppressor." No other way to interpret silence is acknowledged, other than as selfish and siding with the oppressor. I tried to assure friends and family of my political beliefs, navigating the expectations surrounding my online engagement. This relates back to the second ethical category presented above, the mode of subjectivation of showcasing one's compassion and standing in solidarity: the mode of working on oneself that defines activists within this space.

Figure 10 is a screenshot of Mirriam's (@afghancooks) story, in which she reposts an infographic that includes a link to a separate site. This link redirects users to a document shared by Action Network, which has a website that provides activists with tools to quickly and easily share information and resources online. The document features an overview of the war in Palestine, supported by various sources and links, as outlined in the table of contents. Mirriam expresses her gratitude to the original poster, describing them as someone who is "bringing some light into this darkness." The "darkness" Mirriam refers to encompasses two aspects: first, the horrific atrocities occurring in Gaza, and second, the ongoing censorship campaigns, which I will discuss in more detail in the next section.

The primary focus is on educating oneself. This involves engaging with academic sources and researching terms like "Israeli Apartheid," "Nakba," and "Gaza blockade." It also includes diversifying media consumption by following Palestinian accounts on social media and exploring what are referred to as "non-Western news sources." By doing this, one actively challenges the power structures that aim to keep people uninformed. This pursuit is considered an ethical endeavor in the journey towards cultivating a more virtuous self. Staying updated and engaged with these platforms and current news cycles is

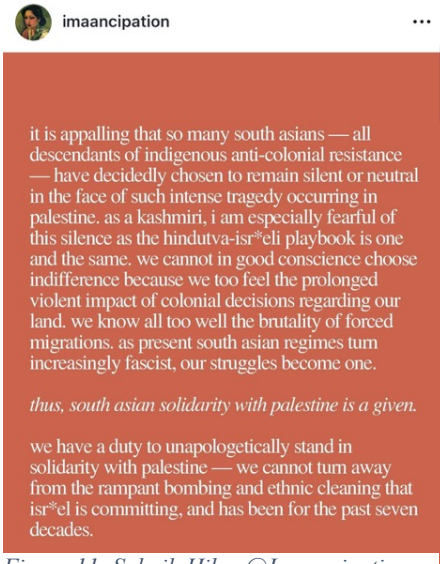

Figure 11: Sohail, Hiba. @Imaancipation "South Asian infographic call to action," Mainfeed post, Instagram 2023.

identified as a top priority for activists. The document Mirriam shared provides numerous free resources for learning about these struggles, helping individuals gain a deeper understanding and move beyond feelings of helplessness.

@Imaancipation (Hiba) made a post calling for South Asian diasporic activists to donate to help funding medical aid to Palestinians. In the slideshow post she states that;

> *It is appalling that so many South Asians; all descendants of Indigenous anti-colonial resistance; have decidedly chosen to remain silent or neutral in the face of such intense tragedy occurring in Palestine. As a Kashmiri, I am especially fearful of this silence as the Hindutva-Isr*eli playbook is one and the same. We cannot in good conscience choose indifference because we too feel the prolonged violent impact of colonial decisions regarding our land. We know all too well the brutality of forced migrations, as present South Asian regimes turn increasingly fascist, our struggles become one. Thus, South Asian solidarity with Palestine is a given. We have a duty to unapologetically stand in solidarity with Palestine - we cannot turn away from the rampant bombing and ethnic cleaning that Isr*el is committing, and has been for the past seven decades.*

Silence (not posting or sharing posts) on "Indigenous anti-colonial resistance" is being complicit with an oppressive, fascist regime. As discussed in Chapter 1, this is understood as south-to-south relationality through anti-imperialistic struggle against fascist regimes. The subtext of posts like these is that they are working to connect marginalized people against their common oppressors. In using the phrase in "good conscience," she underlines the point that South Asians are morally obligated to not be silent.

In the next slide, she uses the term "bearing witness." This phrase was used in the majority of infographics I encountered. The argument presented is that the bare minimum we can do is to look. We must "bear witness" to this genocide, providing eyewitness testimony of the pain, suffering, and denial of freedom experienced by these marginalized people. While this can be emotionally draining, many of the activists within this space argue it can also be rewarding to witness a rallying cry against the dehumanization of marginalized groups, especially as a marginalized person (Kaarsgard 2023, Gerbaudo and Trere 2015). Also, for privileged White Americans and Canadians, engaging with the content in these spaces forces them to confront their preconceived notions about marginalized people (Roden et al.

2022). The sheer virality of many infographics has made more young people aware of these issues. In the context of censorship and erasure, bearing witness can be seen as an honour.

This virtue demand holds even if one has 50 followers on Instagram and that account is private. A righteous Instagram account will still post as many infographics as possible and even very graphic videos of the atrocities and casualties in Gaza to help spread information. The activists I engaged with reiterated to me and online that by reposting these infographics on your story, you are doing a lot for the political cause in demanding a ceasefire and educating people about what has been happening in the region. This ethical work mobilizes one's account into becoming a vehicle to drive more engagement through algorithmic boosts. As discussed by Kelley Cotter (2019), influencers, in the face of shadow banning or other disciplinary content moderation measures dished out by the platform, utilize specific techniques which she calls "playing the visibility game." This includes urging followers to engage through likes, saves and reshares, which tell the algorithm to send a post to more people, since success, in some respects "is determined by the algorithms that govern visibility" (896). This was further confirmed by my participants.

I found that there is a social cost in engaging and not engaging with these posts. Not engaging, according to the activists in this space, means you sign off on a genocide. But engaging in these posts, you are at risk of getting attacked, targeted and silenced by opposing groups on the internet. For example, I heard activists tell me of the doxing they had experienced within these spaces for their posts. This is coupled with other stories of people getting fired from their jobs and/or suspended from schools for being actively pro-Palestinian and demonstrating on the streets and online (Basu 2023). Instagram, a space where one's identity is showcased and cultivated, is also a space where people need to protect themselves in the face of challenges. For instance, the fear of appearing on a watch-list or on Canary

mission's website because of these posts is always present.[8] Canary mission is a non-profit organization with a website that is dedicated doxing, that is, releasing the identifying and personal information of students, professors and organizations that are considered to be anti-Israel or anti-Semitic. Specifically, it says on their website that they "document individuals and organizations that promote hatred of the USA, Israel and Jews on North American college campuses and beyond" ("Canary Mission About Us" 2024). "Hatred of Israel and the US" could translate directly to anyone who has criticized the current practices of these governments; Zionism as a political project and Israel as a nation have worked to make the nation synonymous with Jewish faith, such that people who criticize its government and policies are now accused of being anti-Semitic (Awad and bean 2020, Pappe 2017). Such framings are utilized as a political tool to silence pro-Palestinian activism and also used as a tool to shield Israel from being held accountable for "universal standards of human rights and international law" (Awad and bean 2020).[9] The fear mentioned earlier is communicated indirectly, both through silence and through cryptic techniques aimed at avoiding detection. Sareeta Amrute (2023) proposes "cryptowork" to refer to the specific tactics that diasporic activists use to navigate and protect themselves on a platform. Such cryptowork is undertaken by marginalized communities to protect themselves from hate, which for my interlocutors comes predominantly from self-defined conservative individuals (both men and women) who disagree with them based on differing perspectives. In this context, pro-Palestinian activists employ cryptowork techniques such as intentional misspelling and the use of asterisks to replace letters (Figure 11). These strategies are not only designed to evade search engines used by hate groups but also to avoid detection from content moderation efforts.

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[8] Two of the participants who chose to stay anonymous after our interviews and are as a result, rarely mentioned in this thesis, gave as their reason the harassment they received for being prominent activists on social media during the war on Gaza.

[9] The 2025 Trump administration has taken extensive measures to combat the pro-Palestinian movement, particularly on college campuses. This has included the detainment of non-white and predominantly Muslim students, such as Mahmood Khalil, a recent Columbia graduate and permanent U.S. resident (green card holder), and Rumeysa Ozturk, a Ph.D. student on a scholarship and student visa ("A New Red Scare"). These actions have raised significant legal and free speech concerns regarding campus protests and pro-Palestinian advocacy.

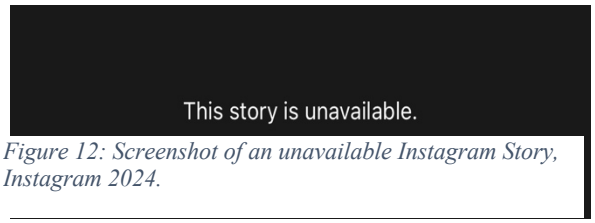

Figure 12: Screenshot of an unavailable Instagram Story, Instagram 2024.

Censorship

In late November of 2023, one month into social media's initial mobilization around the war, I was scrolling through Instagram, swiping through stories, and there seemed to be a lot less posts. Perhaps interest had died down somewhat after the initial wave of news about Gaza. If I actively searched for specific content creators, however, I saw that they were still posting about Gaza, about Palestinians and about protests in major cities in the United States and in Canada. When I tapped on the bubbled icons at the top of the main feed, which indicate that these profiles have uploaded stories, I often encountered a gray screened post with the words displaying the message "this story is unavailable," in the center, instead of the activist's original posts (Figure 12).

I came across some memes that directly addressed this issue, including one shared by one of my participants. It features the character Saruman from "The Lord of the Rings," with his hand over a crystal ball (Figure 13). The caption reads, "instagram.com finding 10K community guideline violations on my account after I post anything remotely pro-Kashmir or pro-Palestine." The implication is that the violations are being fabricated due to a platform's bias, which restricts any content and rhetoric that challenges mainstream news outlets and the dominant narratives.

Figure 13: Anonymous participant: reposted on their story. Instagram, 2024.

Many people faced content restrictions from October 7 to December 2023. According to Human Rights Watch, Meta's moderation practices significantly silenced pro-Palestine voices on Instagram and Facebook during this time. Their report, "Meta's Broken Promises: Systemic Censorship of Palestine Content on Instagram and Facebook," documents the removal and suppression of such content, which would typically be considered

"newsworthy" and protected as a component of Meta's own community guidelines and standards (HRW Committee 2023).

I came across a post while scrolling through my followings that shared an infographic from Human Rights Watch. It informed me that anyone who experienced censorship on Instagram for pro-Palestinian content could submit documented cases. Between October and November, HRW reported over 1,050 takedowns or other forms of content suppression on Instagram and Facebook related to Palestinian human rights abuses following October 7 (HRW Committee 2023). Notably, 1,049 of these cases involved peaceful pro-Palestine content, while only one pertained to pro-Israel material (ibid).

In interviews with my participants, I asked them about their experiences of censorship, shadow banning and other forms of silencing and content suppression. Every single one of them had experiences of shadow banning and content removal for what they talk about. Mirriam, @afghancooks said she got restricted just before our interview.

> *Yesterday I reposted for the first time, instead of just posting on my stories. A couple of Bisans things, and they are on my actual page. I think I posted the guy's message to me, "fuck all of you, you should all leave." I called him a weirdo, and they restricted my account. And now when I try to report his, they keep sending me these emails, "we are looking into this, we are doing this." No, you're not.*

This is just one of the many examples of the social costs users experience by engaging in their ethical activist work. The practice of reposting content from Palestinian journalists, activists and content creators from Gaza was a very common practice amongst activists to increase visibility in the face of content suppression. Mirriam tells me that there is a bias on part of Instagram. She reposted a screenshot of a hate comment she got for reposting content from a pro-Palestinian perspective on the war on Gaza. Instead of the hate commentor (telling her to leave America if she does not agree with the country's foreign policy) getting banned or restricted, she got restricted. When I asked what restricting her account meant, she stated:

> *We rely on their algorithm, and if you look at what they promote in the algorithm, it's almost never going to be a brown woman making food on the internet. You got those brown men making food on the internet, no point, no story, just throw up an onion and sliced, chopped or whatever, or white woman making food on the internet. We are reliant on an algorithm that we can't gain, really. You know, because we require our audience to do things that they won't do, which is interact. You have to hit like, you have to leave a comment, you have to save, you have to share and if you don't do these things you get nowhere. It never gets outside of my followers, that's why I was getting 13 thousand views, 15 thousand views. Now we are kind of moving out and I'm concerned now that because we are being more vocal about Gaza on the actual page, it will decrease the reach and will then mean it will decrease my ability to share on my stories, which I think is a much bigger reach. We have to be really strategic about how you will trick the algorithm, where you are going to do it, where it makes sense to do things.*

Most of her audience comprises young people in the diaspora, providing critical support through reposting and sharing content, which helps expand her reach on social media. As a woman of color, she feels disadvantaged due to the harsh scrutiny faced by marginalized creators, particularly in politically focused work (Are 2022). Attention, as detailed earlier, serves as the ethical substance for many in this space. Mirriam emphasizes the responsibility of followers to take control of their focus and dedicate their time to uplifting others which involves actively engaging through looking, reading, sharing, and commenting. The responsibility for the success of a fellow diasporic woman of color falls on those who engage with her posts and share similar interests to boost their content. Engaging with her content is how audiences support her and uplift marginalized voices, transforming their interactions into acts of solidarity and community building, especially on issues like war, where they serve as activism. She highlighted how restrictions on her content led to reduced visibility, indicating how lack of engagement can effectively silence marginalized voices. "Tricking the algorithm" with community support is the only way out. This is significant context for the virtue demand to repost made by (and of) these content creators. Reposting is made synonymous with allyship and genuine activism, her words underscoring the importance of audience support in this digital space. Good activist practices, showing solidarity within the South Asian diaspora on Instagram, is defined by this, making reposting apart of one's "ethical work" (Laidlaw 2014).

Sitting in an interview with Mina, she commented that while she does not usually monitor the views and the likes of her content, sometimes “it’s so drastic that I can tell.” The next story or main feed post she puts out will have “a fraction of the views and likes.” She goes on to say, “I can tell that 60 people saw a story whereas the day before, 2000 did. So, I will have to do something stupid like post a selfie. It works every time, isn’t that crazy?” She explains to me that another option to get your posts presented to your followers is waiting it out. “They just want you back on the app I suppose.” This is one example of the subversive ways that activists have found and cultivated to combat content moderation that limits their outreach. Something as “stupid” as posting a selfie, in this context, can be considered a part of the ethical work of these activists, all with the intention to bypass invisibility measures and draw attention to the war.

Instagram imposes minor penalties on activists such as this virtual timeout, akin to being sent to one's room. According to my interlocutors, it is routine for Meta to provide little to no explanations for these disciplinary actions. The activists accepted this lack of clarity as normal. As Mirriam described it, she sought to understand why she was restricted after trying to report a man who was sending her racist hate messages due to her support for the Palestinians in Gaza. She received an email stating that they would investigate, but she knew from experience that this was unlikely to be true.

Figure 14: Sohail, Hiba (@imaancipation). "Screenshot of story talking about censorship on instagram when speaking about Gaza." Instagram, October 2023.

These experiences were shared with me during our interviews and were highlighted in their stories as reasons for the importance of sharing content, especially in light of ongoing censorship campaigns. For instance, in Figure 14, Hiba reposts a screenshot illustrating how she is experiencing silencing and

censorship on Instagram. In a post on her Instagram story a week after October 7, she includes a screenshot of a story she wished to post but was unable to, which related to Palestine. She adds that she "could not even post my last story," referring to her main feed post that included an infographic with resources and places to donate. Additionally, there was no other function available that would allow her to repost. There can be various reasons for this issue, whether it is a malfunction on Instagram's end or a poor internet connection on the user's end. In such cases, Instagram displays a "try again" button. But, for Hiba, that option did not exist. A week after October 7, during the early stages of attacks on Gaza, pro-Palestinian content was heavily suppressed. Hiba describes this situation as "$urveillance and cen$orship in real time." Anyone reading this text can easily understand what she means, and the implication that substituting letters is done to avoid detection from algorithmic content moderation systems. In discussing the barriers in posting about Gaza, activists are also calling on Instagram to adhere to its own community standards and guidelines. This trail of evidence of Meta failing to uphold its own standards prompts those who are listening and watching to take a moment to reflect on the context (HRW Committee, 2023). This is a tool for grabbing attention and making virtue demands, demanding activists act righteously and holding accountable those who falsely claim to be righteous.

These are conscious, but largely unspoken decisions which inform other activists of the forces silencing them. The subtext again is to fight against this through all available means. I notice that no one speaks about using these techniques directly. They are something one picks up, in the same way one just picks up slang or phrases one's friend says. In spaces like Instagram, these practices reveal a feeling and belief that accounts are being monitored, such that spelling out certain words will trigger the algorithmic content moderation software. With the increasing use of artificial intelligence and algorithms as a cost-cutting measure and way to streamline operations, and less reliance on human workforces, automated content processing and sorting systems have become normalized (Are 2024). The idea is that no one at

Meta is looking until a post is either actively reported or the automated content processing tools are triggered by certain words is pervasive and widely understood. It informs people's behaviours as they work to spread their content to as many people as possible on these platforms. Nonetheless, it is difficult for users to confront these algorithmic governance tools and to understand what precisely is happening. Tactics like changing a single letter or misspelling a supposedly triggering word are understood through trial and error.

A key aspect of platform governance is content moderation. Without moderation these digital spaces would be unusable. Content moderation is important in keeping platforms safe for users, in trying to rein in sexual harassment, hate speech, discrimination, bullying, and other violent and illegal behaviour on these platforms. However, when these tools are utilized to target specific populations, in arguably unfair and unjust ways, it brings attention to the inconsistencies between Meta's community guidelines and their enforcement. As intimated by the activists, there is very little we know about enforcement policies, and what we know is through the disciplinary measures people in this space have received. These processes of silencing through content moderation are called de-platforming, according to Carolina Are (2024). While Are spoke predominately with influencers, specifically sex workers, this can also be applied to influencer-activists, especially since their success on social media relies heavily on follower interaction. When their posts are not presented to people, they are effectively being de-platformed.

Visibility and attention are politicized. As outlined by Carrie Karsgaard and discussed in the last chapter, social media platforms serve as a "fraught space with pedagogical potential to both reinforce and test the status quo, as public pedagogy is influenced by both platform and user agency" (2023, 10). While the policies of these platforms "legitimate the social order," they ultimately play a "consequential role in the way that particular subaltern communities are built and maintained on Instagram" (ibid).

Users respond to these policies by evading and calling out "disciplinary practices, such as flagging and disabling accounts, through both their posts and their networks, thus working to 'destabilize [the platform's] repressive power'" (Karsgaard 2023, 10). Like Mina said, posting "something stupid" like a selfie in the midst of fundraising posts will get Instagram to push the content. Users' agency in navigating these repressive platform structures points to the platform's potential for dual pedagogy, not only "teaching other users through imagery but also teaching the platform itself" that users will resist what they consider oppressive practices (Karsgaard 2023, 10).[10] Mirriam's perception that she is unjustly targeted by silencing measures because of her positionality is born out when her concerns are not taken as seriously as a white man's by Instagram. The platform is indirectly telling users who is prioritized, what is acceptable and what is not, adding fuel to her activist efforts and virtue demands made to the public.

At the height of the attacks by Israel early in the war, mainstream media like the BBC, the Washington Post and the New York Times wrote primarily in favour of the Israeli side (Johnson and Ali 2024, Jackson 2024). Language was emotive and active when speaking about Israeli deaths, contrasting the passive and neutral language used to describe Palestinians. This was something many activists called out about the news media during this time (Jackson 2024). Madina (@burqasandbeer) shared a meme (comedic tool used to draw more attention to any issue) featuring Peter Griffin from Family Guy, accompanied by a BBC headline about casualties in Gaza and Israel. It reads: "More than 500 people have died in

Figure 15: Sohail, Hiba (@imaancipation). "Story of a repost from @slowfactory on how to spot propaganda" Instagram, Nov, 2023.

[10] In this vein, Karsgaard suggests that people who do not define themselves as activists, using the platform casually, are nonetheless also acting politically, expanding the notion of what is considered photographable, "expressing their agency and self-worth, and celebrating marginalized identities" (2023, 10). Arguably, such expressions also owe something to pressure coming from activists on the platform.

Gaza after Israel launched massive retaliatory air strikes, according to Gaza's health ministry…more than 700 people have been killed in Israel since..." In this image, Peter is at airport security, where a TSA agent holds up a color chart that categorizes skin tones. Instead of labeling them as "okay" and "not okay," the chart reads "killed" and "died," drawing attention to the bias present in major news publications and adding a commentary on what is acceptable under the administration. Again, the ethical substance of attention permeates throughout this space. Posting and engaging with a meme, because of its content, has become a tool to utilize on the road to a more virtuous self.

The sentiment that mainstream media actively worked against reporting the Palestinian perspective was so prevalent that many reposted viral education infographics on how to read news articles and "spot propaganda," as seen in a screenshot of Hiba's Story (Figure 16). Hiba reposted a popular activist account's infographic detailing how one can analyse the news reporting they receive to fish out the bias. Shared in the context of the news and social media coverage of the war on Gaza, just a month after October 7, it lists four forms of bias: use of slurs; use of artificial intelligence to create fake, inflammatory photos; weaponization of pain to justify genocide; and misleading use of language. Posts like this provide others with tools for their ethical work, which is, in this instance, to mine for the truth in the plethora of information with which they are confronted.

Social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok have become key news sources for Gen Z (Hendrickx 2024). Meta has policies to promote news content, such as the Newsworthy Content Policy, where graphic content is allowed on the platform as long as it is deemed newsworthy (Poell et al. 2022). In Canada, however, after the Online News Act or Bill C-18 was published into law in June 2023, Meta banned news on its platforms in the country. The Online News Act requires social media and search engines like Meta and Google to negotiate compensation with online news publishers for accessing their content (Yousif 2023). Online advertising revenue in Canada is around $14 billion. With 80% going to platforms like Instagram and Facebook, and fewer people subscribing to news services because much of the online news content is posted on social media, declining ad revenue jeopardized the financial stability of news outlets. In November 2023, after the bill addressing this situation went into vigor, Google struck a deal with the Canadian government to pay news publishers $100 million annually, ensuring news access for Canadians (Yousif 2023). In contrast, Meta opted to ban news content for Canadian users.

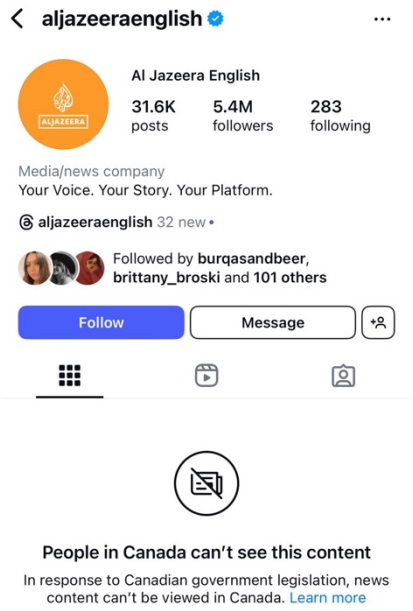

Figure 17: Screenshot by Me. Canadian access to popular online news platforms on Instagram, 2024.

The result was that accounts—from those of independent news publishers and broadcasters to mainstream commercial news publishers like CNN, CBC, and Al-Jazeera—while available and accessible through search engines on Meta's platforms, would not display content to Canadian users (Figure 17). Instead, users are meet with a blocking disclaimer over what is typically the gallery of visual content on an Instagram page. The message states "People in Canada can't see this content. In response to Canadian government legislation, news content can't be viewed in Canada. Learn more." The "learn more" is highlighted in blue, a hyperlink, directing you to the Instagram help site. The information there on why

users cannot share or view news on Instagram does not go into details but indicates that it is a response to this new legislation.

This move on Meta's part had detrimental effects related to its enactment during the war on Gaza. Infographics were still made even though content from official news publications was blocked. This, however, aided misinformation on social media because it became more difficult for users to send verified news material through links. Of course, activists worked around this impediment to reach Canadians. They screenshot snippets of articles in infographics, for instance, although the process for accessing these materials was not seamless. They suggested that followers re-post educational content from activists and that they do research on their own. Above all, this intensified activist efforts to make ethical demands in the sparse online news landscape on Instagram.

In sum, activists compiled stories of their own experiences and submitted proof of the silencing measures on their pages, alongside the horrific news and photos coming out of Gaza. One's identity as an activist, as a South Asian, and as a woman became synonymous with being pro-Palestinian; otherwise, one's activism and leftist politics were deemed inauthentic and disingenuous. The "natural" response, communicated both directly and indirectly, through curation of politically centered media, was to be a vocal anti-genocide individual, righteously. This was the goal or the telos of their efforts. Bringing attention to this war by engaging in some of the ethical work of sharing and posting positioned you as a "righteous activist." To remain silent meant one agreed with these measures. I struggled with this throughout my research. Like many others, I stood with them in demanding a ceasefire. However, I must admit that my mental health was at an all-time low during this period, especially seeing such horrific photos coming out of Gaza. There were times when I asked myself if this were necessary—to constantly post, without trigger warnings and all. In the next section, I dicuss the photos that came out of this war and how I came to understand their importance, despite the indelible mark they left on me.

Photos of War

Another reason for the reporting and the removal of content on Instagram is the graphic nature of visual content coming out of Gaza. The emotional and psychological toll of sharing images of the genocide in Gaza was one reason some chose not to repost. The more you engage with this content, the more you are bombarded with horrific images of war. Many participants shared that they felt the need to distance themselves from these spaces during times of political turmoil. I found that I was experiencing an issue with what I thought was desensitisation from these photos. I was becoming tired and exhausted from the constant uproar and dialogue among activists, all this educational labor taking place, only to see the President of the United States, Joe Biden, fail to take any productive steps to call for a ceasefire. How many more children must die before anything is done? We were continually confronted with these heartbreaking images, all while hit with the moral demands from activists to constantly repost.

Susan Sontag offers one of the more famous discussions of image fatigue. Sontag's criticism of photography was that it was an act of non-intervention. There is always a degree of distance between the photographer and what is photographed and to capture something is an intrusive, invasive, violent act (Sontag 1977). The spectator could only make aesthetic judgements on the photograph and not speak for it. She doubted the idea that photography could "facilitate any kind of ethical relationship between the self and other" (Sliwinski 2004, 150). Photographs have showcased the "depravity of humanity" (ibid). The constant barrage of photos of war-torn regions of the world and the atrocities peoples have experienced at the hands of others, according to Sontag (2003), has not changed anything and has done nothing to keep these acts from occurring again. But this was not what I saw on Instagram.

Instead of focusing on image fatigue, Ariella Azoulay (2008) turns to the ethics of the spectator. In her book *The Civil Contract of Photography* (2008), Azoulay discusses how photography's "broad

dissemination…has created a space of political relations that are not mediated exclusively by the ruling power of the state and are not completely subject to the national logic that still overshadows the political arena" (2008, 12). She argues that in the political sphere "that is reconstructed through the civil contract, photographed persons are participant citizens, just as I am. It must be a covenant for the rehabilitation of their citizenship in the political sphere within which we are all ruled, that is, in the state of Israel" (Azoulay 2008, 17). The photographed person, "claims their citizenship in the photograph;" in the photo they are no longer "stateless or enemies…they call on me to recognize and restore their citizenship through my viewing" (Azoulay 2008, 17). According to Azoulay (2008), viewing a photograph is a civic skill. Through photography, we can recognize the "impaired citizenship" of both Palestinians and women, as evident in the violence inflicted upon them by oppressive states. This civil contract of photography represents a commitment to solidarity that transcends national borders. As spectators, we agree to treat photographs as witnesses to people and events, which in a way fosters a collective sense of duty toward the ones photographed. Universal citizenship is mediated and made possible by photography. It creates a new community, "a political community...not mediated by a sovereign ruling power" (Azoulay 2008, 23). Sharing this photography becomes another task in the journey to being a better anti-racist, anti-imperialist, activist. This framing of photography of war directly relates to the four-fold ethical questions raised above. Not only is the act of bearing witness demanded as a part of the ethical work that one performs "to transform oneself into the ethical subject of one's behaviour", but also the sense of community, compassion and solidarity mediated by photography underlines their commitment to being the righteous activist (Foucault 1990, 27).

Beyond this, the Palestinians are documenting the war they are in. They turn their iPhones around to film themselves and what is happening around them, posting it on social media, captioned with their own written words. Spectators bear witness to people who are not rendered voiceless but are

active participants in their own narrative constructions. With social media, they are able to be call people to take action through spreading the word of what they are experiencing, sharing it over and over again, to make more people aware.

I mistakenly conflated my fatigue as a researcher and activist with this idea of image fatigue. I realized that I was not becoming immune to these images. Every single time, they were shocking; I would freeze in my digital tracks, unable to scroll for a moment as I watched catastrophic videos of buildings being reduced to rubble or saw photos of limbs sticking out from the debris. I found myself avoiding these images. Whenever I detected a sliver of gray, I would scroll by quickly, my eyes darting to the text instead of the image, often blurring my vision. I can only speak for myself, but I find it hard to believe one can become desensitized to these photos. After more than a year of engaging with and researching these digital spaces, I never became accustomed to it; I simply found unconscious ways to cope by looking away.

Genuine or opportunistic activism?

Financial rewards exist in activist spaces, particularly for those with more significant followings. Engaging with others in one's community can lead to collaborative creative projects, combined audiences through features like Instagram collaborations or live streams, and offline events such as book readings, film screenings, and local fundraising activities. Platforms thrive on the accumulation of social and cultural capital, which can ultimately translate into tangible financial benefits like sponsorships, book deals, and various creative opportunities (Abidin and Brown 2018). Moreover, obtaining funding from your followers is very common, as a lot of fundraising for charities takes place in these spaces.

These situations of potential profit often leave the activist in a difficult position, especially when personal politics clash with financial responsibility. In my interview with Mirriam, she talked about the

politics behind certain advertisements in the context of Gaza and content creators' responsibility when choosing to work with companies that have ties to war. I asked her if she had seen any backlash for her creative work, meaning kinds of hate. Her response to that question, however, focused on financial backlash, that is, "backlash" was taken as the monetary downfall of losing/rejecting sponsorships.

> *I love Maryam Zekria. I love her content, I think she's one of the realest people around, I have great conversations with her, she always asks about how you deal with all the hate. She just did this promotion with Silk, which is a part of a company that is on the BDS boycott list…Maybe this contract was signed months ago, and you are sort of stuck because you have taken the money, and you have to go through with it. I don't need to do that; I am an attorney, I run my own law firm, and the people I represent are marginalized, to begin with, so, like, we are so used to fighting the man, the system. I do criminal defense work, and civil rights work, so we are always on the other side, the side of the underdog.*

Maryam Zekria is a food blogger on Instagram with over three hundred thousand followers and millions of likes on her recipe-making videos, more followers than Mirriam. Her primary job is content creation, as far as I know, and, in this context, she was used as an example of someone who relies on the money from sponsorships, leading them to work with companies that are aligned with, according to many people within these activist spaces, unethical practices. Mirriam creates a line between her and other content creators whose platforms are rooted in different beliefs. These activists take into consideration the optics, are constantly aware of how they may be perceived by their audience, and weigh the pros and cons of any work they partake in. As Widlok states (2012, 196), one is always "attuning one's attitude in reference to the ethical demands of changing situations…deriving moral reflections from" any engagement. This assessment of sponsors' politics can be seen as one of the ethical obligations these activists understand themselves to be under. One is obliged, they underline, to practice what one preaches. Reposting infographics on the BDS movement and demanding people to boycott, divest and demand economic sanctions, also means not working with brands, despite their offering large sums of money for the promotion of their product; that is the cost.

Mirriam does sponsorships, as a cook, with certain food brands, but as an attorney she does not rely on these brands to support her. On top of that, she supports the underdog, and to take tainted money would be counter-productive to the activist work she engages in on her account. In the same breath, she adds that it was difficult to get her cookbook published because of the lack of support from mainstream publishing companies, leading her to go straight to her audience. She started a Kickstarter with the goal of $25,000 USD, which got up to $37,000 so she could publish the book on her own. Thus, in asking about the backlash she received, she answered by saying that she relied little on brands and companies and more on her audience to support her.

Any time finances were brought up, the conversation took on a defensive tone. Shamayel said she encounters much of this rhetoric from those in the diaspora accusing others of being opportunistic. "90% of those that live in the [SWANA] diaspora I have heard talk about money, stealing money, like what, why are you calling your own people thieves and crooks?" While content creators make ethical demands of their followers, these followings question creators' intentions, leading to the frustration Shamayel expressed to me.

Sitting in that interview, I reflected on how to broach the topic without being perceived as one of those people in the diaspora who simply assumed that activist creators were opportunistic and disingenuous. I knew that this was the rhetoric they dealt with constantly, but I struggled with how to ask my questions without offending them. Instead of directly inquiring about her finances, I thought back to my interview with Mirriam and asked if Shamayel had experienced any backlash or negative outcomes from being both a business owner and a politically leftist artist. She replied:

> *My designs were very political…I started standing behind my politics by showing my face, and who I was and what made me create it, and being a little bit more open about my revolutionary thoughts. And then they just took a life of its own. It's not been the same since like 2020. I would say, it's like morphed into something different and I know it severely affects my business, it severely affects the aspect of my business, the growing aspect, making it larger, the money aspect. My politics…I am not calm and relaxed about how I get out information, whether it is in*

> *my art or the way I speak whatever. I am a little bit more controversial, loud and in your face and I'm sure I have lost thousands and thousands of euros from women for example who are like "who the fuck is this bitch, with all this shit she is saying. Her hoops are cool, but fuck her." I am sure there are plenty of brain-washed Afghans who cannot handle another Afghan being a leftist, not like a liberal leftist but a different kind of leftist. I get so much hate for that…get over it. And if you like the hoops buy it, but I am also understanding that it is not for you because my art is loud and in your face.*

During the interview, she repeatedly emphasized that her art is personal and the personal is political, stating that if this harms her business, so be it. Despite the ongoing ethical demands and the underlying threat that remaining silent means siding with the oppressor, Shamayel highlights that her commitment as a leftist advocating for her beliefs has been detrimental to her business. As people who are trusted to be a valuable source of information and news, the accusation of being performative, associated with the same suspect state actors who hurt marginalized folks for their own profit, cuts deep. As my interlocutors state, that has a toll, not only socially and financially, but also mentally.

Self-care

Self-care as a concept is apparently flexible. It is thrown about on social media to refer to any activity that works to address any anxiety, stress, and ultimately to "calm, heal, and preserve in the face of adversity" (Spicer 2019, para. 2). Self-care, in this context, has been used on Instagram to refer to practices like journaling, especially in the format of challenging difficult feelings and emotions like the ones discussed above, doing yoga, meditating, deactivating your Instagram account for a moment, trying to stay away from your phone as much as you can, and getting eight hours of sleep.

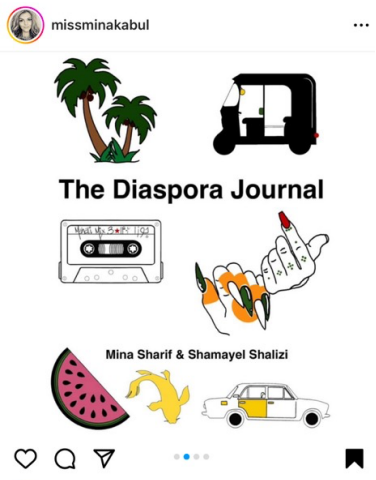

Figure 18: Sharif, Mina (@missminakabul). "Instagram post about The Diaspora Journal," Instagram 2023.

Mina and Shamayel created The Diaspora Journal in December of 2023. It is a collection of prompts and illustrations designed by them respectively, for those who feel "physically or emotionally distant from the lands and traditions of their ancestors." The prompts are meant to both challenge and sooth what they call "the diaspora experience." This was built off a show they did on Instagram. Every Friday, the two would join together on a live stream to discuss their experiences of being diasporic, experiences of colourism, racism within their communities, misogyny, and self-hating, internalized racism, amongst many other topics. In an interview with Mina, I asked her what her intentions were with this journal, and she stated:

> *We are sharing information based on the grueling experience of learning those lessons ourselves. We are trying to make it an easier path for you, and it's not an easy path and one that we have been on. And that's another thing I talk and confront about in the Diaspora Journal; being embarrassed seeing that you're from somewhere else…We still have a long way to go too, you don't know what you are not conscious of. You don't know what's been done, because we have all been highly affected by the fact that our narratives have been so limited.*

The journal poses questions about one's relationship to one's mother tongue, one's relationship to the country where one is currently living, one's experiences of stereotypes "good" and bad, how it feels being in the same spaces as those from the same background, one's relationship to one's physical appearance, and the role religion plays in one's life. These questions are not specific to one diasporic community but rather are purposefully general in order to apply to a wide range of people. They use proverbs from countries all over Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Each page contains illustrations done by Shamayel, ranging from flowers hands decorated with henna, a cassette tape, cardamon pods, the keffiyeh, a candle stick, rickshaws, incense, a lotus flower, evil eye, a sickle, a tea pot, and a Molotov cocktail, to a pearl in a shell. Mina commented,

> *Shamayel is a fantastic artist. She captures these fantastic feelings and moments in every single one…The cassette tape, for example, holds so many insights and a lot of memories for me, but also, we just wanted this to be broad in that the Global South diaspora, how can we relate to people from other countries, from Mexico, but didn't grow up in Mexico, or from the Philippines. We really stuck with what is a universal diaspora experience. I think the show taught us that it is more universal than what we were realizing*

The fact that audiences were able to interact in the chat feature showcased for them that those who tuned in were not just from the South Asian diaspora. People from all over were pulled into these discussions about living somewhere other than where their parents or grandparents were from. When Mina released this journal on Instagram, she used hashtags like #diaspora, #identity, #culture, #selfcare, #selflove, #globalsouth, #journalinspiration and #journal, to organize the post under these categories and themes, but also to reach the audiences diving into these hashtags. #Selfcare is the one that sticks out to me. This work is really an effort to address feelings of insecurity experienced by many of those who identify as in a diaspora. The journal came out at a very critical time for many activists in South Asian/ SWANA Instagram spaces, just a month and a half into the war on Gaza. The journal was one of the self-care and self-cultivation tools provided to this community.

In Audre Lorde's 1988 work *Burst of Light*, she discusses how surviving is an act of activism and also how externally oriented activism in fact caring for herself. Writing about her cancer progressing and deteriorating health, in the wider context of being a black activist feminist lesbian scholar in America, she comments:

> Cancer is political; look at how many of our comrades have died of it during the last ten years! As warriors, our job is to actively and consciously survive it for as long as possible, remembering that in order to win, the aggressor must conquer, but the resisters need only survive. Our battle is to define survival in ways that are acceptable and nourishing to us, meaning with substance and style. Substance. Our work. Style. True to ourselves" (Lorde 1988, 98-99).

She addresses the importance of love and community, arguing that taking time for herself is a political act in the fight against a sickness killing her from the inside. Taking care of yourself becomes a form of activism when you are a marginalized body within a system trying to keep you disenfranchised, and

speaking out against this disenfranchisement is self-preservation and care. Lorde goes on to say that "caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (1988, 131). This language describing her activism and retaliation against sickness has been taken up in many feminists' activism.

Lorde (1988) also writes:

> When I speak out against the cynical U.S. intervention in Central America, I am working to save my life in every sense. Government research grants to the National Cancer Institute were cut in 1986 by the exact amount illegally turned over to the contras in Nicaragua. One hundred and five million dollars. It gives yet another meaning to the personal as the political (133).

In this sense, and although there is also a cost, it is an act of self-care to make demands about what is happening to the Palestinians in Gaza, to say that narratives about Muslims or South Asian people in the media or women on the internet are wrong, and/or the misogyny rampant in one's community should be addressed immediately. Self-care advice is manifested through posts on stories and infographic posts, and in the captions of main feed posts. Whether reposted from their mutuals or created themselves, these posts tend to list what their followers/fellow activists could do to feel better—drawing, journaling, going on a walk, doing yoga etc.—in the face of adversity and heightened political turmoil. Whether they directly refer to her work or not, I see Lorde's framings of caring for oneself everywhere in Instagram activist spaces, as the logic of their practices.

Conclusion

I traveled to Los Angeles, California as part of the in-person component of my research, although I did not write about that trip in the preceding chapters. My thesis was based on material from interviews and digital ethnography. Initially, though, I had intended to spend time in person in the city with a large concentration of Instagram's South Asian and SWANA feminist activists and my time there coincided with the 2023 writers' and actors' strike, two creative populations which overlap with the women I studied. I was well positioned to write about labor and technology, including struggles around intellectual property. The conflict in Gaza, however, led me to take a complete turn in my research, resulting in the final chapter dedicated to this issue. As selfish as it may sound to mention it, the war had a profoundly negative impact on my mental health. I still start most of my days scrolling through my phone. I go through an array of social media applications: first Instagram, swiping though the first set of stories and looking at the messages I received overnight; then I swipe to Twitter; then TikTok, swiping down the first ten TikTok's; and back to Instagram. My right thumb is always positioned by the bottom corner, waiting to swipe down to reveal the next new photo, video, tweet, paragraph, text I see. I justify this morning routine by telling myself I am simply catching up with the world, the world I cultivated on social media. Given that my research focused on activism, and that during my research and writing process, the war on Gaza usurped the spaces I was studying, I saw a lot of war, atrocities, hate crimes, genocide. While the activists I talked to pointed out how important it is to engage with public pedagogical outreach and how important it is—if you call yourself an activist within this space—to bear witness, I struggled, and I was in awe of the way these activists handled hate. Granted, many like Hiba and Madina took breaks after hate campaigns targeting them, but the resilience of these women struck me. In early 2024, I had a second informal conversation with @blingistan. She called me on WhatsApp,

asking how my research was going. She called me *while* I was crying about said research, and I asked her how she does it. How can she keep doing it all?

The happiest and most content I was during research was when I was in (what was supposed to be part of) the field. To me, there was a clear demarcation between observing and participating, and the analytic writing process. I got on a plane and went to Los Angeles, meet people, went to the picket lines where the writers and actors were. I went to film screenings, took notes and then, in a way, clocked out. I would go back to my hotel, text and chat with friends, and decompress, although I was also on social media, collecting screenshots and taking notes of the content that I found. When I returned to the East Coast in September of 2023, however, that was all I did. There was no end, and the line between a casual scroll and research merged every time.

I deleted Instagram off my phone at least once a week during the thesis writing process. And yet, the pull and yearning to know what I was missing out always had me downloading the app again. Instagram became a "toxic boyfriend" to me, blocked, but then as soon as you do that, you remember the good times and then make contact again and vow it will be different, and it never is. During this cycle, I sat down with Shamayel @blingistan. In discussing self-care in the face of vitriol, orientalism, and racism, she validated me in that moment, right there and then, and outlined the importance fighting it in a spiritual and mental way.

> *"If we really want to have meaningful impact we have to be built in a way to withstand the small and immediate impact and large impact…I was speaking about this in another context with one of my friends where I would be in Dubai and someone would find out I am Afghan and stupidly ask me if I speak Arabic, I would be so personally offended by it, and go on this big lecture on the languages of Afghanistan and I respect where that girl is coming from. What's my point there, I was raised in a world where everything everyone else said about Afghanistan I didn't see true with my own eyes. Literally nothing anyone said about that country was correct, until I actually saw it. That is something important to me, debunking these beliefs. That would affect me as a 15-year-old for hours and hours, and now I don't know, I just don't care. You have to choose your battles, you have to pick what you can and can't do and you have to have a belief and some kind of a faith. Sometimes I'll get so frustrated, it can be something small thing, the thing is not important. There is a stereotype about Afghanistan or someone said something, like*

> *an Afghan said, "it's all Afghanistan's fault, it's all Afghan peoples' fault." It doesn't matter the thing, it is the reaction within us…if I am all bent out of shape by whatever that was said, that is ultimately my responsibility because I am not going to be get to the next task in my life, or reach my goals if I am bent out of shape because of that Arabic comment. So, I am going just to do what I need to do…and the radical positivity is going to get me through those emotions and I just believe that anyway."*

Words like "faith," "radical positivity" and "my responsibility" played over and over again. I think about this a lot. When I feel slighted in some way, shape, or form, I think, "what did Shamayel say? what would Shamayel do?" If I am bent out of shape by someone else's ignorance, she taught me, that is my fault, my responsibility. How I take in information, how I take in other people—that is, how I let them affect me emotionally—is something I have control over. This, to me, is revolutionary thinking. Opponents of a revolution undermine it by targeting the people who believe in and are working towards it. Through what Shamayel refers to as "the small and immediate impact" of microaggressions, they gradually chip away at self-confidence, making people question themselves and believe they do not know best. This is how someone against a revolution in beliefs gains control and authority, and it's a process I must constantly resist. Resistance, as discussed throughout this thesis, is done through educating myself. I learned from the activists I studied that having a strong sense of self and being mindful of where I direct my energy, my focus, is my true power. As long as I remain strong in this regard, it will be harder for someone to erode my confidence. I learned that spending my time trying to analyze every little detail can hinder my true goals, which are to educate myself and stand in solidarity with the marginalized in the pursuit of truth. While this is getting harder and harder with the addictive nature of social media, structured to capture our attention, what I do on those platforms, I have some control.

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