Women and queer British South Asian Instagrammers

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I am thankful to an array of people who have kept me going throughout this challenging process of writing – from family and friends, to mentors and beyond. A lesson I have learnt in these increasingly precarious times for early career researchers is that we are nothing without our communities, both online and offline and that our work cannot exist outside of our dedication to one another.

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I started this research in 2017 and in 2020, digital connection took on a renewed significance as the COVID-19 pandemic forced us into lockdown. During this time, I drew a lot from conversations with friends over zoom, WhatsApp, FaceTime, Instagram and Twitter and I am thankful for the patience, knowledge and generosity that has helped shape this thesis. Talking sustained me throughout this period and I am indebted to the brilliant, sharp and intellectual talkers in my life!

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Abstract

The following thesis centers the socio-digital lives of women and queer members from the British South Asian digital diaspora, providing an account of the ambivalent nature of digital identity work. More specifically, it is invested in engaging participants in reflecting on their own engagements and the engagements of others on Instagram. I then critically analyse how they simultaneously resist and reproduce neoliberal logics of social media platforms. I involve participants in reflective interviews related to their digital usage. This approach is a tool underpinned by three theoretical strands that make fluid diaspora experience and digital experience, as well as centering the affective dimensions of social media platforms through the method of in-depth interviews. Practically, I argue that it serves as an animated space within which to analyse data and imaginatively build a community for research purposes. Unlike digital counterpublics like Black Twitter, my participants are individual users and I therefore have created an analytical space through which I can define them as a particular set of users who will have different as well as similar behaviours and opinions. In contextualising participant perceptions within discourses concerning South Asian digital diasporas, I explore how the intersections of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality and caste are centered and obscured and what this tells us about contemporary configurations of British South Asian identities nationally and globally. Further contextualising these perceptions within wider discourses of neoliberal logics of social media and platform capitalism, I analyse how this technological social mode shapes and is shaped by its users.

Preface

It's early evening in December 2020 and we have been through 9 months of varying degrees of COVID-19 lockdowns here in the UK. My social world has gradually become smaller, at points only existing on screens and so today I am pleased to be meeting a friend to go for a walk around our local park. We have spent a year living sedentary lives typing on keyboards and feigning interest at Zoom meetings, so tonight we have decided to put our hands to more tactile use. Armed with scissors and tote bags, we are going to collect greenery to make our own Christmas wreaths. With no clue as to how to make one, we are just happy to be outside and in good company.

The light begins to fade and soon enough the streetlights are the only things that illuminate the steam escaping our mouths as we talk non-stop about everything under the sun; family, friends, art, books, etc., etc. Our slow meanderings come to a stop when we find a particularly interesting bit of foliage to snip – a low hanging bough of holly, a sprig of spruce. Our bags begin to get full, an alpine scent following us around the park.

My friend is telling me about her annual month-long break from social media and how this year during the pandemic, she has thoroughly enjoyed her time away from Instagram. "The pressure and stress it brings just sometimes does NOT feel worth it!" she exclaims, "I'd love to properly give it up sometimes". During this annual month-long digital detox, she explains that she feels so much better about herself and the world when she is away from the screen. I couldn't agree more with her, and we proselytize about the benefits of this.

"It's so bad for self-esteem"
"I know! You feel like your life is rubbish, even though you know it's good"
"I mean, you know that people are curating it – YOU KNOW THAT – but something in you still feels insecure when you see their content"
"I'm so glad to be off it"
"Same"

I savour the vast darkness of the park, the black offering my eyes respite from the blue light of the screen that has become my social life. A good 3 hours later, when we can no longer cope with the cold and the sharp holly poking us in our sides through the cloth bags, we say goodbye and promise to send each a photo of our finished wreaths.

The wreaths come out looking quite good for beginners. My friend posts her effort on Instagram. I refrain, but I am still scrolling through everyone else's Christmas posts. January comes and the wreath starts to fall apart. My friend is back in full force across social media; I don't blame her - I never even took a break. What do we keep coming back for when we know this isn't good for us?

There is no trace of our conversation from the park on social media – that would seem a bit self-defeating maybe. So where should these reflections live?

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Introduction

This thesis is about social media users. More specifically, it is about women and queer British South Asians who use Instagram. Initially, when I first started this research, my notions of identity work amongst this sub-section of the diaspora seemed fairly straight forward and hopeful – that we all benefitted from these digital interactions and found community through the creation and consumption of content. Like all research journeys, this one grew more complex and reflected a digital world that was as multi-layered and ambiguous as the offline world we inhabit. To capture the ambivalence of this digital identity work, my approach centered the perceptions of everyday digital users, whose responses through in-depth interviews *about* their Instagram interactions, provided me with insights that could not be gleaned from digital ethnographies of user accounts. I argue that these insights allow for an analysis of digital identity work to emerge that speaks to the often equivocal nature of being a woman and/or queer and British South Asian on social media. My research questions became:

- How do my participants perceive their lives and the lives of others on Instagram?
- Where do these perceptions place participants within national and global contexts?
- To what extent do participants reproduce the neoliberal dimensions of social media platforms?
- To what extent are social media platforms used as resistive tools within participants' lives?

I learnt that there were many things obscured by an Instagram photo grid that their narratives made known to me; digital inequalities, queer solidarities and mental stress, amongst other things. My need to comprehend the complexity of women and queer British South Asian Instagrammers is because I am enthusiastically invested in the digital world of young British South Asians and consider myself a part of this particular digital enclave. I have spent a lot of time on Instagram and have grown fond of finding memes, photographs and videos that resonated with my experiences of growing up as a girl and young woman in a British South Asian household. Knowing that the times of frustration, loneliness and anxiety as an adolescent were also shared by countless others, meant that my family wasn't weird and that my childhood wasn't uniquely dysfunctional – everybody's mum kept the empty ice-cream tubs to fill with curries and sabzis! Loads of us grew up having issues (and continue to) around

body and facial hair! Queerness is still, for the most part, a taboo subject! Influencers like Simran Randhawa began posting up selfies, pairing saris with jeans in locations around London, the Australian-Canadian writer Fariha Róisín was uploading excerpts of work exploring trauma and feminism as a queer Muslim woman and artist Raju Rage was interrogating trans British South Asian identity through cooking and art. Aside from our similarities, I also witnessed a plethora of differences between us all – the difficulties and hardships endured and the various ways of existing outside of heteropatriarchy; I was not used to seeing these alternative lifestyles and conversations in mainstream popular culture; complex portrayals of British South Asians were still few and far between, even after singer M.I.A and actor/rapper Riz Ahmed broke into the mainstream.

British South Asian women and queer folk were making content with and about each other on Instagram – I would watch, talk about, and share it with friends. I'd look forward to discussing it with them face-to-face, debating everything from how funny this comedy sketch was, whether such-and-such should have done that, how brilliant it was that someone was collaborating with someone else, etc. In the earlier days of my Instagram usage (circa 2015 – I was a latecomer!), understandings of the platform didn't stretch past anything other than finding interesting content and conversations around what it meant to be a woman and/or queer from the South Asian diaspora.

In the ensuing years, as tech workers began to whistle blow on the negative impacts of social media (Mejia 2018; Milmo and Paul 2021), our conversations also involved these same concerns. I noticed certain friends and family members zoning out during conversations, keen to capture a snapshot for the 'gram', fingers and eyes glued to screens as the comments and 'likes' came flooding in. I noticed how we all sat or stood, hunched over our phones, the veil between the online and offline becoming thinner, our conversations, attentions and bodies captured by the digital. Of course, this isn't the fault of Instagram alone, but it is one of the primary smartphone apps that has enabled a platform capitalism to emerge, exploiting user's needs and desires. Soon enough, we began talking about social media's assault on our mental health; these conversations usually coming to the forefront during walks in parks or sitting in cafes, living rooms, back yards, as if being away from the screen reminded us just how good physical proximity to each other really was.

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I began to feel an ambivalence towards a space I used to escape into to laugh and learn about lives that were the same but also different to mine. I felt inadequate because of how it made me feel mentally and socially – I didn't have a large number of followers; I didn't have a product or lifestyle to tout – and I realised others around me felt the same. Just as the news stories began to emerge about the 'brown girl' Influencers, there was another layer to who we were as women and queer South Asians – we were also the everyday digital users going through the motions, but nobody wanted to run a story about that. The default digital user, unsullied by race and gender, who gets to step outside of their identity to talk about the larger things at stake in the field of digital media studies, remains for the most part, white and male. Nirmal Puwar writes:

> Hence, 'black' academics may be granted the authority of being specialists of ethnic and racial identities, businesses, class relations or migratory patterns, but not in more general areas such as globalization, capitalism, class or migration. Thus we see how whiteness can enjoy a position of privilege by ex-nominating race from white bodies whilst racially marking 'others'. It is this process that enables racially non-marked bodies to masquerade as the universal humanist thinkers, doers, artists, politicians, academics and administrators (Puwar and Raghuram 2003, p.7-8).

My conversations with friends and family didn't just revolve around intersections that marked us out as racially 'other', but also around how we were affected by the digital as physical bodies; trying to understand the entanglement of our online and offline realities has become a preoccupation of mine. It has also further illuminated how we are a part of a global neoliberal economy, encouraged further towards self-management and branding opportunities.

The politics of identity and representation has never been as cut and dried as social media likes to make out it is, with its success stories of brown girl influencers. This neoliberal tendency towards identity as a creative commodity is nothing new and I borrow from Sarita Malik's brilliant assessment of diversity policy concepts introduced by New Labour, that attend 'to the *market* predicament by mobilising an innovation imperative for particular kinds

of (ethnic) creativity or excellence (with an emphasis on popular formats and styles of programming) rather than fixate on social concerns' (Malik 2013, p.235). Following this line of inquiry, I begin to understand how we have arrived at the current conjuncture when it comes to modes of digital self-representation; of how popular templates for depoliticised user-generated content remain the most visible, a 'smoothing over [of] difference' (*Ibid.,* p. 236) encouraged, making the most marginalised from the diaspora feel even more invisible and finally in the bid for true diversity 'that quality and creativity are now foregrounded over (structural) questions of (in)equality' (*Ibid.*). Simultaneously, it is also a space that users find affirming. It is these tensions – the neoliberal shaping of digital identity and the supportive structures of social media communities – that keen to foreground throughout this thesis.

I also maintain that as digital users, we possess the potential to key into what it means to be part of global South Asian diasporas, but it is also vital that we understand how Britain has and continues to shape us - how this has constricted our understandings of class, caste and the Indian subcontinent itself. With fingers pushing up against a flat, glass screen, our sense of self is expected to flatten in the process. As Rishi Sunak becomes the UK's first Prime Minister of colour – one of the most powerful leaders in the Western world - how have we equipped ourselves as British South Asians invested in social justice, to critique the politics of representation? Who are *we* in relation to this figure? What do we do when the most right-wing figures in British politics share the same stories of migration? The same names? Do we begin to talk about class and caste? About political ideologies?

If figures who look like us, end up in powerful positions within the British establishment, we must develop a framework that deals with what this current moment means when it comes to race, and in particular, to South Asian identity within the UK. If the digital is where this discourse remains at its most animated for women and queer users (and I believe it is because we are seldom given other cultural spaces), then it deserves critical attention. I reference a quote from Sanjay Sharma and Ashwani Sharma from their introduction in *Dis-Orienting Rhythms* which continues to mark the current moment: 'These closures of political aspiration, the decline of 'politics' in favour of gesture, identity, and liberal multiculturalism, and the disappearance of critical questioning are all to be challenged across the line of music and politics' (Sharma and Sharma 1996, p.3). Through an understanding of participant

perceptions, I extend this line of critical questioning to include an interrogation of social media and the role it has played in the sustained construction of British South Asian identities.

In chapter one, I provide a review of literature concerning feminist and queer theories of the digital that explore its ambivalence as a site of resistance and neoliberalism. Beginning with affect theory and intimate publics, I focus on the concept of ugly feelings and how it has been explored by digital media scholars interrogating digital presentations of femininity, race and queerness online. Moving on to digital counterpublics, I observe how historically marginalised groups build and engage in discursive practices online, demonstrating the resistive potentialities of the digital. From here, I go on to examine the neoliberal dimensions of the digital, beginning with the shift in feminist politics via postfeminism, popular feminism and neoliberal feminism before focussing on racial neoliberalism. I contend that these critical theories engage with the everchanging nature of self-representation on social media. Continuing this line of inquiry, I turn to homonormative renderings of queerness on social media and how this has been counteracted through theories such as 'queer aesthetic practice' and Glitch Feminism. The chapter ends with a review of literature related to scholarship on feminist and queer British South Asian cultural production. Closing the section with a focus on studies that look at women and queer South Asian digital diasporas, I situate my research within these discourses that interrogate the market logic of branding, class and caste within the diaspora. I argue that further research needs to take place in orderto understand how these class and caste politics play out across social media platforms amongst women and queer users from the British South Asian diaspora.

My second chapter introduces literatures that speak to the ever-shifting nature of the digital landscape. It is divided into three subsections: the history of digital life, living online and offline and contemporary concerns of social media. I contend that as digital media researchers, our focus should remain as dynamic as the technologies we immerse ourselves in. Providing a chronology of usership from virtual communities in the early days of the internet through to social media platforms like Instagram, I demonstrate how users and investment in the digital has been debated by various scholars. Those engaged with the gendered and raced dimensions of the digital call for a more critical approach, as they

maintain that online worlds reflect the disparities of the material world, rather than overcome them. Acknowledging the shift from spending a few hours online in a text-based forum to constantly being online via our smartphones, I turn to theories that disrupt the binary of online and offline life. Returning to Glitch Feminism, I maintain that for marginalised users who have found meaning and acceptance in online communities, the digital is as real as the material world. In light of this, I find the term 'away-from-keyboard' (AFK) more useful than 'offline', because we are never offline. In light of this constant digital presence, I end the chapter by looking at the wider concerns of social media (algorithms, online privacy, mental wellbeing, advertisers) which impact my participants just as much as any other everyday social media user.

Chapter three is the methodology chapter where I lay out the rationale for my research. I begin by introducing my theoretical framework which consists of three elements; the first two being Avtar Brah's theory of 'diaspora space' and Ellen Helper's digital inequalities framework. Both theories account for the complexity and fluidity of British South Asian diaspora experience and digital life, which is a cause and consequence of our social lives outside of the digital. The third element is the centering of participant narratives through in-depth interviews, which I argue opens up a space for reflecting on digital life, thus revealing insights that are difficult to glean from digital ethnographic methods of content analysis. I then go on to provide a reflective account of my research methods by starting with the process of selecting participants. I assess the usefulness of social media as a participant recruitment tool and consider the labour that goes into this kind of research before moving on to provide demographic data of my research participants and an account of how I conducted interviews with them. My analysis of data involves a critical realist approach through retroduction, which allows me to analyse interview data and account for unseen mechanisms that go beyond the usual framings of marginalised users on social media. I end the chapter with my critical reflections in the field, concluding that, as a heterosexual British South Asian women researching women and queer members from the digital diaspora, identity work and social media research is fraught with difficulty.

The public and private elements of participants' lives is the subject of chapter four, which is my first empirical chapter. These elements include the Instagram 'private' and 'public'

account settings that they constantly move between. I have divided this chapter into two main sub-sections: negotiating safety and strategies to maintain privacy. The first section is concerned with *who* polices participants' engagements and content online and *how* it is policed and *what* content is policed. This fell into categories of policing by family/wider community and employers, especially when it came to women's bodies and queer expression online. Maintaining privacy is the subject of the second section and explores the various strategies participants employ; from becoming killjoys and upsetting 'some aunt or uncle somewhere', to locking down accounts, partaking in ephemeral data exchanges or self-censoring content. These practices reveal that women and queer British South Asian bodies remain a site of surveillance, even on social media platforms, which is not altogether unsurprising. I begin to complicate this binary of the digital as freeing/oppressive in the following empirical chapters.

Chapter five examines the channels of communication adopted by queer users. Through participant accounts, there is acknowledgment that homophobia remains rife within the British South Asian community at large and that Instagram remains an important site of validation and resource for participants. Through an exploration of normative queer practices experienced by participants in white mainstream queer spaces, I turn to look at how renderings of queer South Asian identity via Influencer culture draw on postfeminist and homonormative media cultures. I argue that very few participants adhere to these practices (whether through lack of resources or political leanings), going on to explore the limitations of Instagram for queer world-making. I go on to apply Lauren Berlant's theory of intimate publics, arguing that participants maintain intimacy through being (in)visibly queer within Instagram,allowing them to build queer networks that spill out AFK. The concluding section focuses on queerness and religion, whereby participants create and embody queer religious practices, opening up possibilities towards an intersectional, decolonial and de-territorialised diaspora identity.

#browngirls are the subject of chapter six; I begin by tracing the popular use of the word 'brown' over 'desi' amongst participants, maintaining that this usage signals a shift in modes of belonging within Instagram. 'Brown' taps into a global sensibility that simultaneously solidifies global links between non-white groups and more cynically, expands 'brown'

markets. Within this context, I position the #browngirl as a space invader taking up space in online worlds in response to being patronised or rejected by mainstream institutions. Through this approach, I analyse some of my participants' perceptions of finding alternative networks and taking up space within Instagram I contend that gaining visibility online is possible when participants 'play the game' and mimic Influencer life-worlds, ultimately determining who does and does not possess the privilege to gain visibility within an unequal digital economy. I demonstrate how Influencer aspirations can end up erasing the complexities of class and caste from Instagram and how such aspirations trickle down to shape the engagements of everyday users.

In chapter seven I turn to participant psycho-social wellbeing in a bid to explore the links between mental wellbeing and social media and to place the narratives of marginalised digital users within wider discourses of social media usage and impact, because they have as much of a stake in it as white social media users. I thematically organise the chapter accordingly: concerns for the self, concerns for others, labour and inauthenticity. The first segment focuses on how participants feel Instagramimpacts them – from good and bad connections with others, to social comparison and trolling – it reveals the varied nuances of digital engagement. From concern for the self to concern for others, I ascertain that participants are most concerned for their younger girl cousins and nieces who they are afraid will be pressured into valuing physical appearance over other attributes when online. From here, I move onto digital labour and how daily participation can take its toll on participants, further demonstrating the uneven access to visibility online. I end the chapter with an analysis of participants' attitudes towards what they considered 'inauthentic' or 'fake' content and their differing perceptions of performed emotional vulnerability displayed online.

My final chapter brings issues of class and caste into sharper focus; in trying to comprehend why class and caste is obscured or ignored by participants, I turn to their perceptions of authentic South Asian identity that has been created and/or consumed by them through social media content. Turing to studies of the British South Asian clubbing scene, I utilise discourses on ethnic authenticity to reveal the dynamics of class at play within Instagram For those participants who did express class identifications, I draw on Rima Saini's research on class affiliations amongst the British South Asian diaspora to determine the relations between

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race and class on Instagram. In the concluding section, I situate participants'' engagements within wider global brown networks, indicating how participants' varied aspirations end up building different kinds of global networks. I maintain that those who work to disrupt the logic of neoliberal identity work unlock the potential to build radical and decolonial global digital networks.

Chapter 1: Feminist and queer theories of the digital

This thesis is an investigation into the lives of queer and women Instagram users from the British South Asian digital diaspora. Through participant perceptions, I stress the ambivalence of digital identity work on social media platforms. The research aim is to analyse Instagram user responses through in-depth interviews in order to understand where the limits and potentialities of digital representation and usage lie, according to participants. Through this approach, I hope to contribute to scholarship that conceptualises the lives of queer and women users from the British South Asian digital diaspora, by drawing on their experiences of being online. Beyond a recognition of images of 'brown' influencers[1], I ask 'what does discussion about the digital, conducted away from the screen capture that cannot be captured by digital ethnography alone? What do women and queer folk from the British South Asian digital diaspora think about themselves and other Instagrammers? How does this feed into wider discussions around queerness and feminism within the British South Asian diaspora at large? How do these users see themselves fitting into national and global cultural and political networks?

Throughout this thesis, I use the term 'queer' to acknowledge the diversity of non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality amongst participants, as generationally, many of them consider their sexual orientation and gender as fluid and shifting (Halperin 2003; Zosky and Alberts 2016). I also utilise 'queer' as a verb because I have witnessed participants 'queering' their surroundings; destabilising, subverting and resisting the logic of heteronormative hegemony within their communities (Pedwell and Whitehead 2012).

I have chosen to use the term 'women' as a way of capturing the diversity of gender identities expressed by participants. Although the term 'womxn' has sometimes been used in a bid to be more inclusive of trans women and women of colour (Wu 2016; Reyes et al. 2021), I have chosen to use 'women' because I do not wish to separate the experiences of trans women and women of colour from the category of 'woman' (Karpinksi 2020). Drawing on Judith Butler's claim that 'securing greater freedoms for women requires that we rethink the

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[1] BBC News article: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-49530394

category of "women"' (Gleeson 2021), I maintain that this allows for new possibilities of gender identity to emerge when thinking through womanhood.

I refer to my participants as a digital diaspora; I acknowledge that there are different definitions of a 'digital diaspora' (Diminescu 2008; Yu and Sun 2019; Ponzanesi 2020) but for the purposes of this thesis, I have found digital media scholar Radhika Gajjala's definition most useful, because she specifically defines a *South Asian* digital diaspora:

> socio-cultural formations of men and women online who trace their origins to South Asia, wherever they may be situated in real geographical space (Gajjala 2003, p. 55).

I alter this description slightly to demarcate the experiences of women and queer participants who were born or have lived in the UK. Therefore, I describe the British South Asian digital diaspora as:

> socio-cultural formations of men, women and non-binary users online, either born or having lived in the UK, who trace their origins to South Asia, wherever they may be situated in real geographical space.

Women and queer members of the British South Asian diaspora have often been overlooked when it comes to scholarship looking at their lives online; thus, in situating this review of literature in feminist and queer theories of the digital, I hope to lend visibility and complexity to these digital lives by rooting them in feminist and queer pedagogies.

Feminist and queer digital sites

For feminists and queer theorists, the digital has never simply been a utopic space for freedom of self-expression, but rather an ambivalent site replete with resistive and neoliberal tendencies. This chapter aims to highlight the breadth of work conducted by feminist and queer studies scholars who have looked at the resistive and neoliberal dimensions of the digital. Theories around who is included and excluded virtually has long been interrogated through a feminist and queer lens, demonstrating that we (women, queer folk, people of

colour) have been having these conversations from the beginning and continue to complicate these digital binaries.

I begin with feminist conceptions of affect theory, in particular, the notion of 'ugly feelings', whereby feminists are encouraged to bring out negative emotions as a way to fight back against demands placed on women to be happy and tolerant of structures of oppression. When transposed to the digital sphere, this theory becomes an effective way of understanding how participants are pushed to perform positive emotions and post respectable content, thus revealing how negative emotions and difficult content become a transgressive act online. I explore this notion further in chapter four via the Instagram public and private account functions. From here I go on to look at the construction of feminist and queer digital spaces through Lauren Berlant's intimate publics, going on to provide a definition of Nancy Fraser's theory of counterpublics. Understood as spaces where marginalised groups can develop and circulate discourses relevant to their lives away from primary publics, I also introduce debates from digital media scholars that question the validity of studies of certain digital counterpublics. This highlights the heterogeneity of participants, who although are part of this particular counterpublic, are also considered unique users with their own skillset and resources. Highlighting the differences in skill and resources is significant when it comes to the quality of interactions and opportunities available to participants; this is investigated in chapters six and seven, which look at influencer economies and psycho-social wellbeing within Instagram.

Continuing, I move on to present feminist theories that explore the neoliberal dimensions of the digital. Postfeminism, popular feminist and neoliberal feminism are concepts which unpack the way that different feminisms are being performed online. Although conceived as a white, western female subject, I introduce narratives on the non-white and non-western postfeminist subject, thus revealing how such sensibilities are tied to global aspirations of the liberated, happy, international woman. I then introduce Herman Gray's theory of racial neoliberalism here because it highlights the complex and contradictory desires of marginalised subjects; attaining empowerment through a politics of representation does not lead to an easy logic of freedom for racialised subjects at the bottom, argues Gray. These theories underline the discussions I go on to have in chapter six.

In a similar vein, queer subjects when inculcated into homonormative political spheres are also not granted a freedom through an adherence to neoliberal/heteronormative structures. I demonstrate this through studies of homonormative performance on social media in chapter five. I ask, in what ways can queer visuality on social media go against the homonormative grain? To answer this, I draw on Gayatri Gopinath's methodology of 'queer aesthetic practice', which she has applied to photographic archives and artworks by diaspora artists. This also brings into focus queer diasporic bodies, who are missing from studies of the homonormative on social media. Legacy Russell's concept of queer digital remix culture also provides greater scope for research into resistive practices of queer visuality and digital diasporas.

In the final segment of this chapter, I concentrate on the work of feminist and queer South Asian digital media scholars, whose research provides illuminating theories of caste and subaltern politics between South Asian diaspora communities and those on the Indian subcontinent. I consider this review incredibly useful to my analyses of women and queer members from the South Asian digital diaspora (which I go on to unpack in chapter eight when I look at class and caste), especially since these theories have not been applied as rigorously to feminist and queer South Asian communities based in the UK.

Affect theory and intimate publics

There are many things we can conjure up when thinking about digital landscapes – interfaces, platforms, phone screens, insurmountable data, but ultimately, the digital is animated by human engagement and emotions (Papacharissi 2014). These 'flows of affect online that resonate with political campaigns, terrorist attacks, natural disasters, and celebrity death' (Döveling et. al. 2018, p. 1) emerge as significant subject positions within feminist theory because feminism is a politics 'suffused with feelings, passions and emotions' (Gorton 2007, p. 345). Although affect theory has come to encapsulate an array of articulations, feminist scholars have often been at the heart of these engagements. Challenging scientific superiority over the emotional and subjective (Greco and Stenner 2008), feminist affect theory has

encouraged thinking around 'the explicit ways in which each emotion affects the individual and the social' (Gorton 2007, p. 345).

Contributors to feminist affect theory such as Sara Ahmed, Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai call for feminism's 'ugly' emotions to be taken more seriously. In her book 'Ugly Feelings' (2005), Ngai unpacks the feeling of disgust explored in literature, concluding

> As Bartlebyan allegories of how literature itself might respond to the market's disarmingly friendly *tolerance* of art – both can be taken as final demonstrations of the unique role ugly feelings can play, not only as interpretations of the predicament of blocked or suspended agency, but also as interpretations of art's suspended sociopolitical agency in particular (*Ibid.,* p. 346)

For Ngai, disgust pushes at the boundaries of personal autonomy – we are made aware of limitations imposed on us by society when we begin to explore the ugly, because it is this transgressive ugliness that an increasingly marketised economy wants to obscure. An antidote to tolerance, 'disgust can be a prophylactic against the contempt that marks the negative limit of that disattendability – one that already assumes its object to be relatively unthreatening' (*Ibid.,* p. 345). We are encouraged in our positivity to 'smile', 'be happy' for fear of what a turn to our ugly sides will bring out – when we turn to the ugly, we can become subjects who have unblocked our agency and become a threat to the status quo. We can begin to confront the reasons for why we feel anxiety, unhappiness, paranoia, etc.

This notion of the ugly-feeling-as-transgression has been explored by digital media scholars interrogating digital presentations of femininity, race and queerness online. Opening up about difficult subject matter is at the heart of Minh-Ha T. Pham's study of American Asian fashion bloggers (2001). Pham shows how such bloggers have created 'fashionable bodies that connect rather than conceal links between fashion and racialized labour, citizen and immigrant, the personal and the public, and production and consumption' (*Ibid.*, p27). Pham agrees that state power and political economy can determine the shape of digital culture, but that the fashion blogosphere remains 'a significant cultural site in which the struggle over the meanings of race, gender, sexuality, and political action happen everyday' (*Ibid.,* p. 28). In a

similar way, I am keen to understand how social media platforms function as cultural creative sites within which participants struggle over meanings of British South Asian-ness, queerness and political action everyday.

Pham uses the example of American Asian fashion blogger Joon Oluchi Lee, (founder of the lipstickeater blog), whose relationship to his mother is informed by her brand of "hard femininity" that he sees himself embodying, not as a man, but as someone who is disrupting the gender binary. His mother conveys a resilient femininity shaped by years of economic hardship, racism and misogyny as a migrant worker in the States; 'such a pedagogy is a countersentimental mode of domestic praxis not organized around the emotional universalist rhetoric of a mother's love but rather is constituted in particular histories and sartorial forms of struggle' writes Pham (*Ibid*., p.23). Objects used by Lee's mother (lipstick, a purse) become his tools 'with which to practice, perform, and produce a new kind of femininity that is not opposed and subordinated to masculinity but is a queer subject position that refuses the binarization of gender' (*Ibid.,* p. 26). The hard femininity of a mother seems ugly when compared to the 'universalist rhetoric' of the soft femininity of motherhood, but rather than fall into a binary of hard/neglectful and soft/loving mother, hard femininity allows Lee to simultaneously embody his own and his mother's difficult histories. A turn towards the transgressive ugliness of hard femininity unblocks Lee's agency as a queer diasporic subject who does not turn away from but accepts and performs a difficult history through photographs and blogging.

A refusal to only engage in happy feelings becomes a political stance, according to Sara Ahmed, where 'the unhappy ending becomes a political gift' (2010, p.88). Through the resistive lens of negative emotions and difficult subject matter, digital users can begin to disrupt the depoliticised "happy gay". Holis Griffin's study of the @aidsmemorial Instagram account maintains that although the act of witnessing content is not radical in and of itself, exposing users to the pain, suffering and resilience of LGBTQ communities during the AIDs crisis 'might lead to new commitments to progressive politics' (Griffins 2022, p. 102). In embracing the pain - the unhappiness - Ahmed writes

Revolutionary forms of political consciousness involve heightening our awareness of *just how much* there is to be unhappy about. Yet this does not mean unhappiness becomes our political cause. In refusing to be constrained by happiness, we can open up other ways of being, of being perhaps. (Ahmed 2010, p.15-16)

For Ahmed, ugly feelings do not make ugly or political subjects, they just *make* subjects. For both Lee and the content uploaded to the @aidsmemorial account, displaying ugly (hard/painful) content brings them into being. This being is at odds with the market logic of social media subjectivities, which subsumes users into a neoliberal digital consumer economy, encouraging them towards a 'positive mental attitude' (Gill 2017, p.621).

This set of literatures prove constructive to my research, as I focus on the affective dimensions of everyday social media usage; how it makes participants feel about themselves and others they encounter online. I often noticed that face-to-face conversations about the digital were emotional and lively - thus, applying the affective turn to everyday social media users affirms that, in amongst the pixels and face filters, the digital is animated and affected by human emotion, even if this is not always as obvious as we scroll through content on our timelines. We rarely post up how these social media platforms make us feel (there will be the odd friend posting up that they are 'logging off' for a bit) and so I hope that my approach draws out these thought valuing user perceptions that are encouraged through face-to-face interviews about digital living (more on this in chapter three). More specifically, when applied to the British South Asian digital diaspora, although I am not concerned with analysing participants' digital content, I am invested in understanding how certain 'ugly' content becomes transgressive, pushing back against respectability politics foisted upon them by family, other digital users and local community. I unpack this further in chapter four when looking at participant strategies to maintain privacy online. Additionally, in chapter seven, I introduce the notion of ugly feelings when exploring participants' posting of 'happy' or emotionally vulnerable content.

Feminist and queer theories of the digital account for 'other ways of being' online, bringing to mind Berlant's notion of 'intimate publics' (Berlant 2008). 'What makes a public sphere intimate is an expectation that the consumers of its particular stuff *already* share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience (*Ibid.,* p. viii), writes Berlant. Building on Nancy Fraser's theory of counterpublics (Fraser 1990), feminist and queer digital spaces have been understood as occupying 'parallel discursive arenas where members […] invent and circulate counterdiscourses' (*Ibid.* p.67).

Historically contextualising Fraser's counterpublics, I turn to Jurgen Habermas' concept of the public sphere; he maintained that the bourgeois public sphere (within a European context) mediated between state and citizens, holding the former accountable through public display (1962). Fraser reconstituted this concept, contending that there were many publics throughout this period which existed in parallel to the bourgeois public sphere, precisely because they were excluded from this central sphere. Although there was much talk of democratic inclusion, 'the claim to open access in particular was not made good' (Fraser 1990, p. 59), with women and working-class men excluded. Fraser criticises Habermas for his idealised view of the bourgeois public sphere and turns her focus to competing parallel spheres, formed by marginalised voices. Termed "subaltern counterpublics", Fraser uses the example of the 1970s US feminist movement to demonstrate how bookshops, conventions and local meeting places operated as "subaltern counterpublics" for women, 'who have recast [their] needs and identities' (*Ibid.,* p. 67).

Communities who have carved out "subaltern counterpublics" online to meet their own 'needs and identities' is the most straightforward way of comprehending the role of the digital in the lives of marginalised users (Mehra et. al, 2004). Groups such as the Inclusive Mosque Initiative who have hopes of building a physical intersectional feminist Mosque in London, have been able to form and build community because the digital provided them space to exist and build networks. From an extensive study of Black American users in the early days of cyberspace (Everett 2009); digital cultural production in the everyday lives of Black British women engaging with YouTube (Sobande 2020); young Western Muslims on Tumblr realising and experimenting with hybrid identities away from family, community and mainstream

media (Pennington 2018); the new possibilities opened up by cyberspace for Chinese lesbians (Lo 2021) and queer youth in Canada (Craig and McInroy 2014), these studies draw out the resistive nature of these spaces as intimate publics and subaltern counterpublics. In chapter five, applying this theory of intimate publics to Instagram, I consider how participants create space or connect with each other because of shared experiences or 'emotional knowledge' that runs parallel to the mainstream white, Western, heteronormative and patriarchal digital spheres within Instagram.

However, defining a set of users as a counterpublic along identity attributes can erase the unique digital practices created by that set of users, argues Andre Brock. According to Brock, Black Twitter 'is best understood as a "public group of specific Twitter users" rather than a "Black online public"' (Brock 2012, p. 545), better reflecting the heterogeneity of Black culture in America. Thus, relegating Black Twitter to the status of Black counterpublic, not only refuses to engage with the tech literacy of a particular set of users but also 'speaks to the power of American racial ideology's framing of Black identity as monoculture' (*Ibid.,* p. 546). Graham and Smith differ somewhat in their assertion that Black Twitter is in fact a counterpublic. This is concluded via an empirical study of the hashtag #BlackTwitter, comparing interaction patterns of tweets that contained the hashtag against those that did not. They found that users interacted more with tweets that contained the hashtag and that it had less thematic overlap with other digital spaces:

> Black Twitter has the function of a counterpublic, as a "training ground for agitational activities." […] given the distinct conversations occurring via the #BlackTwitter hashtag, we suggest that Black Twitter approximates the form of a counterpublic as a "parallel discursive arena", much more so than the other publics studied. (Graham and Smith, 2016 p.445-6)

For Graham and Smith, a digital counterpublic functions as a site for 'agitational activities' that bring to the fore political issues impacting Black communities in America every day. They are less concerned with the technological and cultural attributes of its users and more invested in its resistive political potential amongst users, especially because it is perhaps the most visible alternative arena outside of the mainstream Twittersphere.

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Both approaches offer something useful in terms of digital diaspora research; Brock's approach allows researchers to acknowledge the heterogeneity of digital diasporas. Attributing ways of being online to a particular set of users as opposed to a whole subsection of society not only allows for a nuanced approach to the technological skills heralded by a certain group to emerge, but accounts for different viewpoints amongst users. In understanding his users not only as Black Americans but also as savvy tech literates, Brock succeeds in building a complex picture of usership that not only builds upon the cultural histories of his users but also pays attention to their unique creative abilities as Twitter users. I aim to add another dimension to this via this research – whilst acknowledging the positives of unique creative abilities amongst users, combining it with the digital inequalities framework (more on this in chapter two) proves especially useful in chapters six and seven because it highlights how users, although all identifying as South Asian, differ in their access to financial and social resources and quality of digital interactions. Graham and Smith's approach widens its scope of user activity to demonstrate how Black Twitter users have engendered change on a mass scale (Brown et al. 2017; Wheeler 2019). When envisioning the political potential of Instagram for participants, I return to this notion of a digital counterpublic as a '"parallel discursive arena"' (Graham and Smith 2016, p. 446) in chapter eight.

So far, I have demonstrated how feminist affect theory has brought to the fore the emotional dimensions of digital life. More specifically, users' engagement with 'ugly feelings' has engendered a resistive way of being online that acknowledges the varying intersections of identity and difficult histories of marginalisation. A move towards 'ugly feelings' also signals a shift away from a 'neoliberal moral framework' (Banet-Weiser 2012, p. 56) that demands we stay happy in order to succeed under capitalism. Whilst the 'ugly feelings' framework has been applied to the content displayed on Instagram accounts, it has not been applied to the everyday activities of users (i.e., why they post certain content, what reactions this content gets) especially digital diaspora communities; this is a gap that I think my research can speak to. I think it significant to highlight how women and queer British South Asian Instagrammers adhere to or transgress not only family and community rules through their social media

activities, but also how they navigate this as everyday social media users. Conceiving of digital diasporas as everyday digital users is something I return to in the following chapter.

Feminist affect theory makes room for 'other ways of being' outside of white western cis-hetero patriarchy, and it is through this lens that I have thus far explored intimate publics and "subaltern publics" online. My conception of Instagram s a counterpublic, sits between both Brock and Graham and Smith's definitions of digital counterpublics; it is a unique set of users that make a counterpublic, because 'Black people [and other marginalised folk] are not a monolith' (Florini 2013, p. 225). I consider participants unique in their perceptions and aspirations, which is why I think it important to interview them and find out what these are. Thus, understanding those who make up a counterpublic as a unique constellation of users allows for a much more nuanced approach that avoids essentialism when it comes to identity and tech literacy. Simultaneously, I acknowledge that the digital has allowed for historically marginalised groups to build and engage in discursive practices, lending weight to the political potential of as a site for collective solidarity.

As well as exploring the resistive potentialities of the digital, feminist and queer theorists have also located the neoliberal logic inherent to digital media technologies and how feminism, queerness and race have been re-visioned as a result. In the next section, I begin by looking at post, popular and neoliberal renderings of feminism online before exploring the racial neoliberal and homonormative dimensions of these same spaces.

Postfeminism, popular feminism and neoliberal feminism

To understand the neoliberal framework that digital identity formation operates within, feminist cultural studies scholars Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg observe the ways in which feminist discourse has been shaped online (Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg 2019). Postfeminism, popular feminism and neoliberal feminism are the terms through which they define this shift in feminist politics. To reiterate, my approach is an intervention that serves to highlight the ambivalence of digital identity work amongst the British South Asian diaspora on social media platforms; it is not simply acceptance of platform for 'brown girls' to create spaces of empowerment. I would argue that the conflicting

perceptions and activities of participants that are explored throughout this thesis somewhat highlight this shift in feminist politics on social media, which is why I find the discourse around postfeminism, popular feminism and neoliberal feminism useful for my research and should be applied more rigorously to studies of digital diasporas.

Gill's notion of postfeminism builds upon previous feminist scholarship that witnessed a shift away from collective feminist action towards a digital consumer/ individualism (McRobbie 2004, 2009; Gill 2007; Rottenberg 2014). For Gill, postfeminism is a sensibility that has taken a strong hold across culture and media and become hegemonic. The desirable appearance of the female body, surveillance of it by peers, self-optimisation and an encouragement towards a 'positive mental attitude' has become a 'taken for granted' dimension of gendered neoliberalism (Gill 2017, p.621).

Defining popular feminism, Banet-Weiser notes that although feminist slogans were hyper visible in the media, it seemed as if 'purchasing feminism is the same thing as changing patriarchal structures' (2018, p 4). She maintains that this popular feminism is given greatest visibility on digital platforms:

> But, as we also know, in a media context in which most circuits of visibility are driven by profit, competition and consumers, simply becoming visible does not guarantee that identity categories will somehow be transformed, or will deeply challenge hegemonic power relations (Banet-Weiser et al. 2020 p.12).

The profit and number – driven social media economy incentivises popular feminist articulations of self ('the entrepreneurial subjectivity, the emphasis on personal transformation' (*Ibid.* p. 13)), therefore the most popular articulations become the most visible, and this becomes an end in itself. Rather than pursuing meaningful engagement or change, 'these identities are now subsumed into an attention economy' (Lui 2017, p.261) in an effort to gain endorsement opportunities and viral fame.

Neoliberal feminism builds upon postfeminist and popular feminist claims, with the feminist subject accepting full responsibility for her care and success. In engendering this new feminist subject, a particular cultural purpose is served:

> The production of neoliberal feminism makes cultural sense, since it becomes one more domain that neoliberal governmentality colonizes and remakes in its own image. [...] No longer concerned with issues, such as the gendered wage gap, sexual harassment, rape or domestic violence, ambitious individual *middle-class women* themselves become both the problem and the solution in the neoliberal feminist age. (Rottenberg 2013, p.432)

In addition, neoliberal feminism serves a patriotic purpose in much the same way as Jasbir Puar's rendering of homonormativity (Puar 2007) in service of the American troops abroad; the liberated queer male/feminist subject in America should be thankful for a freedom not threatened by bigoted terrorists/afforded to women in Muslim countries. The ever-eroding rights of women in the West becomes obscured, with places like Europe and America seen as 'progressive' whilst simultaneously being able to sustain internal critique. This, as Rottenberg argues, 'helps to neutralise criticism from other strands of feminism' (*Ibid.* p.433) – how could a neoliberal feminist be *against* feminism if she advocates for more women CEOs?

In conversation with each other, Gill, Banet-Weiser and Rottenberg discuss their different approaches to expressions of feminism in the current mediascape, concluding that they 'have come to understand the ways in which these manifestations borrow from as well as compete with one another in the contemporary landscape' (Banet-Weiser et al. 2020, p. 21). The similarities and conflicts (e.g.: Gill contends that the happy work-family balance pushed by neoliberal feminism has always existed. Rottenberg responds by agreeing but argues that the difference today is that it is considered a feminist ideal) between these critiques reflects the digital landscape in which we find ourselves. As Rottenberg states, 'the feminist landscape is shifting so quickly these days' (*Ibid.*, p. 17), therefore I consider postfeminism, popular feminism and neoliberal feminism as important interventions that allow me to think through the current complex feminist landscape on social media platforms.

Moving on to look specifically at Instagram, feminist digital media scholars have begun to unpack the ways in which different feminisms have been performed through the figure of the influencer. Defined as account holders with a sizeable following (of at least 10,000), Instagram influencers can seamlessly advertise products to their social network of followers on behalf of the advertiser, giving credibility (a sense of 'realness') to the brand they are posting about in their Instagram pictures (Abidin, 2016; De Veirman 2017). The parallel narratives that run through influencer culture is summed up neatly by Brooke Erin Duffy and Emily Hund, who conducted a study of fashion bloggers, all of them women:

> These socially mediated versions are ostensibly women just like us. Yet, just as this rhetoric of "real" obscures hierarchies of age, race, class, sexuality, and body type […], the codes by which top-ranked fashion bloggers represent themselves veil the labor, discipline, and capital that go into the production of the digital self. (Duffy and Hund 2015, p.9)

Digital identity in the influencer context becomes an individualised marketable commodity and one that obscures the offline lived experience that contributes to digital identity formation. Although the majority of participants are everyday users, the trickle-down effect of the Influencer economy is something I explore through an analysis of what I term 'everyday influencing' in chapter six. This mode of creative self-expression rooted in the consumer marketplace lays claim to an authenticity missing from the traditional fashion industry, i.e. these women are 'just like us' and therefore we follow them because we trust them. The conditions that allow for these articulations of self, feed into a 'neoliberal *moral* framework' (Banet-Weiser 2012, p.56) that is predicated upon notions of self-branding, creative autonomy and narratives of authenticity.

Female 'empowerment' in a digital economy driven by attention and visibility becomes achievable through the 'commodifiable body' (Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 25). A case study of Hawaiian surfer Alana Blanchard's Instagram profile argues that images of white western athletic beauty elicit different feminist understandings of the female body on social media (Thorpe, Toffoletti and Bruce 2017). Understanding this phenomenon through the lens of three feminist critiques (third-wave feminism, postfeminism and neoliberal feminism), the

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paper does not proscribe to one approach but rather maintains that such approaches expand our understandings of 'the emergence of new forms of body politics and feminist activisms in digital platforms' (*Ibid.,* p. 383). The third-wave feminist position in the case of a bikini-clad sports influencer is that Blanchard herself is choosing this visibility (Heywood and Dworkin 2003) and rupturing the binaries of sport and masculinity by injecting femininity into it (Bruce 2016). Dubbed 'choice feminism', the third-wave position refuses to engage politically and therefore does not challenge the status quo, argues Michaele L. Ferguson (2010); those difficult conversations or actions that we confront as feminists engaged in politics, are the very things that bring about change.

Without dismissing choice feminism outright, Ferguson makes the point that we should acknowledge the political dilemmas impacting feminists today that make them take up this position in the first place. Here I find it useful to refer to Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism*, which understands the neoliberal age as the natural order of things:

> An ideological position can never be really successful until it is naturalized, and it cannot be naturalized while it is still thought of as a value rather than a fact. Accordingly, neoliberalism has sought to eliminate the very category of value in the ethical sense. Over the past thirty years, capitalist realism has successfully installed a 'business ontology' in which it is simply obvious that everything in society, including healthcare and education, should be run as a business. (Fisher 2009, p.16-17)

Much like the post, popular and neoliberal feminist leanings of the digital era, this naturalised or taken for granted system has installed a 'business ontology' of the self on social media. The digital self now too can be run as a business, a naturalised fact of life that is no longer questioned (Marshall 2021). The celebrated neoliberal feminist subject becomes one who is 'able to individually overcome structural inequalities and obtain economic independence and success' (Thorpe, Toffoletti and Bruce 2017, p.370). The work of feminist and queer studies scholars offers a sociological framework through which to understand the formation of gender and sexuality within online worlds. They also critique the absence of diverse bodies from these digital spheres (Duffy and Hund 2015; Rogers 2020) – what we are then left with is an examination of predominantly white, western, middle-class subjectivities.

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I interject here with Jess Butler's article 'For White Girls Only?' (2013), which Gill references in her own theorising of postfeminist sensibilities. Butler proposes an intersectional approach to a postfeminist understanding that has often privileged a white, middle-class, heterosexual subject. Butler goes against the claim that postfeminism excludes women of colour – this 'seems both overly simplistic and empirically unfounded' (Butler, 2013 p. 480). Using the examples of popular American television shows like *America's Next Top Model* and *Basketball Wives*; and famous singers such as Nicki Minaj, Destiney's Child and Mariah Carey, Butler argues that not all postfeminist subjects are white and middle-class:

> This does not necessarily mean that nonwhite, nonmiddle-class, and nonheterosexual women are altogether excluded from, or somehow unaffected by, postfeminist discourse (*Ibid.*, p. 48)

This does not dismiss the fact that postfeminism centers the white, heterosexual female subject, but rather that it obscures the ways in which nonwhite and nonhetersexual subjects are included in it. Singers like Beyonce embody postfeminist stylings that promote a consumption of feminine goods, champion choice, empowerment and sexual freedom, all whilst constructed through a heteronormative gaze. These figures come to represent a dream of financial and cultural success for women of colour and it is this representation that becomes the focus of achievement. This logic supports the view that if we see more women of colour achieving under capitalism, it will economically uplift the rest of us.

Racial neoliberalism

In his assessment of Black representation online, Herman Gray traces the separation of difference (gender, race, sexuality, etc.) from a collective disadvantage rooted within wider political structures, into an individualising lifestyle politics. In demanding nothing beyond digital visibility and representation, social and economic injustice persists. The objective of forming identity based upon racial, or any other marginalised axis of difference becomes an exercise in the creation and maintenance of a branded self, displaying a 'unique' narrative. Gray contends that marginalised groups seeking representation through cultural forms may

be rewarded with empathy from dominant groups or a form of 'cultural justice' but are just as likely to 'engender new forms of subjection and marginalisation' (Gray 2013, p. 791). If these systems of power are continually perpetuated in the name of representation, then difference no longer inspires a fight for justice and instead 'operates as a form of power that normalises and regulates' (*Ibid.,* p.793).

Just as popular feminism's answer to injustice seems to be the addition of a woman being given a seat at the table, the heightened visibility of people of colour in pollical discussions and media comes without an interrogation of structural oppression. On social media, this 'glossy diversity' (Banet-Weiser et. al. 2020, p. 14) is in danger of making a product of disenfranchisement:

> Within the *politics* of visibility, bodies that are disenfranchised and marginalized are moved into the spotlight so as to highlight that disenfranchisement and marginalization. Within an economy of visibility, the *spotlight* on their bodies, their visibility, the number of views, is in fact its politics. This spotlight is literally designed for social media such as Instagram (Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 27).

Thus, to be seen at all becomes an aim in and of itself. Inserting analyses of racial formation into the digital neoliberal economy, Gray ascertains that 'the alliance of difference and power instigates a yearning for *representation as an end in itself*' (Gray 2013, p.784).

Thinking through histories of the politics of representation, to be seen at all was about disrupting hegemonic structures. In his essay 'Minimal Selves' (1987) Stuart Hall gives credit to the ways in which diaspora communities embraced and articulated their ethnic differences, disrupting Thatcher's 'Englishness' that presented itself as a default/normalising force, as opposed to another ethnic identification. Whether accepted or not, the reality was that English ethnicity was (and continues to be) in flux, in part because of diaspora communities' contributions to its national and cultural landscape (Gilroy 1991; Brah 1996); Hall conceived of a politics of representation as a disruption of nationalist sentiments.

Reflecting on earlier queer diasporic cultural forms, art theorist Kobena Mercer wrote about the constantly shifting space opened up by Black gay and lesbian film makers:

> Such work suggests that we give up the search for a purified ideal type or a positive role model of political correctness, because it teaches us to value our own multiple differences as the very stuff of which our queer diasporic identities are made (Mercer 1993, p.240).

These multiple differences that were being articulated by cultural producers, ushered in a complexity then denied to diasporic subjects. The hope that this representation would bring some form of justice has not convinced Gray:

> I am not persuaded, despite the spread of representations made possible by new media technologies, that the intensity, variety, reach, and complexity of representations of race or ethnicity, gender or sexuality that circulate on Facebook, in chat rooms, on blogs and on YouTube, Twitter or Instagram unsettle this particular alignment of difference and power (Gray 2013, p. 773 – 4).

Furthermore, using the example of the funded activist, Zoe Samudzi and William C. Anderson call for an end to capitalist co-optation:

> People have been increasingly using online platforms to collectivize resources or crowdfund disaster relief efforts, bail funds, and other forms of support for victims of violence or people experiencing financial hardship. But, fundamentally, how does a movement protect itself from co-option by individuals and institutions eternally endowed with the structural capacity and mandate to divert political energy and direction? This question must frame much of our future work and be centered in Black movement debates. (Samudzi and Anderson 2018, p.104)

The neoliberal dimensions of race have largely been aimed at the Black diaspora in America, something that feminist scholar Simidele Dosekun takes issue with (2015). For Dosekun, postfeminism has not considered the non-Western world, arguing that post-feminism is a

readily packaged globalising phenomenon being embodied by women in the global South. Thinking transnationally, Dosekun traces the consumer connectivities that become vehicles for postfeminsim in other parts of the world. Interviewing women in Lagos, Dosekun notes that class becomes a signifier and a way to be included in global postfeminist circles where individual choice and consumerism apply exclusively to 'already empowered' women:

> If an increasingly dominant neoliberal definition of women's empowerment means and is measured by their access to material resources and consumer goods, women already enjoying education, careers, disposable incomes, and measures of consumer choice and cosmopolitan lifestyles are in the position of "already empowered". (Dosekun 2015, p. 967).

Dosekun's project is not to automatically label these women as postfeminists but to open up a space to consider that this sensibility is very much a possibility outside of the confines of the Western world. In choosing to ignore this, scholars can end up ignoring 'the extent to which post-feminist culture may be available to class privileged women there […] in ways that are neither merely watered down nor tantamount to "yearning" for the West' (Dosekun 2015, p. 963). I find this a compelling argument, especially in chapter six when it comes to participants making links with digital users on the Indian subcontinent, further highlighting how global postfeminist circles operate.

I veer here because although my participants are either based in or have been born in the UK, the globalising nature of neoliberal postfeminisms and their racial contours is an important one to note. Its sensibilities not only apply to those in the West, but is a globalising force, encouraged further by the international connections fostered by users from all over the world (Shome and Hedge 2002). As critical cultural scholars, it is important that we confront the challenges of globalisation when it comes to understanding complex diasporic and postcolonial locations today. In the same way that Shome and Hedge urge us to 'initiate a dialogue […] on the intellectual challenges posed by aspects of transnational mobility' (2002, p. 187) so too must we initiate a dialogue on the everchanging nature of self-representation on social media amongst diaspora users in a global context.

Gray's assertion is significant for its analyses of digital racial formations of the self and its acknowledgment of the complex desires of marginalised communities; social or cultural justice is not the aim of every marginalised voice, just as much as those aims not being met by those advocating for them through hypervisibility online. It is important that I apply this notion (what Gray terms 'racial neoliberalism' (2013, p. 784)) to my research so as not to enter with a naivety of participants' aims. However, I also remain sensitive to their needs and desires for real emotional connection; to read ideologically into digital spaces is reductive and 'requires a vigilance against critical readings that sift representations according to whether they confirm or contest forms of racism', argues Gavin Titley (2019, p.46).

Similarly, although Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg place the articulations of post/popular/neoliberal feminists firmly within neoliberal processes of production (Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg 2019), all three scholars agree that online activity through platforms like Twitter and Instagram has also galvanised collective grassroots movements rooted in politically charged campaigns such as the #metoo movement. The macro structures of branding, advertising and campaigning will continue in the name of neoliberal feminism, but so will the micro engagements of everyday digital feminist users in pursuit of community and empowerment, revealing the complex and shifting nature of feminist politics within the digital sphere.

Gray maintains that he is not persuaded 'despite the spread of representations made possible by new media technologies' to 'unsettle this particular alignment of difference and power' (Gray 2013, p. 773 – 4) and in some respects, this can be seen as a pessimistic view of digital identity work. However, I argue that Gray offers a nuanced perspective that seeks to understand *where* and *how* these digital engagements are transformative, but also how they can perpetuate the status quo. As a digital media researcher concerned with how digital diasporas unsettle and perpetuate dynamics of difference and power, Gray's work on racial neoliberalism in the digital sphere ensures that these communities are recognised as having complex desires, beyond just simply advocating for representation.

Thus, by including literatures that highlight the gendered and racial contours of neoliberal digital identity work, I am aware of two things when going into my research; one, that digital diasporas are not immune from the neoliberal logic of digital identity work and two, that participant engagement cannot simply be judged along binaries that either confirm or contest racism. As already mentioned, this approachaims to highlight the vacillating nature of digital identity work and therefore, it is important for scholars 'to detail exactly how and where media organise and circulate affectively compelling sentiment, attachment, and (dis)identification to public policies, bodies, histories, and cultures' (Gray 2013, p.793). This intervention therefore seeks to highlight the complexity of digital identity work amongst women and queer British South Asian Instagrammers, because, as discussed in the following chapter, everyday diasporic digital lives are as fluid and messy as offline lives and deserve greater attention.

In a similar vein to postfeminist studies of the digital, I now turn to queer studies scholars and their critiques of homonormative practices in the digital sphere, before moving on to explore practices of queer visuality as alternative forms of queer digital expression.

Homonormativity and queer visuality

'When people are marginalised or excluded from the workings of capitalist production, they express a desire to leap into, not out of, capitalist relations', writes Gargi Bhattacharyya (2018, p.153). When it comes to this type of affirmation in aspiring queer communities, Rosalind Gill points to the corporate LGBTQ 'power lists' to demonstrate how postfeminist sensibilities line up with neoliberal queer aspirations. The emptying of queer politics' 'potential to threaten the dominant heteropatriarchal order' (Gill 2017, p.615) also suggests that we are post-homophobia, much in the same way that postfeminism maintains that we are beyond the need to fight for women's rights, because they were fought for us a long time ago.

A dialogue has emerged between queer studies and postfeminism; studies that celebrate the resistive potential of postfeminism, from digital burlesque communities (Ferreday 2008) to the queer potentials of extreme femininity in 'make-under' (when women contestants are made to look 'natural') television shows (McCann 2015). With women as primary audience

members of burlesque shows and television contestants brought out to tame their excessive (and therefore undesirable to men) femininity, Ferreday and McCann contend that such excesses of femininity should be read not as hypersexual, but rather, as queer because they trouble the boundaries of gender.

In contrast to this reading of queerness and postfeminism, Kate McNicholas Smith and Imogen Tyler critique the proliferation of lesbian representations in western popular culture. Considering the spectacle of the lesbian wedding, they ask

> Is lesbianism now sutured to femininity in ways that allow (some) girls and women to become respectable lesbians on the condition they "do gender" in ways that conform to heteronormative social rules? (McNicholas Smith and Tyler 2015, p.318)

This 'lesbian normal' draws on a postfeminist media culture that portrays a 'lesbian of hetero-masculine soft-porn fantasies' that on the surface, comes across as liberating but in fact is complicit in 'the defanging of feminist and queer politics' (*Ibid.,* p. 326).

These homonormative renderings of queer identity have made it into the Instagram sphere; in a study of Spanish gay users, self-promotion and financial success become the tools to overcoming homophobia - not mutual aid and collective action (Gras-Velázquez and Maestre-Brotons 2021); this 'defanging' of gay politics creates a 'culture anchored in domesticity and consumption' (Duggan 2002). Examining posts with the hashtag #gayspain, the study finds that the uploading of naked photos marks a difference in the exhibition of the gay male form – from enacting recognition and empowerment usually found in friends and allies in the struggle for LGBTQ rights, it instead promotes building followers and admirers in a global marketplace where a gay lifestyle becomes an exercise in self-branding.

Gras-Velázquez and Maestre-Brotons go on to highlight an interesting shift in the emotional habitus of gay life. Through the historically productive work and activism that arose out of the intense homophobia of earlier decades, negative emotions elicited a strong sense of community. Today, 'the [gay] body is no longer a site of political struggle like in the past, but a sex object […] Gay love, on Instagram, does not purport to end homophobia; it consists of

self-promotion' (Gras-Velázquez and Maestre-Brotons 2021, p. 13-14). Not only do these narratives eradicate political possibilities, they also conceal stories of discrimination and shame by foregrounding the "happy queer" who is positive and successful (Ahmed 2010). The homonormative approach to displays of sexuality on Instagram continue to be critiqued by queer studies scholars. Bisexual men on Instagram draw heavily on homonormative visual culture because this is how their images travel the furthest, thus limiting the ways in which bisexuality can be expressed (Rogers 2020). The homonormative values of male sexual objectification 'threatens to consolidate gay and bisexual men into one shared identity category' (*Ibid.*, p. 377).

I find these studies of homonormative content on Instagram particularly useful when thinking about queer South Asian Influencers in chapter six and how a reframing of the queer brown body in service of wealth, middle-class aspiration and consumption takes center stage over other articulations of South Asian queerness online.

The possibilities to imagine queerness outside of neoliberal structures are greatly reduced when adhering to homonormative visual cultures on Instagram. In this respect, Instagram becomes a tool with which to elevate a successful queer subject who is happy, positive and attractive, and because of this, accepted into cis/heteronormative society. Fighting for LGBTQ rights becomes a personal journey predicated on your own success as a subject under capitalism – the understanding being that you are not disliked because you are *queer* but because you are *unsuccessful/ unhappy*. Because homonormativity advocates for a rampant individualism, collective activisms become side-lined. Importantly, Gras-Velázquez and Maestre-Brotons note that 'hyper-identity, as seen on social media and mainstream LGBT culture, has not eradicated hate against sexual minorities.' (Gras-Velázquez and Maestre-Brotons 2021, p.18).

In what ways then can queerness on social media go against the white Western homonormative grain? How have scholars imagined queer visuality outside of the naturalising tendencies of neoliberalism? Queer diaspora studies scholar Gayatri Gopinath develops a methodology invested in queer worldmaking. In contrast to the individualism and capitalist aspirations of homonormativity, Gopinath writes about 'queer aesthetic practice' that

engages with diasporic queer bodies not readily accepted by the nation-state, that 'deviate from the straight lines of hetero- and homonormative scripts that typically determine one's life trajectory' (Gopinath 2018 p.6). Thus, this practice invokes a rejection of the 'normative fantasy objects' (Berlant and Prosser 2011, p. 185) that construct an image of the good/ successful/ happy life on social media.

Exploring cultural artefacts by diasporic writers and artists, Gopinath creates linkages between them; the memoirs of African American writer Saidiya Hartman, the watercolour portraits of immigrants lost to mass detentions by South Asian American artist Chitra Ganesh and a photographic series by Lebanese visual artist Akram Zaatari, are some of the works that help construct a concept of 'queer aesthetic practice'. Hartman's novel 'Lose your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Trade' details her own journey along a slave route in Ghana and is 'a powerful reckoning with slavery's aftermath' (Gopinath 2018, p 126). Towards the end of her journey, Hartman experiences a moment of intimacy with another man, also a descendant of slaves, an intimacy 'defined outside a logic of blood' which for Gopinath, 'resonates with theories of kinship articulated by queer studies scholars' (*Ibid.,*p. 128). It is in these moments where an affective theory of queerness takes shape:

> Read through a queer lens, the text articulates a model of queer affiliation that may indeed be fleeting, may not coalesce into an easily intelligible or quantifiable form of political coalition; nevertheless, it produces moments of affective relationality that open the door to new ways of conceptualising the self and others. (*Ibid.,* p. 129)

In bringing these cultural forms together, Gopinath reveals the queer aesthetic practices present in the works and thus, through her queer curation of the archive brings new possibilities into being:

> The aesthetic practices of queer diaspora thereby powerfully contest the ongoing legacies of colonial modernity. One of the violences of colonial modernity is the consigning of gendered, sexualized, and racially marked bodies to hypervisibility and/or invisibility within a hegemonic visual field. These aesthetic practices enact and produce a queer optic that allows us to apprehend the intertwined nature of the

historical forces that produce this in/visibility; this queer optic, in turn, enables us to grasp the unanticipated intimacies between bodies, temporalities, and geographies that are the product of overlapping histories of racialization and diasporic dislocation, settler colonialism and empire, war and nationalism. (Gopinath 2018 p. 170)

The introduction of different fields of vision are a way in which queer diasporic bodies disrupt hetero and homonormative visual cultures; this way of seeing inspired me to think about how the digital could be approached in a way that did not privilege what was being *seen* online, but rather how participants *felt* about it. Thus, I decided to conduct interviews with them, rather than conduct digital ethnographies of their accounts – I was interested in that which would never make it onto the Instagram grid. I go on to unpack this further in my methodology in chapter three.

Gopinath primarily works with cultural forms outside of social media and so I turn to Legacy Russell's concept of 'Glitch Feminism' (2020) to explore the disruption of the 'hegemonic visual field' by queer diasporic digital users. Although Russell references a lot of internet artists and their digital artwork, I still find her work useful when thinking about the theorisation of everyday digital users and political disruption on social media platforms.

In an interview, Russell was asked about how early cyberfeminism connected to the concept of Glitch Feminism:

I see Glitch Feminism as a part of that history, for sure. But I also recognize that so many of the primary contributors that come up in relation to Cyberfeminism are cis-gendered white women. (Russell 2020, interview for artnet)

The impetus for writing the book came from the lack of discourse and theory around 'the ways that we [Black and queer people] have used the internet as a site of collective gathering, as a space for questioning and congregating' (Ibid.). Glitch Feminism, whilst acknowledging the important groundwork laid down by early cyberfeminists, is also critical of its marginalisation of queer people, transgender people and people of colour. Russell counteracts this invisibility by introducing the work of queer and Black contemporary artists

who get to the core of the manifesto; 'to consider the in-between as a core component of survival – neither masculine nor feminine […] but a spectrum across which we may be empowered to choose and define ourselves for ourselves' (Russell 2020 p11). Glitch Feminism celebrates the practice and potential of digital tools that have opened up a host of possibilities for marginalised people, in particular queer and transgender users.

Russell makes it clear that she doesn't hold the same naïve optimism of early cyberfeminists – this digital space is inherently capitalist but also open to glitches by those who refuse to stick to gendered binaries. One example is the plethora of queer club nights and collectives that have sprung up 'out of a generation searching to situate in physical space an AFK [away-from-keyboard] response to faces, voices, and visions that often call out in affirmation to one another online' (Russell p.126-7). Russell contends that the images that are circulated of these club nights across social media provide 'a living archive of a living history' (*Ibid.,* p.127).

Gopinath's work is foundational to acknowledging how archives can be understood as queering the hegemonic visual field, and I consider Russell's intervention as applying the same notion to the engagements of social media users. Both identify moments of disruption and affective bonds to make visible the queer diasporic experience which has often been ignored. Russell concludes:

> We are faced with the reality that we will never be given the keys to a utopia architected by hegemony. Instead, we have been tasked with building the world(s) we want to live in, a most difficult yet most urgent blueprint to realize. If we see culture, society, and, by extension, gender as material to remix, we can acknowledge these things as "original recordings" that were not created to liberate us. Still, they are materials that can be reclaimed […] Remixing is an act of self-determination; it is a technology of survival (*Ibid.,* p. 133).

The digital parameters of what queer diasporic bodies are told they should aspire to (again Berlant's 'normative fantasy objects'), are remixed in service of the marginalised; Russell uses Shaadi Devereaux's writings about 'Toxic Twitter' to demonstrate this point. Devereaux explains how Twitter went from a space where 'shouting into the void' eventually

transformed into a call-and-response exercise for black and trans women to discuss issues that impacted them. This digital mobilisation is the glitch in the 'Glitch Feminism' manifesto – 'the glitch mobilizes' writes Russell, 'in mobilizing, we remain fugitive: we stand on the outside, not to look in, but, stateless, to occupy and grow with intention […] It is the thing that keeps us blurry and unbound, pushing back against hegemony' (Russell 2020, p. 129). This queer aesthetic practice is transgressive precisely because it disrupts neoliberal hegemonic cultures, both historically through the reclamation of the archive and digitally, through the glitch. In refusing to be so easily defined along Western, patriarchal hetero and homonormative parameters, the queer digital diaspora retains its blurriness and thus cannot become an entity in service to the neoliberal aspirations of self-branding (as explored in chapter five).

In the spirit of the Glitch Feminism manifesto, the work of gender non-conforming South Asian artists from the diaspora serve to illustrate its point of refusing to give in to binaries that categorise bodies. Although my research does not focus on digital content, I feel it necessary to at least mention those who have, over the years, shaped the discourse around queerness and South Asian diaspora politics on social media.   Hailing from Texas, Alok Vaid-Menon is a gender non-conforming mixed-media artist of Malayali and Punjabi extraction. Nestled amongst the colourful photographs of fashion shoots, talks and book excerpts on their Instagram account, are screenshots of abuse from online trolls. One screenshot (with the identity of the original poster obscured) reads:

> I don't know who needs to tell you this so I'll just do it. You are not a woman, bro. Man up. (@alokvmenon Instagram)

Next to the screenshot Alok writes that they need every single one of their supporters, 'as if my life depended on it (because it does)'. The screenshot makes known the dangers that await bodies that exist outside of the gender binary. Russell writes 'in order to reimagine the body, one must reimagine space' (2020 p. 84). Thus, in the creation of a space taken up by a gender non-conforming South Asian body, Alok succeeds in reimagining space where once there wasn't one for them. The decision to publicly post up the hostile comments and direct messages they receive via Instagram only affirm the need for such a space in the first place.

It also aligns with the idea of bringing up difficult subject matter on social media, thus fighting back against the marketised happiness users are encouraged into.

The experience of disrupting gender binaries online also triggers conversations around self-care. Raju Rage is a British South Asian gender non-conforming artist who has made downloadable care packages for those in 'states of being overwhelmed or restless, as well as various marginalised identities' (Rage on LADA website, 2020). These packages can be downloaded for as little as £1 and include a PDF with resources to read and listen to, inspiring us to cultivate rituals of care and reflection. Much like the examples that animate the Glitch Feminism manifesto, artistic practice subverts the digital mechanisms at play, revealing the limitations but (most importantly) the possibilities of this terrain for queer marginalised bodies. They are vital because they subvert the norms of neoliberal queer visuality – they engage with their diaspora identity, embrace 'ugly feelings' and use the platform that they have to meaningfully engage with users.

So far, throughout this section I have emphasised the emergent link between queer studies and postfeminism, offering a critique of the homonormative dimensions of queer identity as witnessed through television and social media platforms. Studies of queer users on social media conclude that homonormative identity (like postfeminist identity) is built upon pursuing followers and a branded self that competes on the global marketplace. A shift in the emotional habitus of gay life perpetuates the sexual objectification of the gay male form and embeds a consumerist and domesticated approach to gay living. This shift eradicates other political and emotional possibilities of the queer experience, often privileging white, middle-class, happy looking, cis-male, gay users. Such homonormative visual cultures only serve to flatten queer experience.

Turning to the work of queer diaspora studies scholars, we can begin to transgress the hegemony of queer visuality. Gopinath's 'queer aesthetic practice' and Russell's Glitch Feminism marks a refusal to engage with the neoliberal mechanisms of digital identity work. Without accepting it as the natural order of things, these concepts allow for a queering of digital diaspora, a subversion of the neoliberal framings of identity online. Teasing out the queer possibilities of everyday living from the archive, to the disruption of existing in digital

spaces not intended for queer diasporic bodies, these concepts speak to the disruptive potential of queer diaspora studies when applied to the digital.

In locating the discourse around the homonormative dimensions of social media, I again highlight how these literatures provide a framework through which to understand the engagements of queer participants as shaped by digital neoliberal economies. Concomitantly, turning to theories of queer visuality inspire me to comprehend how queerness transgresses these economies through queer (in)visibility as explored in chapter five.

So far, this chapter has not explicitly touched upon feminist and queer theories of the South Asian digital diaspora, the group who are at the centre of my research. Therefore, I dedicate the next section of this chapter to feminist and queer South Asian digital media scholarship. As well as offering intersectional analyses of class, gender and sexuality, I argue that their contributions bring to light issues that are relevant to South Asian diasporas, such as caste and subaltern subjectivities.

Feminist and queer South Asian digital diaspora scholarship
British South Asian diasporas and cultural production: A brief history

Before I look to feminist and queer studies of South Asian digital diasporas, I begin this section by asking, how have British South Asians been understood in scholarship thus far? To demonstrate the lack of visibility that women and queer folk from the diaspora experience across the cultural and academic landscape in Britain, I begin with a brief history of British South Asian cultural production from the 1980s to the early 2000s. I go on to explore British South Asian feminist and queer creative interventions, demonstrating the urgent need to bring visibility to the digital lives of women and queer British South Asians. From here I go on explore scholarship that delves into the lives and concerns of women and queer South Asians from the digital diaspora in America and the Indian subcontinent.

I admit that there is a gap between the cultural producers mentioned in this section and the everyday digital users who form the bulk of my research; they are not all full-time musicians, artists, film makers or writers. Most of them have day jobs or are university students. I draw

on the work of queer and female British South Asian cultural producers because creative interventions have prised open spaces that allow for new and unique subject positions to emerge. In the same way that Gopinath and Russell turn to the work of artists and writers to demonstrate their concepts of 'queer aesthetic practice' and glitch feminism, these creative interventions have challenged the stereotypes of submissive South Asian womanhood and heteronormativity. This fragmentation of identity has provided a space that recognises 'that we all speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, […] without being contained by that position as 'ethnic artists' or filmmakers' (Hall 1988, p.34). Acknowledging this shift in diaspora politics is significant because it has destabilised the essentialised and fixed notion of colonial subjects in Britain, with cultural producers working with and through diversity and difference, shaping the contemporary cultural landscape for British South Asians today.

The late 1960s and early 70s saw an unprecedented wave of migration to the UK of South Asians from the Indian subcontinent (Helweg 1979, Shaw 1988, Werbner 1990) followed by Idi Amin's expulsion of Indians from East Africa (Ghai and Ghai 1971, Ryan and Webster 2008) and the subsequent arrival of Bengalis in the wake of Bangladeshi Independence (Ansari, 2004). Coupled with the arrival of immigrants from the commonwealth countries, racism towards these subjects of empire intensified as British power within the colonies diminished. Early research of South Asian youth by British ethnographers either rendered them invisible because they were omitted from studies of British subcultural youth movements (Huq 2003) or essentialised them. They were posited as victims of skinhead violence (Bose 2003), with an inability to assimilate owing to their 'religious rituals, food taboos and a value system which encouraged deference' (Hebdige 1979, p58). Simultaneously, they were seen as studious and obedient (Zuberi, 1995) whilst also unable to successfully integrate into British society; they were perceived as weak, unaccustomed and mundanely compliant.

This othering was further perpetuated by written accounts of the emerging Bhangra music scene (Banerji and Baumann, 1990) with South Asian youth culture viewed as separate from white British youth culture, distinctly just for South Asians. These accounts (maybe purposefully) missed the point of what these young South Asian musicians were doing.

Postmodernist thought reimagined what a 'diaspora' could be. From classically being defined as a scattering of people from a region, the 'myth' of return and a constant link to the homeland (Safran, 1991), the diaspora came to be defined as a 'condition' under Postmodernist discourse (Hall, 1990; Gilroy, 1993; Clifford, 1994) and a potential emancipatory force against global capitalist forces and nationalist sentiment (Deleuze and Guattari 1983). Thus the 'condition' centered personal experiences of *coming* from one place and *being* in another, as opposed to descriptions of a particular diaspora group; the diaspora subject is constructed through this process of occupying multiple spaces simultaneously, of becoming organically 'hybridised' (Bhabha 1994).

In recent times, critics of hybridity have argued that it has failed as a form of resistance in an ever-increasing globalised world; diasporas of colonised peoples remain unequal as material injustices persist (Acheraïou, 2011; Cere, 2011). As an antidote to racial essentialism, it has been accused of essentialising the migrant identity, favouring the hybridity of 'the migrant intellectual' that ignores issues of class amongst diaspora populations (Ahmad, 1995; p.14). Similarly, others contend that whilst postmodern thinking has reimagined diasporic identity beyond the coloniser/colonised binary, it has lacked intersectional insight by ignoring the gendered and classed dimensions of diaspora communities (Anthias 1998).

The publication *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (1996) by Avtar Brah introduced an intersectional and feminist concept of diaspora, envisaging a *diaspora space* that allowed for an intersectional subject-positionality to emerge. The diaspora space is never fixed but constantly in flux; consideration should be given to the ways in which a group has been 'inserted within the social relations of class, gender, racism, sexuality or other axes of differentiation in the country to which it migrates' (Brah, 1996 p.182), thus the 'situatedness' of a particular diaspora has to be considered in many ways beyond race or ethnicity, as every single one, historically and politically is different. Brah's spatialisation of diaspora shares similarities to Homi Bhabha's 'third space' theory of diaspora:

This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received political wisdom. (Bhabha, in Rutherford 1990 p.211

These theories of spatialisation when applied to diaspora dismiss notions of fixed and essentialised identities and emerge as ways of describing a space that is more productive as opposed to reflective, and alive with new possibilities. Similarly, in his publication *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy argued that politicised identities are 'always unfinished, always being remade' and that ethnicity is 'an infinite process of identity construction' (1993, p.54). In other words, that ethnicity and national identity are not fixed or static.

Stuart Hall's 'New Ethnicities' intervention (Hall, 1988) also presented a significant departure to static understandings of diaspora, in that it began to engage with questions of emerging multiculturalism. Historically departing from British cultural studies' nationalist and ethnocentric beginnings in the 1970s, Hall drew on the work of Black British and British South Asian artists, musicians and film makers who were promoting an emergent cultural politics of representation. He highlighted the ways in which these cultural producers mined their unique ethnic and religious identities through their work, ushering in a 'politics of ethnicity predicated on difference and diversity' (Hall 1988, p.29).

This articulation of diaspora experience ushered in a new cultural politics that contested ideas of 'Britishness'; the simple narrative of the immigrant wanting to save money and go back to the motherland became a myth – diaspora communities were inscribing themselves into the British landscape, making political demands and creating culture that spoke to their unique experiences. Thus, a shift towards diverse diasporic cultural forms gave visibility to British South Asian cultural producers, who not only made their diversity known, they also disrupted the notion of British nationality by inscribing themselves into its cultural landscape.

This concept of diaspora identity as hybrid amongst second and third generation diasporas has also been explored by academics such as Sunil Bhatia and Anjali Ram. In their study of second generation South Asian women in America, they use the concept of voice to demonstrate 'evolving conceptions of a selfhood that is hyphenated, fractured, and in-

between' (2010, p. 232). Bhatia and Ram maintain that their respondents' identities are multivoiced and filtered through their positions in family, community and larger American society; hence, diaspora identity is about 'going back and forth between multiple homes, societies, identities, and languages' (*Ibid.*, p.236). For others, the concepts of 'diaspora' and 'hybridity' have come to represent the commodification of difference in the context of transition through State policies of urbanisation and privatisation. They argue that hybridity should be about 'not just interpreting the world, but wanting to change it' (Kalra and Kaur 2005, p.5; Ahmad 2001). In addition, diasporic cultural products such as South Asian cinema, created to showcase this hybridity, is also in danger of producing its own kinds of essentialisms which are sometimes predicated on the homogenising forces of industry production, write Sarita Malik (2010)

Avanti Meduri positions articulations of hybridity through cultural production in a much more positive light; using contemporary South Asian dance as a case study, hybridity is something purposefully utilised by diasporas in order to claim heritage and identity. Utilising Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of organic and intentional hybridity, Meduri contends that diasporas can 'bring imperial pasts in conversation with postcolonial presents' (2020, p. 115). Concepts of hybridity have been deployed in various other ways too; for Tariq Modood, this means avoiding the assumption that hybridity creates one kind of cultural formation that conveniently aligns itself closely to Britishness, and understanding that there is a plurality of hybrid identifications for diaspora youth (Modood in eds. Sackmann, Peters and Faist, 2017). In her study of second-generation British Muslim women travelling to South Asia, Fazila Bhimji notes that it is 'not simply a case for the young people to enact hybrid identities within national boundaries but with increased travel, national identities may become weaker and global identities become highlighted' (2008, p. 426). Offering an alternative framework to hybridity, Christian Klesse develops a creolised queer diaspora framework through which to interpret processes of cultural mixing amongst queer South Asians; creolisation of racial and sexual identities 'points beyond closed models of multiculturalism towards a description of the 'chaos' of cultural as 'diversal' or 'multiversal', with an acknowledgment of power relations at its core (2015, p. 137).

Conclusively, these studies of second and third generation South Asian diasporas build upon previous conceptions of hybridity, primarily by reiterating its fluidity whilst simultaneously critiquing neoliberal co-optation of diasporas and hybridity and its strengths and limitations in the creative cultural industries. Scholars have gone on to add greater complexity to hybrid identities by showing how they are multiple, contradictory, transnational and chaotic.

Added to this, studies by British South Asian scholars better articulated the emerging 'syncretic cultural formations' of the bhangra and Asian underground music scenes (Alexander and Kim 2014 p.356) in a bid to push back against the essentialising effects of 'white academia' (Sharma and Sharma, 1996; 10) and to avert the neo-orientalist gaze. Sharma and other *Dis- Orienting Rhythms* contributors such as Rupa Huq, Varinder Kalkra and Raminder Kaur demonstrated the important nuances not only of articulation of South Asian identity through cultural movements and scenes but also the academic lens through which the histories of those movements were critically contextualised.

As well as reclaiming academic ground from white scholars, feminist accounts of the British bhangra and Asian Underground (AU) music scenes have sought to claim space, criticising its heavily male and patriarchal leanings. Scholars such as Helen Kim (2012;2013) and Falu Bakrania (2013) provide an extensive body of work on bhangra and AU to locate the histories of Punjabi masculinity inherent to the form – the song lyrics would usually feature a male protagonist singing about a woman, with all singing and performing done by men. This male dominance was also perpetuated in the production of bhangra in the UK, with female voices directed by male musicians. In one case, well known bhangra musician Bally Sagoo was accused of not giving due credit to female vocalist Satwinder Bitti on an album that went on to achieve great commercial success. In many ways, bhangra would 'construct the feminine and queer as other' (Bakrania 2013, p.35), articulating a heterosexual male South Asian sensibility. In chapter eight, I draw on these studies to illustrate what ethnic authenticity can reveal about the dynamics of class within Instagram. Other scholars such as Rupa Huq have interviewed female musicians, DJs (such as pioneering female promoter and broadcaster DJ Ritu) and clubgoers and critically engaged with the gender politics of bhangra and Asian underground (Huq in Sharma et al. 1996), recognising the integral part played by women within the scene. The space opened up by these analyses highlight the complex and

contradictory ways in which British South Asian young women performed their identities throughout the 1990s and mid-2000s.

Despite the erasure of queer and feminine articulations of South Asian identity from the British bhangra and AU music scenes, such identifications were being forged elsewhere. In wanting to articulate a queer South Asian identity in her short film *Khush* (1991), film maker Pratibha Parmar gave voice and screen time to South Asian lesbians and gay men in India, North America and Britain, allowing them to speak about their experiences straight to camera. Interspersed is footage of dream-like dance sequences, old Bollywood film reels and close-up shots of artefacts such as Indian sculptures and rows of bangles on display in a shop. Parmar aims to culturally root this experience of sexuality within the Indian subcontinent and its diaspora; the word 'khush' meaning ecstatic in Urdu, was used by India's queer community to conceptualise same-sex relationships, as terms such as gay and lesbian that originated in the West were rarely used in an Indian context (Joseph 1996). The documentary was one of the first queer-themed films to be shown on British television station Channel Four and garnered several international film awards, with Parmar stating that she 'wanted the oral history testimonies from South Asian lesbians and gay men to be heard' (Parmar in Farr and Gauthier 2012, p.198). The work of New Delhi-born, London-based photographer Sunil Gupta also provides an archive of images dealing with sexual identity, migration, race and family.

The push for feminist and queer visibility in British South Asian diasporic media came not only as a bid for a display of difference as true diversity, but it was also to combat mainstream portrayals in film, television and journalism that perpetuated racist and misogynistic stereotyping. Writing in 1984, Parmar states that South Asian women working within film collectives and writing groups were 'actively engaged in self-definition' (in Jones 2003 p. 292). Queer and feminist diasporic cultural formations were considered both self-defining *and* self-defensive at a time when they were either racially offensive or rarely present within mainstream British culture. In recounting the historical struggles of women and queer cultural producers from the British South Asian diaspora, I am able to acknowledge the barriers they had to overcome and how different or similar these barriers are for my participants today, especially when (in chapter six) they come into contact with British institutions.

Thus, female and queer British South Asian cultural producers prised open a space to articulate themselves and give their lives and stories much needed visibility. This is not to say that there haven't been studies of British female and queer diaspora subjects who are not cultural producers; genealogical history is brilliantly recounted in Alpesh Kantilal Patel's account of Club Zindagi, a queer South Asian club night in Manchester (eds. Gutierrez Rodriguez and Tate, 2015); Rani Kawale has explored the relationship between identity and space amongst South Asian lesbian and bisexual women in London (eds. Puwar and Raghuram, 2003); Rusi Jaspal explores parental reactions to the coming out of gay sons (2019); Meeta Rani Jha unearths feminist interpretations of Bollywood amongst British South Asian women (2018), and Churnjeet Mahn and Rohit K. Dasgupta's ongoing research project "Cross Border Queers" aims to 'challenge both the whitewashing of British queer history and the 'heterowashing' of migrant history' (Mahn and Dasgupta, 2020). As previously mentioned, female club goers as consumers of British South Asian music have also been written about (Bakrania 2013; Kim 2012, 2014). The next logical step would be moving towards the realm of digital interactions - where then is the scholarship on female and queer British South Asian digital diasporas?

British South Asians online

A recent Stonewall study[2] revealed that 51 percent of non-white LGBTQ members had experienced discrimination in mainstream LGBTQ spaces in the UK. Alongside this statistic, only two in five LGBTQ faith members felt that their faith community was welcoming of LGBTQ people. Whilst this latter statistic is not illustrative of members from a specific diaspora community - faith based communities in the survey included Christian, Jewish and Catholic and not all British South Asians are necessarily part of a faith community - it does highlight how unwelcome and invisible queer diaspora members feel in the UK today. In light of this, it is easy to understand how digital spaces free members from the constraints of the physical boundaries of mainstream support groups, club nights and worship spaces that can feel hostile. An example of the digital being a place to envision a new way of being for queer diasporic users is the London Queer Muslims, a website that hosted the UK's first Zikir and theology group run by and for queer Muslims. Another example is the Inclusive Mosque

Initiative, which seeks to implement an intersectional approach to UK mosques, giving women and queer individuals the opportunity to manage and lead worship (Shannahan 2014; Petersen 2019).

A few studies emerge of British South Asians online; an analysis of website barficulture.com reveals how collective South Asian identity has been redefined by early online interactions (Parker and Song 2006); studies of the digital networks of the Hindu diaspora in the UK via Facebook and Twitter (Zavos 2015) and a qualitative study of selfie usage amongst young British South Asian adults (Dey et. al, 2018). Whilst there have been some studies that have looked at the digital possibilities opened up by and for British South Asian women and queer folk, these remain even fewer and farther between. Research into creative labour in digital networks amongst British Muslim women shows how subjects have successfully negotiated cultural and religious identities within liberal western spaces (Warren 2018); Maya Bhardwaj's interviews with queer and trans activists has shown how digital spaces have opened up queer diasporic South Asian feminisms and solidarities (2020) and Rohit K. Dasgupta, Sunil Gupta and Rahul Rao's published conversation around activism amongst the queer British South Asian diaspora provides some illuminating insights and critiques about the digital and beyond (eds. Banerjea et. al, 2018).

Conclusively, research into the digital lives of female and queer British South Asians is for the large part, absent and even rarer are their interactions on social media platforms like Instagram. My research intends to bridge this gap in knowledge by offering an account of the lives of women and queer British South Asian Instagrammers. However, this does not mean that research into women and queer folk from the South Asian digital diaspora in other parts of the world is lacking. Feminist and queer South Asian digital media scholars like Radhika Gajjala, Radha Hedge and Madhavi Mallapragada (amongst others) have theorised and published extensively on the digital lives and causes concerning women and queer members, both from the diaspora and the Indian subcontinent.

Feminist and queer South Asian digital media scholarship

Drawing on the work of Hall, Brah and Gilroy, who all maintain that diaspora identity is fluid and in constant flux, I want to introduce key debates that consider what becomes of diaspora identity in the digital, before moving on to feminist and queer South Asian digital media scholarship.

Jennifer Brinkerhoff's influential study of five diasporas in America explores how these communities maintain digital links with their homelands in *Digital Diasporas: Identity and Transnational Engagement* (2009). Focussed on first generation diasporas, newly formed immigration identities play an important role in the ways in which use of technologies generate different types of communities and engagement with the homeland (Hiller and Franz 2004; Parham 2004; Diminescu 2007; Oiarzabal & Reips, 2012). These earlier works on migration and use of ICTs share similarities with earlier works on migration, whereby movement becomes the norm in a mobile world (Malkki 1995). Whilst there are more recent studies - such as the one published by Candidatu, Leurs and Ponzanesi lokoing at refugee smartphone use that serves to 'challenge simplistic, conservative, and binary interpretations of diasporas' potential' (2019. p. 43) within the field of digital diaspora studies – I am more concerned with studies focussed on how second and third-generation diasporic identity is articulated in the digital.

I begin with a research study that embeds Hall's 'New Ethnicities' project as a framework to explore the lives of the British Chinese diaspora online. The impact of Hall's work on the theorising and recording of emerging diaspora identity has provided a context within which to understand digital identity as 'formative, rather than expressive' (Parker and Song, 2009 p.584); it has allowed for the exploration of the role played by digital platforms in shaping new senses of belonging. The study analyses the responses left on forums developed by and made for young British born Chinese users and provides an insight into the impact of these digital engagements on users' offline lives. Users come together online to share, discuss and contest ideas of British Chinese identity and politics, amongst other things.

With digital research evolving from forums to social media platforms, studies continued to trace the networked formations of second and third-generation digital diasporas; Donya Alinejad witnesses the web practices of Iranian Americans in Los Angeles, noting that the

visual affordances of platforms such as Instagram and YouTube have become integral to formations of Iranian diasporic identity, cultural production and connection (Alinejad 2017). For Alinejad, digital media becomes an important part of diasporic identity formation whereby specific web applications introduce new stylings of diaspora culture through "digital styles". In Francesca Sobande's study of Black British women watching YouTube, diaspora identity is shaped by knowledge-sharing, communication and cultural production; Black British diasporic identity is affirmed as women watch content made by Black hair and beauty vloggers and participate in what Sobande terms 'Black digital diasporic dynamics' (2017). An extensive research study into the digitally networked lives of Moroccan – Dutch youth mostly born in the Netherlands 'considers the digitization of key identity-formation processes, such as coming of age […]diaspora, religious and youth cultural expectations' (Leurs 2016 p.14). According to Leurs, key moments in the lives of diasporic youth are digitally mediated; the digital serves as a personal archive and private space that allows for the experimentation and search for identity whilst simultaneously offering a public stage on which to articulate a sense of belonging. Thus, in these instances, expressions of diasporic identity are further shaped by the affordances of emerging technologies. Digital diasporic identity 'operates around the unfolding of new identity and virtual communities that are informed by new forms of communication that recalibrate and intensify patterns of mobility and hybridity' (Ponzanesi 2020, pp 987-988).

Moving on to look at South Asian feminist and queer digital diasporas, Radha Hedge's study of South Asian women food bloggers employs a mixed-methods approach of interviews and digital ethnographies of 13 South Asian food blogs. Hedge contends that these blogs 'reflect and shape diasporic life and identifications in the global neoliberal context' (2014 p. 100); diasporas using new media is nothing revelatory, but it is the conditions of connectivity that are 'transforming the meaning of how communities are formed' (*Ibid.).* For Hedge, these blog sites have enabled a sustained connection to India (all bloggers were born there and emigrated to pursue professional careers abroad), whilst displaying a cosmopolitan nationalism that aims to insert Indian cuisine into the fashionable global food market.

Hedge situates the blogs 'within an entrepreneurial frame of communicative capitalism' (*Ibid.,* p. 100); whilst they become spaces for community formation and sustained contact with India

amongst South Asian women in America, the technical manipulations of every recipe and post is counted and rated for its popularity. This in turn creates a hierarchy of visibility and recognition, complicating the idea of digital diasporic publics. Hedge concludes that 'global mobility, media and market logics set the context for transnational communities to be actualised' (*Ibid.,* p. 101) more so than by virtue of diasporic imaginings. Accordingly, this combination of neoliberal ethos and technology changes the ways and reasons for why women from the South Asian diaspora create community online. Thus, the privileging of certain blogs not only feeds into market logics of self-branding, but also considers the most visible (in this case, upper-caste/class, heteronormative Indian women) as a representative voice of the diaspora at large, erasing a plethora of subject positionalities in the process.

The re-centering of marginal voices within the digital diaspora is explored in Madhavi Mallapragada' s study of New York-based activist organisation Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM) (2013). Here the digital operates as a site 'offering an alternative pathway to representing and advancing emergent desi political and citizenship cultures' (*Ibid.,* p. 674-5). In foregrounding the concerns of working-class South Asian women and youth in New York, and linking to transnational struggles against state oppression, Mallapragada maintains that the DRUM community 'makes working-class subjects, issues, and political agency visible within online constructions of the immigrant community' (*Ibid.,* p. 676).

Caste and the South Asian diaspora

The interrogation of class, religion and gender within South Asian diaspora communities in the USA has been well researched (Prashad 2000; Shankar 2008; Murthy 2010), but I argue that it is the exploration of caste that highlights the linkages between diaspora and decolonial practices. Drawing on American indigenous research methods, Shaista Patel analyses the work of South Asian American photographer Annu Palakunnathu Matthew. In her photographic series titled 'An Indian from India', Matthew juxtaposes images of herself against archival images of indigenous Americans, which for Patel, seems troubling:

> Any struggles for justice that are race-based with no reflection on lives, lands and
> sovereignty of Indigenous peoples of the land we live on is ultimately a move that

strengthens the settler state which is also an Empire and actively engaged in war and death making in lands racialized immigrants come from. (Patel 2016)

Patel's critique brings attention to the fact that South Asian diasporas still need to be aware of the positions they occupy both in host nations and within the Indian subcontinent. Matthew's lack of reflection signals not only the erasure of the different historical trajectories of Indigenous Americans and South Asians but also comes 'at the expense of suspending any critical analysis of other structures of violence such as caste' (*Ibid.*). Whilst Matthew is keen to link the practice of colonial photography to oppressed nations (these methods were used by the British empire to document Indigenous Americans and Indians in India), Patel sees this as an act of forgetting and supressing. Matthew is not the same as the indigenous Americans she poses as – there are a plethora of differences that have not been considered. This act of supressing historical and contemporary truths within the diaspora feeds into diasporic (mis)understandings of caste:

South Asians understand the diaspora to be more progressive from communities back home, and therefore de-casted […] If systems of oppression are all interconnected and none of us can be liberated until all of us are free, then caste, race, anti-Blackness, Indigeneity must all be considered to understand South Asians' situational complicity here and affirm that our narratives of resistance are not resting on other forms of violence. (Patel 2016)

The Indian caste system is the organising of people into social groups that are fixed and hereditary; Brahmins (priests), Shatriyas (soldiers), Vaishyas (traders) and Shudras (servants) make up this system. Dalits fall outside of the caste system and are derogatively known as untouchables. Violence against Dalit communities in India is rife (Barman 2010), and these attitudes find their way into diaspora communities.

Ignoring or elevating caste in the diaspora – a place where there is an assumption that caste-based discrimination doesn't happen – becomes an act of violence. In one of the few studies of caste in the UK, a Dalit town councillor in the West Midlands recalls being undermined by Jat Communists from the Indian Workers Association who actively campaigned against him

and stoned the cars of his supporters during a 1979 election (Jaoul 2022). Some maintain that a lack of awareness amongst diaspora groups has meant that caste politics have not reached transnational feminist publics and that scholarship available to budding activists is usually written by upper-caste feminists, who in turn, are tokenised by the academy (Gajjala et al. in Macdonald et al., 2021 p. 153).

The urgency of caste discrimination in the diaspora is reflected in the aims of Castewatch UK, a lobbying group founded in 2003 by Dalit communities based in the UK. A handful of UK scholars such as A. Shukra (1993) , Annapurna Waughray (2009), Meena Dhanda (2013), David Mosse (2020) and Eleanor Nesbitt (2020) have shed light on caste politics in the UK, but none have looked at how caste is obscured or understood online. Here I reference a study of global digital protest publics that use #anticaste in hashtag publics like Twitter, to highlight ruptures and coalitions between Indian women and those from the diaspora (Gajjala et al. in Macdonald et al., 2021). I argue that there needs to be more studies like this that further explore caste amongst younger generations from the British South Asian diaspora in digital spaces, to better understand how and why issues of caste are understood (or obscured) by subsequent generations.

Similarly, the power dynamic between South Asian diaspora communities and those from the Indian subcontinent have also been unpacked by feminist and queer South Asian scholars who draw on Gayatri Spivak's notion of 'speaking' on behalf of or 'silencing' subaltern voices (Spivak 1988). The subaltern subject, according to Spivak, must adopt Western ways of knowing in order to be heard and understood. The act of becoming a subject worthy of attention from the West is echoed in Gajjala and Rahul Mitra's study of queer bloggers in India (Gajjala and Mitra 2008). They notice that greater visibility is given to online platforms that privilege middle-class, queer identity formations framed though whiteness, with little regard for India's intersectional queer histories. Gajjala conducted a cyber-ethnography of an email list she joined in 1994, participating in and looking through users' conversations and debates (Gajjala 2004). When introduced to the platform as a researcher, many participants refused to take part, for fear of Gajjala misrepresenting them in her findings. This prompted her to reflect not only on her role as participant/researcher, but also on the limitations of the

email list (and cyberfeminist spaces at large) in representing the experiences of those not easily represented in digital communities:

> There is a traveling of theory and a hierarchy that privileges "Western" epistemologies even in "Other" spaces – especially in bourgeois and elite spaces that end up speaking in place of "the subaltern" (Gajjala 2004, p. 98)

Gajjala traces the histories of South Asian digital diasporas who formed online communities in the Global North before the majority of those on the Indian subcontinent, because they had access to web-based technologies first. The primary users from the diaspora established a dominant upper-caste, hetero-patriarchal male notion of South Asian identity online (Rai 1995; Lal 1999). This established diaspora identity then becomes something that users from the subcontinent 'must enter and disrupt or merge with' (Gajjala 2019, p. 5) – a notion echoed in chapter six amongst some participants, who feel as though the classed dimensions of British South Asian identity are being erased in service of a homogenous identity predicated on shared racial and religious identifications.

When in contact with the diaspora, subaltern users become side-lined as western feminist attitudes circulate and become the most visible online. Thus, issues that impact subaltern feminists are largely ignored in global western feminist circles. In an interview with Dalit feminist Divya Kandukuri, founder of the Everyday Casteism Twitter project, Gajjala asks how she started organising on the university campus in India. Kandukuri replies:

> We started meeting regularly and started reading anything on anti-caste literature. We started meeting in a small shed. One day we put up posters around campus to invite people to our talk on reservations [caste-based scholarships], but the college officials removed our posters. […] But we realized that we are now under surveillance for doing this. (Kandukuri in Gajjala 2019, p. 106).

These stories rarely circulate in Global North feminist circles. Varsha Ayyar, another Dalit feminist talks about how she recognised a link between Dalit activism in India and Black American histories of resistance:

Dalits (ex-untouchables) and African Americans have a lot in common – especially their lived experiences in social hierarchies, their resistance practices, and their long struggle for the civil rights are eerily similar. And these two social groups historically have extended their solidarities with each other and continue to build bridges to carry forward these conversations of the two most remarkable and greatest struggles in human history (Ayyar in Gajjala 2019, p. 97).

Whilst movements such as Black Lives Matter are (rightfully so) adopted by South Asian diasporas as noteworthy causes, the silence on issues of caste reveal how much more work needs to be done on the part of diasporas to firstly to recognise, and then show solidarity for subaltern subjects in India and lower-caste diasporas. For many Dalit feminists, a recognition of caste privilege and how it impacts Dalit and lower-caste women must be understood and rallied around in the same way that Global North issues are amongst South Asian diasporas. A refusal to engage and listen only means a perpetuation of oppressive power structures, as Spivak states, 'unless the mainstream feminist hears responsible critique, the feminist status quo will continue to provide an alibi for exploitation' (Spivak 1996, p.4). By connecting global histories of oppression that include lower-caste and Dalit persecution and subaltern subjectivities, true solidarity can emerge between diaspora activists and those on the Indian subcontinent, a sentiment I explore in my concluding chapter.

Looking at earlier iterations of British South Asian identity as expressed by women and queer cultural producers, provides historic points of reference through which to understand the prejudices and barriers experienced by the diaspora. How different or similar these barriers are for young women and queer participants today will highlight how or whether the political parameters of race, gender and sexuality have shifted in Britain at all. By turning to the creative and social practices of everyday digital users who perhaps consider themselves to be cultural producers in the social media sphere through the creation of visual content, I hope to continue this exploration of British South Asian identity as expressed through the perceptions of everyday Instagram users.

The work that has been done by South Asian feminist and queer digital media scholars demonstrates the breadth of knowledge that already exists when it comes to analyses of South Asian digital diasporas; interrogations of class, caste, citizenship and the entrepreneurial framings of digital identity work all contribute to the complex discourse on feminist and queer South Asian identity online. What I hope to add to this burgeoning discourse is an in-depth exploration of everyday Instagram users from the British South Asian diaspora, who I argue, are not as well accounted for as their South Asian American counterparts.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, in foregrounding feminist and queer digital theories, I have demonstrated how the digital has been conceptualised as an ambivalent site of resistance and neoliberalism. Turning to the work of feminist and queer South Asian scholars, (mis)conceptions of caste and subaltern subjects in the diaspora become centered, thus making it clear that decolonial research must be mindful of these issues when it comes to South Asian diasporas. Scholars have also critiqued the postfeminist, racial neoliberal and homonormative discourses that have become ever more present online.

The disruptive potential of queer and feminist politics in the face of digital consumerism has allowed for other ways of being. In addition, queer diaspora scholars have theorised ways to resist western cis-gendered, heterosexual and homonormative readings of archival and digital media, indicating how queer diaspora disrupt and create new visual cultures.

This chapter has also established that women and queer British South Asians are not featured as heavily in studies of South Asian diasporas in the same way that communities from America have been. The majority of literature concerning British South Asians and their cultural engagements comes from the bhangra and Asian underground music scenes. Some women have been included as DJs and musicians, with the majority studied as consumers and clubgoers. A handful of recent studies have begun to uncover the archive of queer British South Asian lives and club nights, but for the most part, these are rare. Even less visible are

the engagements of British South Asian women and queer digital diasporas, who exist but are woefully understudied.

Building upon the histories of women and queer British South Asian cultural production (which has given me an understanding of South Asian feminist and queer life in the UK), my research aims to understand the lives and perceptions of being online as a woman and queer user from the British diaspora. I consider my research as contributing to the already established body of work by South Asian feminist and queer digital media scholars, who have written extensively on the intersections of class, caste, gender, sexuality and religion amongst South Asian digital users on the Indian subcontinent and the United States. I hope to extend this line of inquiry to include women and queer users from the British South Asian diaspora. More specifically, I hope to understand perceptions of being on Instagram, a platform that 'remains synonymous with the visual zeitgeist' (Leaver et al. 2020, p. 216). Not only does this bring more visibility to the British South Asian digital diaspora community that has had very little scholarly attention, it also engages with how this particular set of users perceive a popular social media platform, and where the parameters lie in its usage as a tool for resistance, community making and consumerism. The next chapter reviews literature that accounts for the ever-shifting nature of digital life, which is why, I maintain, that digital media scholars should remain alert to this landscape. I also include contemporary discourses around social media platforms that include algorithms, Instagram Influencers and digital privacy (amongst other things) because participants should not be confined only to discussion that pigeonholes them as marginalised digital users. They are aware of the wider debates surrounding social media and consider themselves (as I consider myself) to have a stake in these wider conversations as social media users.

Chapter 2: Digital platforms and users

The previous chapter introduced several literatures related to this thesis that seeks to provide an account of the digital lives of women and queer British South Asians on Instagram. It explored the limitations of the digital as understood by feminist and queer studies scholars. Through an exploration of affect theory, digital counterpublics, postfeminism, popular feminism and neoliberal feminism, I argued that these analyses were crucial to the critical contextualisation of the ever-evolving formations of gender and sexuality within online worlds. These concepts also brought the discourse around racial neoliberalism to the fore, where in a similar fashion, scholars explored the neoliberal dimensions of race; these analyses of digital identity work acknowledged the complex desires of marginalised communities beyond a politics of representation. I extended this notion further to include homonormative practices online and explored the political potentialities of the digital through feminist and queer resistive practices. Concluding, I introduced studies by South Asian feminist and queer digital media scholars that interrogated the classed, caste, gendered and neoliberal dimensions of South Asian digital diasporas. I maintained that further research needed to take place in order to understand how these political and social dynamics played out across social media platforms within the British South Asian digital diaspora.

This chapter provides a review of literature that speaks to the ever-changing nature of the internet and by extension, social media platforms. I felt it important to not only provide a review of literature that reflects the intersections of my participants as caste, classed, raced, sexed and gendered subjects, but also a review that captures their experiences as social media users. My own reflections as a digital user extend beyond my experiences as a British South Asian woman to include the complex relationship between the online and offline, algorithmic architectures, mental health and privacy concerns. Consequently, marginalised users' perceptions of the digital become segregated from general theories about the digital because the default white (usually male) user is the 'normative figure who manage[s] to escape racial marking and can thus speak generally' (Puwar 2004, p.74). In providing a review of literature that draws out the histories and current debates concerning social media, I hope

to contextualise my research about marginalised users within the wider generalist discourse on contemporary digital life.

This second chapter is made up of three sub-sections; the first looks at the history of digital life. Tracing the history of virtual communities through to social media and Instagram specifically, I hope to draw out debates that capture the complex task of researching and critiquing social media platforms. From here, I dedicate the second section to a review of literature around online and offline living, highlighting the work of scholars who maintain that the digital is another complex facet of lived reality and should be treated as such. The third and final section explores contemporary concerns of social media (concerns that participants have spoken about at length), from algorithms and online privacy to mental wellbeing, Influencers and advertising.

As digital media researchers, the landscape within which we immerse ourselves is constantly shifting – new technological affordances, corporate interests, and public use demand fluid understandings of digital media. Drawing on scholarship that focuses on the ever-changing nature of media technologies, I hope to illustrate that studies of digital diasporas should remain considered and dynamic.

A history of digital life

This first section draws on literature that has served to understand and theorise online communities. In presenting a chronology of usership from virtual communities to social media through to Instagram, I demonstrate how user investment in the digital has been contested by various scholars and how it has technologically evolved, meaning that we as digital media researchers are required to constantly review our critical engagement with this shifting landscape . Unlike early iterations of virtual communities, Instagram is more than just logging into an application and spending a few hours there – it has blended seamlessly into our everyday lives. How this blending is experienced by women and queer members from the British South Asian digital diaspora is a major point of interest for me.

Virtual communities

The internet came to public prominence in the early 1990s, with commercialised products making it possible for homeowners to access the World Wide Web (Leiner et al. 2009). Virtual communities began to emerge; conversations and debates between people who had never met before could take place, gender and racial identities could be fluid and international friendships could be forged, all whilst sitting in front of a computer screen at home. Writing in 1994, Howard Rheingold defined virtual communities as 'social aggregations that emerge from the Net […] with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace' (1994 p.5). For much of Rheingold's research, he drew on his experience as a member of online public discussion group WELL. Established in 1985, Rheingold, along with hundreds of others, was logging on regularly by 1986. Born out of 1960s American counterculture, WELL's founders maintained that the online venture was an experiment, 'an open-ended universe' (*Ibid.* p.40), in which a host of opportunities (previously unimaginable) were now possible.

In this same spirit of virtual promise, some early cyberfeminists envisioned a shedding of gender in the digital sphere (Plant 1994). However, others felt that such utopian ideals came across as reductive; for the likes of feminist scholar Kathleen McNutt, the digital sphere could not exist independently of the conditions of capitalism as it was 'an intermingling of science, technology, capital and power' (McNutt 2003 p.35). Instead of simple participation in these technologies, becoming critically aware of what lay ahead and how feminists wanted these technologies to develop was of greater concern to those cyberfeminists critical of tech utopias (Luckman 1999; Munster 1999). In a similar vein, Radhika Gajjala called for a more critical cyberfeminist approach that was 'more engaged with issues relating to the politics of race, gender, sexuality, geography and place in the context of globalization' (Gajjala, 2003 p.49).

A similar concern was echoed by digital media scholars looking at race online; 'Race in Cyberspace' (Kolko, Nakamura et. al., 2000) offered the first extensive examination of the postcolonial disparities of the digital world that reflected those of the material world. It argued against the notion 'that online environments facilitate fragmentation of identity' (Ibid., p.5) by demonstrating the ways in which race was digitally constructed and

essentialised (Nakamura 2008; Nakamura and Chow-White 2013). In her study of online game World of Warcraft, digital media scholar Lisa Nakamura discovered that the political economy of this virtual community mirrored that of the material world. Anti-Chinese sentiment was stirred up by players who characterised certain 'worker' players as Chinese, despite the fantasy avatars having no resemblance to racial groups in the real world. Nakamura noticed that players bore racial prejudices that, when brought to the digital realm, did not dissipate, but fed further into anti-Chinese and migrant worker discourses (Nakamura 2009). Perceived notions of virtual freedom became complicated as material inequalities began to shape digital subjectivities.

There were those who, despite their underlying suspicions, held out hope that these virtual communities could reorganise society for the better. Anna Everett, who published the first extensive study of Black digital diasporas in America anticipated

> that digital grassroots activism and its flames of emancipation and liberation could and would persist despite the countervailing winders of increasing corporate media dominance of the ascendant Internet and other digital media technologies (Everett 2009, p. 48)

In response to tech critiques, Rheingold welcomed those 'who understand the limits, even as we continue to explore the technologies' positive capabilities' (1994 p. 257). Both Everett and Rheingold were not naïve to the state and corporate capabilities of virtual communities but rather chose to focus on what communities were doing despite this underlying threat. However, in tandem with his enthusiasm, Rheingold maintained that virtual communities could not replace physical communities:

> I'm not so sure myself anymore that tapping away on a keyboard and staring at a screen all day by necessity is "progress" compared to chopping logs and raising beans all day by necessity. While we've been gaining new technologies, we've been losing our sense of community, in many places in the world, and in most cases the technologies have precipitated that loss. But this does not make an effective argument

against the premise that people can use computers to cooperate in new ways. (*Ibid.* p. 96).

Even during the early stages of virtual community formation, it was a space that was highly contested; technological advancement had rightly so, introduced occurrences that were once impossible, but for some, this 'open-ended' universe had its limitations. For these critics the gendered and raced disparities of the material world were never really disrupted but perpetuated by the digital landscape. However, some saw that it had emancipatory potential, whilst others still maintained that it could never replace interactions in the material world. Drawing on scholarship that questions the nature of virtual communities, I argue that scholarship should continue to closely theorise digital community engagements to stay well informed of emerging complexities that shape digital and material subjectivities. My participants do not just sit in front of computer screens at their desks, they carry these digital worlds around with them through their smartphones, logged constantly onto social media applications – how did we arrive here? I continue my chronicling of digital life by focussing on a history of social media in the next section.

Social media

Social media evolved from Web 2.0, a term first coined in 2004 to describe a platform continuously modified by all users collaboratively (such as Wikipedia), as opposed to content put up and controlled by an individual, forming the basis of social media platforms (Kaplan et al., 2009). The first known social media platform, SixDegrees.com launched in 1997. It allowed users to create personal profiles, list their Friends and a year later, surf Friends lists. Whilst other digital sites were doing things that were similar (dating websites allowed you to have a profile), SixDegrees.com was the first to combine multiple features. These features included connecting to other people online and sending messages. Before this, users often found social network sites bereft of anything interesting to do beyond the creation of a profile. Therefore, being able to build an online Friends list and send messages to them became a central feature that popularised social networking sites.

From 2002, chief sites such as MySpace were launched, allowing users to personalise their pages with unique backgrounds and layouts (boyd 2006). Around this time, AsianAvenue, BlackPlanet and MiGente became major social networking sites for the Asian, Black and Latinx diaspora, especially in America, affording users ownership over their content, and space to have discussions around identity and heritage (Bebea 2003; Byrne 2007, 2008; Kight 2018).

By the late 2000s, social media platforms gained mainstream acceptance as access to broadband and mobile technologies became more affordable. As technological affordances advanced, usership engendered not just social, but also cultural undertakings. User - generated content (UGC) meant users of applications could create a variety of interesting and unique content, such as videos for YouTube (van Dijck, 2009). The discourse around digital usership became 'personal, political, private, and communal simultaneously, complicating the dichotomies used to discuss new media engagement' (Steele 2017, p. 123).

Having proffered a definition of social media in 2007 as

> web based services that allow individuals to
>> 1. Construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system
>> 2. Articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and
>> 3. View and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Ellison and boyd 2013, p. 152)

boyd and Ellison returned to update the term, claiming that 'the technical affordances that define a social network site have become increasingly fluid' (*Ibid.* p. 153). They provided a new definition:

> A social network site is a networked communication platform in which participants
>
> 1) have *uniquely identifiable profiles* that consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users and/or system-level data; 2) can *publicly articulate connections* that can be viewed and traversed by others; and 3) can

> consume, produce, and/or interact with *streams of user-generated content* provided by their connections on the site. (*Ibid.* p. 159)

Unique profiles, publicly displaying connections and producing and consuming user-generated content (UGC) all point to ways in which the digital landscape has advanced. Some maintain that visual affordances like photos, hashtags, memes and videos, regularly uploaded to mainstream social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, have changed the ways in which virtual communities operate. It has also given way to a new kind of digital consumer, bringing opportunity for those previously excluded from the consumer market, which I will explore further along in chapter six when I turn my attention to self-branding and Influencers.

Another visual affordance of great interest to digital media scholars is the selfie. Defined as 'self-generated digital photographic self-portraiture' (Senft and Baym 2015, p. 1588), the selfie first became popularised through MySpace before being propelled into mainstream cultural consciousness via Instagram. In news articles, girls and young women have often been characterised as the primary selfie demographic, accused of vanity and narcissism[1]. Drawing on Foucault's notion of power, Anne Burns conceives of the selfie as occurring 'at the nexus of disciplinary discourses of photography, gender, and social media' (2015, p. 1716). The denigration of female selfie takers, Burns argues, becomes an exercise in criticising and regulating the behaviour of women and their engagement in the social media sphere:

> The criticism of selfies is therefore both an expression of misogynistic sentiment and an effective vehicle for social organization because it conceals a promotion of normative models of conduct and the punishment of those who do not comply beneath a veneer of photographic discussion (Burns 2015, p. 1730).

Regardless of how the image of one's face is framed, accusations of vanity-as-feminine-trait is in danger of perpetuating patriarchal and heteronormative strictures on self-expression online. I unpack this stereotyping of women and young girls' Instagram usage in chapter seven when I analyse psycho-social wellbeing amongst participants.

A more productive criticism of selfie taking can be found in the role digital surveillance and advertising plays when we offer up images of our faces. We cannot, as Lovink reminds us, 'remain silent about the invisible Like-economy behind it all, the billion-dollar advertising industry, the ubiquity of facial recognition software and the burgeoning surveillance market of people's private data' (2019, p. 106-7). Our selfies are treated as data by facial recognition algorithms and commercial services, rather than human communication, rendering us more biometric citizen than online user (Retteberg 2017). Some maintain that this readiness to give up our personal identity serves to strengthen the surveillance state (Giroux 2015).

Others have argued for the selfie as a tool for empowerment. In a study of selfie taking amongst girls in India, Sujatha Subramanian observes how they negotiate discourses of honour and respectability (2019). The taking and sharing of selfies becomes a site of self-expression, as many other avenues are closed off to them. Similarly, Adi Kuntsman reflects on the emerging phenomenon of 'selfie citizenship' – the act of posting political selfies as an act of protest or social mobilisation (2017).

I present a history of social media to demonstrate the encroaching cultural, political and social role it plays in our world today.Selfies are just one of the many visual affordances operating across social media platforms, each one laden with an ever-expanding body of scholarship. Whilst we all gravitate to the mainstream platforms, our reasons for being there vary; memes have been used to circulate and resist white supremacist content online (Williams 2020), to emotionally connect (Newton et. al, 2022) or to simply share a joke (Piata 2016), just as the selfie has been used to contain and empower an individual. Users operate within these platforms in such different ways and it is the job of digital media scholars to express renewed interest in these uses. Hence, an exploration into the lives of women and queer British South Asian Instagrammers is long overdue; acknowledging how they navigate the many layers and functions of Instagram reveals the myriad of ways in which the platform is utilised by them and more importantly how the various functions (direct messaging, content creation, content consumption, privacy, etc.) affectively impact them. This approach feeds into wider discourses around digital life, which, I argue, is as vivid as offline life, or, in the words of Legacy Russell, a life lived AFK, because we are never truly 'offline' anymore. I move on now to offer a brief history of Instagram and why it has been chosen as the site of my research.

Instagram is the social media platform that I have chosen to conduct my research about. Although my data is not located within the site itself – it is situated in the responses from those who have an Instagram account – laying out the digital foundations of this environment reveals its corporate capabilities. I hope this brief section will also provide greater clarity of the platform's digital architecture when reading participant responses. Acknowledging different social media platforms as field sites within their own right is important, as 'it makes analytical sense to distinguish various *types* of social media' (van Dijck 2013, p. 8). The contemporary mainstream cultural climate in Britain remains bereft of women and queer folk from the South Asian diaspora and it was through Instagram that I had noticed the formation of a British South Asian digital visual culture and community that requires urgent scholarly attention.

Developed in 2010, Instagram is a software application that enables its users to create, share, and upload photos or videos from mobile devices, allowing them to link content to other social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter. Although similar to Facebook in some ways, Instagram's unique functions include a visually focused interface suited to smartphones and a wide selection of filters and editing capabilities that users can apply to their images before upload (Sheldon & Bryant, 2015). In addition, new features such as Instagram Stories allows users to upload short videos to their accounts that last for 24 hours before disappearing. It remains one of the fastest growing social media sites of the present century (Wagner, 2015), with an estimated user count of over 1 billion[2]. Despite being designed for mobile technologies (which many would consider a limitation), studies have shown that smartphones are the most popular way to access social media sites (Lunden, 2014).

My interest in Instagram as a site for study stems from my personal usage and engagement with others on the platform: I have had an Instagram account since 2015 and have since spent time following and witnessing the activity of various users from the British South Asian diaspora - from family members and friends, to artists, writers and meme makers. Never an ardent uploader of content, I became invested in wanting to record the responses of those

whose content I was the most interested in seeing, precisely because I rarely witnessed it outside of Instagram: women and queer British South Asians. I had noticed that online diaspora communities had formed and, although this is not a unique phenomenon (Axel 2008; Everett 2009; Madianou and Miller 2012), I saw users articulate themselves in different ways and I wanted to know their reasons for this, as a plethora of meaning exists behind the screen as well as in front of it (Back 2007). In addition, I was keen to explore how the platform's corporate capabilities were understood, adhered to and critiqued by British South Asians.

In 2017, Fyre Fest, a failed music festival promoted heavily through Instagram brought this corporate capability to the public's attention[2]. Endorsed by famous Instagram influencers such as super models Bella Hadid and Kendall Jenner, it called into question the veracity of the content they put up. It was eventually revealed that Influencers were given thousands of dollars to promote the event through their social media accounts; they were paid to circulate videos and images showing them lounging around on luxury yachts and frolicking in the crystal-clear waters of the Bahamas – an insight into what the festival was going to offer ticket holders. Influencers at that time were seen by their followers as authentic because they showcased personal recommendations, therefore considered more trustworthy than your average advertisers. I return to advertising and Influencers and their impact on everyday users towards the end of this chapter.

When ticket holders themselves turned up to the festival in the Bahamas a few months later, they were greeted by a tropical storm, no accommodation, no food, no music and were thousands of dollars out of pocket. The controversy generated debates around the use of Instagram as more of a marketing tool than social networking platform, allowing users to engage with the platform more critically. Aside from the legal implications affecting influencers (Kleiman 2019) , multiple news stories brought users out of the Instagram bubble and into mainstream media arenas where they could reflect on their perceptions of their Instagram lives and how they saw others within it; BBC Newsnight aired a segment in 2019 that posed the question 'is social media turning us into fakes?' whilst a Rolling Stone article

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[2] The Guardian newspaper reporting on Fyre Fest: https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2019/jan/12/how-fyre-festival-went-up-in-flames-bella-hadid-ja-rule

explored the never-ending push towards a forced optimism on social media (James 2019). Away from the delayed scholarship published for small academic audiences (and there are some interesting ones; see Yesiloglu and Urbanska's 'Influencer Marketing' (2020) and Gorea and Jacobson's 'The ethics of using social media Influencers for marketing purposes' in eds. Hanlon and Tuten 2022), the Instagram discourse made it into the public consciousness in timely fashion. This shift made me consider what users themselves were thinking about Instagram and what they understood about the impact it had on them. In chapter seven I try to ascertain why, when participants are well aware of the negative impacts of social media usage because they consume such news articles and documentaries, they are compelled to stay on Instagram.

Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield and Crystal Abidin's book 'Instagram' (2020), is the first in-depth exploration of the social media application. Recognising Instagram's influence on the world, they remark

> In the decade since Instagram's debut, its uptake, influence and leverage on how users come to practise visual social media cultures has expanded dramatically, to the extent that the platform is linked with almost every cultural form and practice; the world presents a veritable everything of Instagram. (Leaver et. al, 2020, p, 212).

As well as the studies on resistive, postfeminist and homonormative content that I have mentioned in the previous chapter, scholarship of Instagram has considered its influence on contemporary image making (Becker in Bunce et. al 2016); its use as an educational tool (Handayani 2016; Carpenter et. al 2020); its renewal of advertising and branding practices (Djafarova and Rushworth 2017; Haenlein et. al, 2020) and its redefining of online relationality (Serafinelli 2018; Lee et al. 2019).

My research is concerned with digital diasporas on Instagram, therefore the following studies offer fresh insight into how particular digital diasporas engage with the platform. In her study of Iranian Americans living in Los Angeles, Donya Alinejad presents the notion of 'digital styles' to explain how particular web applications afford new stylings of diaspora culture (2017). Alinejad notes how the visual affordances of platforms such as Instagram and YouTube have

become integral to formations of Iranian diasporic identity, cultural production and connection. In a study of hip-hop identified Black American youth, Della Mosley et al. observed the performance of gender roles in dance videos uploaded to Instagram (2017). They concluded that although most users adhered to gender binaries, there were a few who disrupted them, signalling the need for 'critical media literacy as a social justice imperative to bolster conscious media creation' amongst young Instagram users (Mosley et. al. 2017, p. 149).

"Composite habitus" is a concept introduced by Karen Waltorp in her study of Danish Muslim women on Instagram (2015). She maintains that the augmented space of Instagram allows users to experiment with identity but only insofar what is already available to them politically and socially (i.e.: political and religious knowledge is composed of family and community environments and attitudes, often coming into contradiction with self-perception). Instagram also allows for the management of public and secret relationships locally and globally. For Kristin Peterson, Instagram becomes a site within which to become a 'social media interrupter' (2020). She presents a case study of Instagram influencer Leah Vernon, self-described as 'a Fat, Black, Muslim', who engages with the aesthetics of the platform whilst incorporating a subversive critique of it. Peterson argues that Vernon's presence is a way to fight back against the injustices perpetuated by social media platforms (who algorithmically favour white, Western and heteronormative content) that perpetuate injustices against marginalised bodies.

Engaging in digital diasporas on Instagram, these studies pay particular attention to women and queer users, but none look at British South Asian digital diasporas. My thesis therefore seeks to build a body of research that pays attention to a community that remains invisible when it comes to research on digital diasporas on Instagram and social media in general.

The evolving nature of our relationship to social media, both politically and socially, has meant that we now must confront the intricacies between offline and online experience. The economic means through which we access these platforms requires deeper engagement if we are to truly understand digital communities. In the following section, I introduce literature that continues to complicate the digital terrain by looking at a binary that has characterised

studies of digital usership - digital dualism, the notion that we exist in two separate spheres of the online and offline. I argue that such a binaried understanding flattens the experiences of digital users; by introducing studies that upset this binary, we are presented with understandings that engage with ideas of existing in a technologically interlinked world.

Living online and offline

Throughout this chapter I aim to highlight scholarship that deals with the complicated and ever-evolving nature of digital engagement. Further unpacking this via the digital dualism discourse, the binaried understanding of online and offline engagements has been tackled by scholars keen to understand the shift towards always being online because of mobile technologies. Writing 26 years after Harold Rheingold's definition of virtual communities, Legacy Russell refuted his claim that virtual communities would never replace physical ones; by now, the digital did not simply provide a way to 'cooperate in new ways' but was a real life lived out, a place where users

> refuse to be hewn to the hegemonic line of a binary body. […] We want a new framework and for this framework, we want new skin. The digital world provides a potential space where this can play out. Through the digital, we make new worlds and dare to modify our own (Russell 2020, p.11)

For Russell, the digital becomes another skin, as significant as the physical body. Russell is queer and Black; in sharp contrast to Rheingold's white, male cis-gendered, heterosexual approach to virtual communities, I argue that Russell has a bigger stake in a virtual community that offers her more than the material world. Even the canon of cyberfeminist theory rendered her invisible; in an interview, Russell was asked about how early cyberfeminism connected to the concept of Glitch Feminism:

> I see Glitch Feminism as a part of that history, for sure. But I also recognize that so many of the primary contributors that come up in relation to Cyberfeminism are cis-gendered white women. (Russell 2020, interview for artnet)

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For Russell, participation in the virtual is about solidifying an identity that has been invisible, not only in the offline world, but in the online world also. Investment in the virtual for those who do not see themselves anywhere else becomes 'the opportunity to experiment and try on different selves' empowering users to seize 'a more integrated public identity with radical potential' (Russell 2020, p. 46-7). An evolution in the understandings of virtual community engagements – from 'computers to cooperate' to the 'new skin' of digital reality – highlights the shift in user investment in virtual communities, and social media specifically; users regain a sense of self that was denied them in the offline world, making it more than just a way to cooperate with others. A virtual life has the potential to be as fully realised, emotional and meaningful as a life lived offline, sometimes even more so. Speaking to *Dazed Digital* magazine, queer artist and DJ Juliana Huxtable talks about the importance of virtual communities in her life:

> The internet and specifically social media, became an essential way for me to explore inclinations that I otherwise would not have an outlet for. Some people go to school for painting or sculpture or new media and have the education and training to explore artistic venues. I didn't. I was always intimidated by the idea of being entitled to create. I second guessed myself and when I did try to explore classes when I was in school at Bard, I was often met with dismissive comments about my inability to escape 'identity'. What I found online were communities of people, both encouraging and critical that were open to engaging with work, no matter how minuscule or developed in scale, and from that I developed a set of practices and an audience that I continue to develop (Huxtable interview with Petra Collins in Dazed, 2014).

The work of postcolonial and feminist digital media scholars and artists continues to complicate the digital terrain. Russell applies a queer lens to online and the offline worlds, writing

> A now-antiquated falsehood, one that implies that two selves (e.g., an *online* self versus an *offline* self) operate in isolation from each other, thereby inferring that any and all online activity lacks authenticity and is divorced from a user's identity offline (2020, p. 30)

Viewing online and offline spaces as two separate entities overlooks the fact that the merging of these two spaces has resulted in some of the biggest political mobilizations in history, from the Occupy movement to the Arab Spring. To relegate these movements to the digital realm (where a lot of the organising occurred) ignores the physical manifestations of bodies coming together in real geographical locations, concerned with issues 'very real to our offline lives, such as economic inequalities, social injustices, global politics and so on' (Jurgenson 2012, p.4).

Large-scale political movements aside, the "digital dualist" fallacy threatens digital space making, according to Russell; experimentation and exploration of queer identity online is as real as any offline experience In Real Life (IRL). Both Nathan Jurgenson and Russell prefer to use the term away-from-keyboard (AFK), as opposed to IRL (a term that become popularised in 1990s chatrooms meaning 'in real life'), signifying 'a more continuous progression of the self' (Russell 2020, p.31). A self that is influenced by and simultaneously existing within the online and the offline. In a similar vein, Emily Noelle Ignacio argues against Sherry Turkle's (1997) assertion that online and offline lives are *parallel* - the two exist side by side but do not meet. Ignacio prefers the term perpendicular (2004), suggesting that digital diasporas are usually part of strong offline communities. Therefore, social and community-based interactions play an important role in shaping user identities online and vice versa; the online and offline are interwoven because both are significant in the lives of diaspora users. In order to adequately understand the lives of second and third generation digital diasporas, I acknowledge that users exist AFK and that the online and offline both link together constituting an "augmented reality" (Jurgenson 2012 p. 84) – human and technology amplifying each other.

In highlighting feminist and queer scholarship that breaks down these digital binaries, I hope to demonstrate how alive the digital truly is when it comes to understanding the lives of digital diasporas. The interwoven nature of online/offline living has, in huge part, been facilitated by the introduction of social media platforms – a space where anyone with a smartphone can sign up for free and post content from their lives. In foregrounding interviews with participants about the digital, it complicates a digital dualist approach to identity work – I

consider participant perceptions relayed to me via face-to-face or phone call interviews as part of digital identity work. These perceptions that do not make it onto the Instagram interface still influence and shape online engagements, demonstrating the interconnectedness of our online and offline selves. Rooted in feminist and queer pedagogies of the digital, where marginalised users have built worlds, identities and networks usually denied them in the physical realm and whether we consider it a negative or positive of contemporary life, existing online and AFK is where contemporary cultural life is. In tandem with this interwoven nature of contemporary digital societies come the concerns that impact every single user. I dedicate the following section to these.

Contemporary concerns of social media

I include this section because I consider my participants as much a part of the wider social media community as anybody else; I decided upon the following concerns partly because these regularly came up in conversation with family and friends, as well as media reports, so I knew that they were out there in the public sphere, not just the academic one.

Algorithms of oppression and platformisation

Safia Noble's extensive work on the oppressive mechanisms of algorithms is an important intervention that deserves recognition when investigating the lives of digital diasporas, because often, it is something that users themselves notice online. Like Nakamura, Noble contends that the disparities of the offline world are reflected in the online. In a study of Google's search engine, she finds that searches of Black women and girls return pornographic and racist content, 'naturalizing Black women as sexual objects so effortlessly' (Noble 2018, p.17). The search engine algorithms are anything but neutral forces:

> What we find in search engines about people and culture is important. They oversimplify complex phenomena. They obscure any struggle over understanding, and they can mask history. Search engines can reframe our thinking and deny us the ability to engage deeply with essential information and knowledge we need […] They galvanize attention, no

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matter the real-life cost, and they feign impartiality and objectivity in the process of displaying results. (Ibid., p. 116-7).

These digital inequalities become deepened because discrimination is embedded in computer code and in artificial intelligence technologies. Noble reminds us that it is not machines that write this code, but human beings who hold their own value systems, upholding racist and sexist views whilst convincing users that the digital decision-making tools they develop are neutral or objective. Thus, the algorithmic default setting for digital visibility and acceptance is whiteness.

Another major concern for digital media scholars is the threat of platformisation via social media. Thomas Poell, David Neiborg and Jose van Dijck define platforms as:

(re)-programmable digital infrastructures that facilitate and shape personalised interactions among end-users and complementors, organised through the systematic collection, algorithmic processing, monetisation, and circulation of data (Poell et al., 2019, p.3)

Platform owners - the Mark Zuckerberg's of this world – have created something that 'is a new form of sovereignty, a third institutional form' (Lovink 2019, p.72), resembling markets and states, but not conforming to either. Creating value from our data is one worry, the other being the illusion of freedom they create whilst setting out rigid rules for compliance. Like algorithmic default settings, this masked compliance is seen as neutral, or even worse, as choice. Platforms can be seen by some as conduits for users' opinions, photos and social engagements, whilst others view them as 'walled gardens', where publishing, access and content rights are limited (Dekker and Wolfsberger 2009).

For the likes of Instagram, an aesthetic visual identity is limited by the app's square photo grid and array of filters. This 'templatability', whilst 'diminishing the feeling of individuality' isn't necessarily bad, according to Leaver, Highfield and Abidin - 'a good template emerges because it is visually and affectively pleasing' (Leaver et al., 2020 p. 215-6). Thus, it is user response to platforms that contribute to their success. Geert Lovink does not lend as much

autonomy to the user, contending that platforms 'aim to subordinate users, firms and indeed anyone involved in the making of products, to its economic logic' (Lovink 2019, p.68).

I agree that without user preferences, platforms like Twitter, Instagram and Facebook would not have outshone the competitors, but that is the logic of markets – there will always be a brand winner. What is interesting about this assertion is why and how users have utilised certain platforms in their lives. Unlike Lovink, I do not believe that all users are subordinate to the economic logic of platforms – users come to them and stay for a plethora of reasons. Whilst economic interests maybe one reason, there are many others that still require attention.

Interrogating platform protections reveals how the default architecture works *against* marginalised communities, many of whom are trying to find a way to connect and create intimate publics online. Governance is carried out by the platforms themselves meaning that they can be dangerous spaces for marginalised users who are not protected; one study found that queer women on Tinder, Instagram and Vine would self-censor to avoid harassment, as flagging mechanisms did not protect them (Duguay et al. 2020). The platform architecture (hashtag filtering, algorithmic recommendations) would reinforce hegemonic technocultures that would render queer women invisible online. Similarly, shadowbanning on Instagram (the partial censoring of online accounts without the user knowing), targeted content the company loosely defined as "sexual content". This implicated a large swathe of marginalised users from queer, Black, body positivity and sex work communities by hiding their content from the Instagram Explore page, greatly reducing their visibility (Are 2012).

Algorithms at their core seem to be founded on heteropatriarchal capitalist values, presented as the default order of the internet. By and large, platforms profit from our data and user-generated content, whilst offering limited protection and shadowbanning marginalised users. Given this context, how have alternatives to oppressive algorithms and platformisation been envisioned by scholars?

A cohort of researchers based in Seattle have created the Critical Platform Studies Group (critplat.org). Founded with the aim of investigating the role of big tech in civic life, the group

has two main goals in mind; 'supporting the municipal regulation of algorithmic systems' and 'exploring the influence of big tech funding in our research communities' [7]. As researchers, remaining critical of algorithms and platforms and how they are built allows us to understand how users are implicated into their neoliberal logic. This offers a complex understanding of digital usership – that in one sense we are contained and restricted by the limits set by big tech, but that also within this, there are choices that are made by users that push a particular neoliberal identity or economic goal.

A 2020 critplat research project looked at why it is important to involve those on the margins in the creation of new software in order to be able to meet their needs (Katell et al.). In this respect, marginalised users are able to shape a platform to meet their needs instead of the other way around. Critplat utilises a human-computer interaction (HCI) approach, which is the study of how people interact with computers and to what degree computers are or are not developed for successful interaction with human beings. This opens up critical dialogue about algorithms and platforms by simply asking users 'why doesn't this work for you?' Whilst this is not something I will employ in my research, it is important to acknowledge that there are researchers out there in the field of data science finding ways to introduce the 'human' back into the creation of platforms. Perhaps this can offer us some hope that not all has been lost to the algorithm – perhaps we can wrest it away from automation:

> The platforms operate because of their software – automated procedures, algorithms and filters – not through a large staff of editors and designers. Their lack of employees is their essence. (Lovink 2019, p. 31)

When understood this way, flows of digital interactions are seen more as machine influenced and less human, making it crucial that we begin to ask users themselves what they think of these platforms. These 'ground-level views' – a term I have adopted from a study about anti-racism and Twitter, where algorithms and platforms are understood through people's responses (Mislan and Dache-Gerbino 2018) – are important when it comes to everyday digital users.

Finally, I conclude this section with a closing remark from Noble, who believes that a black feminist technology studies (BFTS) approach is sorely needed when it comes to researching gendered and racialised digital identities:

> More research on the politics, culture, and values embedded in search can help frame a broader context of African American digital technology usage and early adoption, which is largely underexamined, particularly from the perspectives of women and girls. BFTS is a way to bring more learning beyond the traditional discourse about technology consumption (Noble 2018, p. 172)

Although written in 2018, the perspective of women and girls (as well as queer) digital diasporas remains largely underexamined. Like Noble, I hope to introduce a framework that extends beyond traditional, or in this case underwritten, discourses about technology consumption amongst women and queer members from the British South Asian digital diaspora. The following short section is dedicated to another concern of social media and one that has been at the forefront of many participants' minds: online privacy.

Online Privacy

I feel it important to talk about online privacy and its varied notions, especially because it has been shown that private networks are important to South Asian diaspora youth, who rely on them to mask the truths of their social and sexual lives (Handa 2003). In addition, it lays bare how digital users are implicated in systems of state surveillance and how the blurring of the private and public sphere shifts concepts of sociality. For many participants, privacy concerns are of great significance, as I demonstrate in chapter four.

When Edward Snowden blew the whistle on National Security Agency (NSA) surveillance in 2013, millions were made aware that data was being mined, not just for marketing purposes, but for state surveillance. In this section, I turn my attentions to studies of user perception of data privacy, as there are many tangents this section could take. The political machinations of data privacy and Big Data are well documented by scholars exploring everyday user rights

to digital privacy (Korba and Kenny 2002; Lyon 2014) and the implications of state surveillance capitalism (Brayne 2017; Aho and Duffield 2020).

Those looking at user perceptions of data privacy have brought forth useful insights into how it has impacted user engage online. Some avoid digital activities such as shopping online because they are reluctant to share their data with websites (Mekovec and Vrcek 2011) whilst others use private messaging platforms such as Telegram to get around platform surveillance (Akbari and Gabdulhakov 2019). Some users consider the trade-off of personal data for convenience worthwhile by welcoming Voice-based digital assistants like Alexa or Siri into their homes and revealing their inherent trust in technology (Vimalkumar et al., 2021) whilst others have little to no idea what data is being accessed through their social media accounts (Golbeck and Mauriello 2016). For others, it is privacy from other users, rather than corporate or state apparatus, that becomes a priority in a bid to stop cyberbullying, racist, homophobic or misogynist abuse (Swenson-Lepper and Kerby 2019).

Another dimension of online privacy is the blurring of the private and public sphere, as Henry Giroux writes:

> Once again, too many young people succumb to the influence of neoliberalism and its relentless refiguring of the public sphere as a site for displaying the personal by running from privacy, by making every aspect of their lives public (Giroux 2015, p.160)

Whilst perhaps a bit of an over generalisation of young people and their succumbing to neoliberalist values online, Giroux's assertion that the public sphere has been refigured through the display of private content is an interesting one that carries weight for my research. The private nature of selfies, status updates and videos invite anyone virtually into the life of a user. Whilst this presents challenges (which I tackle in chapter four), it is also recognised that users 'construct new types of publicness that echo but redefine publicness as it was known in unmediated and broadcast contexts' (Baym and boyd 2012, p. 328). Hence, we may not be working with something completely unfamiliar to us as media researchers, but nevertheless it is important to make sense of the shifting dynamics of socially-mediated public life. Similarly, negotiating the boundaries between the professional and personal on social

media, Josie Cassano Rizzuti asks 'how are these lines being blurred?' (Cassano Rizzuti 2020, p.81). Such anxieties can impact users' mental health and the following section is dedicated to an emerging field of research that seeks to make known the linkages between digital media technologies and mental wellbeing.

Mental wellbeing

Constant access to social media via smartphones creates habits that have intensified, as the veil between online and offline has become thinner, writes Geert Lovink. In our 'constant desire for engagement with others and the world', we partake in 'online voyeurism' and a 'detached form of peer-to-peer surveillance culture that carefully avoids direct interaction' (Lovink 2019, p. 29). Empirical studies concerned with digital addiction have found that young adults have experienced depression, disruption in self-perception and impairment of relationships owing to excessive digital media usage (Montag and Walla 2016; Cemiloglu 2022).

Other studies dispute this claim, suggesting that concerns regarding social media and mental health may be misplaced (Berryman et. al, 2018; Coyne et. al 2019). Whilst there have been positive associations made between mental wellbeing and social media with regards to combatting social anxiety, making connections and belonging (Grieve et al., 2013; Allen et al., 2014; Lui and Brown 2014) recent studies have begun to unpack the negative associations in more depth.

Looking specifically at Instagram, studies have confirmed that there is a link between the platform and psychological well-being. This in part, could be down to its visual affordances – physical appearance is a significant aspect of persona identity and Instagram relies on a steady stream of photographs and videos to function. Observing the negative impacts, social comparison which 'can lead people to believe others are happier or have better lives' (Mackson et al., 2019, p.2178) correlates with an increase in depression (Lup et al., 2015). Looking to studies of women Instagram users, I found that most focussed on body image and eating disorders (Holland and Tiggemann 2016; Butkowski 2019; Sherlock and Wagstaff 2019; Engeln et al., 2020), contending that Instagram increases appearance anxiety because users

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present idealised versions of themselves via filters and other editing software and in turn, are exposed to other users' idealised selves (Fioravanti et al., 2020).

When it came to queer users and research into mental health on Instagram, many studies saw it as a site where community formation, coming into being and affirmation helped users deal with mental health issues that arose out of living in cis/heteropatriarchal societies (Fox and Ralston 2016; Duguay 2018; Wandrekar et al., 2021). Conversely, Instagram is also approached as a site where instances of cyberbullying targeting queer users occurs (Duguya et al., 2018). One recent study unpacked the potential toxicity of some queer online spaces whereby divisions meant that some users felt policed or bullied by those from the community (Bodinger-deUriarte 2019).

Of South Asian Instagrammers, I found a few studies that explored issues of colourism and mental health amongst young adults of Indian descent (Sharma et al., 2022) and young migrant women in Chennai (Varghese 2017). Colourism – a widespread system of inequality whereby those with darker skin are discriminated against – was found to have impacted users negatively online; most users said they felt more confident online when they were at least one skin tone lighter than their natural shade in posted images. Similar studies also look at the impact that colourism has had on other Instagram users of colour mental wellbeing, from Black youth in South Africa (Tate 2015) to the Latinx community in the USA (Cruz 2022). Counternarratives to colourism and body shaming by Instagram users to increase self-esteem have also been published (Peterson 2020; Mudasser 2021; Childs 2022).

The tension between those who contend that mental well-being is not directly impacted by social media and those who believe it is, has been dealt with most effectively in my opinion, by digital media scholar Ellen Helsper, who writes

> Does the widespread diffusion of digital communication tools mean that all individuals engage equally in the social use of ICTs? For social uses of ICTs and our ability to manage our interactions online, inequalities reflect normative and cultural power dynamics, rather than socio-economic inequalities between groups of different socio-cultural backgrounds. […] There is a relationship between wealth, education, and how much you

engage socially with ICTs to expand bridging social capital. [...] Social-psychologically vulnerable people are also more likely to be bullied online and are less likely to be satisfied with the quality of bridging relationships. (Helsper 2021 p. 149-150)

Like Nakamura, Helsper maintains that our online lived experience closely reflects the disparities of our offline experiences. When it comes to the quality of a user's digital engagement, factors beyond our socio-economic status, like the power dynamics at play within our lives AFK result in the positive or negative outcomes of our online interactions. I consider this approach incredibly useful when it comes to understanding the interwovenness of our online and offline lives, and I return to Helsper's approach to socio-digital inequalities in the next chapter.

The digital takes up more and more space in our daily lives and it is important to acknowledge that it is not without consequence for our mental health. Historically, the outcomes for marginalised users have been observed as positive. More recently, research is split; there are those who maintain that social media does not majorly impact mental health and those who contend that it does. The visual affordances of Instagram make it a complex site of study when it comes to mental wellbeing, with a majority of studies looking at body image, eating disorders and social comparison. Of the negative outcomes amongst queer and of colour Instagrammers, cyberbullying and colourism came to the fore. I argue that, using Helsper's approach, a more complex reading of mental wellbeing amongst British South Asian women and queer Instagrammers is required. In the final section, I present a review of literature dealing with social media's corporate dimensions via advertising and Influencers.

Advertising and Influencers

Social media's corporate core is no secret; urbanist scholar Donald McNeill observes that 'Stanford University retained its preeminent reputation in providing computer engineers with an education in entrepreneurship' (2016, p. 497), emphasising the corporate drive of social media coders and their willingness to allow advertising agencies access to their sites. The technological changes brought about by e-commerce and social media sites intermittently disrupted the established economic order with many tech corporations creating wealth

within an emerging digital labour market that the American state still has very little power to regulate (Gerlach et al., 2016).

Out of this digital labour market, we have witnessed the rise of the prosumer and the influencer. A term first coined by Alvin Toffler in 1980, the prosumer was conceived of as an individual who consumes and produces value simultaneously. Toffler predicted that the role of production and consumption would blur, with consumers taking part in the production process allowing for mass customisation, in a bid for companies to grow and satisfy a saturated market full of products. In today's economic landscape, self-checkouts at supermarkets fulfil this prosumer logic, with customers momentarily becoming till operators. In a social media context, this entails users producing their own content that keeps platforms operational. Prosumers 'can easily and with no expenditure of money find out about the doings of potentially innumerable friends as they are able to provide personal information for others' (Ritzer 2015, p.434).

For George Ritzer, this blurring of boundaries has given way to an exceptional form of digital exploitation:

> Consumer capitalism can also be seen as magical in that consumers eagerly buy much more than they need and want and pay much more, at least collectively, for those goods and services than they need to and that they cost to produce, distribute, and market. However, what is being argues here is that *prosumer capitalism is an infinitely more magical system* than either producer or consumer capitalism. The capitalist pays *nothing* for the work of prosumers (*Ibid.,* p.434)

User-generated-content in whatever form becomes a digital product made and consumed by users for free. According to Ritzer and Jurgenson, all digital users are prosumers, ushering in a new form of capitalism, one which is 'based on the freedom and creativity of the consumer' (2010, p. 31). The blurring of these boundaries ends up creating a system of workers whose labour is exploited for free by corporate platforms.

Others don't perceive of the prosumer age as wholly negative; the idea of strangers making and sharing things with each other makes them active participants in a sharing economy. Juliet B.Schor and Mehmet Cansoy argue that it 'offers social connection, flexibility, autonomy, and novel means for entrepreneurship and money-making' (Schor and Cansoy in eds., Wherry and Woodward 2019, p.7). It also opens up a space for users to create their own niches in markets that historically excluded them (Lin and de Kloet 2019; Sobande et al., 2019) and digital participatory cultures through crowd funding platforms (Planells 2015).

Why is consumer power considered so valuable? I trace this back to theories of the citizen consumer, as understood by Roopali Mukherjee and Sarah Banet-Weiser. Outlining the history of immigrant communities in 19th and 20th century America, 'practicing consumer citizenship' became 'a means to mitigate and challenge racist practices and cultural exclusion' (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser p. 7). They claim that the civil rights movement was 'organised around issues of consumption and access -in retail stores, at lunch counters, and on city buses' (Mukherjee and Banter-Weiser p.7). Thus, even at this point, corporations were already responding to an ever-changing consumer market in order to grow their customer base and having consumer demands such as the 'Don't Buy Where You Can't Work' campaign of the 1920's was about asserting a political autonomy in the capitalist workings of the States. Consumerism and citizenship became cemented together, where a post-war America interconnected the public and private spheres via the creation of the "citizen consumer" (Cohen 2003) (a result of a growing economy, suburbanisation, etc.). Some scholars maintain that this allowed for a political consumerism to emerge because 'the consumer public sphere was a battleground for access and improved employment opportunities' (Brown 2017, p. 248)

Thus, the prosumer could in another sense be understood to be fighting for access and even improved employment opportunities, a notion I elaborate on further in chapter six when focussing on participants and their desire to create a professional persona outside of their occupations. For those few who succeed via influencer status and end up turning a profit from their digital labour, another set of issues presents itself.

Some digital media scholars have focused their attentions on Instagram influencers, defined as people with a sizeable following (of at least 10,000) who can seamlessly advertise products to their social network of followers on behalf of the advertiser, giving credibility (a sense of 'realness') to the brand they are posting about in their Instagram pictures (Abidin, 2016; De Veirman 2017). The parallel narratives that run through influencer culture is summed up neatly by Brooke Erin Duffy and Emily Hund, who conducted a study of fashion bloggers:

> These socially mediated versions are ostensibly women just like us. Yet, just as this rhetoric of "real" obscures hierarchies of age, race, class, sexuality, and body type […], the codes by which top-ranked fashion bloggers represent themselves veil the labor, discipline, and capital that go into the production of the digital self. (2015 p.9)

Digital identity in the influencer context becomes an individualised marketable commodity and one that obscures the offline lived experience that contributes to digital identity formation. This mode of creative self-expression rooted in the consumer marketplace lays claim to an authenticity missing from the traditional fashion industry, i.e. these women are 'just like us' and therefore we follow them because we trust them. The conditions that allow for these articulations of self, feed into a 'neoliberal *moral* framework' (Banet-Weiser 2012, p.56) that is predicated upon notions of self-branding, creative autonomy and narratives of authenticity.

Whilst much attention is paid to influencer markets online, we are also reminded that there are many prolific platform users who curate specialist content and 'conscientiously crafted feeds' (Leaver et al., p.149) who exist outside of the Influencer economy. Whilst it is important to acknowledge the role played by Influencers and the advertising industry on Instagram, I argue that there needs to be more research into the lives of everyday Instagram users who are prolific platform users. Thus, my research offers an analysis of everyday Instagrammers who are also aesthetically invested in their content and status within social media ecologies, who go on to perform what I term 'everyday Influencing' in chapter six, signalling how the digital has continued to evolve as a complex landscape replete with a plethora of subject positionalities which deserve greater attention.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have demonstrated how digital media scholars have theorised the ever-shifting contours of the digital. Early cyberfeminist critiques confirm that the digital has always been contested territory. Postcolonial scholars see it reflecting the disparities of the material world, whilst others imbue it with endless possibilities or sites for revolutionary potential. Tracing the trajectory of virtual communities through to social media platforms and finally, to Instagram, I hoped to show how the digital has evolved in complexity and what my personal stake as a researcher is in it. Looking at studies of women and queer digital diasporas on Instagram, I argue that there is scope to extend this body of research into the lives of women and queer British South Asian Instagrammers.

The evolving complexity of digital life is brilliantly reflected through the work of Russell's Glitch Feminism, for whom the digital becomes another skin, one as valid and real as our physical skin. This disruption of the digital dualism binary further complicates the notion of contemporary digital societies, which is why renewed research into digital societies is needed – precisely because we are only becoming *more* enmeshed with our digital selves. I finish the chapter with concerns that both users and researchers have around social media and ones that participants have opinions on too. I include them so as to incorporate research of digital diaspora communities into wider discourses around social media platforms, as I feel that marginalised digital users are often excluded from them. My inclusion of literature on Influencers is to highlight the gap that exists when it comes to the creative aspirations of everyday digital users, which is something I hope that my research can bridge. Such a focus is valuable in adding nuance to debates about the neoliberal nature of social media platforms.

In the following chapter, I present the methodology and theoretical foundations of my research, which draws on Avtar Brah's conception of the digital diaspora space and Ellen Helsper's digital inequalities framework. In the spirit of Gopinath's reimaging of the visual field, I center participants' words in place of the Instagram content that often determines social media usership by utilising interviews as a primary research method.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The two previous chapters have laid out a review of literature relevant to this thesis. The first chapter explored feminist and queer theories of the digital, analysing its resistive and neoliberal dimensions. I maintained that more scholarly focus should be dedicated to women and queer British South Asian digital diasporas. The second chapter introduced literatures highlighting the ever-shifting contours of the digital alongside the algorithmic and platform architectures of the internet and social media specifically. I included these literatures as a way to contextualise my research within the wider discourses of contemporary digital life and the concerns and complexities that affect all social media users, regardless of background. To reiterate, I argue that more focus should be given to the creative engagements of everyday social media users and not just Influencers. Hence, in this chapter, I lay out my theoretical framework which attempts to answer the following questions:

- How do my participants perceive their lives and the lives of others on Instagram?
- Where do these perceptions place participants within national and global contexts?
- To what extent do participants reproduce the neoliberal dimensions of social media platforms?
- To what extent are social media platforms used as resistive tools within participants' lives?

This chapter introduces the methodology that underpins the research taken to the field site. Here, I aim to develop an approach that interweaves the ideas explored in the first two chapters, which explore the resistive and neoliberal tendencies of social media within the context of the global political and social economy.

To develop a theory of diasporic digital usership that attempts to answer these questions, I draw on two theoretical frameworks. The first is Avtar Brah's theory of diaspora space which, drawing on legacies of colonialism, lends a temporal dimension to diaspora experience. Folded into this is Ellen Helsper's digital inequalities framework which serves to disrupt the binaries of the digital divide and digital dualism by introducing the notion of socio-digital

inequalities. These frameworks underpin my approach which extends into the digital lives of women and queer British South Asian Instagram users.

Theoretical framework
The diaspora space

The desire to better understand the Instagram engagements of the British South Asian digital diaspora meant that I first needed to define what diaspora was. Avtar Brah's theory of 'diaspora space' gave me the tools to comprehend the complexity of diaspora experience and most significantly, to understand it as a *space* in constant flux, much like the ever-shifting digital terrain. Marrying concepts of a feminist politics of location and borders, Brah demands that we consider the micro/ macro-level cultural, economic, political and social dimensions that configures the diaspora space:

> The concept of diaspora space is central to the framework I am proposing. It marks the intersectionality of contemporary conditions of transmigrancy of people, capital, commodities and culture. It addresses the realm where economic, cultural and political effects of crossing/transgressing different 'borders' are experienced; where contemporary forms of transcultural identities are constituted; and where belonging and otherness is appropriated and contested (Brah 1996, p.238)

For second-generation British South Asians, this postmodern conception of diaspora better serves to reflect the condition of social digital living between many places at once, mentally and physically. Brah's framework goes beyond physical borders, as 'borders are arbitrary constructions. Hence, in a sense, they are always metaphors'. Thus, diaspora communities cannot be simply defined as living within different national borders, as borders also constitute 'psychological, sexual, spiritual, cultural, class and racialised boundaries' (Brah 1996, p.198).

Brah's theory does not only apply to South Asian diasporas, it applies to all communities and nations because all identities and global histories are the result of or impacted by diasporic connections. In the context of my research, I use it to construct a South Asian diaspora space;

to be British South Asian is not just a case of being born into a family of immigrants who settled in the UK from the Indian subcontinent, it is a complex experience that encapsulates not only a physical but also a mental sense of (un)belonging. Through the diaspora space, Brah has opened up a medium for many facets to exist at once – 'bodily presence and limits, […] and ideological formations of belonging and exclusion' (Kirby 1993 p. 174). This notion of existing between many intersections at once is transplanted into social media because participants sense of South Asian-ness online is impacted by a variety of factors and is constantly changing. In 'Cartographies of diaspora: contesting identities', Brah's first chapter is dedicated to histories of British South Asian diasporas, with her concluding that 'Asian-British identities are in flux […] whatever form these political and cultural identities assume in the 1980s and beyond, they are interwoven into the British social and cultural fabric' (Brah 1996, p. 48).

The 'diaspora space' recognises the complexity and fluidity of British South Asian diaspora experience that has become even more interwoven into British culture since Brah's 1996 publication. Drawing from this spatial turn, I am incorporating the digital world into this idea of the 'diaspora space'; in mapping out the 'crossing/transgressing [of] different borders' which now constitute the digital, everyday women and queer Instagram users who are largely marginalised within and beyond their communities; this mirrors my approach to participants who are defined by their unique intersections but still placed within the wider structures of Instagram as everyday social media users.

The following section will go on to incorporate the digital inequalities framework, equipping me with the tools to analyse the ways in which power structures are implemented in participants' lives.

The digital inequalities framework

Instagram is an ambivalent space for users – somewhere they can deal in content and engagements that make them feel good, bad, angry, happy, sad, lonely, etc. The life in which a user is embedded AFK, (meaning away from the keyboard or phone screen but not fully divorced from the digital realm, as both material and digital living is intrinsically entwined)

also has a role to play in how they interact with Instagram, as well as how they are positioned within wider structures of global capital. All of these layers shape and influence users and this is why the digital inequalities framework is useful in showing how 'structure and agency come together to shape action, inaction, opportunities, and constraints' (Helsper 2012, p. 17). Writing in 1994, Brah acknowledged these layers that make up an individual's life:

> The micro world of individual narratives constantly references and foregrounds the macro canvas of economic, political and cultural change. (Brah in eds. Afshar and Maynard 1994, p. 169).

In a similar vein, Helsper's approach explores the life-worlds of digital users fully, from the macro (global cultural, political, financial systems), meso (university, school, city of residence) and micro layers (family, friends, community) in which they are embedded. Of socio-digital inequalities Helsper writes:

> I define the social as the physical, ideological, and social environments that shape our everyday lives, as well as the resources we have and the ways in which we act, think, and feel about all of these. The digital consists of the ICT access, skills, use, and the attitudes we have towards the digital […] the social is both the cause and the consequence of the digital. In turn, the digital is the cause and consequence of the social. […] That is, the social cannot be understood without the digital, and vice versa. This is why I use the term 'socio-digital inequalities' and not digital inequalities. (Helsper 2012, p45).

As argued previously in chapter two, binaried understandings of digital dualism fail to deal with the complexities of an increasingly digitised society. Helsper's digital inequalities framework provides me with a theory of digital usership that not only acknowledges these complexities through structuration, but also draws on users' personal experiences to better understand this landscape. A desire to move beyond a techno-utopian and techno-pessimist understanding of digital users, the digital inequalities framework demands we take a much more nuanced approach in understanding 'who is disadvantaged in ways specific to where they come from and who they are' (*Ibid.,* p.25). Whilst Helsper talks about socio-digital

inequalities, it is important to note that disadvantage and inequality isn't the sole focus of my research; I am equally invested in the positive outcomes of these engagements for participants, but in recognising the disadvantages, I am able to see what the advantages are and for whom. The socio-digital inequalities framework reveals the 'diverse and complex landscape of inequalities, and how this shapes our future in increasingly digital societies' (*Ibid.,* p45).

We do not live in an era where the digital is good or bad, or one where the digital is divorced from our material lives; it is a complicated terrain and even more so for certain diaspora communities who have rarely been the object of scholarly focus. Because 'the social cannot be understood without the digital, and vice versa' this framework allows me to conceive of my participants' Instagram usage as *influencing* and *influenced by* these layers:

- The macro: global neoliberalism (postfeminism, homonormativity, self-branding, platformisation), global resistance (LGBTQIA+ movements, feminism, anti-racism), diaspora identity
- The meso: university, school, cities of birth and residence, workplace, places of worship, British South Asian identity
- The micro: family, friends, partners, local community, home, identity, self.

These layers that make up a participant's life are interwoven throughout a platform like Instagram; the digital inequalities framework allows me the opportunity to investigate how these layers influence an individual through their Instagram usage. As part of my approach, I use the word layers in place of structures because the more localised that interactions become, the less I consider them as structures that bear down on individuals. I understand them as intricate layers that build and shape socio-digital life.

Helsper argues that although descriptive accounts are plentiful when it comes to describing everyday digital users, there is not much theorisation of the structures that bear down on an individual. Similarly, big data studies serve to quantify online interactions, rather than concentrate on the quality of the interaction, flattening the experiences of users; just because their presence has been counted on a certain platform, does not mean that they endorse or

have had a good experience on the platform. It is crucial that we begin to apply macro, meso and micro layers of an individual's life to these online interactions, not only to disrupt the digital divide and dualist binaries, but also to understand how they play a role in defining digital inequalities.

There was no doubt that these three layers would come into play when participants spoke about their lives on Instagram; family, friends, school, university, their city of residence, as well as global issues would all be a part of their narratives - bodies increasingly exist between both online and offline. For participants, Instagram is not spoken about in isolation as a social media platform, it spills out into the material world and vice versa.

Helsper's theorisation adds complexity to discourses on digital inequalities, contending that even when groups have the same skills and access to digital technologies, the outcomes are different for each one. Taking the inequality of consumption as an example, Helsper asks, who is more likely to click on what? Those from traditionally privileged backgrounds who are valued for their life-worlds would benefit more from being online than those from historically vulnerable backgrounds. What can be gleaned about the life-worlds of women and queer members from the British South Asia digital diaspora? What digital inequalities and privileges exist for them? What macro, meso and micro layers construct their lives? How are diaspora members positioned when it comes to speaking about digital inequality and privilege? How does this digital inequality and privilege compare to those on the Indian subcontinent?

Linking social and digital inequalities together ensures that I do not fall back on an essentialised view of digital life or of participants, as either empowered or disempowered. This framework also opens up a space for the possibility of a complex and nuanced account of women and queer British South Asian digital diasporas to emerge. Helsper's framework also incorporates an intersectional approach:

> intersectionality is approached here as the recognition that an interplay exists between physical limitations and internalisation of specific identities, the reactions of individuals within people's everyday life contexts to different aspects of one's identity, and how structures constrain possibilities for equality. Intersectionality forces us to

think about gradations and shades of inequality or injustice, rather than absolute differences. […] Accordingly, we need to be conscious of how one type of disadvantage compounds and changes another type of disadvantage. This implies studying how disadvantage accumulates and concentrates over generations so that inequalities become entrenched over time in very particular communities or groups of individuals and how certain inequalities are more likely to change in a positive direction (*Ibid.,* p 19).

Most of my participants will be second or third generation British South Asians, with parents or grandparents from the Indian subcontinent. There most likely will be ways in which generational inequalities have become entrenched or overcome, and this will be particular to each individual, depending on the kinds of layers that make up their lives. Helsper is careful never to lay blame at the door of the individual, contending that 'it is possible to study one system of inequality (e.g. gender) separately and in conjunction with other systems of inequality (e.g. ethnicity, national politics) since they intersect with different effects' (*Ibid*., p.20). In this way, an effort is made to examine 'the universal and unique' (*Ibid*., p.20) simultaneously.

In conclusion, I have presented the digital inequalities framework as my methodological approach in analysing women and queer members of the British South Asian digital diaspora. Instagram and the social media landscape at large requires a deeper examination of how structure and agency shape socio-digital subjectivities; I draw on the macro, meso and micro layers of an individual's life through which the digital is woven. These layers are the cause and consequence of an individual's digital life, which in turn is the cause and consequence of their social life. Thus, it disrupts the digital dualist fallacy, making a case for the intricate entwining of the digital and material world. Utilising this framework in the study of a group of digital users who are marginalised both culturally and academically in the UK, gives me the opportunity to fully realise their life-words via these structures and 'determine who feels empowered, connected, and appreciated in digital societies' (*Ibid*., p. 183) and who does not.

Thus far, this is an approach to understanding the lives of women and queer members of the British South Asian digital diaspora composed of two elements; the first being the feminist

and postcolonial theory of the diaspora space, which recognises the complexity and fluidity of British South Asian diaspora experience that has become even more interwoven into British and digital culture since Brah's 1996 publication. The second is the digital inequalities framework that acknowledges macro, meso and micro social layers in the socio-digital life-worlds of users.

The third and final component is the centering of user narratives, which I discuss in the following section.

Centering participant narratives through in-depth interviews

To sum up, my approach is theoretically underpinned by these three elements:

1. **The diaspora space** theorises digital usership whilst living through the diaspora experience. As a space for diaspora experience, I recognise that it is always in flux – that what participants feel, think and are positioned will always be changing

2. **The digital inequalities framework** which acknowledges that the social (physical, ideological and social environments) and the digital (ICT access, skills, use, attitude towards the digital) are the cause and consequence of each other. It also recognises the macro, mesa and micro layers (the universal and unique) that bear down on an individual and how these play a role in defining digital inequalities for a user.

3. **Self-reflective interviews** center the narratives of participants and their perceptions and experiences. It opens a space for reflecting on digital life and revealing insights that are difficult to glean from digital ethnographic methods and interface research.

By positioning this approach as a site beyond the screen, in-depth interviews serve to reveal the complex engagements that are seamlessly interwoven across online and offline spheres. In-depth interviews also aim to center the reflexive narratives of participants. Drawing on

Gopinath's queer aesthetic practice, the neoliberal framings of identity online can be somewhat subverted by entering into research about social media purposefully through face-to-face or voice-to-voice conversations; the voice replaces the onscreen texts and images, in a bid to reclaim the human interactions at the heart of digital media research (Brock 2012). Employing feminist research practices also demands that historically marginalised subjects be able to speak for themselves. Ultimately, the researcher shapes the analysis thereafter, but feminist practices are concerned with reducing the hierarchy between the researcher and the researched (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2007). The status I lend to participants' narratives will be unpacked through a critical grounded theory approach further along in this chapter.

Face-to-face and phone discussions about Instagram and how it made people feel was a major prompt for my research; I'd had many a conversation with friends and family who had a variety of opinions about it. I noticed that most of these conversations did not show up on the Instagram interface. Through AFK conversations in my personal life, I noticed that people were open to reflecting on their digital lives; what they saw online, how it made them feel, what they felt about other accounts, etc. I began thinking about how these reflections of the digital came to shape our lives outside of the screen – our conversations, thoughts, emotions and relationships. More specifically, I became interested in how this space was animated because it felt as though these reflections did not make it back onto the platform itself. One example was a friend telling me that he felt lonely after looking at photographs of other people constantly with friends. A few days after this remark, he posted a photograph of a hike he was on, with no trace of our conversation anywhere, as if it had never really happened.

I can only speculate that this was partly because it was not the right place to criticise the very activity in which you were partaking – would it come across as hypocritical if you talked about the problem of Instagram *on* Instagram? Could it be that it has 'established new and aesthetic communication norms' (Leaver et. al, 2020, p. 6) where this criticality had no space? This is not to say people haven't addressed some of these concerns via the platform – this usually culminates in a post saying something along the lines of 'Instagram isn't a healthy space for me, so I will be taking a break from it for the next 2 months. You can reach me at (email address)'; criticism of Instagram usually concluded in having to leave it for a period of time.

AFK, I found that people did open up about the problems and joys of Instagram in ways that they didn't online, and I found these insights incredibly illuminating. I decided that I wanted to open up a site of reflection for participants and one way to do this was to conduct reflexive in-depth interviews about Instagram. The digital inequalities framework is animated by personal vignettes that Helsper has compiled over years of interview fieldwork, maintaining that they 'describe individual and personal experiences' of ICT use (Helsper 2021, p. 3). This may sound like a simple enough reason, but to engage in conversation about digital usage, I argue, brings up a host of findings that differ from analyses of Big Data and digital ethnographies of user profiles. Previous studies of everyday digital diasporas on social media have analysed discussion threads on forums (Byrne 2007, 2008; Everett 2009); hashtags (Brock 2012; Sharma 2013; Graham and Smith 2016) and status updates (Florini 2014; Brown at. Al 2017) on Twitter; images and videos on Instagram (Russell 2020) and blog posts (Steele 2017).

In-depth interviews as a research method applied to studies of digital users goes some way in supporting the need to theorise digital selfhood and interactions through directed self-reflection (Hogan 2010). I consider these interviews as more than just descriptive accounts of social media usage – they become a way of repurposing digital data in order to make space for digital self-reflection. Providing a space for users to reflect on their own digital lives using interviews has been employed by other feminist digital media scholars such as Francesca Sobande when discussing the digital lives of Black women in the UK. Sobande invited participants to talk about being media spectators of Black women vloggers on YouTube. Their narratives revealed the ways in which these videos spoke to their need for agency and 'reclamation of diasporic identity' (2017, p.21).

The importance of giving users time and space to reflect on their digital lives should not be undermined because 'many of us have a digital identity but fail to fully understand how it is represented and interpreted in the digital realm' (Thomas et. al 2018). In a study involving social media users, researchers remediated individual users' social media data (status updates, photographs, blogs, etc.) into a physical book, a photographic triptych and a film. They then presented these back to users, who looked through each format and reflected on their digital self-presentation. The study found that this kind of 'digital remediation' allowed

for 'forms of self-reflection and sense making in a large, personal social media digital dataset' (*Ibid.,* p 57); participants, upon viewing these items, responded with private forms of contemplation, questioning digital self-hood and grappling with the realities of personal social media content within a different context. Many users upload a lot of data – this often means that there is little opportunity to go back and reflect on what has already been posted. In-depth interviews that encourage self-reflection of digital life become a valuable research method for media scholars in pursuit of new insights of the digital self. Other methods such as photo-voice and self-curated photo elicitation have also been used in self-reflective studies of influencers on Instagram (Marcella-Hood 2021). These methods have not been used in studies of British South Asian digital diasporas.

In line with the digital inequalities framework, in-depth interviews would open up a space for participants to talk about the quality of the interactions they have on Instagram, beyond just stating or observing that they have uploaded, 'liked', 're-grammed', commented on or deleted content. Interviews also complicate the notion of public and private space on a digital interface where some actions can be seen by many (such as posting up content) and other actions that can only be seen by a few, sometimes only one other person (sending a private Direct Message (DM) to another person). When people have spoken to me about Instagram, they sometimes open up about their private interactions which would be impossible to know anything about through digital ethnographic methods.

I also felt it important to direct dialogue about digital engagement away from the screen and into the conversational space of the interview in an attempt to regain the human element of digital research, because the digital is animated by human engagement (Brock 2017). In stepping away from the screen, self-reflective interviews allow participants to go beyond *telling* me what they do online and instead *grapple* with and *reflect* on what it is they and others do online. Conducting interviews was an opportunity to gather data which may not have been possible to gather through digital ethnographies of participants' Instagram accounts.

To conclude, I will use self-reflective interviews to build a complex picture of digital users and the diaspora communities they come from, as sociologist Martin Hand writes:

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One of the advantages of in-depth interviewing in relation to social media is to avoid the reification of 'social media' as an ontological domain rather than a complex range of situated meaningful practices (Hand in ed. Sloan and Quan-Haase 2016, p. 223)

Like the diaspora space in relation to diaspora experience, interviews become a way of understanding social media practices as intricate 'meaningful practices'. My research extends research into social media *visuality* (Hand, 2017) that involves 'moving through a digital environment while rooted in the materiality of our immediate circumstances' (Pink 2012, p. 122). This further disrupts the digital dualist binary by placing our digital circumstances firmly within our material lives and vice versa.

Applying in-depth interviews to studies of digital engagement gives weight to the space outside of the screen. Using the example of the photographic camera, Les Back writes:

Part of what I want to argue is that the lens is not always about the control and fixing of subjects. To see photography as merely a governing technology misses the instability and complexity of the drama that unfolds on either side of the lens. (Back, 2007 p.104)

In a similar fashion, I would argue that to see Instagram simply as a tool that shapes visual culture and self-representation obscures the complexity of experience and response that is happening behind it. A techno or media determinist discourse maintains that society is shaped by technology (Evans 1979 in Robins and Webster 1989, p. 24). Such a reductionist framework does away with complexity and human agency – it has been widely criticised as a way of approaching social phenomena (Melman 1972). Baym argues that technological determinism 'locates cause with the technology', whilst its opposite, social constructivism 'locates cause with people' (2015, p. 51). She posits that a third perspective called social shaping (MacKenzie and Wajcman 1985/1999) represents a middle ground, whereby 'people, technologies, and institutions all have power to influence the development and subsequent use of technology' (Baym 2015, p.52). Social media platforms like Instagram undeniably engineer specific kinds of sociality, yet it is everyday users who take up the possibilities and

constraints of social media practices, rejecting and reworking them into everyday life. It is reflections of these practices that I am interested in analysing.

My approach has been formed through feminist and postcolonial understandings of the diaspora space and feminist research practices also inform the in-depth interviews. Shulamit Reinharz writes that feminist researchers attempt to access 'people's ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher' (Reinharz 1992, p.19). This is because historically, women, along with other marginalised groups have been silenced or had others speak for them. In a study of the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty, Brook Erin Duffy maintained that although she considered the campaign 'the archetype of "commodity feminism"' (Duffy 2015, p. 712), it was only through interviews with the women who took part in the campaign that she was able to tease out themes of creativity and authenticity. Duffy admits that 'this experience taught [her] first-hand of the value of feminist research methods' (*Ibid*.).

This approach seeks to recognise and take seriously the layers through which these social media practices are enacted; the binaries of online and offline have become further complicated by years of intricate engagement that requires further examination. Returning to Helsper's notion of digital inequalities, I aim to spotlight those who are the 'non-professional' or 'low-cost content creators' from a diaspora community; I use these terms cautiously because, unless they explicitly tell me, I cannot always be certain of participants' aspirations on Instagram – perhaps they are wanting to become influencers but have not generated enough followers yet. However, because most of them are not influencers or micro-celebrities on Instagram, I define them as 'non-professional' and 'everyday' content creators. In tandem with Avtar Brah's feminist and postcolonial renderings of diaspora identity as constantly changing, my approach offers a theorisation of the everyday ecologies of digital diasporas. This theorisation does not simply deal in the optimism of digital diasporas, but serves to highlight the inequalities, risks and negative qualities associated with digitisation.

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In the following section, I offer an account of participant recruitment through social media platforms which leads me to reflect on digital labour practices as a researcher.

Methods
Process of selecting participants

The following account charts my efforts in locating participants through social media platforms. Whilst consideration was given to presenting a shorter account of this process, I have included it in detail as evidence of the amount of digital labour that is undertaken when maintaining an online account and the challenges in recruiting participants through social media. My reflections on this give me greater insight into participants responses when they talk about digital labour, an issue I shall expand upon in chapter six.

To generate purposive samples (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Bryant and Charmaz 2007), I made it clear that I wanted to reach out to British South Asians who identified as women and/or queer and had Instagram accounts. Posting a call for participants through Twitter, Facebook and Instagram felt appropriate, as participants were required to already be users of these platforms. There is evidence to suggest that users often interact across platforms simultaneously (Lenhart 2015), so posting a call over all 3 major social media platforms would ensure that I could reach out to as many users as possible with there being a strong possibility that they were Instagram users, regardless of where they had first seen the call. I decided to post up a call out across my personal social media accounts on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. I also Direct Messaged a couple of artists on Instagram (who had defined themselves as South Asian) with fairly large followings to ask them to share my post. This resulted in a small number of people contacting me, but not enough, which was when I realised that I needed to increase my digital reach.
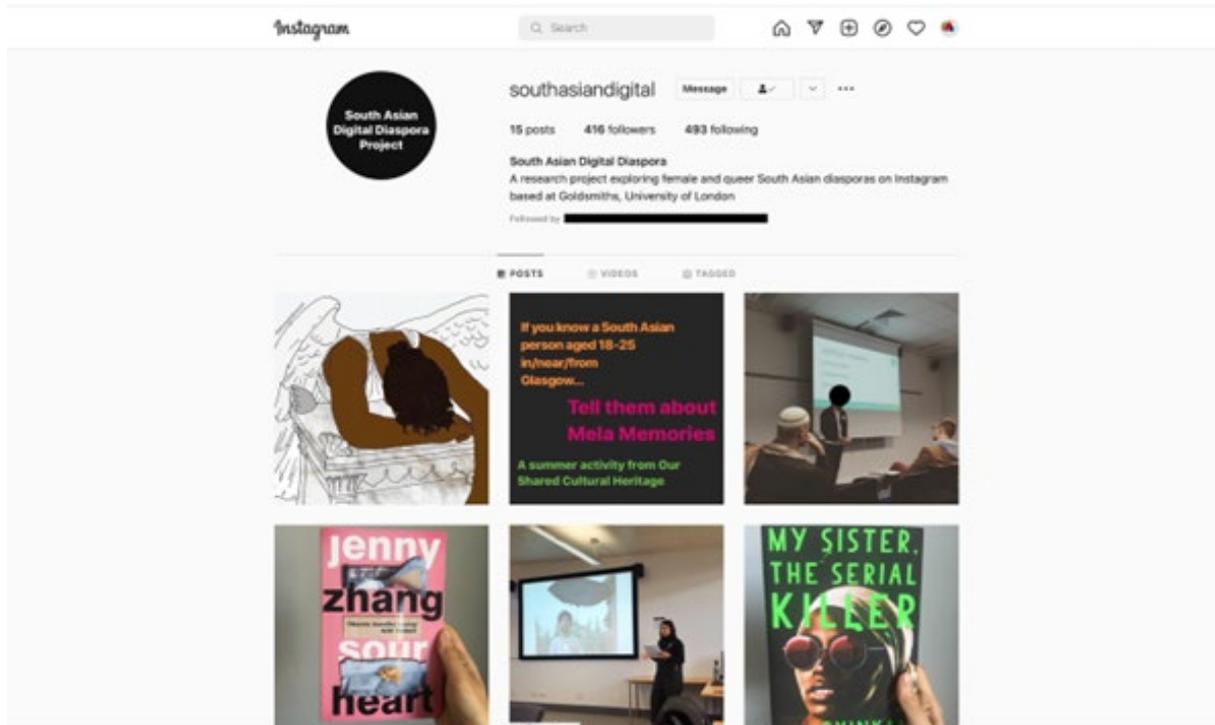
Fig. 1. Research account set up on Instagram

I decided to set up a research Instagram account, separate from my personal account, providing a level of readily available transparency that would establish an element of trust (Sikkens et al. 2016). Instagram allows users to have multiple accounts that one can switch between with ease. I called my research account South Asian Digital Diaspora (fig. 1), with a bio that read 'A research project exploring women and queer South Asian diasporas on Instagram based at Goldsmiths, University of London'. I thought that attaching my study to an institution like Goldsmiths would add weight to my Instagram account and make followers trust the account, meaning that they would be more inclined to get in touch and be interviewed.

I then began looking for accounts to follow in the hope that they would follow me back, re-post the research project and that this would lead to a snowballing of research participants. In the first couple of days, I followed 150 accounts, some of whom followed me back, but nobody came forward as a research participant. I realised that I would need to engage further through my account to build up a sense of trust with others on this platform. I also needed to build the digital profile of the project by uploading Instagram posts so that the project would spread further online; I started the first post off by re-gramming a short BBC film about British

South Asians made by filmmaker Vivek Vadoliya, hoping this would pique the interest of some users. I hoped that users would begin to engage with my content and consider it interesting enough to come forward as participants (fig. 2). I continued to follow accounts, taking time out every day to follow at least 20 relevant accounts. I found many Instagrammers by searching for the hashtags #southasian #queerpoc #southasiandiaspora #britishsouthasian #southasianfeminist #southasianlgbtq and also found many personal accounts by looking through the followers lists of creative groups such as Burnt Roti, The White Pube, Brown Girl Magazine and Kajal Magazine.
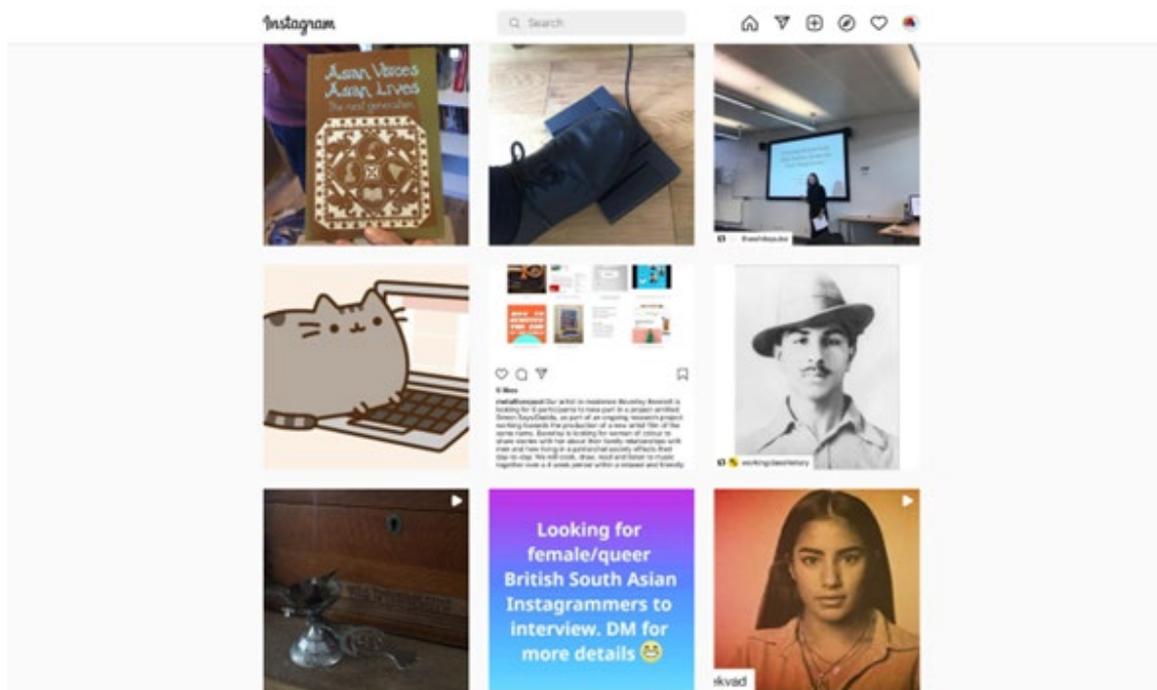
Fig. 2. The first few posts uploaded to my research Instagram account

I put up a second post asking for women and queer British South Asian Instagrammers to Direct Message (DM) me if they'd like to be interviewed. I also added this post to my Insta Stories, which last for 24 hours before disappearing but have higher rates of engagement than regular Instagram posts. Independent arts organisation The Brown Orient also added my callout to their Insta Stories that day. With more followers this time, a couple of Instagram posts and an Insta Story, I received 10 direct messages from South Asian women who were interested in being interviewed or were wanting to know more about the project. 5

comments were also left below the post by South Asian women, who were saying they were interested in being interviewed. One follower tagged a friend in their comment.

Slowly, through the continued following of other accounts, uploading content to my research account, asking for participants, asking friends and family to re-gram my call out and sending out over 60 DMs, I had roughly 20 people respond; 9 went on to become research participants – others stated that they didn't fit the criteria or simply stopped responding after a few exchanges. The drawback to this form of recruitment is the lack of trust that social media users have in the researcher, as they are the ones who have been personally approached by somebody they don't know (Sikkens et al., 2016).

I began interviews and throughout the months slowly received messages through both Facebook and Instagram: the former replying to my callouts on group walls and the latter responding after coming across and following the Instagram account. After delivering a talk about my ongoing research at Edge Hill university, an attendee posted up my photo and tagged the account on Instagram with a caption stating that I was still looking for participants. The post received over 400 likes and brought a number of new followers to the account, along with 5 new research participants. The attendee had an Instagram following of over 20k, making a significant contribution to the visibility of my account. I was hoping that snowballing techniques would have taken hold after this new post, but this did not occur. At this point, it is difficult to ascertain whether this was down to me not being active enough online, or whether calls for participation in research studies do not gain traction on platforms such as Instagram. This is something that requires further research but is beyond the scope of this thesis. I eventually amassed a total of 34 research participants over a period of 7 months who all went through to the interview stage.

After reaching this number, I stopped actively recruiting because I had started doing interviews and struggled to find time to come up with new and engaging content to draw in more followers. The task of running an Instagram account that depended on follower engagement was a new experience to me (my personal account is set to private, I mostly follow people I already know and I rarely post on it) and so I have dedicated the next segment of this chapter to my reflections on labour in social media recruitment.

Conclusively, my methodological focus was to record the perceptions of women and queer Instagrammers from the British South Asian diaspora, but I had few financial resources and limited access to a large random number of Instagram users who would identify as women and/or queer, as well as being part of the British South Asian diaspora. Through the setting up of my research Instagram account, my sampling method included non-probability forms of sampling; purposeful sampling, whereby I approached participants myself through DM's, snowball recruiting and convenience sampling whereby participants self-selected by choosing to follow me or directly messaging me themselves (Stratton 2021). As I go on to discuss further in this chapter, the limitation to non-probability sampling means that the results of my research may just apply to my participants and others like them, rather than representing a general population. In this case, most of my participants are a cluster of creative types who are current university students or graduates living in urban areas.

Interview question design

To reiterate, my research focus was to gain an insight into the socio-digital lives of women and queer British South Asian Instagrammers by trying to ascertain:

- How do my participants perceive their lives and the lives of others on Instagram?
- Where do these perceptions place participants within national and global contexts?
- To what extent do participants reproduce the neoliberal dimensions of social media platforms?
- To what extent are social media platforms used as resistive tools within participants' lives?

I chose to conduct interviews because interviews provide in-depth information related to participants experiences and viewpoints on a certain topic (Turner 2010). By following Carter McNamara's (2010) recommendations for creating effective research questions, I was able to come up with eight initial questions:

1. *How often do you post from your account?*

2. *Why did you set up your account?*

3. *Do you think that the reasons for why you use it have changed over the years?*

4. *Has Instagram had any real-life impact or not?*

5. *Has it allowed you connect to the South Asian diaspora in a unique way or not?*

6. *What content do you post from your account? Eg: selfies, political posts, everyday life, etc*

7. *Does your account represent real life or is it an alternative space that is different to your real life?*

8. *In terms of negotiating identities, (of being women, South Asian, an artist, queer, etc.) does your account help you achieve this?*

McNamara suggests that questions should be open-ended, neutral, worded clearly and asked one at a time. These questions were open-ended, as they aimed to reveal opinions, experiences, narratives and accounts – this qualitative approach was not about establishing parameters of digital engagement amongst participants but rather determining the diversity of these engagements (Harrie 2010). I piloted these eight questions with five of the participants before going back and refining them – this allowed me to ensure that they were effective; I removed question number six, as it became clear that the answers to this question didn't provide any significant insight into digital labour practices or negotiation of identity. Participants usually talked about the kind of content they posted a lot earlier on in the interview, therefore it felt as if I was making them repeat themselves. The pilot made clear to me that participants wanted to discuss the negative impacts that Instagram had on them, and so I included the following question, which replaced question six:

Do you or do you not consider there to be any (current or foreseeable) negative impacts when it comes to Instagram?

I also simplified question number eight, as it caused confusion and participants didn't really understand what I was asking of them. I altered it accordingly:

When someone scrolls through your account, what do you want them to take away from it? What do you think it says about you?

Many participants usually paused when asked this question, often saying that it was something interesting that they had never really thought about. If they could be seen onscreen, they would refer to their phone and scroll through their content to confirm the date they first started posting or to view the overall themes of their content. Those whom I had contacted via phone call would often excuse themselves and say they would need a minute or so to scroll through their content; there were silences, but these never felt awkward. I always asked follow-up questions or had prompts, as this ensured that I obtained optimal responses from participants; at points, I drew on John Cresswell's suggestion by reconstructing the interview questions in order to reduce misunderstanding and constructing effective prompts to aid further understanding (Cresswell 2007).

Reflections: labour in social media recruitment

Beginning this research project, I considered social media a useful tool in recruiting participants remotely, who were otherwise difficult to reach (Parkinson and Bromfield 2013). I had thought about attending a few South Asian LGBTQ+ nightclub events in London and a South Asian feminist book club in Birmingham, but because participation relied solely on being an Instagram user, it was difficult to justify the financial risk of returning with little to no research participants. Having attended a conference about intersectionality and Islam in Birmingham, I had difficulty in recruiting participants as some did not fit the brief and others did not have an Instagram account.

I assumed that social media users would easily come forward because they so readily animated the platforms I frequented and would consider my research project an opportunity to engage further with somebody online. As my online posts garnered less engagement than I would have liked, I began to understand the sheer amount of labour that was required to gain traction online. My enthusiasm began to flounder when each successive effort reaped a very small number of interactions that I felt were not reflective of the time spent creating and uploading a post; the emotional, physical and mental toll of content creation, as well as content engagement is a process completely obscured within the digital realm. Whilst I have

personal social media accounts, I rarely post content, therefore had not experienced these developments before in a personal capacity.

Obscured digital labour has been the subject of studies when focussed on research subjects and their experiences (Duffy 2017, 2015; Terranova 2000), yet the reflections of researchers utilising these platforms, especially those that require visual cues such as Instagram, requires further attention. Most usefully, I gained a sympathetic insight into the efforts of everyday digital users and their reasonings for regular posting or lack thereof. It also affected my sample size, which was predicated on my willingness to keep posting and responding online. After a 7-month period, I decided that I could not sustain the energy and time required to create and post content alongside my other research duties.

Sikkens et al. reflect on the uses of Facebook as a recruitment tool in their qualitative study of online radicalisation and were able to recruit 33 out of 80 participants over a period of 17 months through social media (2016). The types of participants wanted for a particular study hugely impacts their willingness to come forward - for Sikkens' participants, the research posed a security risk. In comparison, I was able to recruit 34 participants within a 7-month period, revealing that although it became an unsustainable recruitment method, participants were enthusiastic about coming forward. Lack of funds to bankroll large digital recruitment drives means that more time is spent on creating content that possible participants will engage with. Initial engagement, however, does not necessarily result in somebody then agreeing to be interviewed. The numbers also reveal the limitations of social media recruitment for digital media researchers who must invest in time-consuming content creation when it comes to attracting users to their study.

Interviewee recruitment processes have been investigated by the likes of Guro Korsnes Kristensen and Malin Noem Ravn, who argue that 'more researchers should include their reflections upon and experiences with recruitment in their research texts' (Kristensen and Ravn 2015, p. 725) but it largely remains overlooked (McCormack 2014;). Recruitment through text-based applications such as Twitter or web forums have researchers reflecting on their entry into digital spheres as outsiders (Gajjala 2004; Leurs 2016) or that a research callout is considered spam or fraudulent misinformation to potential participants (Koo and

Skinner 2005). Very few studies have begun to grapple with the sheer amount of effort required for social media recruitment of participants and qualitative social media research at large; Kristensen and Ravn compare the increased labour of analysis when applied to social media:

> while conducting a discourse analysis of a newspaper for a day could be feasible, doing a discourse analysis of a popular Facebook group even for one single day is almost impossible, unless one has access to a whole team of researchers (Kristensen and Ravn 2013, p. 7)

Kristensen and Ravn are not discussing digital recruitment here, but it is an acknowledgment of the insurmountable increase in labour for researchers entering the social media landscape. It highlights the limitations placed on lone researchers with no research budget and limited time within a vast digital landscape to carry out in-depth analyses and recruit participants.

Reflecting on the digital labour of recruitment on a platform like Instagram also reveals the reasons for why it is not a platform through which everyday digital users are recruited, as they are much more difficult to seek out in comparison to Instagram influencers. Influencers are well versed in the mechanics of Instagram's algorithms that regulate visibility, making them easier to find and communicate with, as they are used to being approached by anonymous followers (Cotter 2018). I often found it difficult to get everyday users to communicate with me if I approached them first, as they sometimes did not trust me. My rule of thumb was that I only contacted those that had followed my research account, considering this their permission to reach out to them because they had expressed some support or interest in the project.

Researchers will usually have a pre-defined selection criteria that seeks to capture certain characteristics for a study (Kristensen and Ravn 2015); I knew I wanted British South Asian participants who identified as women and/or queer and had Instagram accounts - beyond this I had no other preferences. I realised that I had to have a fairly regular stream of content that couldn't just be image tiles of text asking for participants. The labour of creating content for my account revealed to me the limitations of Instagram as a recruitment tool because the

type of content I uploaded required me making further assumptions about users who would be interested in my research. I uploaded content that showcased arts projects, left-wing Indian politics and diaspora literature, meaning that I was shaping the recruitment site in a bid to appeal to an even more niche type of user. Thinking back on this, I have asked myself why did I upload a photograph of a book I was reading? Why was I compelled to upload personal content?

In hindsight, beyond just wanting to maintain a continuous stream of content, I wanted to seem more 'authentic' and 'real' to prospective participants, whose trust I would gain because they would see the books I was reading, the 'behind the scenes' shots of me transcribing the interviews that I had already recorded, the talks I had given and conferences I had been to. I thought that adding this personal dimension would make me seem more trustworthy, as is often observed in studies of influencers who are advertising products through their accounts (Brooks and Piskorski 2018). What I discovered was that it became incredibly laborious and the lines blurred somewhat between my professional and personal persona, which I did not like.

Changes that I think would need to be implemented for a much more successful recruitment drive via social media would be to plan posts and content in advance using third party software such as Canva, where I could create professional looking image tiles for Instagram and a scheduling software such as Buffer, which would upload content to my research account for me at the optimal times, so I would not need to be constantly posting throughout the day. I would also develop a content strategy so that I had clear boundaries of what type of content to post and not post, especially if I wanted to attract a more diverse group of participants. I would also make better use of Instagram's other affordances such as the IG stories function, which has a higher rate of engagement. Consequently, I would need to put more work into the planning and delivering of content to attract a higher number of participants to the study.

More planning, more software and more content inevitably requires an increased demand on my time and labour, revealing how 'digital skills are fundamental to participation in digital societies' (Helsper 2012, p. 80). My participation on the platform was limited

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due to my lack of time and experience when it came to utilising Instagram as a platform to attract followers. The recruitment process in part influenced the kinds of participants I finally amassed and most definitely influenced the number I finally settled on. I now go on to speak further about the research participants.

The research participants

I have organised all 34 participants' demographic data into the table below.

Participant	Platform recruited through	Age	Sexual identity	Gender identity	Religion	Currently Based	Occupation
Mis	Instagram	19	n/a	Cis woman	Hindu	London, England	Fine art undergraduate
Pum	Facebook	24	Queer	Cis woman	n/a	Sri Lanka	Journalist, radio producer
Bro	Instagram	32	Heterosexual but doesn't like the binary	Cis woman	Muslim	Dakar, Senegal	Unemployed
Bal (1)	Instagram	25	Doesn't label sexual identity	Cis woman	Sikh family, personally multi-faith	Kent, England	Freelance illustrator
Dal	Instagram	23	Bisexual	Cis woman	Sikh family, personally agnostic	Leicester, England	Freelance journalist, producer
Pvn	Instagram	27	Pansexual	Non-binary	Hindu family,	Kent, England	NHS worker

					personally agnostic		
Lai	Instagram	21	n/a	Cis woman	Muslim family, personally atheist	Paris, France	Design undergraduate
Abl	Instagram	24	n/a	Cis woman	Muslim	Birmingham, England	Freelance journalist
Dil	Instagram	n/a (31?)	Heterosexual	Cis woman	Sikh	Glasgow, Scotland	Postgraduate student
Gur	Facebook	18	Bisexual	Cis woman	Sikh/ Hindu family, personally spiritual	Sussex, England	English literature Undergraduate
Bal (2)	Facebook	n/a (22?)	n/a	Cis woman	Sikh family	Kent, England	n/a (unemployed?)
Aaz	Instagram	24	Heterosexual but doesn't believe in the binary	Cis woman	n/a	Toronto, Canada	Social work master's student
Uxu	Instagram	19	Bisexual	Cis woman	Hindu family, personally agnostic	Leicester, England	Undergraduate student
Bri	Facebook	n/a (36?)	Queer	Non-binary	n/a	Galway, Ireland	Postgraduate student
Kaa	Instagram	27	Heterosexual but doesn't believe in the binary	Cis woman	n/a	London, England	Freelance artist

Zaa	Instagram	21	Queer	Gender fluid	Muslim	London, England	Youth worker
Avi	Instagram	25	Heterosexual	Cis woman	Sikh	Luton, England	Trainee solicitor
Bha	Instagram	29	Lesbian	Cis woman	Hindu/ Christian family, personally agnostic	London, England	Postgraduate student and audiologist
Kri	Instagram	33	Heterosexual	Cis woman	Hindu family, personally not religious	London, England	Virtual PA
Job	Instagram	33	Queer	Non-binary	Christian family, personally not religious	London, England	Cycle courier
Bla	Instagram	28	Heterosexual	Cis woman	Sikh	Wolverhampton, England	Freelance illustrator
Ill	Instagram	22	Heterosexual but not sure	Cis woman	Muslim	Aberystwyth, Wales	Unemployed
Afs	Instagram	26	Queer	Cis woman	Muslim	Manchester, England	Arts programmer
Amo	Instagram	30	Heterosexual	Cis woman	Hindu	London, England	Freelance artist
Ama	Instagram	27	Heterosexual	Cis woman	Sikh	Northampton, England	Radio broadcaster
Rea	Instagram	25	Bisexual	Cis woman	Muslim family,	Leicester, England	Audiologist

						personally not religious	
Her	Instagram	20	n/a	Cis woman	Sikh family	London, England	Undergraduate student
Eri	Instagram	n/a (30?)	Queer	Cis man	Hindu family, personally not religious	Rotterdam, Netherlands	Fine art master's student
Hee	Instagram	27	Bisexual	Agender	Muslim family, personally atheist	Texas, USA	Gallery worker and art history undergraduate
Hel	Instagram	22	Heterosexual	Cis woman	Hindu	Leicester, England	Tattoo artist
Art	Instagram	31	Heterosexual	Cis woman	Muslim family, personally not religious	London, England	Art master's student
Sta	Facebook	28	Lesbian	Gender fluid	Christian family, personally not religious	Berkshire, England	University administrator
Sal	Instagram	27	Heterosexual	Cis woman	Muslim	Bradford, England	Gallery worker and artist
Bud	Instagram	21	Bisexual	Cis woman	Muslim family,	Sussex, England	Psychology and sociology undergraduate

				personally agnostic		

I have given participants pseudonyms with letters taken from their Instagram handles that are short enough for them to remain anonymous throughout my research. I had considered using participants names instead, but I found that using social media handles grounded the interview data in the digital landscape and helped me recall posts and other content when coding. Some entries read n/a because participants either forgot to answer these questions – in these instances, I have approximated age and occupation by looking through their Instagram posts or reading through the interview data. I felt that it was not appropriate to do this for sexual, gender and religious identifications, as some participants may only have felt comfortable disclosing this information to close friends or support groups (Walby 2010) and that this information cannot be assumed on the part of the researcher. Under religion, I have attributed a family religion if the participant is not personally religious and in cases where they are, I have just added the one word of the religion.

I have listed current occupation, but think it is important to mention that every single participant had an undergraduate degree, which gives some indication of how current jobs in the cultural sector have been attained. Whilst these sectors are indicative of middle-class aspirations within the UK, I did not ask participants about class. Some participants maintained that they came from working-class families. Such distinctions, when applied to second and third generation diasporas do not fit as easily (Abbas 2013; Meghji 2019) – something I come back to unpacking in chapter six. Amassing a sample size of 34 was a difficult and laborious process for reasons which I have already discussed in the section above. Because I used non-probability sampling methods, I do not claim this number to be representative of the experiences of all women and queer British South Asians on Instagram but maintain that it is a sizeable number to unpack socio-digital entanglements amongst select members of the British South Asian digital diaspora.

Interviews were semi-structured, and I usually began by making participants aware that I was recording the interview and if participants did not want to be recorded, I would take notes instead – however, there were no objections to recording interviews. Thirty-one of the 34 interviews were conducted via Skype or WhatsApp, as I could not afford to travel to various locations around the UK where most of my participants were based. Most participants preferred voice calls rather than video calls for a variety of reasons, such as bad phone signal or limited phone data, personal preference or being out in a public place. I always respected their decisions. Financial limitations and the possibility of widening the research pool has meant that researchers can now utilise VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) technologies such as Skype and WhatsApp in order to reach participants remotely (Lo Iacono et al., 2016).

Two interviews were conducted via email; one participant emailed me saying that she didn't really like phone calls because she couldn't really think about answers properly and asked if it could be an email interview instead; research has shown that some participants feel more comfortable with the anonymity of email interviews and their ability in writing rather than speaking (Meho, 2006). I agreed and emailed the questions over to her. Another participant lived in the States, and we struggled to maintain a clear online connection through Skype, WhatsApp and FaceTime; we attempted to call each other two days in a row to no avail. I suggested that maybe it could be an email interview, which she agreed to. Two of the major drawbacks to email interviews were the lack of rich data produced by the answers and the lack of deeper questioning or direct probing (Meho, 2006) that could be instigated whilst listening to the interviewee's answers. It also meant that I had to respectfully chase both participants up, as they forgot on a couple of occasions to email the answers back to me (Opdenakker, 2006).

2. How would I implement an approach that would resist reductive understandings of participants socio-digital lives when it came to analysis of data? I found that a critical grounded theory approach not only acknowledged this, but

that this same structuration was reflected in the digital inequalities framework. I expand on this in the following section that looks at data analysis.

Data Analysis
Critical Grounded Theory approach

The key aims of my research included (a) engaging participants in reflexive processes around socio-digital life; (b)resisting binaried assumptions of social media engagement as commodifying or empowering; and (c) allowing the voices of everyday digital diaspora users to be centred and taken seriously. Historically, grounded theory was developed in the 1960s with the aim of discovering 'theory from data systematically obtained from social research' (Glaser and Strauss 1967, p.2). When combined with in-depth interview methods, it allows the researcher a degree of flexibility and control whilst in the field (Charmaz in eds. Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2008), lending itself to my research aims. Grounded theory also offers clear tools and guidelines for carrying out such tasks for an early career researcher. It also refrains from developing an initial hypothesis; although I was engaging the interviewee in a 'directed conversation' (Lofland and Lofland 1995), their responses shaped subsequent lines of enquiry, as I had very few preconceived ideas (beyond digital community formation) of participant's views and reflections.

Critical realism is a philosophy of social science that emerged in the 1970s and 80s through the work of philosopher Roy Bhaskar. Originating as an alternative to positivist and constructivist scientific understandings of the world (Denzin and Lincoln 2011), Bhaskar drew on both methodologies in his account of ontology and epistemology; a positivist tradition of society maintains that the world exists according to an evidence-based reality, whereas constructivism argues that knowledge is constructed from human experience. Bhaskar criticised positivism for endorsing 'the epistemic fallacy' (1998, p. 27), that is a reduction of ontology (the nature of reality) to epistemology (how we understand reality). He contended that 'reality' cannot be limited to what we can scientifically measure. Similarly, constructivism viewed and formed reality entirely through human knowledge and experience, again privileging an epistemological rendering of reality. Such reductive approaches to research

serve to provide limited insights into our understandings of the world (Bhaskar and Danermark 2006; Price 2015).

To counter this, critical realist ontology stratifies reality into three levels that allows us to engage in explanation and causal analysis. The first is the *empirical* level, whereby events or objects are mediated through the filter of human experience and interpretation. These ideas, meanings and actions can be causal. The middle level comprises of the *actual* where events occur regardless of human experience or interpretation and are different to what is observed at the empirical level (Karlsson 2005). The third level is the *real* where causal structures produce the events that appear at the empirical level. This stratified notion of causation allows for a more adequate understanding of how material and social powers, operating in different locations and often at different hierarchical levels are related. An acknowledgement of the causal powers between entities allows for a conceptualisation of absences often missed by positivist and constructivist accounts of the world (Bhaskar 2008).

A key component of a critical realist approach to data is that there are multiple causes to be teased out through the exploration of a research setting and that there are other potential mechanisms that have an effect beyond direct observation. Whilst I can observe particular patterns in participants' interview responses (finding likeminded individuals online, creating spaces of empowerment, hating certain content), I should also ask myself 'what must be true for this to be the case?' (Oliver 2012, p. 379). Understood as 'retroduction' (Bhaskar 1986, 2009), this central feature of critical realism proves to be 'the most fertile' in its ability to offer new understandings of socio-digital life amongst the British South Asian digital diaspora (Pietarinen & Bellucci 2014, p.354).

Retroduction allows me to analyse interview data and account for unseen mechanisms that produce diverse analyses of well-known phenomena – in this case marginalised users on social media. For example, some participants spoke about hiding their queerness in plain sight on their Instagram accounts. They said they were unable to talk openly about their own gender or sexual identities because family followed their accounts. Instead, they would post up book recommendations by queer writers and send private DMs to others about LGBTQIA+ resources. Beyond describing social media as a site of empowerment or repression for queer

British South Asian users, I retroductively understood this phenomenon as '(in)visible queering' of a social media platform, that describes how a participant feels in control of their identity and does not deny it to themselves whilst also being watched by their family and wider community.

Coding Data

I began coding responses during the interview process, using the qualitative data analysis software Nvivo. Coding as I went also allowed me to modify the interview process and existing notions that I had about Instagram users. A critical grounded theory approach encouraged me to code responses that would achieve greater conceptual clarity when it came to acknowledging existing critiques of feminist and racialised neoliberal formations online (Hadley 2015; Belfrage and Hauf 2017).

Employing the Retroductive framework to coding, the significant themes that emerged were *Personal Identifications*, *Other Members from the South Asian Diaspora, Community* and *Digital Labour Practices*. The connections between these concepts allows me to describe and conceptualise the ways in which participants construct their socio-digital worlds. Within these codes, I established another 106 separate nodes implementing line by line coding and stratifying each node into higher and lower categories of relevance whilst taking into account relationships between categories (Bartlett and Payne in eds. McKenzie et. al. 1997).

For example, an individualistic approach became evident when some participants talked about the content they would post to their Instagram accounts, creating a tension between *Personal Identifications* and *Digital Labour Practices*:

> *I post a lot of pictures of myself now, but it has to do with me as a fat brown woman coming to terms with my own self-identity as well as also - the fact that I'm a woman in the luxury fashion industry, I'm the only one I ever see.*

This participant is empowered enough to post up images of herself as 'a fat brown woman' because she does not see images that reflect her online, yet her placement within the luxury

fashion industry also fulfils capitalist logic of branded self-identity as a form of digital labour. These two paradoxical stances reveal the ways in which participants' narratives are in constant contradiction, yet also reveal the wider structures that dictate their lives. This same participant told me that her mother monitors her Instagram account and tells her to take down photographs that she deems too revealing:

> *I know there's been cases where my mum's been like 'take that down now' because I'm too exposed, and my mum is very liberal. She's like 'you're projecting the wrong image out there' and basically compared me to being a sex worker.*

The respectability politics used to govern women and queer members of the British South Asian community become causal factors when it comes to participants pursuing online avenues of self-expression, even if those avenues are controlled by familial forces. A critical realist approach maintains that not all structures are interrelated or that one causal factor impacts all outcomes in the same way, but it is important to highlight the wider causal mechanisms which are implicit in the data and impact participants' lives: patriarchal and homophobic structures through the cultural community, the digital neoliberal economy and prejudiced assertions from the wider community. Through looking at the myriad of mechanisms involved within the stratified realities of participants' lives, I can develop a much more nuanced analysis of their engagements on Instagram.

Subsequently, I offer critical reflections of my own positioning within the research field and my relationship with participants with whom I share many similarities. Although I did not employ ethnographic methods throughout my research design, I reference work from the field of feminist insider ethnography in a bid to interrogate my own reflections of conducting research within a community that I am very familiar with. The final section of this chapter deals with the methodological limitations of my research and the ways in which I resolved them in order to present a complex account of participants' perceptions.

Critical Reflections
Researcher Positionality

Because I was dealing with participants' private lives, I chose to conduct in-depth interviews with them, building up a level of intimacy. Whilst I did not conduct ethnographies of my participants, I draw on feminist insider ethnography to reflect on my relationship with participants because I belong to this community as a British South Asian woman and Instagram user. Although I was aware of the differences in background between the participants and myself, I was able to position myself alongside them in a number of ways as I was interested in knowing how other users perceived themselves and their counterparts online. Being in my early thirties actually made me older than most of the participants, but only by a few years, generationally making us the same. This proved an advantage as the age gap between researcher and participant has been identified as a shortcoming in research around British South Asian youth (Harris 2006). Having two parents who are South Asian, one from East Africa and one from the Indian subcontinent meant that instantly there was a rapport with participants, who were enthusiastic at the prospect of a 'brown' woman researcher paying attention to often dismissed South Asian diaspora communities.

For some participants there were assumptions that our lives were similar when it came to family dynamics which, to a point they were when it came to talking about overbearing extended family members like aunts and uncles. However, when it came to discussion of overbearing parents, I found myself agreeing so as not to appear 'inauthentic', as I subconsciously accepted this behaviour as part of a South Asian cultural identity. Having had fairly liberal parents, I felt that it would be insensitive to disclose privileges that were afforded me and not some of the participants. As a South Asian woman who has grown up with mainly non-Asian friends and now lives in a city that doesn't have a big South Asian community, thoughts of presenting as South Asian as possible and not really exposing too much of other non – Asian aspects of my life definitely felt like a big pressure to perform for fear of participants not considering me authentic enough to carry out this research.

Although I am not queer, I would consider myself an ally and recognised the significance of contributing to research that focused on young queer British South Asians online, which is still very limited. I was keen to understand the similarities and differences in our experiences of navigating Instagram as British women and/or queer South Asians and how these experiences fed into the wider debates surrounding digital labour and the British South Asian

community's attitude to queer politics. Participants did open up to me, with some relaying information that they were sharing for the first time. Although I was never asked, I was also worried whether queer participants would think that as a researcher in a heterosexual relationship, I had no right to interview those from the queer community. During my fieldwork, I attended the LGBTIQ+ Intersectionality and Islam conference in Birmingham - a couple of my participants who were struggling with their sexuality and religion were pleased to be given information about the conference.

These reflections reveal that any kind of identity work is fraught with difficulty; conservative and reactionary elements towards expressions of identity exist, no matter who they are directed at or who they come from (Kim 2013). Whilst participants were speaking of the limitations placed upon them by family or community, they were reinscribing norms around South Asian identity through conversations with me about strict parenting and Asian communities. Identifications between myself and participants were constantly in flux and although I never lied to participants, certain aspects of my life would be magnified to make a participant comfortable – there is an acknowledgement 'that hybridity is performative' (Henry 2003, p. 233). Arguably, it is also accepted that ethnographers exhibit a '"multiplex subjectivity"' and that different contexts force different facets of that subjectivity to the surface (Narayan 1993, p. 681).

Aiwha Ong writes that an insider ethnographer can establish links to research participants through their own personal struggles with representation and identity (1995) – my personal journey of grappling with my South Asian-ness definitely served as a link to participants. Whilst there were participants I had more in common with than others, I made sure to treat everyone the same and code all data in the same way. This was something I reflected on continuously throughout the interview process.

Class distinctions played a huge role in many participants' understandings and acceptance of me as a middle-class professional researcher. My institutional affiliation and postgraduate status prompted questions from participants, sometimes asking for advice as to how to enter the postgraduate field or simply wanting to know more about the research and how I came to be interested in social media interactions. Some participants felt it important throughout

the interview to let me know about their professional and creative endeavours, perhaps in a bid to counter the uneven power dynamic that they felt between researcher and researched. These interactions made it clear that participants were active subjects, with the ability to shape and control the encounter (Kondo 1986). At times, it did feel as if certain participants were advertising themselves to me, veering wildly off topic but I was happy to listen; a foundational principle of my approach is that participants have a space to speak and all aspects of the conversation deliver a rich insight. Class distinctions amongst the diaspora is a topic to which I shall return to in chapter eight in greater detail, as this is something that requires further unpacking.

Ethical considerations

My initial approach after someone had followed the Instagram research account, was to ask for their email address to which I would send an information sheet and consent form, asking them to fill it out. When it was emailed back to me, I would then proceed to organise a date and time for an interview. All who read the information sheet did not have any issues with the handling of their details and were free to withdraw at any time. I had stated both in the information sheet and before each interview that I would be recording the interview, telling each participant that I was the only person that would be allowed to listen back for transcription purposes. Nobody ever objected to being recorded, but if they had, I would have stopped the recording immediately and ask if I could make notes instead. Those that wanted to remain anonymous would request this at the start. I have also deleted the South Asian Digital Diaspora Instagram account so that participants cannot be found through it.

The risk of exposing participants' digital lives through my research findings made digital analyses of accounts difficult to implement within my research. Most people disclosed gender and sexuality identifications that their families had no knowledge of, and a couple of participants were no longer in contact with immediate family members; one participant disclosed that their parents were actively trying to find out where they lived. Some participants had said that they had been subjected to online harassment because of their gender or sexuality. Considering these safeguarding issues, I felt it best to conduct in-depth interviews and anonymise them all.

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Such deliberations feed into the wider discourse of digital research methods on social media platforms. Although participants have agreed to the terms and conditions set by digital platforms that usually include clauses on how personal data can be accessed by third parties, boyd and Crawford maintain that 'it is problematic for researchers to justify their actions as ethical simply because the data are accessible' (2012, p. 672). Anonymity is difficult to maintain on photo-sharing apps such as Instagram, especially when data sets could potentially be published online and presented at conferences. Throughout the interviews, many participants stressed the importance of remaining anonymous for family and work reasons, indicating that interviews were the most secure form of data collection. I consulted Leanne Townsend and Claire Wallace's guide on social media research that proved useful when approaching digital accounts and making my own research account on Instagram, which I ensured was transparent about its aims (Townsend and Wallace 2016).

Having developed a methodological framework within which to conduct my research, I attempt to resolve the limitations of my framework in the following section.

Methodological Reflections

The sample of 34 participants, although geographically spread out, do share many similar characteristics when it comes to political and social outlooks. Any number of factors could have contributed to such similarities, including the recruitment drive I had formulated through Instagram attracting a certain type of person. Some media scholars maintain that digital connections refer to technologically manipulated forms of connections that are engineered through meta data (van Dijck 2013). These links are confined within the 'constraints of software and adaptive algorithmic architectures' (Bucher 2015 p.1 -2), i.e. a social media connection or network is not an act initiated by an existing social circle but one driven by nodes connecting to user profiles, which can be the profiles of individuals, groups or companies (Castells 2004; Dunes 2013). Participant selection most likely was influenced by algorithmic activity, giving me access to similar types of people. I realised that to find participants who had accounts on Instagram, I had to actively recruit through the platform – my unsuccessful trip to the Islam and Intersectionality conference confirmed this.

A more considered approach to recruitment through social media is perhaps required, as upon reflection, I could have communicated my research aims a bit clearer to followers of my account, chosen my content more carefully and cast the net wider. I could also argue that short-term fieldwork may not be suited to a platform such as Instagram, as time and labour is needed to build a following. Additionally, I had no previous frameworks to refer to throughout my recruitment drive and so errors were made throughout the process. This is something that deserves more attention within social media research methodologies.

I regret not being able to conduct face-to-face interviews with participants, as this would have situated my work further within feminist epistemologies by forging a stronger rapport with participants. Due to financial restraints, all interviews (bar one) were conducted through phones and computers; this is seemingly at odds with my conceptual framework that seeks to center the human rather than the screen. Physically being in the same space with participants would have strengthened the conceptual framework, but the means to achieve this was beyond my control. Participants seemed to enjoy the interaction, and all were enthusiastic about the project, proving that a connection was still forged, and their voices were still heard, despite the physical distance.

Having in-depth interviews as my sole source of data can be viewed as short-sighted because there is only so much meaning I can attribute to it (Silverman 2007). A lack of empirical data concerning natural (or in this case, digital) settings can also generate biases within the data, making it unreliable. I argue that for many participants, empirical analyses of their accounts would have been difficult owing to the security risk posed. Many participants had private accounts, so to even be accepted into them as a researcher was a privilege.

Participants may shape their narratives in accordance with what they think I want to hear or perform in a way that makes them seem impressive (Bailey 1994). I allow these behaviours because I understand that identity (which is always being performed) is also allowed to be fluid; regardless of our shared ethnicity and gender identifications, participants 'are accepted as subjects with voices, views and dilemmas' (Narayan, 1993, 672). Narayan argues for 'the *enactment of hybridity* in our texts' (1993, 672), in the same way that Brah advocates for a

subject-positionality within the diaspora space that is constantly in flux (1996). By implementing a critical grounded theory approach to analyses of participants' perceptions, stratifying the data allows for macro, mesa and micro structures to surface, illustrating the complex realities of lived experience often missing from empirical studies of social media users.

 Throughout this section, I have tried to resolve the methodological limitations of my research; a justification of in-depth interview as my sole source of data enables these oft-overlooked narratives to exist within studies of digital media. I also hope to contribute to emerging discourses around social media research, and in particular qualitative research methods applied to Instagram.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the conceptual and methodological framings I have delineated within this chapter have gone on to form the theoretical basis of my approach. To restate, it is a theoretical approach underpinned by three strands; a recognition that digital users are living through an ever-shifting diaspora and digital experience ('transgressing different borders' of diaspora/national and online/AFK life); an acknowledgement that the social and digital are the cause and consequence of each other, further disrupting digital dualist approaches to digital life and that interviews centering participant perceptions, not only open up reflective space but also allow for another way to perceive of the digital outside of digital ethnographic methods.

Whilst a critical grounded theory approach acknowledges the fulfilment of neoliberal identity politics, it also reveals the stratified layers that unfold beyond the screen. I contend that these layers cannot be accessed through empirical methods of digital discourse analysis, as participants create and reflect on the digital realm they inhabit in nuanced ways. I argue that this approach provides a deeper understanding of the context through which meaning is made and how online/offline boundaries are simultaneously breached and maintained amongst women and queer members of the British South Asian diaspora.

The first two chapters of this thesis presented a review of literatures related to feminist, queer and diaspora studies discourses across the cultural and digital landscapes, this present chapter sets out my methodology and the remainder of this thesis presents my empirical findings. My initial empirical chapter focusses on participants' use of the public and private functions of Instagram.

Chapter 4: The public and the private

In the previous chapter, I conceived of an approach that seeks to center the perceptions of women and queer members of the British South Asian digital diaspora. I am keen to know how participants perceive their own and the lives of others on Instagram, where these perceptions place them within national and global contexts and to what extent they reproduce and resist the neoliberal dimensions of social media platforms. This study aims to acknowledge the everyday socio-digital ecologies of women and queer British South Asian Instagrammers who are already marginalised within and beyond their communities. In this first empirical chapter, I highlight the public and the private elements of participants' lives; this includes the Instagram interface settings that they constantly move between, revealing how community policing occurs on Instagram and the residual rules of public and private content that is maintained by participants themselves.

Instagram allows its users to set their accounts using privacy settings and features. Initially, users opt for a public or a private account. A public account means that any Instagram user can view and comment on the content uploaded to the account and can also become a follower. A private account ensures that uploaded content is only viewable to followers - those who wish to follow must put in a request. This request is then reviewed before being accepted or rejected by the account holder. An account can be switched from public to private and vice versa at any time, and users can have multiple accounts, each with different privacy settings applied.

The introduction of the Instagram 'Stories' feature is something that many participants happily welcome. It allows users to upload visual content ('Stories') to their account that automatically disappears after 24 hours. In addition, the 'close friends' feature means that users can select which of their followers can view their Stories. This means that even if you are a follower, you must be a part of that user's 'close friends' list to see select Stories. In addition to these settings, users can also block another account from following them; blocking someone means that they will no longer be able to find that particular profile, posts or stories, making it virtually invisible to them. Users can also mute others' accounts and stories from their own Home page, so that they do not have to view content from certain people, but still

be following them. This revealed that nearly all participants frequently switched between the public and private settings and had multiple accounts with different privacy settings, showing how these features have shaped participant practices in for safety and privacy.

Negotiating safety is the focus of this first chapter, as the phrase 'safe space' was a recurring feature in interviews with participants. More specifically, this establishes from whom participants are trying to stay safe. This usually turns out to be family and community members, but I am careful not to claim that policing runs exclusively along generational lines (the trope of the old chastising the young) because some participants are supported by parents and sometimes surveillance comes from school peers. Work policing also occurs, signalling how the lines between work and leisure become blurred within Instagram.

I then go on to look at the four main strategies that participants employ in response to privacy breaches: the killjoy, the lockdown account, ephemeral data exchanges and self-censoring content. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's work on public comfort and the killjoy, I argue that content displaying feminist and queer themes goes some way in contesting conservative values upheld by participants' families and communities. This response differs in comparison to the others in that participants are willing to cause discomfort by continuing to post transgressive content. The other responses reveal the different ways in which policing is circumnavigated using Instagram's privacy features because it is not possible to become a killjoy, owing to certain participants' lack of safety when it comes to being open about other facets of who they are with their families, employers and communities.

The lockdown account becomes a reaction to people trying to infiltrate participant accounts, sometimes through dishonest means by setting up 'lurking' profiles that intend to spy on individuals. In response, participants make their accounts fully private, thoroughly vetting any new followers or flat out refusing to add anyone they don't already know. Ephemeral data exchanges via finstas ('fake' Instagram accounts) and the Stories feature are temporary uploads where participants feel less policed because the content disappears and is only available to a select audience of their own choosing. Through these mechanisms, participants are still able to accumulate social and cultural capital within their chosen communities without consequence. Finally, the self-censoring of content forces participants to reflect on

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the acceptability of their content, shaping their accounts to avoid a backlash. Through the notion of 'imagined surveillance', I posit that participants capitulate to the uneven power dynamics at play within their families and communities. Highlighting this reflects a difference in aspiration between this group of participants and their families and communities, which I go on to unpack further in subsequent chapters.

Starting with this somewhat straightforward notion of safety and privacy addresses existing scholarship on the positive uses of Instagram by marginalised bodies in processes of community building (Alinejad 2017; Mosely et al., 2017; Ahmad and Thorpe 2020). I argue that my research reveals other functions of the 'safe space' for participants beyond it being a site to connect with others and self-express in relative safety, highlighting how resistance and compromise are deployed. In this context, the framework begins to open up other avenues of exploration such as queer (in)visibilities, middle-class user-generated content, 'authentic' and 'fake' content and psycho-social feelings which are explored in the forthcoming chapters.

Negotiating safety

Fig.1.*Screenshot of the landing page accessed from a computer of the 'About' section on the Instagram site.*

When I first came across Instagram's landing page (fig. 1), the marketing copy emphasised their 'commitment to fostering a safe and supportive community'; beyond it being a social

network site, I wondered whether Instagram as a safe and supportive community was true for any of my participants. My curiosity arose from my own ambivalence towards the platform – sometimes it was a space that generated positive content and exchanges around British South Asian identity and community, and other times, I would find myself disliking some of the negative interactions and corporate economies that users would get drawn into. I wanted to know whether other women and queer users from the diaspora felt this way and what they saw as the positives and negatives within this space. As interviews commenced, I noticed that participants' use of privacy features played a significant role in constructing a sense of safety from certain external forces which were threatening to breach it. This initial section focuses on defining these external forces before moving on to the varied responses to these breaches.

External policing: Family and community

For participants, safety was in large part characterised as privacy from the wider family to upload content, which initially could be posted with more ease on Instagram than Facebook. Amo, a printmaker and artist who was born and grew up in India, came to the UK in 2014 and tells me that Instagram was an escape from the already-infiltrated Facebook:

> *We were in India and we were showing pictures and being friends with other male friends, etc. but then all our uncles and aunties and mothers and fathers - everyone came on Facebook in 2012, 2013 and it became very difficult for us to maintain privacy on Facebook. For me, especially. I started the ceramic account so that I could connect with friends via that and still have a sort of safe space. That was the reason! (Amo)*

The surveillance of young women's internet usage by their families in comparison to their male counterparts has been noted in studies of young internet users in India (Kumar 2014), with some women being more cautious about what they share and with whom, as it could affect their reputation and social standing (Arora and Scheiber 2017). Although on a different continent to most other participants growing up in the UK, Amo's statement illustrates the risks associated with wider family members developing the digital skills to master a particular platform and therefore increasing their surveillance into the digital realm. She started an

account on Instagram in a bid to still be able to connect with friends easily whilst posting about her artwork.

Dil plays music in a band and is based in Scotland. She tours around the country and tells me that she struggles to find other South Asian women within her community who share the same musical interests as her. Instagram was first useful for her when she went to university:

Things like Facebook - parents and family started popping up on there so it was fine, but it wasn't really - I didn't use it in the same way as when it was just young people, so Instagram tended to be the thing to have a social life with university friends. (Dil)

Amo and Dil characterise a safe space along generational lines – somewhere where there are no 'uncles and aunties and mothers and fathers', a space that 'was just young people'. The threat of older family members jumping ship from Facebook to Instagram was something participants felt was inevitable:

They're learning it slowly! It's coming! […] If there is a family member who is on Instagram, I have already blocked them! So Instagram for me is kind of a safe space, unlike Facebook. (Amo)

It's also because the people who would have a problem with my Instagram might not be on Instagram yet. But I'm sure Instagram at some point will become a place where old uncles are on it and maybe I'd have to make it private at that point. (Bro)

Because older family members have yet to place their social expectations or limitations on Instagram, it can still feel like a safe space for those migrating from Facebook to Instagram (Marcelino Mercedes 2015). At the same time, I am careful to not label all older family or community members digital spies – I have not interviewed anyone above the age of 36, and therefore I do not know what the digital aims and desires of anyone older than this are. Sympathetically, Zaa, a recent graduate living in London (under the watchful eye of their parents) tells me:

Some of our aunties are on Instagram and I really wonder - they're in their 40s and I really wonder what that is like. What's interesting is the intergenerational thing. (Zaa)

A study of intergenerational social media usage argues that older cohorts do share similarities with younger users when it comes to negotiating mediascapes, building around personal preferences and a willingness to adapt to different communication practices (Rosales and Fernandez-Ardevol et al. 2020). 'While older people indicate having lower skill and confidence levels, educational background, general health, and experience with ICTs are more important predictors of use than age', writes Helsper (2012, p. 84).

Zaa tells me that they identify as working-class; their dad is a bricklayer and their mother worked as a seamstress at home 'off the books' whilst the family were on state benefits. 21 year-old Zaa is second-generation Bengali, whose family most likely arrived to the UK in the 1970s, in the wake of Bangladeshi Independence (Ansari, 2004). The Bengali community in the UK remains one of the most economically deprived in comparison to other groups from the diaspora (Gardner and Mand 2012). Economically marginalised parents like Zaa's may not possess the same level of digital literacy as their children because their jobs and education will not have offered opportunities to develop these technical skills. Zaa however is much more skilled in their use of digital technologies having been in environments that encourage and require digital participation, such as university where they completed their master's degree. For parents at an economic, social and educational disadvantage, digital participation is limited, and in comparison to parents with higher level skills (who can take part in active co-use), their abilities can end up being limited to restrictive regulation as a result of material inequalities (Paus-Hausebrink et al. 2012). This avenue of thought lends greater complexity to this generations' everyday digital usage; older working-class social media users within the British South Asian diaspora warrant greater scholarly research to understand their usage beyond their simple roles as digital infiltrators. Unfortunately, this is beyond the scope of this thesis.

Whilst it is important to not overgeneralise older generations' digital usage (the issue is much more nuanced than this), I must also acknowledge that the present day 'parental [or familial] gaze has become technologized' (Howell 2010, p.1). Some participants do have very real

concerns around older family members breaching their safety online. 22-year-old Ill, who lives in Wales and hopes to become a professional illustrator tells me:

> *If I see someone post something negative about the LGBT community I want to share that I am supportive of it … but then my mum keeps telling me (she follows me on Instagram) ' oh no, you need to remove that, it's okay for you to support them, but it is not okay for you to put it online because as a South Asian community it might come back at you and people might make assumptions about you or judge you or mistreat you in that way. (Ill)*

Ill's mother doesn't mind that her daughter supports the LGBT community, but she should not let others in the community know about this. Hinting that they may think that Ill is queer, her mother worries that she will experience homophobia at the hands of the community; 'not of being unhappy about the child being queer but of *being unhappy about the child being unhappy*' (Ahmed 2010 p 3). The risk of community backlash hangs heavy over Ill's mother, who would rather shut down her daughter's content than face the criticisms levelled at her daughter (and her as a mother) because of the posts.

Mothers are figures that repeatedly come up when content policing is talked about – they are usually the only family member welcomed to follow participants and the ones who directly comment on content that is not suitable. In one sense, they operate as content moderators, not wanting their children to step out of line and jeopardise the family name (Bhopal 1998), whilst also attempting to protect them from reprimand. Given the opportunity, they also support them:

> *I met my friend down there and his brother and there was a photo of the three of us that he posted. So I reposted it to my Instagram thinking nothing of it - it was such a nice photo and it got back to my family. My mom follows me on Instagram and she even 'liked' the photo but when my dad saw it he went absolutely ballistic and so I took down the photo. (Rea)*

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Rea's mother approved of the image, whilst her father's reaction caused her to remove it. By posing with a male who was not part of the family, Rea hints at promiscuity, according to her father. Rea tells me that she comes from a very conservative Muslim family but that moving out of her parents' house to a different city has opened up a whole new world of content to her:

> *My explore page has gradually changed. I think with some of the friends I started making down here and what they were following, it's that coming up on my explore page and all they were sharing with me. I haven't met any of these people but I'm exposed to more liberal South Asians. I come from a really conservative background so I never really knew that girls could do these things. They were doing what they wanted, and I found it really empowering really. (Rea)*

This loosening of the patriarchal shackle is echoed in Kaa's comment:

> *So, my mum divorced my dad early on, when I was eleven, which meant it gave us freedom to do whatever we wanted to do! So my mum is a massive patron of be yourself, love yourself, do everything that makes you happy. (Kaa)*

Here, mothers signal an acceptance that fathers do not but can also contradict this acceptance by telling their daughters to remove content. In one sense, they pursue a digital intimacy with their daughters, but this is not without an element of surveillance. This ties into previous research on the role of South Asian mothers when it comes to their daughters, by feeling responsible for behaviour that will impact their futures and relationships with men within the family and beyond (Ross-Sherriff et. al in Lansford et. al 2009). For Kaa, the same consequences do not exist because her family – made up of her, her mother and sister – is not impacted by a patriarchal gaze and so in comparison, the digital intimacy Kaa experiences with her mother is not fraught with a sense of control.

Conversely, it is not always older family members who are responsible for spying. Zaa talks about having a private account that ends up being infiltrated by what they term a 'lurking profile', resulting in some of their school peers making homophobic comments about them:

Recently I had this issue where I was posting some stuff from a shoot that I did and there's a pic of me smoking and some of my secondary school friends - I went to an all-boys school- there's this thing where everyone was really conservative and also a lot of South Asian descent and Bengali as well. So, they have these lurking profiles that you've got to watch out for. […] One of my friends alerted me coz people were making really homophobic comments about me in WhatsApp chats and I was like 'oh damn' I have to be careful. I blocked a lot of people after this and I thought it was a safe space because it was private but apparently it wasn't. (Zaa)

There is a sense of unease, as participants feel that family and community members adopt a disguise to infiltrate private accounts, puncturing this safety and leaving some, like Zaa, feeling exposed. Zaa's account makes space to experiment with queerness that they were unable to explore at a conservative school, making this infiltration a violent act on the part of their peers. Having images taken from their private account, reproduced and disseminated to others via WhatsApp groups without their knowledge, presents a challenge to participants because information and images can be stolen and disseminated at speed.

Homophobia in the Bengali community in the UK remains an issue as do instances of cyberbullying of queer users in the UK which can result in negative outcomes for users (Rudoe 2017; Helsper 2001). In this instance, Zaa has felt 'a sense of impending danger' they tell me, since this interaction, which has impacted their sense of safety and made them feel a bit paranoid – who in the community has images of them on a phone? And where might these images travel to and reach? The need for ever more private intimate publics becomes important for this very reason and one I return to explore in the following chapter that looks at visible and invisible queer interactions online.

The workplace also becomes a site of surveillance, as some participants go on to tell me. In the context of participants' lives, the 'workplace' and 'professionalism' are important sites of respectability politics within the South Asian diaspora, (i.e.: always being reminded by parents/ older family members to behave at work and do well) and so workplace policing puts further pressure on participants. Aside from feeling as if they are being spied on by current

and future employers, workplace policing leads to a blurring of the boundaries between social and work life for participants, feeding into the notion of self-branding within Instagram.

Workplace policing

Whilst rarely mentioned in interviews, I thought it important to highlight the fact that some participants spoke of workplace intrusions into their profiles, revealing how information that is intended for social purposes impacts participants' professional lives, further blurring the boundaries between life and work. I see this section as significant for its reflection of contemporary employer/employee digital relations, a discourse that diaspora workers are usually left out of, but one still impacts them.

Freelance illustrator Bal1, was made aware of her employer tracking her social media profile when she was told to remove them from her account bio:

> *I think the only time someone told me something was when I was interning at a PR company and I think I just put their name in the bio just to be like 'I'm interning at here', they were like 'can you take off your profile please?' I was like, 'err, okay'. I thought that was bit weird. (Bal1)*

Initially, she thought it strange, but then goes on to tell me that she hasn't 'really been employed' beyond interning, therefore 'I haven't had to watch what I do'. Participants become introduced to the concept of "imagined surveillance", which is 'to describe how individuals conceive of the scrutiny that *could* take place across the social media ecology and, consequently, *may* engender future risks or opportunities' (Duffy and Chan 2018 p. 121). Bal contends that she has not had a proper job yet, but going on previous experience, the workplace can become a 'socialisation agent' (Ibid.), meaning one changes their online privacy settings or content so as not to compromise job opportunities. Thus, Instagram is a site not only frequented by friends and family (wanted or unwanted) but also employers.

In another instance, Pvn, an NHS worker, tells me that they have had to delete colleagues from their accountand re-start their account with privacy settings in place. They tell me that

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they have been unfairly judged by colleagues in the past for uploading sexually charged content and content dealing with their queer identity:

I don't really want the people I work with to know anything about my personal life in fear of judgement. But it's really difficult to maintain a solid social media account where you want to post all the things that you want to post - you can't because you're worried about what your work colleagues might find or how people might perceive you. (Pvn)

Aside from being cautious when it comes to future employment, participants like Pvn are concerned with work colleagues infiltrating their accounts because it impacts their professional life. Information concerning one's gender and sexuality is particularly worrisome for participants in a work situation; 29-year-old Bha took up a work opportunity in Zambia, leaving her girlfriend back home in England:

Last year I moved to Zambia and in Zambia being gay is illegal. I basically went over to Zambia to set up a clinic and so had to go through my entire social media and delete everything to do with being gay. So that was really hard […] there were so many people wanting to follow me on Facebook, on Instagram, literally if I just met them for five minutes, they would find me. (Bha)

For Bha, the geographical context required a much more urgent response - to ensure her safety in the role, she had to delete content from her personal account because naturally, people would try and follow her account, and this was something that was unavoidable. Whilst not readily applicable to participants with British passports, it is worth keeping in mind the added risk to someone with precarious citizenship, as surveillance of social media by state powers is a very real threat to their residence in a host nation. The discovery of queer content by work colleagues becomes a violation of sorts and is indicative of how heteronormative many work environments still are, with varying degrees of risk associated upon discovery of participants' queer identities.

This blurring of work/life boundaries has been researched extensively by internet scholars investigating social media as surveillance tools that enable employer harassment and

discrimination (Lam 2016; Balnave et al., 2013). Some argue that being able to upload vast amounts of information to a personal profile is altering the divisions between our social and working lives:

> It remains important as ever to maintain the distinction between home and work. This blurring of boundaries is profoundly changing the nature of work and has greatly increased the scope for monitoring and surveillance of employees both in the workplace and beyond. […] These sites (Facebook and LinkedIn, for instance) can distort the boundaries between work and private life as never before. […] information posted on these sites is sometimes used by employers to sanction employees for misconduct, even though an employee's use of the social networking sites may have been intended as strictly personal. The danger is that these sites potentially open their information to a large audience at the discretion (but not necessarily with full knowledge and awareness) of the individual posting information on the Internet. (Van Gramberg et. al, 2014 p. 2245).

Bal1, Pvn and Bha reference their negative experiences of work policing as employees for an external employer. Each have developed ways of dealing with this; Bal1 adhering to the notion of "imagined surveillance", hence maintaining her employability, Pvn keeping work and life separate and Bha, tailoring content to stay safe on work trips abroad because she knows people will want to follow her online.

These strategies are employed to resist work policing, which is something that not that many participants brought up during interviews. More common are strategies for safety in response to family and community policing, which I go on to unpack further in the following segment.

Strategies to maintain privacy

South Asian diaspora youth have often been inventive when it comes to discreet living whilst under the watchful eye of the family or community, especially young women (Bakrania 2013). Whilst mobile communication has continued that inventiveness (Zaidi et al. 2012), participants have experienced many challenges in their bid for privacy, which can be accessed by others anywhere in the world.

It emerged that most participants had experienced resistance from family and community when it came to certain content that they had uploaded. These uploads usually revolved around liberal displays of the body and queerness. When dealing with the consequences of this type of policing, it was interesting to note the different ways in which this was approached. Some participants self-censored their content to appease external forces, whilst others upended public comfort and became killjoys in service of pushing at the conservative limits of family and community. I being by discussing the killjoy tactic.

The killjoy

> If you say, or do, or be anything that does not reflect the image of the happy family back to itself, the world becomes distorted. You become the cause of a distortion. (Ahmed, 2010)

> *I've cropped out the fact that I'm in a short skirt, coz my mum follows me and it's the idea that all my family can see and there's a certain image that you don't want to project. (Lai)*

> *For some people that could be really weird to confront or uncomfortable to deal with. Especially if your ideas about being and living are quite like transgressive or not heteronormative. (Eri)*

I begin this section with a quote taken from Sara Ahmed's essay 'Feminist Killjoys (And Other Willful Subjects)' (2010) because the concept of the 'killjoy' allowed me to think through the ways in which the presence of certain behaviours and bodies were deemed unsuitable and therefore excluded from Instagram by family members wishing to preserve a respectful 'image of the happy family'. Followed by quotes from participants Lai and Eri, it becomes clear that uploading images in revealing clothing or expressing queerness become things that need to be shut down either indirectly through distant relatives or directly through mothers. As an aside, it is important to mention that patriarchal formations can also extend the other way, whereby (mostly upper class and upper caste) families take great pride in their daughters

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wearing western clothes (short skirts, bikinis, etc.), as well as supporting liberal queer causes. As long as other lines are not crossed and the bodies on display adhere to normative standards of thinness/fairness/beauty, etc. Although I haven't noticed this as strongly through participants' narratives, I recognise it in my own family, where my mother likes sharing photos in WhatsApp chats and on Facebook of myself or my sister in make-up and glamourous clothes. Thus, whilst in some families, this content is transgressive, in others, it is used to further patriarchal and normative beauty standards.

Ahmed defines a killjoy as 'the one who gets in the way of other people's happiness' (*Ibid.,* p 6); in this sense, participants who upload transgressive content become killjoys, getting in the way of 'a certain image' that their families are projecting to the wider community. Women are still expected to uphold the South Asian community's cultural expectations through the display of modesty and humility (Lindridge, Hogg and Shah 2007). On Instagram, this translates to no photos in revealing clothing, no photos with men outside of the family and (for male participants also) no displays of queerness. The uploading of such images makes others uncomfortable; one participant tells me that a photo of her in a pair of shorts 'will probably distress some aunt or uncle somewhere'. How then does a killjoy respond to such a reaction? Ahmed writes:

> Power speaks here in this moment of hesitation. Do you go along with it? What does it mean not to go along with it? To create awkwardness is to be read as being awkward. Maintaining public comfort requires that certain bodies "go along with it"(2010, p.6)

For some, to "go along with it" means that you separate content into different accounts: a public account whereby anyone who goes to Instagram can see your content and a private account, where content is hidden. The killjoy surfaces when one decides to keep going "the wrong way"; they do not care what family or community says about the content they post up – they will not create another account for it, and they will not compromise their content for the sake of public comfort:

Sometimes I'll just post some really explicit or sexual stuff that I've re-blogged or like reposted from some other accounts. Who cares? For me, it's just something to share and like one of my friends, she has a lot of nudity in her work and she's a feminist and she's constantly being censored and constantly being shut down for some of her posts. I've reposted some of her stuff. Based on who's following me, do I share or not? After initial hesitation, I'm over it in a way. (Eri)

To me it doesn't even matter, but its parents who care about what other people think and so at this point in my life, more people in my family, more than ever before know about my sexuality and there are some relatives on Instagram, and I don't care whether they see it or not really. (Bha)

I don't really block people unless they're bordering on dangerous or trolling, I don't feel bad about who's in the community, whose gonna talk, it's just, put my life out there. (Dil)

Eri is a Rotterdam-based student studying for his master's in fine art. For him, Instagram is where he can explore themes of queerness; his use of the word 'hesitation' echoes Ahmed's, where 'power speaks here in this moment of *hesitation*'. As killjoys, participants 'refuse to allow these realities to be passed over' (Ahmed 2010, p.9), by displaying queer and feminist content and making it accessible to all who enter, regardless of the levels of discomfort it may produce. This discomfort lies at the heart of activism, and it is at this point of tension (will a parent or community member flag up this content? Will it cause an argument?) that change can occur.

Continuing "the wrong way" has effected change in the lives of some participants, who are now confident enough to practice what they have unapologetically preached online, AFK:

I've been able to, rather than living that entirely online, I have been able to take that back out and because I've shown that side of myself publicly on the internet, now it's allowed me to show that person to the people I see in the community who've seen it on Instagram. (Dil)

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Being able to display this lifestyle online through a public account has given Dil the confidence to be more open about this within her community, many of whom she knows have already seen it on Instagram. Similarly, Bha, who lives with her girlfriend, finds it easier to talk about her sexuality publicly because her account is also public and followed by family members:

> *I've already given these talks to new students when talking about careers and saying where you can get to in your career […] mentioning my sexuality will probably come up because it's been a challenge in my life. So, if you're willing to take the stage and say it, you might as well make your Instagram public because it's not a big deal anymore. (Bha)*

Her considers her presence on Instagram a learning experience, both for her and her parents, as she grapples with digital self-representation:

> *I'm also trying to change in my own little ways that I can with the small communities that I'm in. The way that South Asian women look specifically - the way that we don't conform to these certain stereotypes, because I certainly don't. And I think my parents are definitely learning a lot about the way I present myself online and how it's kind of a part of what I'm learning and what I want to do later on. (Her)*

Incorporating a classed analysis into this notion also aligns with previous research on the rejection of British South Asian conservatism for women through educational achievement. Kalwant Bhopal writes that those British South Asian women who were able to access education were also able to access greater degrees of power, allowing them to redefine and renegotiate their identity (Bhopal 2000). Published over 20 years ago, Bhopal's article focused on the rejection of arranged marriages by British South Asian women who went into higher education. Arguably, for my participants (all of whom either have or are in the process of obtaining an undergraduate degree), arranged marriages are not so commonplace anymore and so it is heteropatriarchal structures and body shaming that participants are in opposition to. I am careful when making this observation because this is not to say that British South Asian women without access to higher education cannot reimagine their own identities and

positioning in the world, but rather that they have less access to social and financial power that would allow them to enact these desires. There is also something to be said for the uploading of middle-class user-generated content that builds an individual's social capital, which will be discussed in chapter six.

Thus, the killjoy causes the family and community discomfort through the wilfulness of their content, in some cases enabling them to take it AFK. It is here, amongst the killjoys of Instagram that I can unlock its potential to disrupt the patriarchal and heteronormative structures of one's family and community.

I consider killjoys on Instagram significant in that they are able to affect change within a family or local community, unlocking its political potential by making visible feminist and queer lives. In identifying this moment, I demonstrate what Andre Brock calls 'cultural competence in digital practice' (2017), whereby digital scholars (who often make their practice about identifying moments of oppression or commodification of identity) should be attentive to the emotional value of these practices for participants. These practices form a productive space where participants look to ways in which they can dismantle oppressive structures within their own lives, which don't just have to adhere to killjoy tactics of confrontation- there are other ways of living a feminist and queer life on Instagram, which I go on to discuss in the subsequent sections.

The lockdown account

In foregrounding the killjoys as those who take action to contest conservative values within the diaspora, I am in no way suggesting that other participants are inactive. A small number come from liberal families who are happy for them to make whatever decisions they choose, such as co-habiting with partners outside of marriage (although I should note that these participants are in heterosexual relationships), whilst a few do not feel safe disclosing parts of their lives to extended family. This binary of liberal and conservative is further complicated by my earlier point about the limits of liberal families that still adhere to patriarchal and normative beauty standards. Whilst I acknowledge the differing standards of this small

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number of participants from liberal families, my line of inquiry into the limits of these standards is unfortunately beyond the scope of this thesis.

For the majority of participants from conservative families, locking down their accounts by making them fully private is one way of feeling safe:

> *My parents ended up stalking me when I left the house, so I basically had to lock down all social media and basically tell all of my friends that if my parents ask or ring you or turn up at your house - because they did and they will - don't tell them anything. My new name, my social media handles, anything. Yeah. So for a little bit I did have to lock my Instagram. (Sta)*

Sta's situation is an extreme one – a few years ago, they ran away from an abusive conservative Christian household and have not spoken to their parents or younger brothers since. Sta's mother was particularly abusive and suffers with poor mental health, having run away from an abusive household herself when she was young. Sta believes running away from abuse led her mother to join the conversative Christian community, 'which hilariously I ended up running away from' Sta tells me. Keeping all accounts private ensures that family cannot gain access to Sta's location, as this could prove dangerous for them.

For Zaa, locking down in the interests of safety means losing the benefits of networking through Instagram as well as inducing feelings of paranoia:

> *You don't know whose watching, especially when you're wanting to further your career and a lot of your art entails themes of queerness; there's this sense of impending danger that you have lurking somewhere at the back of your mind. (Zaa)*

Zaa has gotten good at working out what a 'lurking profile' looks like, they tell me that 'it's typically a profile with not many posts at all, they follow more people than they are followed by and there's often no profile picture'. Having your privacy violated in this way can lead to mental distress, especially when the space within which you sought solace is no longer safe. Zaa goes on to tell me about a friend of theirs:

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One of my good friends, she's Guajarati, she's also second generation, she also had a similar thing where family would follow her and then watch her stories and then talk about her. And when she blocked them, they made new accounts and they continued to follow her and talk shit about her. That distance that you have, like catfish, it's really dangerous. (Zaa)

Catfishing refers to the practice of someone pretending to be somebody else online by using a fake social media profile to lure in others. It usually refers to online dating, where the dishonest user 'catfishes' their unsuspecting date into believing that they really are the fake identity they have created online. In some of these more extreme cases where a catfisher has created a complex fictional identity and maintained long-term online communication with someone, a multitude of exploitations occur from financial to sexual. Victims are left negatively impacted, experiencing social isolation, post-traumatic stress disorder and fragile mental health as a result of these deceptions (Whitty and Buchanan 2016). For Zaa to use this term in this context points to the mental distress that this deception committed by wider family and community causes; ethnic minority and LGBTQIA+ youth experience more cyberbullying than other groups (Nygaard in eds. Pullen 2014). The psycho-social feelings experienced by participants is an important element of socio-digital life and one that I explore in chapter 8. Although these profiles are not created to communicate with participants, they aim to deceive by never revealing their true identity.

These kinds of deceptions, along with the consequences of certain content being found out causes participants to lockdown their profiles. Along with making their Instagram accounts private, I consider a lockdown more of an attempt to exercise vigilance in the face of lurking profiles keen to catch participants out. Like Zaa, some participants do not like having to lock down their profiles because it prevents them from accessing opportunities or having visibility online. Similarly, it prevents participants from making new connections:

I don't really accept anyone that I don't really know, just to keep myself safe. (Budd)

Bud is bisexual but has not come out to her family about this. She uses her account to post about her sexuality but has set it to private for fear that her parents will find out and stop her from speaking to her younger siblings. Bud wants to make sure that what she posts about does not get back to her parents and so to ensure this, her account is on lockdown. A consequence of this is that she does not accept any followers she doesn't already know.

The lockdown account is a response to real safety concerns that some participants have. It also complicates the notion of the killjoy, because one does not necessarily have to be confrontational to live a queer and/or feminist life; these participants achieve this through locking down. The levels of safety participants feel in being forthright with their content varies; some feel safe enough to disclose now, some may feel safe enough to at some point in the future and others may never feel safe enough to. Levels of safety indicate that when it comes to feminist and queer politics, many participants are keen to express their views but cannot because of a *lack* of safety. These concerns reflect the urgent need for interventions from those who feel safe enough to become killjoys in service of those who cannot. Hence, these diverse set of circumstances impacting each participant ensures that they are not viewed as one homogenous group, but individuals grappling with multiple aspects of their unique identities and set of surroundings (Lindridge, Hogg and Shah 2007).

Ephemeral data: Stories and finstas

The ephemeral nature of Instagram features such as Stories and fake Instagram accounts commonly known as 'finstas' become another way that participants maintain privacy. The Stories feature allows you to post content that disappears after 24 hours, leaving no trace; 'a recognition of the value of impermanent content, of user practices that do not privilege an exhaustive archive of everything posted' (Leaver et. al, 2020, p. 81). I like Eri's take because it captures the frivolous and temporary nature of the Stories feature:

> *Stories also feel more like a mood, you know? (Eri)*

Drawing on this notion of Stories encapsulating a certain mood, for some that can be displaying suggestive or funny content:

It disappears, so peoples' stories are extra trashy and extra frivolous. (Job)

It was almost unreal, as a way of documenting things in a way that's quite fun because I know that it only lasts for 24 hours and some of it can be risqué, some of the stuff that I post [...] It's a really fun way of doing things because you can indirectly get to know somebody quite a lot. You respond to each other's stories, so there's a little bit of flirting going on but there's no pressure coz stories only last for 24 hours.(Afs)

My stories I post on everyday, it's mainly just like sharing memes or just sharing stupid shit that happens in my life that people coincidentally find funny. (Her)

The 'trashy' nature of content fits this ephemeral data exchange where participants can share videos of drunken nights out, flirt online and upload memes, amongst other things. Afs tells me that a friend of hers has even been on dates with people she has conversed with through Stories. In line with this sentiment, finstas are not only deployed for privacy reasons but also as a backlash against the polished picture-perfect normativity of Instagram[3], which many participants told me they didn't like:

No one is actually like that in real life and that's the craze that Instagram has created, the picture-perfect fake. (Sal)

In addition, the 'Close Friends' feature on Stories has the benefit of participants being able to select who can see their Stories, adding another layer of privacy:

I made my original account public last year and simply hide people from my Stories (anyone who I feel would misinterpret my identities etc and cause me any discomfort). (Hee)

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[3] In chapter six, I delve deeper into the subject of authentic and fake content when exploring the figure of the #browngirl and what Instagram can reveal about her role within global social and cultural economies.

If it's something like you wouldn't want certain people to see that, make sure you block them on your Story. Every time we meet and they're like 'have you blocked this person, have you blocked my sister on your Story? Have you blocked my cousin on your story? (Uxu)

If I put something on my story, then sometimes I don't want some people to know where I am. And I want other people to know where I am. (Sal)

Finstas are another way to maintain privacy for participants where they 'could attempt to evade the concerns about surveillance and possible disciplinary outcomes' (Duffy and Chan 2018, p. 127), by making content for a select number of followers:

So I had a fake insta then and I deleted maybe a year ago but that was like 'here's screenshots of random shit that happens to me' or 'here's that crazy boy who said this', 'here's me looking drunk and crazy'. It was stupid shit. (Lai)

Like Lai, people often delete these accounts, making them spaces of ephemeral data exchange. 23-year-old Dal was tempted to start one herself:

I was quite tempted to make a finsta - those fake Instagrams - it's not really fake because it's still you, but then a more public-facing one and then have a private one. But to be honest, yeah, as a woman you do have to be careful because essentially, I do have nosy relatives who actually aren't very close to me - you know like in Bend It Like Beckham? (Dal)

'Bend it Like Beckham', the 2002 British film made by South Asian director Gurinder Chadha, sees protagonist Jessminder Bhambra go against the wishes of her Sikh family to pursue a career in football. On hand are a gaggle of wider family members watching and commenting as events unfold. Dal has also grown up in a Sikh Punjabi family in Leicester and tells me that wider family live all over the Midlands area of the UK, so she is vigilant whilst out drinking with her friends and online. Like the film, which resonated with many young British South

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Asian women at the time (myself included), Dal's comment about having to be careful 'as a woman' signifies that women's behaviour online requires moral management within some British South Asian communities.

The number of second generation British South Asian university students has risen considerably – evidenced in part by the fact that all 34 participants have graduated from or are currently at university – bringing with it certain tensions. It is important to note that these tensions are not characterised as being 'caught between two cultures' (an outlook often applied to British South Asian youth), but something much more nuanced. Parents are happy for their children to move away for higher education because going to a higher-ranking university indicates an upwardly mobile social and financial trajectory. Writing in 2012 about Muslim women students in the UK, Fauzia Ahmad states:

> Another major motivating factor for many was the opportunity to leave home for a legitimate reason, even though for some, the parental home was also in London. Whilst remaining aware that 'living away from home' was going to leave room for suspicion and gossip amidst some quarters of the community, the opportunity to leave home was, nevertheless, an important consideration. It is perhaps interesting to note that the desire to live away from home whilst at university does not necessarily signify an intention to abandon or sever cultural or religious links and practices. (Ahmad 2012, p. 148).

To exercise a level of autonomy and to be a part of the online culture of campus life whilst at university and beyond is important for participants; ephemeral data exchanges show how they claim a stake in these things and manage to avoid the consequences. Going clubbing, attending LGBTQIA+ events or any other such transgressions require being a part of these digital ecologies that are not 'fake' but very real facets of participants' lives; as Dal notes 'it's still you'. Participants do not sever themselves from their cultural communities, instead finding ways to splinter self-hood online. 27-year-old Hee, originally from Essex but now living in Texas with their family tells me:

> *As I'm allowed to control who views my Stories and am able to hide certain people I only know in a professional or cultural community capacity- I am actually quite open*

about my gender, sexuality, beliefs and politics there specifically. It's definitely an issue for me as I don't believe in the western concept of "coming out" yet am still very close to my cultural community and family in real life and do not wish to share these parts of me with them as I know they will be unwelcoming. (Hee)

Hee identifies as bisexual and agender (gender-neutral) - their refusal to share this information with their family or wider community does not put them at odds with those around them, but rather reflects how western concepts of queerness are complicated for participants; Hee is frustrated by not being able to communicate about who they really are outside of Instagram, but is not satisfied with the idea of 'coming out' to their family. These tensions have been explored previously by scholars interrogating sexuality and religion amongst the South Asian diaspora (Puar 2007; Yip 2004), revealing that the simple binaries of 'queer/progressive/western' and 'heterosexual/regressive/non-western' are not true reflections of LGTBQIA+ diaspora experience. This is something I begin to unpack further in the next chapter.

Throughout this section, I have shown how ephemeral data exchanges via Stories and finstas function as an archive of transgressions that participants have learnt to manage and control, allowing them to build social and cultural capital whilst avoiding community consequences. The final section of this chapter looks at how participants curate content in a bid for privacy.

Self-censoring content

Unlike the killjoys, not everyone can be 'the one who gets in the way of other people's happiness' by following through with the content that they truly wish to upload. In these cases, some participants self-censor their accounts:

It's not like I post anything bad but she [a distant cousin] can make anything into gossip. (Bal2)

I've had to clean my Instagram up a little bit because I had pictures of me in a bikini when I went on holiday with my friends. Stuff like that, I've just had to get rid of and I know not to post because brown parents, it's not even worth it. (Lai)

I could never post some secret darkest desires - I could never post anything like that, I don't think social media is the place for that really. So that's why anything I post, I am comfortable with whoever sees it, if my parents see it, so be it, and if someone else sees it, so be it.(Abl)

Policing forces some participants to make a distinction between 'bad'/ 'darkest desires'/ offensive content, that becomes 'clean'/ 'cropped' or 'careful' posting. It is unclear whether these distinctions end up dividing participants when it comes to defining appropriate and inappropriate content within Instagram or whether this approach is simply done to protect oneself from reprimand. Duffy and Chan's notion of 'imagined surveillance' that I referred to previously is practiced here by participants in much the same way, 'wherein parents, educators, and young people themselves become socialization agents who normalize unbounded surveillance' (Duffy and Chan 2018, p. 134).

For some of these participants self-censoring is in reaction to rebukes from family members, whereas for others it is an *imagined* surveillance that gets 'normalized as a part of everyday digital life' (*Ibid.,* p. 132). 27-year-old Ama, a broadcasting producer from Northamptonshire imagines what her family's reaction would be before she decides to post something or not:

If I am posting things, I kind of always think to myself 'is this something I would show my family or not?' If not, then I look at why I'm posting it and is there a reason or some sort of effect that I'm trying to create around it? Otherwise, do I really need to post it? (Ama)

Ama tells me that she has a good relationship with her parents and talks to them about everything that she posts. It is only their opinions and not the wider family or community that she respects and there hasn't been an incident that has made her re-think her content. However, Ama does still reflect on her content and *imagines* what kind of reaction it would elicit from her immediate family; to an extent, imagined surveillance has shaped and rearticulated Instagram for her. Similarly, for Rea, her account does not reflect her life AFK:

There'll be no guys, there'll be never anything of me dressing in a revealing way, even though I do in day-to-day life and there'll be nothing that can come back to bite me basically, that my family were to see. A lot of my family follow me on Instagram, so it doesn't really matter. If I try to hide it, they're going to see it anyway. Yeah, and so I'm just very careful about what I put on there rather than keeping it private. (Rea)

Rea does not wish to put more labour into a finsta or other private accounts and thinks it is pointless to post up content that 'can come back to bite' her because it would be found out anyway. The notion that she imagines her life to be so thoroughly scrutinised online means that she doesn't post certain content online at all.

Duffy and Chan's study is made up of college students and graduates around 18-22 years old and is primarily concerned with work policing. What my research has shown is that of all the various social institutions that participants anticipate digital surveillance from (including employers and educators) it is family and community that are of most concern to them. Even for those who are no longer at university, but living and working, imagined surveillance ensures that they carefully censor their content. It is seen as a solution to a problem that they cannot solve any other way; it ensures online availability to family and the wider community without causing upset or the need to switch between multiple accounts.

Performing a censored online-self is an act of self-preservation – you live your life AFK however you want to but can keep family at bay by presenting a conservative version online - but this can also perpetuate parental surveillance; 'After all, a hidden curriculum that prods individuals to expect scrutinization of their *personal* social media profiles is the same one that renders *professional* [or parental in the case of Instagram] surveillance permissible' (Duffy and Chan 2018, p. 133). Allowing family or community to shape the kind of content that is posted means that although unwillingly, participants *do* capitulate to the conservative logic of family and community surveillance, normalising it in the process. This process continues to follow some participants into their late 20s, remaining unchallenged, a self-perpetuating process that perhaps has been happening in different ways in South Asian diasporic families already, especially when considering, in turn, what my parents could have hidden from their parents!

Family policing creates a point of tension, a space where 'some bodies become blockage points, points where smooth communication stops' (Ahmed 2010, p.5). The feminist and queer bodies on Instagram create tension when externally policed; not only does smooth communication between family members and participants become barbed but the smooth roll-out of images-as-communication across the Instagram grid stop, even if momentarily. The images are redacted, cropped, made private. Those who continue the roll-out, continue the communication, going on 'to become what you are judged as being' (*Ibid.,* p.7): a queer body and/or a feminist body. I do not want to chastise the self-censors for not challenging the conservatism of their families or communities – what is at stake will vary for each participant. It is important here to point out that model minority discourses in South Asian communities are also tied to precarity and the hardships of migration, borders, housing, jobs, etc. So, although this conservatism is rooted in religious and patriarchal values, it also comes from the material concerns of migrant families who want a better life for themselves and their children. Although families want their offspring to be well educated, modest and financially stable, participants themselves are veering off into a different direction, as Fauzia Ahmad writes:

> At the same time though, female Muslim students are 'branching out', studying topics such as English language and literature, history, economics, international politics, media studies, fashion, and (even) anthropology and sociology. Personal interest is obviously the main reason behind such diversity of choice, but it also suggests that students in *this sample* are meeting 'middle- class aspirations' through studying more arts-based subjects. (Ahmad 2012, p. 148)

Over a decade later, these 'middle-class aspirations' are reflected in my sample of participants, most of whom have studied or are studying a humanities/ social science subject or working in the cultural sector. Hence, aspirations begin to lean towards social justice and the politics of identity, in tandem with participation in middle-class institutions that include art galleries, museums, theatres and universities. Participants are not simply trying to rebel against family and community strictures but trying to build social and cultural currency in these arenas. What are the politics of this participation? This is the question I begin to answer in the subsequent chapters, interrogating how queerness, class, caste and mental health are

entangled within neoliberal digital economies of self-branding and luxury/aspirational user-generated content that participants are a part of.

Conclusion

This chapter has looked at how participants have negotiated safety on Instagram. I began by characterising the parties who were most keen to breach this safety – family, wider community and to a smaller extent, employers, which is where I first introduced the concept of 'imagined surveillance'. From here, I established the four main strategies employed by participants in their various bids for privacy. For the killjoys, challenging the breaches in safety lead to a better understanding between themselves and family, even though it was uncomfortable. For the lockdown account holders, it meant putting boundaries in place by blocking the safety breaches. Those who wanted to lay claim to the social and cultural capital of Instagram but not get into trouble, took part in ephemeral data exchanges in a bid to get around surveillance and finally, the self-censors heavily curated content in a bid to maintain comfort.

On the one hand, these practices reveal that women and queer British South Asian bodies remain a site of surveillance, even within the realm of Instagram. On the other hand, they show how participants have challenged, rejected and circumnavigated these hetero-patriarchal boundaries, inscribing themselves within wider social and cultural digital media ecologies, despite the setbacks. The decision to open my research with this chapter was made because I felt this chapter to be the least complicated; participants creating transgressive content that isn't accepted by a heteropatriarchal British South Asian community isn't that surprising given the wealth of research on the policing of women and queer bodies in the diaspora. Starting here means that I can begin to complicate this idea of the digital as offering a freedom to women and queer Instagrammers, who themselves are enmeshed within wider social and cultural neoliberal economies. The next chapter looks at the hidden interactions of queer users and how they negotiate intimate publics on a platform that is very public and (as already demonstrated) prone to policing.

Chapter 5: Queering the account

The previous chapter explored the different strategies participants used to challenge or get around privacy breaches that primarily came from family and the wider community. I located four ways in which privacy and safety was negotiated; the killjoy, the lockdown account, ephemeral data exchanges and self-censoring content. In some cases, the workplace became a site of surveillance, leading participants to enact an 'imagined surveillance' of their own accounts. Those that self-censored their accounts also arranged their content in this way, imagining what their families would say if they posted certain things. The content usually considered transgressive by participants' families and communities were liberal displays of the body and LGBTQIA+ culture and politics. The themes of queerness that some participants were keen to explore or show solidarity with had resulted in them being berated by family or in one case, having their content disseminated amongst school peers who made homophobic comments about them. These findings suggest that women and queer bodies are still policed by family and community on social media; despite this, participants employed a variety of practices to maintain their safety and autonomy.

The idea that social media platforms in and of themselves offer queer bodies protection is not true – these spaces are easy to infiltrate. In light of this, how are they used to offer support and channels of communication within queer circles? I thought that I would begin this chapter with a section exploring whether homophobia was still prevalent within the British South Asian community. It would be unfair to make assumptions, especially when I had witnessed a small level of acceptance within my own family (which I talk about in the next segment) and therefore was keen to know what personal experiences queer participants had with their families.

Thereafter, I focus on what happens when participants venture further afield into white mainstream queer spaces where they also find hostility. This leads me to reflect on homonormative cultures amongst queer South Asian influencers and how this can feed into

the aspirations of everyday queer users, segueing into participants reflections on the limitations of Instagram for queer world-making.

As a result of how participants are treated by family, wider community and mainstream queer spaces, the following segment applies Berlant's notion of intimate publics to Instagram. Here, I explore the 'hidden' ways in which queer participants communicate and reach out to one another. I identify this invisible economy as a way of making queer diasporic experience that goes against social media's push for a default publicness, revealing how queer diasporic bodies use Instagram to forge networks that are not easy to research in simply looking at the Instagram interface alone.

The pushing of a digital neoliberal outlook also forces queerness into white western binaries of traditional religion versus liberal modernity, pride versus shame and out versus the closet. Some participants find these narratives unhelpful and so queerness and religion is explored in the final section of this chapter.

Homophobia, Diaspora and Instagram

Gender and sexuality identifications was something nearly all participants were keen to elaborate on, even if they identified as cis-gendered or heterosexual:

> *I identify as straight, I don't really believe in like the binary of sexuality, like the way it manifests but I suppose to use that terminology, I would say [I am] straight. (Bro)*

> *I think there has to be less of a shame in how I might question sexuality as well and I mean for the last year because I operate in breaking down these constructions of gender and sexuality - even saying, I'm pretty sure I'm heterosexual -like everything is constructed! (Aaz)*

> *I'm Muslim and I think I'm straight. (Ill)*

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This questioning of binaries and constructs reveals how participants are open to other ways of being in the world – even Bla, who is in a heterosexual marriage, subverts the gender of her husband:

I'm married to a man, so I'm heterosexual, although sometimes he's like my sister. (Bla)

Recasting her husband to a feminine role means that Bla has what she calls 'an interesting relationship' with him, where communication and emotional connection are strong, akin to social bonds usually created between women and not often witnessed in heterosexual British South Asian marriages; throughout our interview, she refers to moments where he has helped her deal with difficult situations. Such interrogations of gender and sexuality show that there is a commitment to questioning the constructs of gender and sexuality amongst participants.

The desire amongst participants to express a queer South Asian identity is made all the more urgent by the fact that homophobia and transphobia is still very widespread within British South Asian communities. I reached into the network of participant Instagrammers for advice on how to help a cousin of mine who had just told his family that he was living as a transgender man, giving everyone his new name. His parents, my aunt and uncle, refused to accept this truth and continue to misgender and deadname him (using his birth name) to this day. I spoke to Bri about my predicament during our interview because she runs a British South Asian LGBTQIA+ online support forum. I asked how I could best support my cousin and she told me:

I think, just be a listening ear for him and just let him know that you're supporting him through this journey, especially if he might face challenges by coming out to his family. (Bri)

I found this advice incredibly useful because I knew Bri would understand the cultural and religious context of the situation, so there was very little explaining to do on my part. Being able to get to the heart of the matter with somebody who understood gave me a small insight into how diasporic queer support networks on Instagram provided genuine and useful support for participants. I knew my aunt and uncle had flat out refused to engage with my

cousin, so when I attempted to speak to my own parents about their niece who was now their nephew, it was a difficult conversation to have – would I be confronted with the possibility that my parents were transphobic? Over a period of months that eventually led to them meeting my cousin face-to-face at a wedding and seeing him for the first time in a suit with short hair, I had had conversations with them about trans identity and why everyone should be able to live in any way they wish to. What was difficult at first (my dad got incredibly angry over the phone when I said he should be using my cousin's chosen name) finally resulted in them using the right name and pronouns; my dad even told another wedding guest "that's my nephew!"

My experience varies to that of others and perhaps it was easier for my parents to accept a nephew who had pushed back against heteronormative boundaries than it would have been if it was one of their own children. I knew I needed to understand how others had been treated to fully grasp the full extent of homophobia and transphobia in the British South Asian diaspora. Speaking to participants, it seemed as if acceptance is still difficult to attain:

> *We want there to be positive representation of sexual minorities and just give people a platform to share their own experiences because there is so much homophobia in the South Asian community - whether its cultural homophobia or religious homophobia - we want to try and raise visibility about that homophobia. (Bri)*

> *My upbringing is quite conservative so I'm not really out, but I have a very double life, like home life and my outside career/friends life. I think it's really shocking how, at the age I'm at and I'm the youngest of 5 kids and I have 3 older sisters and an older brother, but it never ends. There's always people watching what you do. (Zaa)*

> *I have two friends in my life, work colleagues actually, who are Muslim and I came out to them and it was a very negative experience and they had a real problem with me being gay. (Bha)*

It's such a stigma in our community and it's been happening for years and [to] celebrate the Hijra and yet this all can't be accepted or appreciated -it's all very odd. (Art)

I didn't want my parents to find out - I still don't want them to find out now. However, I've decided I am going to come out to them and just when my younger sibling is a bit older. I can tolerate not talking to my parents, but I don't want to lose any access to my siblings. (Bud)

For those participants who had decided to tell their families, the consequences were real. 29-year-old Bha is a lesbian who lives with her partner in London. Her parents had not spoken to her for seven years after she came out to them, but together they are slowly rebuilding their relationship and Bha thinks that it is important to document this on Instagram:

My parents have now even met my girlfriend for the first time, they've come to my house where we live together, and we've got our animals. That's what I'm going to post about, that is really my life. Even for me, I don't actually see that many of those South Asian lesbians posting about that same stuff. That day-to-day life stuff and I think it's just something nice to see that you just get on with it and that is what I would hope.(Bha)

For Bha it is important to show that an everyday life can be lived as a South Asian lesbian – posts about pets, parents and partner serve to create a queer heterotopia where 'individuals, of infinite genders, sexualities, and radically transformed bodies can, by living, interacting and creating their own spaces, take power and be empowered' (Jones 2009, p.6).

Job has alluded to her parents that she is queer, although she has not fully come out to them. After spending a Christmas with them that was 'dull and a bit stressful', Job reflects on the many barriers that are in the way of being able to fully realise a queer Indo-Caribbean self-hood:

The intersection of being female, Asian, but from the Caribbean with parents from a very much older generation and then queerness on top of it means that I feel like I don't exist. (Job)

For Job Instagram becomes a space where this selfhood can be actualised:

Instagram is largely just about pictures, it kind of felt like I had more permission to just post images of myself […] There's loads of things I follow like queer South Asian […] I follow Indo-Caribbean as well - a word that I just never hear uttered in the UK or anywhere. I almost didn't realize how much there was out there and how much joy and satisfaction there is in just seeing pictures and a bit of text. (Job)

The act of creating content and sharing it matters a lot to someone like Job because Instagram is one of the few places where the intersections of who she is are validated; finding Indo-Caribbean identity when she'd never heard of it before reveals how user-generated content makes real a facet of identity that was unknown to participants previously. The tools of representation seem more democratic, because it is content made by someone like you with the same digital access as you. The complicated nature of User-generated content (UGC) is something I will return to in chapter six, (because it is not as simple as all that) but in this instance, it is undeniable that Instagram can represent queer identities that reflect and actualise participants' personal histories and lives.

Throughout this section, it seems clear that being openly queer is still (in a lot of cases) an impossibility in British South Asian communities and for those participants who have come out to family, the road to reconciliation has not been easy. Thus, Instagram, I imagine becomes ever more animated, as participants find ways to enact the complexities of life. I wondered whether it got easier as participants ventured out into mainstream queer communities.

Normative queerness

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I noticed a tension amongst participants who were frustrated by the othering they experienced in mainstream queer spaces; online, they are able to access content and conversations that recognise them are both South Asia and queer, whilst AFK, the effort to being made to feel welcome by mainstream queer spaces lags behind. I include participants' insights of normative queer practices as a way to build up to the next section of the chapter, where participants engage in what I term, non-normative digital practices of (in)visibility as a way of making queer diasporic experience.

White mainstream queer spaces

When encountering white queer spaces, participants would tell me that they sometimes felt uneasy:

> *I didn't go to the pride society while I was at university with white - well, it ends up being white, they're not advertised as such - but white LGBT spaces because I don't feel comfortable there. (Dal)*

> *When I am around other white queer women it's almost as if I'm like this big niche, or this big thing that didn't really exist. So, then I'm almost like this strange fetish, I wanna say. And it makes me feel really uncomfortable and awkward. (Pvn)*

Being othered within their own communities, then as a person of colour in white spaces and then again, as a queer person of colour in mainstream queer spaces, made Dal and Pvn go out into Instagram and seek out queer South Asians. This othering, or fetishizing as Pvn puts it, means that they are denied a cultural connection to queer spaces because of the policing of classed, gendered and coloured bodies in mainstream queer spaces (Dasgupta and Dasgupta 2018).

These experiences demonstrate the need, not only to connect with other queer South Asians, but also to engage in culturally relevant content, which Instagram is good at providing. Visuals that tie South Asian queerness to literature, music, film, art, academia and fashion (amongst other things), means that participants allow themselves into being; these cultural forms allow

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participants to be 'actively engaged in self-definition' (Parmar in eds. Jones 2003 p. 292), in opposition to the restrictions of family and community and the othering experienced in mainstream queer spaces.

On the one hand, queer content allows participants into being – something that feel they are denied in mainstream queer spaces - on the other, it taps into transnational homonormative media cultures, that value certain queer South Asian bodies over others.

Homonormativity

Renderings of queer South Asian identity online, draws both on postfeminist and homonormative media culture. A few examples of the successful queer subject also reveals that class, caste and country play a role in visibility when it comes to queer South Asian identity on Instagram. Queer South Asian Influencers from the diaspora such as Aditya Madiraju, Lilly Singh and Andy Lalwani use self-promotion and financial success as the activist tools to overcome homophobia within South Asian communities. All three live and work in the US or Canada and come from middle-class upper-caste, Hindu, Sikh families. These affluent circles allow for a liberalism that accepts queerness, as long as queer individuals adhere to homonormative politics. For example, Influencer Aditya Madiraju features his parents and in-laws in many of his posts, alongside his husband. This acceptance (possibly) was easier to attain as a homonormative subject who can successfully utilise gay lifestyle politics as an exercise in self-branding. None of my queer participants adhered to this; some did not openly display queer content for fears of backlash, others did not possess the cultural and financial capital to attain this level of visibility but also a few of them did not agree with the notion of the 'successful' queer Instagram subject.

Resisting the professional airbrushed images of queer success, artist and writer Eri tells me that he often enjoys posting ugly content:

> If I find a compelling image or interesting or really ugly image - from the high and the low, just to kind of archive that and see what it sort of registers or why I feel a certain way about that. […] I want to be a bit personal and it doesn't have to be beautiful. I mean, in

fact it's maybe more interesting if it's kind of ugly. Maybe there should be more ugly on Instagram - it's too clean. (Eri)

I regrettably didn't push him to give me an example of ugly content, but I imagine that it perhaps looks unpolished, obscure, something that is 'not representative of the whole and maybe there will never be a whole that emerges', he goes on to say. Eri's uploading of ugly content goes against the idea of the whole/clean/complete queer subject, that he refuses 'to be constrained by happiness' (Ahmed 2010, p. 15; Ngai 2007), and thus open up other ways of being as a queer digital diasporic subject. He is not providing his followers (or potential brands) with complete positive content that they can readily consume, preferring to invite them to think on ugly images, as he finds their responses to these compelling.

Continuing this resistance of homonormativity on Instagram, Zaa thinks it is important to be 'more real' in their content:

I think ultimately Instagram is a propaganda machine, people do pay these people in order to further their own politics or their own agendas. Be that bigging people up or deflecting criticism from their own position of privilege. I think people just need to be a bit more real with each other. (Zaa)

Zaa tells me that they are 'pissed off' that class is rarely talked about within the diaspora, and they hope to bring working-class diaspora experience to the fore. Bringing up these uncomfortable truths, in an environment where Zaa thinks SAAD space users shouldn't lump themselves into an 'oppressed kind of band wagon', would allow an array of queer South Asian identities to emerge, not just those whose wealthy life-worlds are valued. For Zaa, those who become the most visible online (usually because they can afford to be) end up *speaking* on behalf of others, self-describing as oppressed, but rarely willing to unpack what this means and how they themselves are implicated in global homonormative cultures. Writing on intersectionality within queer circles in 1997, Cathy J. Cohen reiterates this point, identifying a liberatory queer politics that Eri and Zaa do not see being reflected on Instagram:

In the roots of a lived "queer" existence are experiences with domination and in particular heteronormativity that form the basis for genuine transformational politics. By transformational, again, I mean a politics that does not search for opportunities to integrate into dominant institutions and normative social relationships, but instead pursues a political agenda that seeks to change values, definitions, and laws which make these institutions and relationships oppressive (Cohen 1997, p. 444-5)

I return to the obfuscation of class and caste within Instagram in chapter eight.

Influencer aspirations of everyday users

Although the references I use to demonstrate queer South Asian homonormative cultures on Instagramcome from Influencers and not everyday users, Influencer culture has had an impact on the ways in which everyday users navigate and understand queer South Asian diasporic identity. The danger in aspiring to a clean image of queer South Asian identity means that homonormative cultures become the 'successful' way to be queer and South Asian; Hee, who is queer and critical of Western concepts of 'coming out', told me that they were contacted by a make-up brand to promote a cosmetics product and are considering taking up the offer. Whilst they are not emotionally invested in the transaction ('I don't want to be considered an influencer, but free stuff is cool I guess', they tell me), they are also considering it.

Homonormativity within Instagram reveals how such renderings, like transnational postfeminism, are tied to transnational homonormative media cultures that not only force a plethora of subject positionalities into the category of 'brown' oppression, but also perform a South Asian queerness that integrates 'into dominant institutions and normative social relationships' (Cohen), encouraging everyday users into neoliberal practices of the self in the process (self-branding, sponsorship deals, etc.).

For those like Eri and Zaa who are in opposition to homonormative neoliberal practices, their critiques serve to expand not only Cohen's concept of liberatory queer politics in calling for resistance to dominant ways of being, but also Helsper's theory of the rich get richer online:

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While extroverted, highly socially resourced users are more likely to engage with social uses of ICTs, they are less likely to depend on them for information and social feedback. (Helsper 2021, p. 141).

I think this point aptly describes the ways in which Influencers and those whose content algorithmically rises to the top utilise the digital. Homonormative Influencers are incredibly skilled in their social engagements online; they possess the financial and social resources to reap the benefits and perform a version of South Asian queerness that is perceived as successful. In doing so, they also inspire a business ontology of the self in everyday users, who may not want to be thought of as Influencers, but who become implicated in the same system of identity-as-brand. What this practice obscures firstly, is the difficulties for those queer South Asian subjects on the social and economic margins who will never attain this kind of success and secondly, the nuance needed to fully contemplate what is actually required in the fight for South Asian queer liberation.

Eri and Zaa's critiques become important resistive practices when navigating through homonormative media cultures because neoliberal practices become accepted forms of activism in queer South Asian digital diasporas. Ugly images, always in transition, go against the clean whole image perpetuated by those who go on to become the successful queer Instagram subject, excluding and further marginalising queer South Asian bodies who cannot or do not wish to attain this kind of success. Allowing oneself to not become subsumed in a neoliberal digital economy becomes difficult on social media, because it is the user creating the content and uploading it. This obfuscation of the bigger mechanisms at work can make it difficult to ascertain how we are being shaped by these digital media technologies, but it is not impossible to reflect on; the impact of Influencer economies on everyday digital usership is something I come back to in chapter six . In the following section, I give space to those who recognise the limitations of queer world-making on Instagram.

Limitations of Instagram for queer world-making

Eri is a queer artist living in Amsterdam and doesn't feel that Instagram is a platform that encourages political dialogue or community:

Some people are very assertive and outspoken, from politics to gender, etcetera like everything that they identify with. I saw this a little bit more on Tumblr before I started on Instagram [...] the kinds of conversations that took place on Tumblr and the way the exchanges took place on Tumblr were very different to exchanges on Instagram [...] I think Yahoo bought it out and like a bunch of censorship guidelines and all the terms of service changed. (Eri)

Tumblr, a microblogging and social network website founded in 2007, has been labelled a queer technology by some digital queer studies scholars (Cho 2015; Vivienne 2017; Cavalcante 2018), who, like Eri, valued the conversations and content that gave space to queer users:

Tumblr allowed trans users the changeability, network separation, and identity realness, along with the queer aspects of multiplicity, fluidity, and ambiguity, needed for gender transition. (Haimson et al., 2019, p. 346)

Haimson et al.'s study of trans users on Tumblr revealed how corporate interests outweighed and dismantled trans communities online. In 2018, Tumblr announced that it would no longer allow "adult" content on the site, meaning that educational and medical information about gender transitions were banned. This sent a clear message to trans users and by extension, the wider queer community on Tumblr; users usually brought up in Western societies 'are taught to mistake the erotic for the pornographic, in a system that defines "good" as profitable' (*Ibid.,* p. 353). Thus, the "good" becomes the most attractive content legible to wider audiences and which proves to be the most profitable for corporations. For Eri, the complexity of queer world-making was allowed on Tumblr, not because the site welcomed it, but because until 2018, it not stop it.

Content moderation shifts in line with controversies and user practices (T. Gillespie 2018), signalling how Tumblr were unwilling to listen to its queer users who had shaped the platform to meet their political, social and emotional needs. A rejection of marginalised user practices by corporate enterprises comes as no surprise, but points to ways in which a user-centred

approach should be advocated for. Participants like Eri and Aaz notice these restrictions for certain users on Instagram, where "good" visual aesthetics is valued over other things:

> *It can be used to continue heteronormativity, patriarchy if you're not careful. [...] I think that we're doing good but we just need to be aware that we're not trying to commit these crimes again [...] you always have to be learning, always have to be willing to push it because Instagram is one place where I think stagnation can be easily identified but a lot of people don't know how to identify stagnation when they're looking at pretty things. (Aaz)*

Aaz understands that users can get swept up into this way on engaging on Instagram and being able to be critical of the platform becomes difficult, where the same 'stagnant' images and ideas can end up circulating in pursuit of more pleasing images. Instagram 'despite the rhetoric of friendship' continues to privilege 'the dominance of commercial displays and exchanges', encouraging users to publish content 'in the persona of a public figure for an imagined, unseen audience' (Leaver et al., 2020, p. 103). Thus, the continuation of oppressive power structures of heteronormativity and patriarchy as identified by Aaz can continue with little resistance, as users continue to self-brand and self-manage identity.

One solution could be to move away from Instagram, although not engaging can lead to social exclusion. Aside from censorship changes, Eri says that he moved from Tumblr to Instagram because of 'social pressure':

> *I was like, okay, I can't really engage with these short conversations or posting [on Tumblr] and there seems to be quite a lot of people also having some of my dialogues on Instagram. So that's where I think it started but also because a lot of my other friends around me - like peer pressure or social pressure were like 'hey we want to know what you're up to' (Eri)*

An obvious aspect of social media is its ability to connect people digitally, but this digital sociability brings demands with it from other followers on Instagram, who demand to 'know what you're up to'. Whilst not denying Tumblr's corporate intentions from its inception in

2007, it feels as though Instagram has heightened this corporate dimension further, and the furthering of corporate "good" queer aesthetics has pushed other marginalised queer aesthetics and narratives further from visibility. Pvn still feels like Tumblr is a much more diverse site in comparison to Instagram:

> *I'd say Instagram is way more policed than Tumblr is. […] I think it's difficult because it's [Instagram] a form of self-expression but its limited self-expression. (Pvn)*

Limited self-expression within Instagram, as recognised by queer participants themselves, means that some of them will find unique and diverse ways of engaging outside of the confines of the platform. Despite criticisms of Instagram, it is where their friends and family are and usually where others will go to find out what is happening in their lives.

In highlighting these thoughts, I want to show how users are aware of the limitations of the platform as a space that in and of itself, is coded along corporate rather than emancipatory lines. Thus, although Instagram has allowed for certain opportunities for connection, it is marginalised users who have sought out and created modes of being together in distinctive and meaningful ways, precisely because some of them understand the ways in which they are being restricted as queer users. This is something that marginalised digital users have always done (like trans users on Tumblr), yet research has not focussed on how queer British South Asian users have done this on Instagram.

For those who are outside of the "good", homonormative neoliberal economy of social media visibility, I introduce the concept of (in)visible selves and queer networks in the following section as a way to delve into the unique ways that participants utilise Instagram.

(In)visible selves

Berlant's theory of intimate publics has been applied rigorously to digital spaces where queer diasporic bodies congregate through forums, websites, etc. (Dobson et al. 2018) but in this chapter, I am keen to know, in light of participants telling me that they have experienced policing within Instagram, *how* they foster a shared intimacy that evades this surveillance.

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Like Andre Brock in his analyses of Black Twitter users, I am wary of erasing the unique digital practices of participants, and so dedicate the following section to their individual ways of maintaining intimacy through what I term (in)visibility and the maintenance and expansion of their networks.

(In)visibly queer

Talking about South Asian queer spaces, digital media scholar Rohit Dasgupta writes:

> I am slightly critical of desi queer organizations, I must admit. Having volunteered for over a year in one and being involved with another, I was shocked at how little political engagement they have initiated. There also seems to be a move towards 'visibility politics', with certain desi queer 'faces' of the community making it an essential part of their politics (Dasgupta et al., 2018, p. 74).

Dasgupta sees this visibility as a forced aspect taken from western queer practices and criticises the South Asian diaspora queer community's urge to make people come out to their families. Making oneself vulnerable, he argues, is not sustainable when there are very few networks of support for South Asian queer individuals. Living in what is globally perceived as a liberal democracy here in the UK, means that they are seen as 'not worthy of much support' (Rao in Dasgupta et al., p.77), in comparison to the fight for queer rights in India during the campaigning against section 377 in 2018. This isn't to say that the struggle has been made any easier for queer communities on the subcontinent after the decriminalisation of section 377, but rather that there is an assumption that being queer and South Asian in the UK must be easy because one is cushioned by liberalism.

None of my participants have found it easy being queer and South Asian – most have not told their families and the one who has, did not speak to her parents for several years. They do not feel seen or respected in mainstream queer spaces. Coming out is not an option, but enacting queerness cannot be helped. A process I found incredibly interesting and one which got me thinking about participants being (in)visibly queer was Dal's comment:

I don't post about my sexuality. The big reason why I take the creative path account is because I wouldn't want to accidentally post something on my public one. […] Even though I think that I don't hide it, there are clues if you look quite closely. So for example, one of the companies I work for, Gaysians […] I do all their Twitter, I've been doing some Instagram. We've got more people on the team, so the pressures less on me. I'll post about our events, but I always keep it where I have plausible deniability. So, if I post about a book I'm reading that may be about LGBT culture, but I'm not explicitly saying I am bisexual, coz I have family on Instagram now.(Dal)

Dal's approach of 'saying stuff without ever saying it' subverts the 'default publicness' championed by social media at large. Facebook, for example, was criticised for its real identity policy by queer users for whom digital pseudonymity was and still is paramount to feeling safe online (Newton 2014). Pum also tells me that she prefers to represent things, rather than say them out loud:

I am giving myself 100% away, I'm just doing it through representation rather than portraying it accurately if that makes sense? I'm choosing to show it in a very specific way rather than saying this is what it actually is. But I don't think I'm hiding or masking anything (Pum)

Alexander Cho writes that default publicness on social media is not 'the simple instantiation of a social media post available for everyone online to see' but rather 'a design stance, an orientation and a "belief" built into the architecture of social media spaces' (Cho 2017, p.3184). Much like the oppressive structures of algorithms, default publicness pushes for a western, heteropatriarchal form of publicness that queer diasporic bodies cannot display. Dal subverts this by posting about South Asian LGBTQIA+ events and culture without implicating herself, instead leaving 'clues if you look quite closely'. Communicating subversively to others becomes a strategy amongst queer users who find ways to let others know who they are and what they think. Similarly, Hee tells me:

I am not "out" in any way to my family or community. I am comfortable in my identities enough to vaguely allude to them on my IG bio. (Hee)

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The IG bio can be seen by anyone who navigates to an account, even if that account is private - it is here that Hee has decided to allude to their queerness by posting things like a pride flag emoji. This notion of (in)visibilising the queer self on Instagram allows participants to push a queer publicness that they are comfortable with. Through the deployment of (in)visibility as a strategy to live as a queer body, they also claim a queer space for South Asian identity. In avoiding confrontation and keeping important familial relationships going, the (in)visible queer self becomes self-defining and self-defensive. This also creates the possibility to imagine queerness outside of digital neoliberal structures that are constantly pushing us to make visible our identities in a ploy to turn queerness into a marketing brand.

'Community' has become a contested definition when it comes to Instagram which many claim 'stretches the idea of community further than is meaningful' (Leaver et. al., 2020, p. 20). The idea of community on Instagram is a complex one, but to an extent, offers an avenue to explore other ways of being that participants are denied when being with the wider community. Abl lives in Birmingham and is part of a big South Asian Muslim community:

> *Every time we go to these gatherings, we have to wear desi clothes, we don't wear western clothes even though it's not an occasion, it's not a special event. It's like you're still expected to put on your best behaviour. We're here in front of the community. So I've always had that connection with Asians because they're everywhere around me, but then I've also always felt very vulnerable because I've always had to put on some kind of front, you can't be yourself in front of these people. (Abl)*

Although participants do not usually have physical social links with each other on Instagram, a sense of community is fostered through the use of emojis that allow people who do not know each other that well to still be able to offer support and affirmation:

> *I think there is a lot of community support that goes on and with these kinds of quick message reacts, like clapping or the heart, you don't have to message but you can send support, it's good for people that don't really know you but still support what you're doing. (Zaa)*

These message reacts provide an affective atmosphere of support; the clapping hands and heart emojis being the emotional responses that are much needed but usually missing from the people who 'you can't be yourself in front of'. These reacts become a way to facilitate emotional and affective transmissions, of building kinship and 'moments of affective relationality that open the door to new ways of conceptualising the self and others' (Gopinath 2008, p. 129).

Even within Instagram, there aren't always many like you, so how do you understand and conceptualise the self without support? Job, who was born in Trinidad but grew up in London and self describes as a 'butch Asian woman' found Instagram to be much more positive and responsive compared to other platforms like Facebook. Job tells me that

> *in South Asian culture, butch Asian women are probably quite rare, but it's quite a self-perpetuating cycle of not having role models. (Job)*

Job tells me that the decision to become more public online was an act of bringing herself into being:

> *I just know how sad I felt because of the lack of visibility. So I was like, 'I'm just going to make it public, I'm going to be a bit more visible as a cyclist, as a brown female cyclist, I'm gonna be more visible as part of a queer non-binary women's band'. So yeah, it was a conscious decision. (Job)*

This coming into being for Job is less about building a following (she tells me she routinely deletes people she doesn't know that well) and more about finding others who make her 'feel better about [her]self' and vice versa.

Even a default publicness is infused somehow with a queerness that allows others to confide in certain participants. Bla does not post up content that displays a queer publicness (she is married to a man) but has had a queer follower reach out to her:

> *It was just the day before yesterday, there was a queer Sikh and he messaged me and he was talking about how uncomfortable he feels in spiritual spaces as in like at the gurdwara or just within his community. (Bla)*

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Similarly, Afs, who is queer but does not display a queer publicness has had others open up to her:

> *I think because of the way I am, there was a period of time where in the space of 6 months about four Muslim women came out to me and that's only because I'm really open about who I am, my identity and there was this feeling that there was no judgement. (Afs)*

Offering a space of no judgement creates a safe space for others to reach out, but it also reveals how a default publicness permits a way of being that is denied others. Bla and Afs do not publicly talk about being queer and can therefore display a default publicness that to those not tuned into the 'queer optic' (Gopinath 2018, p. 170) of their content can be seen as heteronormative and therefore acceptable. Bla posts up illustration work that explores the religious and spiritual dimensions of Sikhism and Afs posts up photos of friends and work. Here we witness how the digital world is 'not living up to the promises of a totally decentralised space for everybody to freely express themselves', in the words of participant Eri.

Inevitably, class and financial stability also has a role to play in the UGC participants post up and the default publicness they can display; Bha and Bla both have good jobs and live in their own houses, and therefore are not relying on their parents. For the likes of Ill and Zaa, both of whom live at home and are currently unemployed, displays of queer UGC can cause tensions at home and are avoided as a result.; here I refer back to Ill's comment about her mother telling her to take down her content when she saw 'someone post something negative about the LGBT community'.

Although Bla and Afs's content can be read as heteronormative and therefore aligns somewhat with a default publicness we have gotten used to seeing on Instagram, it is also (in)visibly queer. Both cultivate online spaces of 'no judgement', keying into a framework that lets 'queer South Asians find care alongside activism in constructed spaces of intimacy' (Bhardhwaj p. 334). These constructed spaces are important because as Sunil Rao points out,

'none of the other communities are going to do it for us' (Rao in Dasgupta et al., p.77). Bla and Afs display a default publicness so that others can remain (in)visible. Some don't even get the opportunity to be allies.

To conclude, the practice of (in)visibility within Instagram means that participants embody queerness by keying into a queer optic, making them visible to those who matter and invisible to those who don't. For Dal, queerness is alluded to through creativity, such as the posting up of queer literature. For others, it is through the deployment of symbols such as the rainbow flag and private message reacts, which become ways to enact 'affective relationality' (Gopinath 2018, p. 129); if you post an image and somebody understands the reference, then you are being affirmed in who you are, therefore can conceptualise yourself as a queer South Asian body, when it is difficult to do that AFK. I also consider (in)visibility as a practice that disrupts digital neoliberal practices of self-branding, because (as Job demonstrates in her routine culling of followers) it is cultivated as an intimate space for strong relationships, not a public space for a high number of followers. Finally, the default publicness displayed by those who can been seen as adhering to heteronormative practices (i.e., there is nothing transgressively queer about their content per se) are in fact promoting an intimate space that queer users can feel comfortable in. Whilst it is difficult for a default queer publicness to exist within Instagram, an (in)visible queerness can.

British South Asian Queer networks on Instagram

(In)visibility enables participants to 'grasp the unanticipated intimacies between bodies' (Gopinath 2018, p. 170), which can spill out AFK, beyond the screen. This section came into being because, as Legacy Russell maintains, our digital reality is as complex as our material reality. I therefore wanted to unpack the notion of queer networks on Instagram; I once used to think that the natural progression of digital friendships were that they eventually left the digital realm and existed in the material, but I consider this more a fluid relationship – they can exist in many forms where there is no assumption about linear progression into the material:

Also similarly, I've met people through Instagram first and then in real life or just had conversations online with people that I may or may not meet, but there's a form of solidarity and it's like an online community. (Her)

Hee does not necessarily need to meet people in real life – solidarity that stays within Instagram remains valid and allows members to build an archive of resources, when these resources are incredibly scarce AFK:

Connecting with accounts supporting queer and gnc [gender non-conforming] south Asians, accounts that support independent south Asian artists/stylists/designers, accounts that tackle history and politics- this has all allowed me access to the representational content I would have died for as a child. It is incredibly important to me and I share as much as I can from those accounts so others can use them as resources. (Hee)

Sharing content through IG stories, following accounts and reposting content that centers queer South Asian identity become actions that create networks across Instagram – hence it is not just people talking to each other online, but also sharing certain content that builds a sense of community. Not everyone can share a public queerness on their profile, and so other ways of forming networks, whilst remaining safe and not being spied on, include following certain accounts and 'liking', watching and bookmarking resources.

Online communities building strength through the sharing of content isn't anything new, but it is important to think about the ways in which, much like participant's ideas around gender and sexuality, Instagram networks are fluid; although it is not a cohesive community that defines itself, it is also not a solely online community either. These entanglements serve to extend queer networks into something that is gloriously messy. My own experiences of following someone online and then seeing them in real life does create a strange moment. Job tells a similar story, relaying how the occurrence has increased her queer network:

Someone just came up to me and she was another butch Asian woman - I'd seen her, and I was like 'another butch Asian woman!' and she was like 'oh yeah I follow your

band on Instagram' […] I didn't realise she was already following me and that was an icebreaker, so we've hung out a few times. (Job)

As a result of finding each other via Instagram, Job and this woman have spent time together AFK. Job is part of a women of colour cycling group and had encouraged her new friend to join, which she did. Instagram and participant's queer networks outside of this become bigger and enmeshed as a result. For Pvn too, it has meant that socially, their networks have expanded AFK:

I've been able to meet a lot more trans people, because of things like Instagram […] you get to stay in touch with others and send each other messages and hang out in person and things. You get to find what events are going as well through those people and just you can go on Instagram and see what the events involve, like Deptford pride and things like that. (Pvn)

The point that I am making when it comes to queer networking within Instagram is that it remains fluid in its forging of connections both online and AFK. To reiterate Radha Hedge's point, the ever-evolving conditions of connectivity are continually 'transforming the meaning of how communities are formed' (Hedge 2014, p. 100). Many participants see the same value in online and AFK interactions, especially when queer South Asian life is so invisible. For some, this leads to friendships AFK, but not everyone is seeking this out – there are no rules around how queer networks are created and maintained. When it comes to queer digital networks, Russell writes that

limits are bound up within a construct of "real life", one that violently forecloses worlds, rather than expands them. IRL [In Real Life] falters in its skewed assumption that constructions of online identities are latent, closeted, and fantasy-oriented (e.g., *not* real) rather than explicit, bristling with potential, and very capable of "living on" away from the space of cyberspace. […] our gestures, explorations, actions online can inform and even deepen our offline, or AFK, existence. (Russell 2020, p. 43).

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The complexity of these networks remain vital to those whose lives are made richer for their connections made within Instagram, in ways that are not always easy to see or quantify. These networks become ever more significant as the potential to create queer religious spaces or access resources become possible, which is what I explore further in the final section of this chapter.

Queerness and religion

The role that religion played in queer participants' lives varied and as a result, the way they navigated it within Instagram varied too. Some participants have avoided it throughout their lives:

> *All my friends, none of them were Indian, I had one Indian friend, and even at uni I had a real negative opinion of the Hindu Society or the Indian Society at uni. […] Before I had never seen and I've never felt like I've fitted in before, even with my own cousins, I barely keep in touch with anybody. (Bha)*

In Bha's case, her family were not strictly religious in the first place; her father is a Hindu from Gujarat and her mother is a Guyanese Christian whose family originated from India. Bha tells me that religion 'was there in the background', but never really a major part of her family's life. Bha's reluctance at being part of the Hindu and Indian societies was because she felt like she didn't really fit in, perhaps because these were never places she was familiar with when she was living at home. Inscribing religion onto every participant is something I am wary of doing, as some do not have strong links to local religious communities or institutions. For Bha, the unease she felt in being around her family was less around religious concerns and more to do with their lack of understanding of queer identity, which only began to open up for Bha once she started connecting with queer South Asians on Instagram.

For Zaa, avoiding their community was a form of self-protection, but it is a separation that they think is unhelpful:

I think growing up, I've been quite cautious to hang around with a lot of people from my own community […] I think that cliques form also; there is a South Asian Instagram world that is a religious - I can only speak of the Muslim one - I think that community, and there's queer South Asian makers and there are these cliques that are forming and I think that it does become an echo chamber sometimes and there isn't much communication between these worlds. […] A lot of people I know, me included, they pre-emptively block a lot of conservative family members […] I think there is that kind of paranoia and not talking. (Zaa)

Living in a Muslim family, Zaa thinks that it is unfortunate that religious and queer Instagrammers have separated themselves off into 'cliques' and 'echo chambers'. The increased division and perceived paranoia has meant that there is a lack of communication between different religious and queer groups, even though there is an increase in these conversations within the groups. Thus, algorithms offer each group tailored content and are the default architecture that works *against* marginalised communities, further dividing them into echo chambers that do not allow for an intersectional and decolonial solidarity to emerge. I explore the possibility for these solidarities to occur across platforms in chapter eight.

Like Zaa, Hee thinks a separation from their religious community does not work and they are committed to finding other ways of subverting heteronormativity and Western queer practices whilst maintaining links to family and community:

It's definitely an issue for me as I don't believe in the western concept of "coming out" yet am still very close to my cultural community and family in real life and do not wish to share these parts of me with them as I know they will be unwelcoming. (Hee)

Both Zaa and Hee have a pre-emptive hunch of what the community would do if they talked about queerness and whilst this could be to do with previous negative consequences (especially in Zaa's case where homophobic messages were exchanged between school peers), it is important to unpack why other participants feel that there is a mutual exclusivity between queerness and religion.

Dal feels as if her bisexuality will not be accepted by others alongside her Sikhism:

> *I don't necessarily identify as Sikh – it's that kind of time in my life where I'm old enough to think those things over myself, especially because I identify as bisexual, so then the two, according to some people, don't always go together, even though I've been bought up with that. Like my idea of a wedding, for example, is in the Gurdwara, our temple. A traditional wedding but obviously some people who follow our religion would have a lot to say about that. (Dal)*

As demonstrated at the start of this chapter, homophobia within the diaspora is a very real concern, with queer participants finding it difficult to live their truths because of the lack of support they would receive as a result. Whilst mainstream queer spaces can offer some respite, they can often end up enacting colonial practices of othering, making participants uncomfortable. For Bud, the separation of religion and queerness is a hallmark of conservative Muslim communities and white queer spaces, and therefore unwelcoming:

> *I wanted to really explore the reinforcement of the idea of that being Muslim and being queer is mutually exclusive and that is perpetuated both by the Muslim Community and the LGBT societies in Western civilisation that are mainly run by white Western individuals. (Bud)*

Bud wanted to commit a master's thesis to the exploration of queerness and Islam but was told by the university department that she couldn't, because they feared backlash from the local Muslim community – even in trying to understand herself on her terms, Bud was shut down rather than assisted by the institution in trying to better comprehend the plight of young queer practicing Muslims. Although participants like Bud are being met with opposition, they continue to interrogate these tensions.

In beginning to untangle these complexities myself, I found Jasbir Puar's revisiting of *Terrorist Assemblages* incredibly useful. Reading religion into the project of homonationalism,

(whereby the State co-opts LGBTQIA+ politics in service of nationalism) Puar contends that Christianity's liberal acceptance of LGBT people serves in the 'othering' of non-Western nations and religions, further excelling Western exceptionalism:

> The deconstruction of the binary between religion and (homo)sexuality emerges dangerously close to forms of Christian exceptionalism that undergird if not drive homonationalist tendencies towards consolidating narratives of racial and civilisational exceptionalism. (Puar 2014, p.205)

Thus, early Christian theological texts have been imbued with a transgressive quality so that 'queernesses already manifesting within the fold of early Christianity are imbued with exceptionalist tendencies' (Ibid., p. 206). This Western exceptionalism has perhaps trickled down into mainstream queer spaces, making participants feel judged and patronised as a result; the Muslim/Sikh/Hindu queer person who has to choose between their regressive religion and their queer life.

Some participants have refused the idea that their religions are regressive and their interactions on Instagram are a good example of this. Whilst a path towards reconciling religion and queerness can feel obscured, others are aware that they can hold space for these things to exist. Bla was messaged by a queer Sikh follower and in response she created 'an online comfortable gurdwara space' for him:

> *The fact that he reached out and he felt that he could connect with me, and he felt comfortable sharing that, felt really special because it was almost like we created an online comfortable gurdwara space that he couldn't get in a physical space but he had that and that was really nice. (Bla)*

Bla has decided to practice Sikhism in a different way - creating online space for ritual and ceremony, she reimagines religious doctrines, where women and queer folk are leading prayers and holding space that is deeply rooted in religious practices; the work being done is not tied to a neoliberal push for recognition from the algorithm, but rather a push towards being there for each other in (in)visible ways. Participants may not always be well versed in

academic theories of intersectionality but embody queer sensibilities that offer support to those they recognise as being on the margins.

Other online groups such as the Inclusive Mosque Initiative and Sarbat LGBT+ Sikhs network also provide readings of the Quran and the Guru Granth Sahib, reworking texts and recognising their religious links to social justice activism and intersectional community cohesion. Another group that participant Afs knows, provides a useful religious space for users:

> *There's this queer Muslim group in Manchester that's now started on Instagram, then a lot of queer groups that post their stories, ask for advice, ask people to get involved in opinion polls and that's always really nice. So it feels like I'm more connected to people even though I might not physically be. (Afs)*

This is incredibly important work because community conservativism and Western attitudes towards queer religiosity have often left queer British South Asians who want to practice religion feeling alone in their desires, as Bud tells me:

> *Any queer Muslims I've ever heard of (and there hasn't been many), they've rejected their faith. However, I don't want to, so how do you find other people who are like you when it's quite dangerous? Some people, it could end really badly for them if their families or communities found out (Bud)*

When it comes to participant's communities, I find that it is the conservativism of others that they usually take issue with, not with the religion itself. Challenging community attitudes means beginning to unpack colonial, hetero-patriarchal and capitalist legacies alongside caste-based discrimination to arrive at a place where we begin to dismantle these things not only within the white spaces around us, but also within our South Asian diaspora communities. Reinscribing queerness into non-Western religions is one way of doing this, disrupting Western exceptionalism in the process. I conclude this final section with a passage from feminist diaspora scholars Katy Pal Sian and Rita Kaur Dhamoon, which urges us to continue pushing for a decolonised relationship with religion that goes beyond cultural identities and into global networks of de-territorialised diaspora identities:

A decolonial Sikh Studies must commit itself to aligning itself with postcolonial feminisms, Asian feminisms, Indigenous feminisms, Black feminisms, and Latinx feminisms that critique reductive analysis and develop instead tools to narrate our own histories and our futures outside a Eurocentric framework.' (Sian and Dhamoon 2020, p. 51)

Conclusion

I began this chapter with an acknowledgement of participants' openness to queer possibilities – even those who identified as cis-gender and heterosexual were keen to disrupt binaries of gender and sexuality. This queering of diaspora identity makes 'non-heterosexual desires and erotic or cultural practices intelligible, even if they are expressed in forms different from categorical enunciation or public manifestation' (Klesse 2015, p. 136). I found this hopeful because space was being claimed outside of the constructs of heteronormativity. This thinking becomes even more valuable given the homophobia I was surprised to learn was still prevalent within the diaspora. In conjunction with the othering participants felt in mainstream LGBTQIA+ spaces and the homonormative leanings of "good" content perpetuated by queer South Asian Influencers from the diaspora, participants found ways to resist and critique, which is crucial, as Helsper writes:

Digital content creation is the online activity that could potentially impact not just on our own life-worlds, but our shared digital futures. The content we create and promote through our online activities is our legacy. It shapes the world for those who come after us. Therefore, it influences who feels welcome and has a chance to build on what we have done (Helsper 2021, p. 175)

The impact that Influencer content has on our everday life-worlds is something I come back to in chapter six. Counteracting homonormative content, I introduced the concept of (in)visible selves, whereby participants fostered a shared intimacy through allusion to queer politics, message reacts and a default publicness that allowed others to key into the queer optics of their content. The fluidity of queer networks also served to disrupt hierarchies that

placed more value on offline realities, when the online is just as real, especially for marginalised users. Concluding with the participants' embodying of queer religious practices, I ague that it has the potential to further open up possibilities of an intersectional, decolonial and de-territorialised diaspora identity.

However, not all participants are critical of a neoliberal digital economy that perpetuates homonormative renderings of South Asian diasporic identity. The following chapter addresses the postfeminist leanings of Instagram through the figure of the #browngirl.

Chapter 6: #browngirls

The previous chapter explored how queer participants built visible and (in)visible intimate publics through Instagram. The risks involved in displaying a default public queerness has meant that there are conditions over who has the monopoly on default publicness. More often than not, this means that identities displaying heteronormative or at best, a hidden queer optic, become the most popular way of being online. Nobody I had spoken to had fully leaned into South Asian queerness-as-brand, but using other examples from Instagram to show how a homonormative branding is pushed online, I concluded that participants are often encouraged to display a business savvy when it comes to LGBTQIA+ politics as a way to overcome adversity and hostility from family and the wider community.

Following this line of inquiry, I begin this chapter by invoking the concept of the #browngirl. Taken from participant responses, the #browngirl comes to represent a particular kind of subjectivity. I use the hashtag because participants would often use the word 'brown' with the hashtag, showing how this user-generated mechanism has evolved on social media. Initially understood as a way to create "searchable talk" (Zappavigna 2012), hashtags have evolved from an information-organising tool to a resource for building social relations (Zappavigna 2012). There are studies looking at the ways in which hashtags create ad hoc communities that either persist or dissolve online (Bruns and Burgess 2011). Tracing the trajectory of #browngirl allows me to understand how this hashtag builds this ad hoc community and what this figure represents about this community. Throughout this chapter I ask: Who is she? What does she come to represent within the wider world of digital self-representation and digital labour? How does she reconfigure South Asian identity within Instagram?

In this first section I invoke the #browngirl as a space invader in the spirit of Nirmal Puwar's intervention that interrogated the taking up of institutional space by marginalised bodies. I find Puwar's concept useful because 'our analysis needs to go beyond the number-crunching exercises which count (monitor) the quantities of different bodies in the stratified structure of institutions' (Puwar 2004, p. 32). In much the same way, my intervention hopes to offer an analysis of women and queer British South Asian Instagram users that goes beyond the fact

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that they are present online, instead looking at how the politics around gender and race are shaped online. Before this, I briefly interrogate the term 'brown' as used by my participants and how this word has taken up a prominent position on Instagram.

From 'desi' to 'brown'

I am female, I am Muslim, I am brown (Bro)

I mainly want it to say that I am creative, but I am also a brown woman (Gur)

I noticed that more participants tended to use the word 'brown' over 'desi'. Derived from the Sanskrit 'desh' meaning 'of a country', 'desi' is a word used colloquially by South Asian communities to refer to those of South Asian descent. In Helen Kim's exploration of the word within the British South Asian music scene of the early 2000s, 'desi' (as opposed to 'British Asian') was a term used by younger members of the diaspora. This signalled a shift towards a transnational 'desi' community that was forming around internet radio stations, download sites and forums (Kim 2012). Fast forward to an era in which social media platforms like Instagram have proliferated, and the preference for 'brown' over 'desi' signals another shift in modes of belonging within social media.

In some cases, I noticed 'desi' being used to conjure up nostalgia or South Asian tradition by some participants when talking about 'growing up eating desi food' (abl) or talking about following desi accounts 'where you could wear traditional clothes with your normal clothes' (Bal2). Bud, who is an undergraduate student in Brighton, uses the term to describe the diaspora in a telling way:

But it's very interesting because there's a lot of black-phobia within the desi community, yet in our school, it was slightly different; the Black and the Asian kids were pretty chilling and if there was any racial differences, it was amongst the whites against either Black or Asian or Black and Asian. (Bud)

Here, 'desi' represents racist community attitudes towards the Black British population and Asian is employed as a positive term to describe the South Asian kids at Bud's school in the context of racial solidarity with their Black school peers.

In some respects, 'desi' has come to represent an older conservative community and is therefore imbued with nostalgic and traditional qualities for a few participants. For others however, it has allowed them an opportunity to key into a particular kind of British South Asian-ness, whether that be desi comedians, #SouthAsiandesilesbian or #desipunk. Yet, very few participants used the word 'desi' all at; how 'brown' has come to replace 'desi' reveals a shift in how participants want to be perceived in global networks of identity performance and communication.

'Brown' was a word I began seeing more (in place of 'desi' or 'South Asian') roughly four years ago when I saw a screenshot of a Twitter thread circulating on Instagram. The tweet joked about how brown dads bulk buy fruit and expected their children to eat it in one sitting, reminding me of how when my dad visits, he brings a box load of fruit that I palm off onto friends because it is an impossible amount to eat. I sent this screenshot to a friend whose Nigerian dad did the same thing; my understanding of 'brown' coming to mean person of colour. I noticed the word crop up more on social media and it was one that participants used a lot to describe themselves and me. One participant, Lai, clapped her hands exclaiming 'you go brown girl!', when I told her that I was doing a PhD. Another told me she used the hashtag #browngirlmagic in her posts so that other South Asians could find her. Searching #browngirlmagic brings up over 249,000 posts on Instagram. Judging by the images, the term has been embraced by women of colour from around the globe – from Filipino fashion designers and Pakistani mothers to Mexican novelists and Black American business owners.

Participants no longer see themselves as tapping into a transnational 'desi' community but align themselves with 'brown'; on Instagram this can be both national and global, with participants seeing themselves as fitting into both. Tattoo artist Hel describes her posts as 'super brown', embracing both a global 'people of colour' network and her South Asian heritage:

I love being able to show people of colour that tattoos look amazing on their skin tones, no matter what shade. […] Just because my job is a bit different it doesn't take away from the fact that at home I still live the same life as any average young South Asian person. (Hel)

Although working in Leicester, Hel's posts tap into a global 'brown' audience, regardless of whether her physical business attracts international clients. To be a part of a global brown network, it makes more sense to self-describe as 'brown' rather than 'desi', but it also brings a sense of empowerment in spaces where participants feel invisible. In the following section I approach the #browngirl as a space invader.

The #browngirl and the institutional narrative

Unease was keenly felt by participants in majority white institutional settings. Feeling left out, invisible or patronised, meant that participants worked hard to take up space, and Instagram helped build this confidence. After modelling her art practice on famous 1990s art collective the Young British Artists (YBA), Mis, a 19-year-old fine art student found artwork through Instagram that better articulated her practice:

Remember when you had the YBA artists? And they were all white - you're a token person of colour and then I remember in [art] foundation I was like 'I'm one of them, like this is me' and coming here [university] and then thinking, actually that's not me. I just made work to try and fit in with them and through Instagram I've found artists [where] the work I'm doing hasn't had to change to sort of suit them. (Mis)

Mis felt a pressure to make her work fit into the aesthetic sensibilities of the YBAs and found that Instagram offered her an alternative network of artists. In her book 'Space Invaders', Nirmal Puwar writes 'when a body is emptied of its gender or race, this is a mark of how its position is the privileged norm' (Puwar 2004, p.57). This ''privileged position' that is 'reserved' for those who are not bedraggled by the humble shackles of nature, emotion and, in effect, the bodily, [allows] them to escape into the higher realms of rationality and mind' (I*bid*.).

Forgetting their raced and gendered bodies is not an option for participants – musician Dil tells me 'I can't think or know any or many brown women who make art that isn't politicised in some way. Because we are political, our being is political.' Thus, for Mis, finding alternative artistic practices that center her experience means that her very being is not being erased or side-lined. Through her own efforts, Mis has gained access to other South Asian artists, highlighting the continued failure of institutions to recognise artists of colour (Parmar 1993). She had gone on to forge an online project with another participant called Lai who unknowingly, is a participant I interviewed a week prior to speaking with Mis:

> *Why did I follow her? I think it's coz she was definitely South Asian and looked like what she was doing was really exciting and I found it inspiring, coz going back to my work it was always about how growing up, all your role models in front of you are white and you just assume [...] that they've got all the [important] positions and then she was someone I saw was like 'you're really exciting and doing something cool that loads of white people do but you're not actually white', that's why I followed her I think.(Mis)*

Lai is based in Paris and works in the luxury fashion industry. Through this connection, Mis and Lai collaborated online (they have yet to meet AFK) and produced a series of images in response to the lack of models of colour in the fashion world. The fact that I had interviewed both without the other knowing shows the interconnectedness of Instagram and how creative women of colour continue to nurture transnational links with one another as cultural allies (Shohat 1998). On a more cynical level, it shows how digital connections are forged, creating a bubble of communities that become shaped by the algorithmic architectures of social media sites. Lai and Mis are happy that they were able to find each other online, but what José van Dijck terms the 'technological unconscious' becomes 'a powerful steering agency that not simply facilitates human activity but actually constitutes it' (van Dijick 2010, p. 403). Just how this technological unconscious is steered is something I return to when talking about the #browngirl and self-branding later on within this chapter.

Mis is impressed by Lai because she has taken up space in an industry dominated by 'loads of white people'. It would be easy to mark the #browngirl as a neutral force within these spaces, but Puwar complicates this notion by stating that to be a space invader, 'it is necessary to be

an insider' in a 'playing-field that is riddled with networks, conflicts, struggles, cliques, judgements, infinitesimal sources of measurement and social cloning from the top' (Puwar 2004, p. 199). What has it taken for Lai to get to where she is? Over the course of our conversations, her strategies for success in this competitive sector became clear:

First year of Paris was very picturesque, romantic pictures of Parisian lifestyle, like 'here's a picture of the Eiffel tower'. That started to push up my followers because that unfortunately is what people wanna see: mainstream people want pictures of Paris. So, I got a lot of followers and then... I started to get the fashion jobs. I found work as an intern with Philip Lang which was the first job I got in fashion. (Lai)

Visibility plays a big part in Lai's initial journey and reveals the classed dimensions of UGC; to be noticed by followers and amass a respectful following, her content needed to be exciting and aesthetically pleasing. A few years spent studying in Paris would be an opportunity as good as any to show off a cultured lifestyle, creating symbolic capital for Lai. Helsper contends that 'differences in content creation and consumption are ascribed to differences in personal taste and interest, as if these are disconnected from historic patterns of inequality' (Helsper 2021, p. 154). Lai knows that photos of the Eiffel tower will get her 'likes' and therefore posts up content reflecting the norms, values and tastes of those with higher symbolic capital within Instagram. What Lai produces on Instagram 'tells us whose values count' (*Ibid.*, p. 159). In this case, it is the monied class who are well-travelled.

Thus, the #browngirl as space invader is invested in the institutional game; 'the investment in the game is the first and most simple sense in which women and racialised minorities are, however differentially placed and committed, on the inside' (Puwar 2004, p. 120). Having landed an internship with one design company which was then able to advocate for her, meant that Lai was able to rise within the ranks, eventually being able to work at Paris Fashion Week and land a summer job working with a renowned designer. Being advocated for opens the #browngirl up to 'exposure to key players in the field' (*Ibid*., p. 121). The terms of the game and outcomes vary for different participants, depending on a variety of things- from content to advocacy - revealing how unequal the terrain is for different players:

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Those women and racialised minorities who carry weight through the bearing of their carriage, in class or educational terms, as internalised history, via the habitus, are clearly at an advantage compared with those who don't. (Puwar 2014, p. 128)

Mis may or may not be able to access the same things that Lai has been able to; the #browngirl trajectory is 'part of a process of improvisation, which in turn is structured by cultural orientations, personal trajectories and the ability to play the game of social interaction' (*Ibid.*, p. 125). My personal trajectory was a process of improvisation; I entered the artworld in my early twenties as a comparative literature graduate, worked my way up before coming back to further education as a postgraduate. My dad went to university as a mature student to land a job as a secondary school teacher and my mother never went at all. My interest in contemporary art was nurtured by a middle-class white uncle who would take me on day trips to prominent London galleries. I doubt I would have had access to these spaces any other way as a young teenager. Suffice to say, I learnt the body language, art speak, histories and etiquette of the contemporary art world which became my passport into it. My Instagram and Facebook feed reflect this, where well framed shots of exhibitions in places like Venice help increase my symbolic capital in the field.

I consider my uncle my earliest advocate for my entry into the contemporary arts sector, equipping me with 'this sense to be appointed and promoted' (*Ibid.*, p. 124). Hence, the demand of the field resembles the #browngirl's 'family upbringing and/or their educational careers' (*Ibid.*, p. 127). This is not to say that the #browngirl does not feel the weight of her identity as a space invader:

Thus those who attempt to *name* the particular – in terms of gender, race or class – in what passes as universal face the contortions of naming something that is ontologically denied. It entails going against the grain of the accepted institutional narrative which: (a) denies the body; and (b) relies on a myth of sameness. The challenge posed to institutional narratives and to the sense of professional identities makes naming a contradictory process that adds to the tenuous positionality of 'space invaders'. (*Ibid.,* p. 131 -2)

Quite a few participants pointed out how white the spaces they occupied were:

I do talk a lot about social media in marketing situations, for example, going to conferences, but no one ever asks you. Sometimes I'm the only Asian person in the room.(Dal)

I'm literally the only brown girl in a lot of my classes! It's a really strange feeling. (Gur)

When I started printmaking in the beginning and I was not on Instagram or anything - you know how printmaking here is a very white space to be honest. (Amo)

Going against the institutional narrative highlights the 'tenuous positionality' of the #browngirl. When wanting to write a university dissertation about the mutual exclusivity of LGTBQIA+ politics, western imperialism and Islam, a participant was told by her supervisor that her proposal did not make it past the ethics committee because the ideas 'were too radical, they would anger others and that they [the university] fear backlash from the Muslim Community' (Bud). In institutional settings, 'whiteness exists as an unmarked normative position' (Puwar 2014, p. 58) and one that the #browngirl is expected to take up. If she does not, she is not allowed to progress, becoming one 'who break[s] with these manners [and] could very easily be in the territory of inappropriate behaviour' (*Ibid.*, p. 139).

Simultaneously, her race and gender become a burden; she is expected to enter 'as a racially marked speaker' (Ibid., p. 73). 27-year-old freelance artist Kaa tells me about her experience at Wimbledon art college:

I went to Wimbledon college of art and before that I went to Central St Martins. So I constantly felt like I was being pushed towards making art around my identity, my femininity and all this stuff. Yeah of course I'm female and of course I'm South Asian but that wasn't the scope of the work, I was just sort of making work coz I was still discovering who I was. I think it was confusing for my tutors, confusing for people around me because my work probably did look quite feminine, but it wasn't necessarily the point of it. (Kaa)

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Kaa felt that her approach was 'confusing for my tutors' because the institutional space offered up to her was only available if she was going to speak about marginality, because 'easily available tropes […] are preferred over open-ended conversation' (Puwar 2004, p. 70).. Being forced to essentialise herself especially when she was still unsure of who she was, made Kaa approach Instagram with a sense of purpose, of finding others who would understand the nuances of her work:

> *Finding people now that actually understand that yeah, of course she's going to make that work coz she connects to that culture. But that's not the point of the work because they understand what I'm talking about because they come from the culture that I come from or understand a bit better, makes me feel like I've finally found people who understand what on earth I'm talking about when I make an abstract painting using a part of my mum's sari or using channa or using gunguruu. The point of it isn't being feminine, it's potentially being masculine. It's really nice to find a crowd of people that would understand what I'm talking about. (Kaa)*

She tells me that growing up in Leicester, the wider family and community never really understood her artwork, so the opportunity to unpack it came when she engaged on Instagram. Similarly, Sal who lives and works in Bradford tells me that it offered her an outlet she didn't get at home:

> *I was still doing my degree and everyone around me had Instagram I was like 'what's all that about?'. But it was about showcasing art and showcasing creativity and even if I didn't allow myself to voice my artistic and creativity at home, I was able to do it on Instagram. Because who cares about art, right? I don't have any of my artwork up back home, so [Instagram]- it's my wall, I guess. (Sal)*

Whilst news outlets are quick to run stories like the BBC's 'the 'brown girls' out to conquer Instagram' (Shah 2019), it is worth considering the impact that the institutional narrative still has on young British South Asian women today; already self-conscious of being the only Asian body in the room, they become strait-jacketed into 'marked identities, which repeatedly

attempt to lock the speaking subject outside universal speech and within particular ethnic enclaves' (Puwar 2004, p. 70). What participants' insights reveal is that they feel ignored or patronised within the spaces they work, study or live. Thus, Instagram offers the #browngirl a level of autonomy and flexibility often denied her AFK.

For someone like Lai, who is keen to capitalise on the #browngirl Influencer approach, it makes sense, because she is able to post about her identity, without causing discomfort to her employer or tutors. In fact, this approach can introduce more opportunities to her AFK, in the form of sponsorship deals, brand collaborations and much more. Does Instagram offer an alternative to the institutional narrative? If so, what is it? What choices can the #browngirl make here? I grapple with these questions in the next section that looks at #browngirl influencers.

The #browngirl and Influencer economies
Influencer life-worlds

Instagram is approached by some participants as somewhere they finally belong. There is a sense of personal growth and solidarity:

> *The thing with South Asian communities is they're [sic] very expressive women that love to feel, they love to be very dominant. They love to be assertive in a way that white spaces don't let women be, so reading their poems, reading their prose and reading how real they are from the get-go, I feel really connected to them in a way that I don't feel when I see white Influencers or whatever and I really respect them. (Pum)*

> *I was going on my own sort of self-discovery thing in terms of learning about the history of diasporic communities and building a sense of who else was up there and what people were doing. (Dil)*

In this way, Instagram becomes a way of 'writing oneself into being' (Sundén 2003 p.13). Whilst this is true to some extent, there are also complex strategies for belonging at play here,

most notably through the figure of the #browngirl influencer. Pum infers that she feels more connected to brown influencers over white ones because they are allowed 'to be assertive'.

On Instagram these same strictures seemingly do not apply, meaning participants feel that they are able to express a level of autonomy over their identities and how they express themselves. This expression can take many forms, from posting up artwork (digital collages, paintings, illustrations, video work) and poetry to video blogs and photos of everyday life. However, in a social media context, I argue that a different set of rules have come into play within Instagram that determine who is and isn't visible. Looking at studies of Influencer culture, a framework of how to engage on Instagram as an advertising platform becomes evident. Leaver et. al maintain that Instagram's founders had never intended for the platform to be used for commercial purposes; its major selling point was the ability to capture photos spontaneously whilst 'on the move' via a smartphone camera. However, influencers have repurposed this rhetoric, gamifying the platform's affordances. The influencer framework consists of four reappropriations:

- High follower-to-following ratios, where unknown users follow the influencer, who in turn follows only a small ratio of users
- Taking high-resolution photos with a digital camera that have been edited and then uploaded to Instagram
- Using Instagram 'as a digital repository of advertorials and self-branded images, in which followers may scroll through an account to locate purchasing information or use the Influencers' projected lifestyles as a referent.' (Leaver et. al., 2020, p. 105)
- Scheduling posts and designing feeds to maximise publicity.

The role of Influencer, like the space invader is usually a process of improvisation and may not necessarily tick all four boxes; freelance illustrator Bla had amassed a following of over 15,000 at the time of our interview and I suspect this has only grown since. She tells me she struggled to deal with the responsibilities that come with being an 'accidental Influencer' of sorts:

It's really interesting because that's something that I really used to struggle with, responding to messages […] I did not know how to respond. […] Just because I have a following, I'm just as much trying to find my way as other people are and there's this strange kind of celebrity culture around Instagram […] Because you didn't ask to be put in that position it sometimes feels a bit unfair. To express yourself publicly and share these things, you've got all these tags that come along with it and all of a sudden you have to be this person and I don't feel like I have to be that person. (Bla)

Bla's work has clearly resonated with a lot of followers online, and she has had to mould herself into someone who is publicly available. With the help of her husband, she has developed strategies to reply to followers and treats her time on Instagram as a job where she enters the 'cyber office' when not illustrating or painting.

For those who aspire to Influencer status, Instagram becomes the arena within which to hone your skills. Lai excitedly tells me that she is working to increase her number of followers to 10,000, which then unlocks a feature that would allow her to add links to her Stories which would take a follower directly to the page from the link. Here we see how Instagram incentivises the Influencer framework. At the time of interview, Lai's following was at 8,000 which was cultivated via her links with the luxury fashion industry:

I think it's because I've gone to art schools my whole life - every single person I'm connected to is an artist or photographer or they're fashion stylists or they're something. So, us just doing our everyday lives looks like a fashion Instagram account, but it's just literally everyday life for me. And so I always find it weird when someone is like 'who manages your account?' I'm like 'what do you mean who manages my account, it's my personal Instagram! All the pictures are taken by me!' (Lai)

UGC plays a huge role in determining who is given visibility and who is not. For the #browngirl Influencer to feel comfortable on social media, her content is remade in the image of financial or creative success:

Social cloning not only occurs at the level of somatics, ways of carrying the body, gestures and mannerisms, as well as a likeness in social background and social networks. It is also manifested in ideas, opinions, political perspective and social taste in general. (Puwar 2004, p. 123).

Lia's social networks give her access to content that many others do not have; fashion shows, models, museums and galleries build Lai's social capital and visibility on Instagram. Lai's previous experience in art school – of hierarchies and order – means that she fits into 'the existing somatic norm' (*Ibid.,* p. 122) of the managerial class. This has made her a key player in her field and imbued her with a sense of authority as a #browngirl Influencer who simply *chose* to post better content. Helsper contends that this myth of meritocracy is not true:

There is a discourse of choice in relation to everyday content creation – everyone can do it, if they want to. After all, how difficult could it be to make and upload a selfie, like a post, or create a funny GIF? […] Learning by doing, receiving feedback, and trying again are all necessary for improvements in our creative abilities. The opportunity to build this literacy depends on an intersection of socio-economic and socio-cultural resources that stimulate creativity, and the privileged have more control over their time and autonomy (Helsper 2021, p. 162)

A #browngirl Influencer like Lai, through a series of improvisations, has managed to socially clone mannerisms and aesthetic choices to emulate a middle-class sensibility that has worked in tandem with her UGC; the more content she uploads, the more opportunities she is likely to get back in return and vice versa. Being able to utilise her identity as a self-described 'fat brown woman' working in fashion, Lai has highlighted that which is denied her via the institutional narrative: her gender, race and body. To echo Dil once again that 'our being is political', the #browngirl influencer brings to Instagram that which she is denied elsewhere and is listened to by her followers. In fact, she starts to be rewarded for this, even when she has no interest in being an Influencer:

Funnily enough, I got my first sponsor email today asking me to promote a cosmetics product to my 800 something followers which I don't really know what to do with as I don't want to be considered an influencer but free stuff is cool I guess. (Hee)

Hee is queer and agender and describes their content as 'based around my personal aesthetics and engagement with art around me [and content] which is important to me as a fat person of colour'. In an era of corporate mega-Influencer (follower count: over 1 million) saturation, it is easy to see how advertisers prefer the micro-Influencer (follower count between 10,000 and 100,000). Keen to find ever more 'authentic' and 'real' brand ambassadors, advertisers target even smaller accounts in a bid to get their product out there. Hee does not 'want to be considered an influencer' but thinks the exchange would be worth it because 'free stuff is cool I guess'.

In order to understand the allure of products marketed by micro-influencers, I borrow a term from Park et al., in their research on social media advertising – they maintain 'that consumers perceive micro-influencers to be more authentic than mega-influencers, which can then rub off onto the products or brands that the former endorse' (Park et. al. 2021, p. 588). This 'rubbing-off' of authentic experience onto the product is what advertisers hope will entice a market of consumers who can either align themselves with the influencer (as someone who is 'one of them') or hope to capture the 'rubbed-off' authenticity that has transferred from endorser to product. 'Many consumers expect brands to take a stance on socio-political issues', writes Francesca Sobande and therefore 'brands continue to face mounting pressure to present themselves as being socially just, yet in ways that seem authentic' (Sobande 2019, p. 2736).

To target brand ambassadors who are perceived by consumers as 'one of us', results in higher purchase intentions for followers. For the #browngirl influencer who engages in content creation that celebrates a certain lifestyle, she reaffirms 'the post-feminist ideal of individual success obtained through inner self-discovery' (Duffy and Hund, 2015, p. 4). Whilst the domain of Influencers remains, for the most part, overwhelmingly 'young, thin and white' (*Ibid.*, p. 9), the #browngirl utilises a self-described 'fat brown' subjectivity to achieve entrepreneurial success. Thus, her identity, having been rejected by the traditional

institutional narrative on her terms, is ripe for commodification within Instagram. Writing about the appropriation of Black culture by white Influencers, Wesley E. Stevens maintains that 'in divorcing Black aesthetics and culture from their history, these companies – and presently, influencers – often end up whitewashing urban aesthetics toward explicitly capitalist ends' (Stevens 2021, p. 13). In a similar way, the #browngirl Influencer is in danger of divorcing South Asian aesthetics and culture from their history, even though, unlike the white Influencers, she is a part of the diaspora. However, her articulation of self is significant in that she has overcome prejudices and exudes a confidence that is transformative for other followers.

Influencers and erasure

How do South Asian aesthetics become divorced from culture and history within Instagram? What is erased in the process? One participant tells me:

> I find some of the diaspore[sic] scene very middle-class and not necessarily speaking to my narrative and this is like beyond Instagram. And not speaking the narratives of my life and experiences, just by virtue of the way these things manifest, they adopt a narrative […] it's that assumption that we've all had the shared experiences that we haven't, because class is definitely a big part in our experiences as people of colour in the UK […] the scene on Instagram is kind of a continuation of that. I'm really interested in a lot of stuff that is happening and I'm following these people and I'm fascinated by it […] but I do think it's a continuation of that and not necessarily speaking to the working-class South Asian experience. (Bro)

Bro is frustrated by what she sees online because she feels that there is an expectation that South Asian content will resonate with her, even though it rarely talks about class, which I expand on in chapter eight. Similarly, Zaa thinks that different South Asian identities end up being subsumed by

> this South Asian monolithic nation project happening out there which I think is something that I'm quite cautious about because I think that growing up in this

country, you're growing up with loads of people from diasporas and to self - exoticise yourself sometimes (because it does go to that at points), there is a real risk to that. With this collective consciousness which is coming about on Instagram, there is a convergence of more niche people into this bigger aesthetic in order to get recognition to be a part of that project. (Zaa)

This 'bigger aesthetic' that feeds into what Zaa terms a 'South Asian monolithic nation project', is led by content that gains the most traction online. In the #browngirl context, it privileges a creative middle-class who often come to define the 'brown girls of Instagram' phenomenon; looking through news articles from the BBC (Shah 2019), Popsugar (Charruza 2020) and Idiva.com (Bhuyan 2019), that celebrate 55 of the most popular #browngirl Influencers, all are thin, heterosexual, cis-gendered women. The two cis-gendered men featured as style Influencers (content creators Anthony Gomes and Aditya Madiraju), are the ones who subvert gender norms by incorporating the wearing of saris and make-up on their accounts; one of them is openly gay and often posts about his husband. Most of these Influencers are based in the USA, with the remaining 12 spread across India, UK, Canada, Australia and Pakistan. All live in major cities like New York, Sydney, London, Mumbai, Toronto and Lahore. The majority have family that came from the North Indian state of Punjab (the next biggest contingents originating from Pakistan and Bangladesh), and the majority are either Hindu or Muslim.

A pattern that begins to emerge when scrolling through all of this content is the performance of a luxury lifestyle – holidays, designer clothes, fashion shoots, weddings, expensive houses, restaurants, etc. This notion was always at the heart of Influencer culture, but what makes it different when it comes to #browngirl Influencers, is the visibility of race, gender and religion, which is highlighted and spoken about regularly by the Influencers. Videos are posted up of Hindu and Muslim weddings, festivals like Diwali and Eid are explained to followers and emotional posts about parents and grandparents, detail their immigration journeys from the subcontinent to the West. Hence, a particular kind of 'brown' identity emerges and is given visibility; an urban, wealthy, Punjabi, Hindu/Muslim, cis-gendered and heteronormative one.

Some participants are critical of the privileges that these Influencers obscure in the name of giving visibility to 'brown' culture:

> *You see people that get influencer status are like very present in their timelines and their stories. They're easy on the eyes, maybe they're light skin and maybe if they're not too critical about like certain things like algorithmic racism, etcetera then you know you're not going to get Shadow banned. (Eri)*

> *With a lot of these South Asian cultural and art movements, I think you do get a lot of high caste people who are from really affluent families who do participate in certain systems, who are a ruling oppressive class in certain respects, but they jump on this whole 'we're diaspora, we're oppressed' kind of band wagon. (Zaa)*

Seemingly being able to disrupt the institutional narrative by centering her gender, race and religion, the #browngirl influencer simultaneously erases the class and caste inequalities and ethnic and religious diversity of the diaspora via these aesthetic practices. The mainstreaming of South Asian identity becomes mechanised by the algorithm that has always and continues to value the life-worlds of the wealthy, who remain 'not too critical about certain things', as Eri says; some things become more acceptable to talk about – like your struggle with being brown at school, body hair, your parents experiences of racism in a new country, but these become mechanisms to tell a life story that is then rewarded with sponsorship deals and invites to podcast episodes. Your struggle is allowed to be discussed, but then nothing is done to tackle the systems of racism that created these difficulties in the first place. You telling your story is enough. Hence, the sharing of your particular experience as a person of colour is rewarded by a neoliberal system that offers you a seat at the corporate table; 'visibility politics are additive rather than transformative and resiliently compatible with capitalism's relentless appetite for new markets', writes Bev Skeggs (1999, p. 228).

The type of #browngirl content that generates 'likes' and positive reactions is the content that is replicated and becomes the norm online, as Helsper explains:

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As the environments and lifestyles of the better-off get more visibility, they become the norm for those who follow Instagram accounts. This makes the less privileged more hesitant to post online. (Helsper 2021, p. 167)

This new normal is difficult for the less privileged to replicate for a variety of reasons. For some participants, it comes down to a lack of money for more professional looking content:

I think [my content] it's more my day-to-day because I don't really have the means or the space to make photoshoots and stuff. (Zaa)

For others, it is a lack of time due to work or not having the mental capacity to be online all the time, making 'the less privileged more hesitant to post online' (Helsper 2021, p. 167):

I think it's really difficult to maintain those sorts of accounts when you have a working life as well. (Pvn)

I don't really keep that up too much, I think you almost forget about it after you have to do other things as well. (Bal2)

I've learnt to have more content to share but I'm so busy with lots of different projects that sometimes it's difficult to find content all the time. (Bri)

Having two different social medias - one for me and then one for the brand, it was just like, no I'm done. This is so exhausting (Sta)

It is more likely that those from upper and middle-class backgrounds will succeed in securing visibility for their content because they have the time, money and mental capacity for it; in essence, they are able to play the game. In the following section, I look at the opportunities that open up for those able to play the game, beyond Instagram.

The #browngirl Influencer burden: Intimacy and work

The #browngirl Influencer is an important figure for participants who have not seen representations of young South Asian women from the diaspora in popular culture. In addition, because their followings are usually in the thousands, not in the millions, the audience assumption is that because the #browngirl Influencer is *relatable*, she is also *accessible*. In previous studies of fashion bloggers on Instagram, Duffy and Hund observe how Influencers cultivate 'a relatable persona [that] involves interactions with audiences' (Duffy and Hund 2015, p. 8). When someone stops being accessible, do they become less relatable? Speaking to participants, this seems to be the case:

> *They don't want your time because you don't have a lot of followers. So then it's also like this popularity contest of 'okay so I'm not worth anyone's time or I'm not worth anything because I don't have a million-odd followers or because I don't like everyone's posts every 2 minutes'. And it gives you this really horrible sense of self-loathing and dread and anxiety and I feel like that's definitely gonna have an impact on people that are already marginalised. (Pvn)*

> *I think I've noticed if there's someone I wanna talk to or something, you might send them a message and they just think that you don't have loads of followers as well, so they're like 'I'm not gonna bother, you're just some random weird fan. (Bal1)*

For Pvn and Bal1, being ignored by Influencers reveals a power imbalance that they did not think existed; they are cast as the passive 'fans' and the Influencer is the active agent. This imbalance tells Pvn and Bal1 that they are different to the Influencer and the difference is that they are less because they have fewer followers which translates to less social capital, therefore they deserve to be ignored. Whilst the Influencers themselves may not think these things about their followers, it is undeniable that these interactions negatively impact followers, especially, as Pvn points out, 'people that are already marginalised'. This power imbalance further enhances the notion that 'people with less status and symbolic capital are less likely to have the digital resources that allow them to express themselves and be recognised by others in a positive way in digital environments' (Elpser 2021, p. 174).

One participant on the other side of the tracks tells a different story. Bla, who I mentioned earlier has the biggest following of all my participants (15k at the time of interview). As an illustrator, she writes children's stories that center British South Asians and her work has become incredibly popular. Bla now feels that she has been tasked with the responsibility to respond to followers:

> To express yourself publicly and share these things, you've got all these tags that come along with it and all of a sudden you have to be this person and I don't feel like I have to be that person.' (Bla)

Thus, when a following has been built, a #browngirl Influencer is burdened with the responsibility to be accessible to their followers. In Bla's case (and perhaps in many others), she does not know how to respond and doesn't always have the time. An intimacy has been established with followers, but this is also now work.

The #browngirl Influencer status results in 'presence bleed' (Gregg 2011), whereby the working environment bleeds into our home and social lives; Bla tells me that she doesn't 'wanna be on it [online] and I feel like I have to be on it now because it's so intertwined with my practice and I don't have a choice to not be on it'. This mixing of pleasurable activity - which comes in many forms from showcasing your lifestyle, to dance and illustration – with work, inculcates a middle-class office culture on Instagram, as Melissa Gregg writes:

> The most successful online platforms of recent years, social networking sites, build on the deliberate confusion of work and friendship that have been hallmarks of professional middle-class office cultures for decades. (Gregg 2011, p. 6).

Everyday Influencing / management of the self-as-brand makes this 'bourgeois business culture the new normal' (*Ibid*.), and many things become obscured as a result; the labour that goes into maintaining this intimate work/social/friendship dynamic, class, caste, religion and the imbalance of power in a system that quantifies social and cultural capital through numbers of followers. There is also the question of authentic #browngirl identity, but I will

unpack this in chapter eight, when I begin to explore class and caste in more depth on Instagram.

In this section, I have tried to demonstrate how the conflation of intimacy and work is not only encouraged but essential to #browngirl Influencers and how they are perceived by their followers. When ignored, followers feel rejected, contributing to their lack of visibility and further marginalisation by figures they look up to and who represent young South Asian identity on a global scale. This further confirms a follower's lack of symbolic capital and the realisation that they do not possess the resources to achieve the same level of visibility, despite having a smart phone and access to social media. For the #browngirl Influencers, being available and receptive to followers is a responsibility thrust upon them, drawing them into a bourgeois business culture, that rewards those with an already middle-class sensibility or those prepared to play the game.

Throughout my interviews, I asked about the number of accounts participants had – I myself had two, a personal one and one for charity fundraising – and so it wasn't unusual that most of them had a number of accounts. When I began looking at what these other accounts were used for, it became clear that the #browngirl Influencer framework of the self-as-brand had trickled down to everyday users who, whether financially or socially, were not interested in building a huge following, but were primed for advertising opportunities.

Everyday Influencing

The everyday influencer practices a ''business ontology' in which it is *simply obvious* that everything in society, including healthcare and education, should be run as a business' (Fisher 2009, p.17). I extend this sentiment to include the self, with participants demonstrating that it makes sense to have a version of the self that is working in another capacity alongside paid occupations. 33-year-old Kri is an office PA based in London and has two accounts. One is a personal account and the other is a blog where she can be keyed into the food and drink sector:

I just wanted to keep the food and drink side of things separate because that's such a huge sector and for me to be in touch with certain bartenders - I dunno, I felt like it just wasn't gonna be possible for me to do it on my personal Instagram versus what I call my Instagram blog. (Kri)

For those who are everyday influencers, the #browngirl way of performing identity can become a viable enough model to exist online - evading the traditional establishments initially but eventually being rewarded by them because it is a trajectory that is financially and culturally viable. The hope is that you come back to them polished, knowing how to play the game. I argue that the everyday Influencer isn't necessarily keen to build up a big following (many cannot afford to) but manages an alternative online profile as an act of self-management that could result in business opportunities, more so than social opportunities. In a neoliberal era, the digital self becomes a business venture to be managed, sold and advertised. Whilst studies of everyday users on Instagram have concluded that the platform is used to present an actual and idealised self, as well as to maintain social relationships (Lee et. al., 2019), I argue that a 'business ontology' of the self has trickled down to everyday users.

During an interview, Art, a 31-year-old masters student referred to her public account as a 'professional persona'. Here, she posts about exhibitions happening in Lahore to bring greater visibility to the arts in Pakistan. Art tells me that she has slowed down posting on her personal account but tries to keep up posts on public. Art does not have a huge following but is invested in creating content that fulfils the goal that she is trying to reach - creating content that is engaged with by followers. She tells me the following story:

And then I ended up speaking to a woman in India who said she works for an art fair there and said, 'you know, we all follow the account to pick up what's happening in Pakistan and its really wonderful the way you've been projecting it' and it just really humbles me. I'm like, I'm so happy that the agenda and the premise that I have for this Instagram account is actually working. (Art)

The figure of the Instagram influencer is often lauded by advertisers for creative content creation and 'do-it-yourself' career models (O'Meara 2019) - in this respect, Art has fashioned

out a (largely unpaid) Professional Public Persona (PPP) as an arts ambassador for Pakistan. I use PPP as a way to define a particular mode of public engagement for participants on Instagram; it is usually work done outside of a paid job or full-time studentship, it is digital users who do not (for the most part) identify themselves as influencers and it is about projecting a professional image on their public account. For Art, it has already proved fruitful – she was invited to moderate a panel discussion at a university because of it. I collated information gleaned from interviews and content that was displayed on participants' public accounts and what their PPP was:

Participant	Occupation	Professional Public Persona (PPP)
Mis	Undergraduate student	Artist
Pum	Journalist/ radio producer	n/a
Bro	Unemployed	Cyclist
Bal1	Freelance illustrator/ in-between jobs	Artist
Dal	Freelance journalist/ producer/ marketing	Freelance journalist/ producer/ marketing
Pvn	NHS worker	Alternative Lifestylist
Lai	Undergraduate student	Founder of digital platform for young creatives
Abl	Journalist	Journalist
Dil	Postgraduate student	Academic/ musician
Gur	Undergraduate student	Poet
Bal2	Pharmacy worker	Online magazine founder/ artist
Aaz	Postgraduate student/ tour guide	Body positivity campaigner/ lifestylist
Uxu	Undergraduate student	Artist

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Bri	Postgraduate student	Activist
Kaa	Freelance set designer/ performer	Set designer/artist
Zaa	Youth Worker	Artist
Avi	Junior Lawyer	IG user
Bha	Postgraduate student/ audiologist	IG user
Kri	Virtual PA	Food and drink blogger
Job	Cycle courier	IG user
Bla	Freelance illustrator	Illustrator/ blogger
Ill	Unemployed	Artist
Afs	Creative Programme Manager	Writer/ performer/ poet
Amo	Print maker	Print maker
Ama	Radio producer	Body confidence campaigner/ Fashion blogger
Rea	Audiologist	n/a
Her	Graphic designer	Artist
Eri	Artist	Artist
Hee	Undergraduate student/ art museum worker	Body confidence campaigner / queer activist
Hel	Tattoo artist	Tattoo artist
Art	Postgraduate student	Contemporary art promoter
Sta	University administrator	Alternative Lifestylist
Sal	Art gallery worker	Artist
Bud	Undergraduate student/ carer	n/a

For those that did not have a public account, they were not applicable in this case. Those that used their account to keep in touch with friends, post everyday content and did not explicitly

state or display any desire to push a personal brand or service have been termed 'IG user'. Others utilised Instagram to expand their occupational footprint into the social media sphere in order to drum up more business, therefore their occupation and PPP were the same. However, most participants have used it to create a persona that is different to that of their occupation.

Whilst it can be argued that the internet should be a space of freedom for people to engender greater possibilities than they currently experience within their day jobs or university lives, (.i.e.: why shouldn't a museum worker faced with the monotony or stress of their day job reimagine themselves as a body confidence campaigner?), it is the Influencer logic through the organising of PPP that signals what participants actually want to gain. Conversely, it could also be argued that participants are ethical prosumers, creating and consuming content that makes space for them where markets previously excluded them (Brown 2017). However, I argue that it isn't just about seeing yourself *reflected* in consumer markets, it is about displaying your PPP in order to *appear* marketable to brands and employers, so you can become their employee:

> *I would need to split my personal life to my online life - like how I want people to see me. So I think that's where I actively started to change what I was posting. So a rule that I actually have for myself is that I don't take pictures of my food unless it looks absolutely amazing. (Ama)*

Ama's 'rule' of only posting aesthetically pleasing images of food is one among many that participants uphold when it comes to PPP. Another is to upload content that is useful in showcasing the skills that you can offer; therefore, personal content is irrelevant because it does not operate in this capacity:

> *Especially with the kind of people that are kind of important, if I made it really personal they'd be like 'who are you? What do you do? What are you trying to say? You don't have any skills or you're just on holiday?' - I don't feel like its relevant to share. (Bal1)*

Referring back to Duffy and Chan's notion of 'imagined surveillance' experienced by young users, I maintain that for everyday Influencers, it is not family, educators or future employers that participants are thinking about here – it is advertisers. Advertisers are present, watching and approaching users with small followings to endorse products. Like Hee says, 'free stuff is cool' and so why should participants turn this opportunity down?

The idea that Instagram can offer another business opportunity beyond being just a social networking site is a very real possibility for everyday users, therefore they prime themselves for this. However, others tell me that they feel the pressure of this self-management and worry that Instagram is more business venture than social network:

> *There are more ads, its more about advertising and it's more capitalised. Before it was easy and simple and you didn't have to think before you posted photos and how people were receiving them but now you have to be more conscious (Ill)*

> *It's gonna be that people will be building up their profiles so that businesses can target them so that they can become an influencer or a promoter for that business and other people are using it as a business platform. So, I've noticed how it's changed into a much more commercial thing rather than it being a social platform […] I think we'll [social networkers] still be around but we won't be getting as much likes or we won't be promoting things. (Avi)*

For Avi, a belief that the social networker is a dying breed points to how subjectivities are being shaped by digital technologies; socialising is no longer a priority here. For British South Asian women, the #browngirl Influencer culture that rewards you for telling your story becomes a viable option; you can gain visibility, endorsement from traditional institutions and free stuff - all of it seemingly on your terms. As an everyday Influencer, brands will begin to approach to you, so it's worth telling your story.

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Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have demonstrated the rules at play within Instagram through the figure of the #browngirl. The term 'brown' used by participants, taps into a global sensibility, solidifying international links between non-white groups across the globe and on a more cynical level, expanding the 'brown' market, that includes an array of consumers. While predominantly white and male institutions patronise or ignore young British South Asian women, Instagram becomes a place where they can see themselves reflected and express themselves on their own terms. However, what emerges through the figure of the #browngirl Influencer is the introduction of another set of rules that privileges the middle- and upper-class content creator. They usually have the money, access to cultural networks and time needed to upload content that gains the most traction online. Therefore a heterosexual, cis-gendered, urban, wealthy, and usually Punjabi Hindu/Muslim #browngirl identity emerges. In the process, this erases other complexities of caste, class, religion and ethnicity in pursuit of an acceptable brown story from which rewards can be reaped.

There are rules around who is valued and who is not – this is not an equal playing field for all. For the #browngirls who are able to tell their stories, a neoliberal trajectory of individual triumph over adversity (parents moving from the Indian subcontinent and 'making it' in the USA) is relayed, rather than collective actions to disrupt or critique racist immigration regimes; the story being told and rewarded with online traction, advertising deals and sponsorship is the point in telling it. The 'business ontology' of the self serves to show that the self-branded self is 'an ideological position [that] can never be really successful until it is naturalized, and it cannot be naturalized whilst it is still thought of as a value rather than a fact' (Fisher 2009, p. 16). The *fact* of the self-as-brand ensures that this framework trickles down to the everyday Influencer, who networks and shares content, not purely for social ends, but also for advertising ends; this becomes the common state of 'being brown' online. Within the next chapter I begin to focus more on the impact that social media platforms at large have on the mental wellbeing of participants.

Chapter 7: Psycho-social wellbeing on Instagram

In chapters four and five, I was keen to understand how Instagram had shaped and influenced participants engagements with their communities and families and how queer intimacy had been fostered. In this chapter, I turn to participant psycho-social wellbeing and what they consider to be the mental impacts of always being online. Broadly understood, the field of psychosocial studies is interested in the bringing together of affect, emotion and feeling with social, political and cultural forces, linking together 'the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals' (Mills 2000, p.5; Woodward 2015). In the context of this chapter, the psycho-social is defined as 'an individual's perception and feeling of being part of the information society' (Buchi et al., 2018, p. 3693). I argue that participants'' personal lives are enmeshed with Instagram and I am interested in unpacking the links between mental health and social media further; previous studies have indicated that prolonged social media usage does contribute to poor mental health (Gui et al., 2017) but the digital inequalities framework goes further, highlighting how the macro and micro life-worlds of users play a part in determining the quality of interactions online:

> It is easier to develop skills if you have access, and you engage more broadly when you are more literate. The digital world differs based on your starting point. We enter through different doors, so we differ in how we navigate different digital worlds and inhabit different digital spaces. (Helsper 2021, p.181)

Throughout interviews, participants expressed a diverse range of opinions when it came to the quality of interactions experienced – it was positive for some and negative for others. By focussing on the psycho-social, I hope to demonstrate that Instagram is defined by both the universal and the unique aspects of participants' socio-digital lives and that each person does indeed enter it 'through different doors'.

Concerns for the self

Throughout my interviews, I attempted to capture participant perceptions that not only centered around diaspora identity, but that also tied into wider discourses around social media usage. When I think back on my own perceptions of Instagram, conversations with friends and family did not just revolve around doing and engaging with 'South Asian stuff' online, but that we also had something to say about the state of social media at large. My participants also had things to say about this and to reiterate Nirmal Puwar's point, it shouldn't just be white men who have ownership of the more abstract ideas or the larger cultural arena - it concerns all of us. Unfortunately, it those deemed as 'unmarked' (read as white) digital users who are given the opportunity to discuss these issues, whilst the 'marked'/ marginalised users become 'straight jacketed' into discussions around their identity to fit into institutional narratives, as was revealed in chapter six.

Approaching participants as both marginalised users *and* Instagram users means that I am able to comprehend their experiences as part of smaller and wider online communities; my approach is an intervention inside the wider Instagram community and therefore, although participants are keyed into smaller networks where they know and follow other British South Asian users, they are also a part of the wider Instagram world, which impacts them also. This opening section explores participants' perceptions of Instagram on their mental health. Throughout interviews, I noticed that some participants questioned the authenticity of connections they maintained on the platform.

The diversity of connection

In previous chapters I have highlighted how Instagram has provided opportunities for participants to engage with each other and how these connections have been self-defensive and self-defining. Living a feminist or queer life AFK was sometimes made easier because of these connections and other times, became a solace for users who didn't feel safe expressing this side of themselves amongst family, colleagues, and the community.

Counteracting these positive engagements were participants concerns around whose content and identity represented the South Asian diaspora, as well as the neoliberal economic model of self-branding that some participants resisted, and others knowingly embraced. Thus, Instagram is not simply an emancipatory space for users but a complicated one where participants' experiences and conceptions of it vary. One significant theme that emerged was the diversity of connection; having already touched upon the rejection felt by those who reached out to users with big followings, participants saw connections within it differently. This further complicates the digital terrain, as connections made on social media are understood as either positively impacting someone (they feel empowered by being with others like them) or negatively impacting them (trolling, cyber-bullying, competitiveness, envy, etc.). This section attempts to capture an account of the quality, reasoning and anxieties around participants' connections, demonstrating how their lives are interwoven throughout the online and AFK elements of their lives.

24-year-old Pum has moved around a lot since childhood – from Sri Lanka to Australia to the UK and back to Sri Lanka – so Instagram has become a vital tool for sustaining friendships. Pum questions the quality of engagements she has with friends on Instagram:

> *I sometimes feel really good when a friend I've had for 6,7 years, 'likes' my pictures and in the back of my brain I think 'oh we're still friends because they like my picture' but in reality they're just mindlessly scrolling and they just click on a picture of someone they've known - it doesn't mean we're still friends but it gives me a sense of illusion and it's really scary. […] I feel that sense of constant interconnectedness is misleading because the thing with time is, as time goes on, friendships kind of fade and relationships change and you kind of become different people but because of things like Instagram and 'likes' and the constant bombardment of personalised information, you feel like you're connected even though you're not. (Pum)*

For Pum, the engagements she has with friends AFK cannot be replicated by 'likes' and she worries that the 'constant bombardment' of personal content is mistaken for genuine connection. Digital media scholars have critiqued the idea of connection within digital networks (baym, etc.) and users like Pum reflects on the ramifications of our networked

society. She is concerned that the 'illusion' of connection, when stripped away, reveals that we are in fact less connected as a result. Time spent on illusive connections could be put to better use by connecting AFK, according to Bal1:

> *I think like you're missing out on time that you could be using to do something good for yourself or connecting in real life with people around you. (Bal1)*

I asked Bal1 if she had met anyone she had connected with on Instagram AFK and she told me that 'there was someone I was supposed to meet but she cancelled. So not yet, I haven't met anyone yet'. In attempting and failing to meet up with this person, Bal1 feels that 'real life' connections are more reliable.

Similarly for Job, it is important to receive validation from oneself and from those physically around you:

> *It's fine to like the 'likes' and feel good from that and I think as long as I don't go down a road where that's my only source of validation - I think it's important to be able to like things about myself just as much as myself. Or to receive good feedback about myself in person being in conversations with people. So I think that for me is the biggest fear - that I'll get too into it. (Job)*

Both Pum and Job are afraid of developing unhealthy attitudes towards themselves and others – Pum fears the illusion of friendship presented by these networked connections that become more and more sophisticated with each new technological affordance; I can witness edited and filtered aspects of someone's life through high quality images and videos, some of which is livestreamed as it is happening. I can feel as if I am *right there* going through this moment with someone I follow – it is easy to feel a part of someone's life when you consume so much of it. Job is fearful that validation from those she doesn't know that well will override her sense of self. These connections, as demonstrated by queer participants in chapter five *can* offer genuine support and solidarity, but these connections can also fail to deliver on promises of affirmation as experienced through AFK friendships.

I asked other participants whether they had met up AFK with anyone they had connected with through Instagram, and nearly all of them said no. I have argued previously that meeting AFK isn't always the end goal for many participants, so the following responses prompted me to think about what else these engagements meant. 23-year-old freelancer Dal, who works across journalism, marketing and production says:

> *I wouldn't say I've directly got any.... I found out about work through it, I think would be the right way to say. (Dal)*

I am sure Dal was about to say that she hasn't directly found friends through Instagram and goes on to say that she found work opportunities through it. Similarly, Uxu, a 19-year-old university student has found more opportunities for her artwork than friendships:

> *I would have said not so much, more relationships forged in real life than through Instagram. But I have found a lot of opportunities. (Uxu)*

Dal and Uxu have found ways to build their professional networks through Instagram and have found financial opportunities through it, becoming space invaders (Puwar 2004) in the process. For example, Uxu found a call for commissions looking for South Asian artists - she applied and was successful.

For others, the distance provided by the digital networks within Instagram ensures that followers do not get too close. Aaz, who is currently undertaking a master's degree in social work is glad to have a level of control when it comes to connections within Instagram:

> *I feel like it's a buffer, a protective layer where nobody gets too close and tells me what I can't say or prevents me from starting conversations or prevents me from continuing them. (Aaz)*

Aaz tells me that she often felt limited in the conversations she had with South Asian friends around her because 'maybe certain things were conservative and we hadn't gotten around to talking about gender or sexuality'. Although these things are allowed within Instagram, Aaz is

also able to manage these conversations and retain a level of distance, meaning that she doesn't experience 'that fear of being embarrassed or rejected'. For someone like 28-year-old university administrator Sta, this distance works as she is an introvert and doesn't enjoy being in constant contact with people:

> *I'm not very good with talking to people in general. In maintaining constant friendships in general […] I can keep up to date with what other people are doing, they can keep up to date with what I'm doing without the constant burden of communicating, which is always really useful. (Sta)*

This of course is not true for everyone – Kaa and Pvn have met and made friends through Instagram and have maintained these friendships AFK and they perhaps feel as if they are utilising Instagram in the ways that we are told we should. Going back to Instagram's homepage image of two women in physical proximity to one another, the company peddles an image of traditional friendships (fig. 1). Pvn reflects on the difficulties of not being able to fulfil this potential:

> *Luckily, I don't mind going to events, I've got a support network so I can meet other people if I want to meet other people on nights out and I like making friends on the train or making friends when I go out to a bar or something. But for some people, it's just too difficult. And I think Instagram worsens their anxiety. (Pvn)*

Pvn makes friends easily AFK and recognises that this is not the end goal for every participant, and that in fact the social overload of Instagram can worsen social anxiety. Helsper contends that 'while extroverted, highly socially resourced users are more likely to engage with social uses of ICTs, they are less likely to depend on them for information and social feedback' (Helsper 2021, p. 141). Kaa has also met up with others from Instagram:

> *I'm going out and having a tea with them and then potentially doing work with them or having a discussion with them or going to a gallery with them. (Kaa)*

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A platform like Instagram works incredibly well for extroverts who are socially resourced enough to build on their existing social networks through Instagram. For introverted users, access to resources and maintaining social links at their own discretion allows them to avoid social overload and engage in 'more experimental, open communication online' (Helsper 2021, p. 140). This is certainly true for Aaz, who is invested in 'starting conversations' with others she doesn't know that well because she hasn't been able to do this as successfully AFK.

All of these responses reveal the complexity of connections within Instagram – they are made and maintained in different ways for different reasons by different users, reflecting the varied psycho-social backgrounds of participants. Pum, Bla1 and Job are apprehensive about these connections when it comes to making or maintaining friends; they are worried about being sub-consciously shaped into valuing online connections in the same way that they value existing friendships or affirmation AFK. The notion that these connections stand in for meaningful friendships does not ring true for them – there is the possibility that you can be let down. To echo Rheingold, all three feel as if there is a danger of 'losing [a] sense of community' (Rheingold 1994, p. 96) that exists in a much more tangible form 'in real life'. For the likes of Dal and Uxu, professional connections are central to their engagements within Instagram, much more than social connections. For the socially resourced, it is a social tool, allowing participants such as Kaa and Pvn to pursue and extend their social networks AFK and vice versa – their friends most likely will (and do) feature in their content. Those who are much introverted or require a buffer for their social interactions (such as Aaz and Sta) use connections to access information and engage in social feedback.

This diversity of connection serves to present my participants as a heterogenous group of digital users and reveals that psycho-social wellbeing plays a role in their unique experiences of Instagram. I now move on to explore social comparison through uploaded content and its impact on participants' self-esteem.

Social comparison

A practice that negatively impacted participants mental health was the uploading of aspirational or 'living their best life' content, as Hee put it. Participants ended up socially

comparing themselves to others they followed, leaving them feeling as if their lives and achievements were not enough. Social comparison has been explored on social media by digital media scholars (Yang 2016; Meier and Schafer 2018), but as it came up so often in interviews, it deserves a mention and further determines that not all content made by South Asian diaspora users makes others feel good or adequately represented. Although participants tell me that they know content is heavily curated (and they do this themselves), the impact it has on them is undeniable. Bro, who quit her day job to take up a cycling tour around the world still feels as if she should be doing more:

> *Yeah and I think it makes you feel inadequate. I also feel like I'm looking at all this stuff that people are doing and I just feel like, what am I doing with my life? I'm not doing all of this stuff' (Bro)*

The sense of underachievement drives a need to exist in an economy of self-branding and self-management even more, making the living of life amongst everyday users competitive. Hee feels as if every area of life is up for social comparison:

> *It is hard not to find yourself comparing to others while scrolling- whether in terms of photo editing, body image, aesthetic sensibilities etc. and it can make you feel like you're in some competition for who is having the most fun or living their life the best. (Hee)*

From this 'emerges a new game in the attention economy, where the pursuit is no longer some semblance of authentic disclosure, but a competitive investigation into and comparison of the different strands of selfhood that a single user might put out' (Leaver et al., 2020, p. 113). To combat this feeling of inadequacy, some participate in this attention economy, uploading content to keep followers engaged by impressing them:

> *'I'm only trying to post to keep people engaged and make people think I have a life that they wanna live and I think that's the scariest thing about Instagram.' (Gur)*

Pum and Jo used words like 'scary' and 'fear' when talking about how Instagram can shape behaviours and Gur echoes this sentiment, almost as if the platform directs her behaviour more that she herself does. She considers this a negative because her drive becomes to impress others, rather than find meaningful connections and resources online.

For Rea, social comparison meant that she would end up spending a lot of money on designer clothing:

> *I was following a lot of (I'm really into fashion) of high-end designers and that put pressure on me to always want to buy designer and buy expensive clothes and that used to be fine but since I moved out [from parents' house] that's no longer in my budget. And so when I moved, I did go through like a massive purge of who I was following because I found that the people I on follow on there were having a bit of a negative impact on me. (Rea)*

Social comparison on Instagram has negatively impacted participants by making them feel inadequate in their own achievements, putting pressure on them to partake in the attention economy to stay visible and even influence their spending habits. Here, the invasiveness of the digital neoliberal economy in everyday users' lives intensifies their self-management and aspirations, but also puts pressure on them to spend money. In line with these pressures, beauty standards become a significant area of concern.

Beauty ideals and pressures

The disruption of Western beauty ideals is something that participants have spoken very positively about. For those identifying as fat brown women, Instagram has given them visual signifiers they do not see anywhere else:

> *That's why I love following these amazing plus-size models on Instagram because things like stretch-marks and where they're placed on your body and the outfits that you want to wear [..] that's what I was connecting to. (Aaz)*

For queer participants, it has opened up ways of being outside of South Asian diasporic heteronormativity:

> *I think we have this really restrictive image of passive Asian women who are hyper feminine […] Through the hashtags, I think I've just started following different people that just made me feel a bit better about myself. There's this butch Indian woman on like Indian Pop Idol or Fame Academy in India at the moment and she just posts incessantly all the time. It's just really nice seeing her absolutely smash it. (Job)*

Conversely, it has also put pressure on participants to adhere to normative beauty standards because the images of South Asian women that gain the most traction still exclude alternatives:

> *If you don't include dark-skinned women when you're talking about brown girl beauty […] make sure that you're aware that people come from different places and say that you're going to do a certain thing and do it. (Aaz)*

Despite alternatives, light-skinned, thin, heteronormative beauty standards remain the most dominant within Instagram, putting pressure on participants to post up selfies that look 'perfect':

> *If I take a selfie, I do see all the things that are wrong with me. Before, I used to take a selfie and post it, now I do a few things like 'oh my nose is a bit more bigger' or something like that or my eyes are too big or my face looks a bit fat here, I can't post this selfie. Because of the way that the culture is on Instagram, you have to be perfect. (Amo)*

Whilst it is too simplistic to assume that all selfie-taking is frivolous and superficial – it 'may reflect different aims, different levels of seeking out responses and attention' (Leaver at al., 2020, p. 68) - a part of this practice does put pressure on young women to place value on physical appearance. Strategies to deal with these pressures include refusing to use filters and embracing a much more 'real' image:

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At the beginning I played with some filters but now I refuse to put a filter on any pictures because I don't like that element of it. (Bro)

Bud decided to stop following beauty accounts on Instagram, which used to lower her self-confidence:

I noticed and that I followed a lot of like makeup and hair things and just beauty, but it was having a negative impact on my self-confidence. (Bud)

For Avi, the need to stay politically on the right side of the beauty discourse, meant that filters would be applied in such a way to counteract feelings of inadequacy. Avi's dilemma points to how a postfeminist sensibility can take hold whereby needing to cover up her dark circles, whilst not wanting to whitewash her face points to contradictory ways of adhering to such beauty ideals:

I hope people don't look through my pictures and think 'oh why has she whitewashed her face?' or 'why is she trying to make herself look a certain way?' […] I have dark circles under my eyes that I'm quite conscious about, so I take photos that lessen that or don't exacerbate it. That means that it will make your skin look even whiter, so I put up the saturation to make sure that it's still true to what I look like. (Avi)

This section reveals the mounting pressures that young women deal with when surveillance is a constant possibility – from family, employers, community, advertisers, possible professional avenues and other followers. This self-managed beauty of being presentable, but true enough to yourself, not revealing too much, but enough that you could get noticed by the right people, all the while battling to maintain healthy self-esteem is a difficult thing to juggle. It was positive to see some participants go against this by putting strategies in place to protect themselves but that others were negatively impacted when observing their faces through the camera. It demonstrates that Instagram, although now replete with 'brown girl beauty' images and accounts is not free from criticism amongst the South Asian diaspora, who are still negatively impacted by these perfect images. Thus, a transnational postfeminist

sensibility is reflected in content that pressures participants to adhere to heteronormative beauty standards, encouraging the self-management of appearance whilst also extolling the virtues of 'brown girl' representation. Another form of surveillance (that sometimes targeted participants' appearance) was trolling from unknown followers.

Trolling

Although participants didn't bring up trolling that much, the few who did told me that it usually revolved around their appearance or left-wing political conversations. Unsurprisingly, it was men who were unknown to participants who would make comments about appearance:

> If I'm perhaps posting a bikini picture or I'm in my swimwear [..] I'm going to receive a comment from guys. Sometimes it's the types of comments that you don't really want [...] I do not engage with that [..] but then I can sometimes hold back on how or what I post - I might crop it or take something away or put my hair in front on the image because I know how it might be perceived. (Ama)

Ama goes on to tell me that these comments most likely wouldn't have been made to her face, but the digital policing of South Asian women's bodies become the assumed responsibility of South Asian men who don't even know the women they are directing their comments at. In response to this, Ama censors her content and this patriarchal gaze becomes another in the canon of imagined surveillance that participants are already negotiating.

Abl tells me that when she came to the defence of well-known Egyptian Influencer Dina Tokio, who was getting comments for showing her hair underneath her hijab, Alb became the object of the abuse from one troll, who told her she didn't wear her hijab correctly either:

> I realised, for him to say that, he's obviously seen my pictures on my Instagram because on my actual Instagram picture you can't really see my face. So how would he know that I wear my headscarf that way? It just made me feel - I'm not gonna say insecure - but it made me feel something. Unsafe, I think. (Abl)

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For women and queer participants, this anonymous hetero-patriarchal gaze is never too far away, ready to censor and police images. These images that participants post up enable them to feel empowered, confident and perform a sense of individualism – Alb likes the way that her hijab is fashionably styled – which is curbed by this anonymous surveillance. Abl made her account private after this incident.

Scrolling through endless South Asian Influencer accounts, I had noticed that trolling most frequently occurred when these Influencers posted up content about the most recent Black Lives Matter protests after the murder of George Floyd in 2020. In support of these protests, they were met with accusations of playing the race card by both conservative white and South Asian users, who purported that American policing was not racist. In line with these observations, a couple of participants told me that they have witnessed similar occurrences:

> *I think the comments section is really interesting because I've noticed some people who use their platforms for activism, they've had to switch off the comments because of how it impacts their mental health. […] I've had to really negotiate what my relationship with social media and things are these days, because it's sent me to a really, really dark place in the past. (Her)*

> *A couple of people that I follow that are really outspoken on topics specifically against white supremacy and I think a lot of the engagement you see seems really toxic.(Eri)*

The centering of difficult subject matter not only brings out conservative voices but it negatively impacts users, making them less likely to want to engage in these conversations online. In one sense, whilst social media subjectivities can be shaped by neoliberal aspirations, the desire to engage in more complex political content can also be off-putting because of the criticism that comes with it. Therefore, usership is not only shaped by advertising opportunities, but can also be shaped by negative interactions with other users. I remember Zaa highlighting the 'lack of communication with people who don't share your politics' as an issue (which it is), but I can equally understand how those on the receiving end of trolling move away from the interactions as it negatively impacts them mentally.

Moving on from psycho-social concerns for the self, I noticed a lot of participants bringing up their younger girl cousins when it came to their concerns for others on Instagram.

Concerns for others

Thinking through the pressures that it has put on her, Avi thinks that they will only increase on an image-focussed platform like Instagram:

> *People are becoming a lot more image conscious […] more concerned with how they look and how they are portrayed or how they portray themselves - I think it's only gonna get worse. (Avi)*

Considering the future impacts, many participants' thoughts turned to younger users, in particular pre-pubescent and teenage girl cousins and nieces in their extended family. Bringing these members into the conversation shows that British South Asian diasporas have continued to retain strong links with extended family. No participants had children of their own and most were concerned for those who were yet to face the consequences of platforms like Instagram. Reflecting on how it has shaped certain behaviours, participants worried that it has begun to instil certain values in their younger family members:

> *I love her but it's just really interesting to watch her navigate her way through it and sometimes she'll come up on my feed and I can see the types of things that she's looking into and I'm like 'argh no, I don't want you to be influenced by this thing!' (Bla)*

Bla got married and moved away from her niece with whom she was very close. Distance has meant that she mostly now engages with her through the content she posts up, but she worries that her niece will feel pressured because of the overload of influences and content available at such a young age.

For others, it is behaviours in younger family members that they perceive as being influenced by our networked society that trouble them:

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I have little nieces and nephews that can play with my iPhone better than I can and I'm like 'good Lord what's your identity going to be in the future and why should technology have to be a part of that?' (Art)

Participants begin to act as mediators between younger family and Instagram – Dal maintains that this is because older family members are not as digital literate and therefore do not possess the skills to control usage:

My cousins, because they ask me, my mom's side of the family, especially because I think from the Asian Community, some of them aren't the most technology-minded, so they do ask me and I'm a bit like 'actually, don't'.(Dal)

Another worrying behaviour that participants observed was the prizing of physical appearance:

I see my cousins posting up selfies and I'm thinking 'what was the point of that?' and 'why are you wearing so much make-up? You don't need to'. […] Am I promoting this world? I need to be careful of what I'm sharing. (Kaa)

I have some of my younger cousins who follow me on Instagram and I don't want them to see that's life because I had an incident with my cousin. She was nine or ten at the time and she was saying 'oh maybe if you use this filter you will get more likes' […] I thought that this is not what I want them to think life is about because it does have an impact and people do get influenced. (Ill)

Both Kaa and Ill tell me that they try to make sure that their content is not overly filtered because they have a responsibility to the young girls and women in their families who follow them to show them that there is more to be had beyond beauty and popularity. On the one hand, it is undeniable that the digital does create new subjectivities and that these are not wholly positive for users; being exposed to others idealised selves has exposed the postfeminist logic to younger users who recognise that if you look pretty, you will get more

likes, leading to greater success on Instagram. Participants are aware of the consequences, because they have often been on the receiving end, therefore feel that they have a duty to guide younger users. However, this concern around girls and young women, if not reflected on, could lead participants to repeat practices of policing they have experienced themselves from older family members. As Anne Burns has argued, denigration of female selfie-takers has only served to regulate the behaviour of women in the social media sphere (Burns 2015). The digital practices of young South Asian girls from the diaspora have been monitored more than they've been understood by older family members (Durham 2004) and it is important that participants avoid this when broaching the subject with younger users. I also suggest that this policing could be read as a form of dissimulation whereby participants use their young nieces and cousins to articulate their own fears around bodily policing and normative beauty standards (Skeggs 2010). I dedicate a section to the concept of dissimulation further along in this chapter because I contend that it aptly captures participants' seemingly contradictory distrust of and compulsion for social media.

This concern did not extend to the boys and young men within the family – do they not require guidance? What challenges are they dealing with? Perhaps, as evidenced by a recent study into men's self-management of the body and increased pressures to take up a male bodily ideal (Norman and Bryans 2022), there perhaps should be room to consider how it impacts them. This is beyond the scope of this thesis, but it is an avenue of research that I am sure would yield some very interesting insights into the lives of young heterosexual men from the British South Asian digital diaspora. I also feel that participants are aware that power dynamics within families still operate along patriarchal lines, therefore it is girls and women to whom this solidarity is given. Sal, an artist based in Bradford, puts up videos of her working with heavy machinery when making her sculptures. She has noticed that the girls and women in her family have been emboldened by her life choices and content:

> *Since I started breaking away from that cultural stigma that an Asian girl doesn't speak her mind, doesn't venture out of teaching, being a doctor, being a lawyer [...] I've noticed it's the women in my family who have started speaking their mind; they don't realise it and it's a really slow process. I've noticed that they are also questioning the*

men in our family now, which didn't happen before. […] The younger girls are like 'oh if she can do that, then I can do that'. (Sal)

Through the privileging of content that is about *doing* rather than *being*, Sal has provided an alternative way of being online that the women and girls in her family can draw on.

Imagining the future of Instagram as something 'that's only gonna get worse', perhaps taps into wider anxieties about the platformisation of the internet:

> There is an urgent realization that the open web is threatened by platformization. In this rendering social media become sticky sites that attract and arguably entrap users, locking them in (for their departure, even if desired, would have considerable cost to one's social life). (Rogers 2019, p.269)

Even as platforms offer solace to marginalised users, the pressure to stay social media-dependent does away with the writerly elements (blogging, websites and forums) of the open web and into 'walled gardens' with restricted publishing, access and content rights. If algorithms continue to favour heteronormative beauty ideals without disruption, I can understand why participants are concerned for subsequent generations of women.

Another element I am keen to expand upon is the issue of labour on Instagram; my own experiences of social media recruitment felt laborious (I was never really much of a poster before this) and so I began to wonder how everyday users felt about posting and maintaining content and followers.

Labour on Instagram

When it comes to the maintenance of visibility and revenue on Instagram, the labour practices of Influencers has brought to the fore some fascinating insights, from obscured behind-the-scenes work (Duffy and Hund 2015) to aspirational consumer content in the Global South (Iqani 2019). Crystal Abidin's research on everyday Instagrammers found that many took on the labour practices of Influencers by reposting and producing advertising

content in an attention economy 'that has swiftly profited off work that is quietly creative yet unevenly reciprocal' (Abidin 2016, p. 87). Outside of follower's contributions to the fashion and beauty industry, I argue that more attention needs to be given to followers' labour when it comes to everyday usage and how this makes them feel.

The daily participation with social media can take its toll on users, and some reported physical symptoms that led to them having to reduce their usage:

> *I've been having migraines and I went to see my doctor and she said I was being overstimulated and that I needed to use less and less of my phone. (Pum)*

> *My eyes start hurting when I look at my phone for too long or at computers for too long. (Bal1)*

The need to provide constant content is a pressure that some participants struggled to maintain:

> *Where you start to feel the pressure to make more content and therefore seek out ways to do that […] Then I think there's always the pressure to be on it, like with work even its like 'why don't you post? Why don't you have more followers? (Dal)*

Dal's job involves posting on social media for various organisations and companies – a blurring of the work/life boundary has led Dal to feel as if she should be posting and building a following constantly outside of her working hours. Part of this hidden pressure – and something I experienced when maintaining a research account – was thinking of *what* to post to keep followers engaged.

Imagined surveillance from potential sponsors or employers keeps participants in a cycle of content posting in hopes that they will get picked up:

> *I have always stalked myself [online]; I do that all the time and imagine what people think (Mis)*

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Some of the people that follow me, they're like producers and this and that and it's like they always want to see people's Instagram's, I've learnt. So, it's like keeping it looking high quality (Bal)

Whilst some opportunities can pay off and they certainly have for certain participants, this labour, as Abidin points out, is 'unevenly reciprocal' (Abidin 2016, p. 87; the creative energy that goes into building a following in hopes of gaining enough visibility, is something that will not necessarily lead to opportunities or even 'likes' for everyone. Remaining invisible when you have put so much creative energy into your content is disheartening:

You are so reliant on 'likes' that if you don't get them, then you start questioning it and that's something which I've recently dealt with, with the algorithm changing and not many people interacting with it and it's upsetting to see something you've worked hard on not getting the response. (Ill)

Ill lives in Aberystwyth, Wales with her parents and siblings and there isn't much of an arts scene for her to get involved with, therefore Instagram acts as a platform for her work. Similarly for Bal1, who lives in Kent, the arts scene is in London and not something she can easily access, therefore Instagram becomes a place to keep up connections with creatives. In order to cultivate opportunities, they should be active online. Although building and maintaining a list of followers sounds simple, it is in fact time-consuming and complicated, which is why both Bal1 and Ill have struggled.

Participants told me that building a following was a challenging process – you don't just add any old account! Adding users that were relevant to your interests and would be active followers whilst open to the possibilities of exchanges and collaborations were requirements that were difficult to meet:

I was saying 'there's definitely South Asians out there doing really exciting stuff' and you 've got to have the time to find them. Once you've found them, you know they're there and you know it's going on, but you've got to live your life and go to work. I'm

thinking if you're doing that, I do feel like it's a bit of a luxury - I've been able to find it all, which is nice, but I can understand how people would completely miss it as well. (Mis)

I think that's through having maybe one person that I know is South Asian and creative and then finding a load of people through that, but I felt like I still haven't found as many people as I would like to. (Gur)

Just seeking advice or putting out jobs or events and things that are happening in specifically South Asian communities or BME communities. So yeah, it's definitely taken me some time to find them. I think a lot of us are coming out of the woodwork. (Her)

Having the time to build this network is seen as 'a bit of a luxury' by fine art student Mis, and it feels as if Gur and Her have dedicated time and energy to build something that still requires work. This is the one of the residual rules of socio-digital living – that the labour is ongoing. For many of my participants, for whom work in the creative industries is the end goal, everyday digital engagements become an exercise in self-management in a bid for employment opportunities and greater visibility.

Self-management within Instagram involves everything from creating content, uploading it and making sure it is aesthetically engaging, to following the right people, engaging with them and adopting new interface affordances. Many participants cannot afford to keep up because they have full time jobs or do not have the budgets or social and cultural networks for more professional looking content:

I think it's really difficult to maintain those sorts of accounts when you have a working life as well. (Pvn)

I've learnt to have more content to share but I'm so busy with lots of different projects that sometimes it's difficult to find content all the time. (Bri)

Having two different social medias - one for me and then one for the brand, it was just like, no I'm done. This is so exhausting! (Sta)

[My content] I think it's more my day-to-day because I don't really have the means or the space to make photoshoots and stuff. […] I think if you want to get out on top, if you want to be successful, it can't look very grassroots which is unfortunate. There is a certain aesthetic you have to go for to get a lot of publicity. (Zaa)

Apart from one participant, who made it clear that she aspired to Influencer status, nobody else was knowingly working towards this goal, or were possibly too embarrassed to admit this to me. Speaking to participants who had chosen to share in the attention economy, I realised that to simply take part and work towards a personal goal (even when not an aspiring Influencer) takes a lot of work on very uneven terrain. Those who have ample money, time and/or social resources are the ones who benefit the most from the cultural and financial capital that Instagram has to offer because they are the ones who are able to dedicate the most labour to it.

This in turn exacerbates inequalities; in the case of my participants, those with greater visibility online will get noticed by those in the traditional cultural industries and the hypothesis of the rich-getting-richer through use of ICTs is confirmed. Lai who has interned for a host of luxury fashion designers recounts how her personal content, featuring models and high fashion photo shoots went viral, resulting in her keying into global fashion networks:

All the pictures taken were mine but that one went viral, so there was a massive boost of attention. […] And that was the moment that I got into the fashion world I think and that was literally because a picture went viral, which is insane. (Lai)

Money, time and social resources are not mutually inclusive when it comes to attaining visibility; Bla isn't keyed into social networks as an illustrator and isn't particularly wealthy, but she does have enough financial stability to work from a home studio full-time and the time to build her following and her career:

All the perks of doing what I get to do is I get to really enjoy my job […] I think because of that I've been able to connect with other people who have given me really good opportunities and those are all the best things about it, in terms of career. (Bla)

For those experiencing negative outcomes, the answer has been to dedicate less labour to it, thus further decreasing their chances of visibility:

Generally, I don't scroll as much anymore, unless I really want to actively look for something and I'm monitoring how much time I'm spending on it. (Bla)

I'm working on my behaviour to stop that because it can become unhealthy where you're fixated on checking […] when I'm with my friends and stuff I allow myself not to look online and really live in the moment. (Ama)

I believe it's important to hit unfollow on anyone that makes you wish you weren't yourself immediately or to switch the app off and just enjoy photos for yourself until you feel comfortable sharing. (Hee)

I felt like it was really time-consuming, and I deleted it for that reason. And then two years ago I started it back up, but I made sure I limited what I was posting about and the sort of content I was posting. (Pvn)

After I reached 34 participants, I decided to stop posting on my research account – I already felt deflated by the lack of response I was getting for existing posts and therefore felt relieved when I decided to stop posting.

The labour of everyday usage can take its toll, especially when participants are primed for imagined surveillance from prospective employers. Time and effort spent on curating a following and content goes beyond maintaining a network for friendship and family, into the realm of self-management and branding. If success can be sustained, participants are more invested in the labour they put in, but, as I explained in chapter six, those with greater social and financial resources are the most visible and most likely to benefit from their labour. Those

with fewer resources end up dedicating less time and labour, as it is unreciprocated and, as a result, they reduce their usage.

Inauthenticity

This final section unpacks participants' knowing approach to Instagram; I noticed that they were aware of many of the negative implications of their engagements, but nonetheless took part. From here, I observe their differing perceptions of performed emotional vulnerability.

Dissimulation

Having already discussed how aspirational content took its toll on users' self-esteem (resulting in social comparison), I also noticed that participants questioned the authenticity of this type of content, yet were compelled to stay. From a researcher perspective, I am keen to highlight participants' understandings of the impact of social media technologies because these critiques are not just the purview of academics and digital media scholars. I argue that these discourses are known and shared amongst everyday digital users too and it is our responsibility as feminist researchers to acknowledge them because users are not just passive research subjects, they hold knowledge that we must pay attention to. I understand the allure of social media – it feels as if it is somewhere where everything happens and everyone is - not being there induces what one participant called FOMO (fear of missing out). Yet I noticed that some participants didn't really seem to trust what they saw:

> *What are they doing right that I'm doing wrong that they can lead these lifestyles and do this and do that? And then sometimes you just realize it's never what it seems. (Rea)*

> *I know a girl whose got like 13,000 [followers] or something but I know that through my friend, she's super depressed but her feed is this super fake happy, everything's bright and pink and Disneyland. (Bal1)*

> *I don't trust what I'm seeing on Instagram. (Bro)*

Nevertheless, they continued to take part, illustrating the prominence of social media in contemporary life and the dissimulation that occurs, where content is posted but negative thoughts about it are concealed:

> *You pose your body this way, that way, contort your face, I think it takes away from what your real life could be. (Bal1)*

> *Nobody wakes up in bed looking perfect with their highlighter popping like they do in like a post of you promoting a hotel, like that's really unrealistic. Whilst I might post something like that, I like to be real in my captions. (Ama)*

Sitting in bed 'looking perfect' for a post is 'really unrealistic', according to Ama, but it is not bad because she goes on to admit that she would post something like this herself. To counteract the unreality of the post, she says she would write something 'real' in the caption that accompanies it – perhaps describing the mishaps that went into making the image, as many Influencers do to appear authentic whilst still posting aspirational content (Leaver at al., 2020).

With more and more social media discourse out in the public realm in the form of news articles, documentaries and podcasts, participants were well versed in the mechanics and critiques of social media and its shaping of contemporary life:

> *There's a lot more research going into it […] looking into the influence of it and how it's really influencing our realities. (Bla)*

> *I saw this documentary that came out a few weeks ago as well, which I've seen and actually preceded my argument as to why we shouldn't – at least me personally on my personal one – why I'm not posting as much. (Art)*

They knowingly take part in a socio-digital economy because it has become a naturalised part of life, argues Geert Lovink

> Social media are neither a matter of taste or lifestyle as in a consumer choice; they are our technological mode of the social […] social media transformed from a hyped online service into essential infrastructure, underpinning social practices equivalent to writing letters, sending telegrams, and telephoning. (Lovink 2019, p. 32)

Whilst this may be true, participants' dissimulation of social media highlights the pressures that come with being part of this technological mode of the social. Some confess that they are building a brand of themselves in order to create more opportunities but admit that it is a complex issue to deal with:

> *There is a persona to an extent that is who I am, a sellable entity […] I have made myself a product in a way and it's really hard to say whether that is real or part of it is a digital extension. (Dil)*

> *Subconsciously you put yourself out there as a brand, so there are a lot more selfies now coz there's a lot more of 'this is who I'm working with now' and lots of app features […] I try to get across as much of myself now and that leads to me doctoring that. (Zaa)*

> *But if I wasn't accountable online, I'd probably stop at the point that its boring but because I'm accountable I know I have to push through and I have to make this really interesting for myself. (Bla)*

> *Me personally I think I've become really dependent on Instagram to promote my work and get clients, it's the only form of social media I have. So I guess that in itself is quite a negative relationship which could lead to negative impacts. (Hel)*

Participants *know* that they are a part of a network that isn't wholly positive and that it is shaping them into a product. This knowing branded self on the one hand is about making occupational dreams possible (through the PPP I conceived of in chapter six) and on the other, acknowledging that this dependence is not good for their mental well-being. This cynical approach

is a particular structure of feeling which emerges from a property of consciousness and action particularly at work in late capitalist societies […] Cynicism is the tone one is likely to use when one sees through and yet feels compelled to do the same thing over and over again. (Illouz 2007, p. 89)

Although referencing internet dating, Eva Illouz's assertion points to how a cynical approach to Instagram is a symptom of our late capitalist society, that shapes the diaspora subject as much as anyone else. Participant perceptions makes known this cynicism that is not discussed at length within Instagram, because the digital interface becomes the space within which participants feel 'compelled to do the same thing over and over again'.

Thus, this 'essential infrastructure' that underpins social life, is accepted by participants to have a neoliberalising tendency of personal content as positive self-branding, making them cynical not only to the content others post up, but also to how their own desires are shaped by it. Their dissimulation of social media - of doing one thing (constructing a digital self for the market) and thinking another (that this could have negative impacts) highlights the bind users find themselves in this contemporary technological mode of the social. That this is happening not just in Influencer economies, but amongst everyday users on social media is a valuable insight when we consider the neoliberalising tendencies of platform capitalism amongst everyday users.

I know that I have tapped into a very particular sub-section of users, and this is down to how Instagram's algorithm has put me in contact with a creative class of users, but it reveals that aspirations go beyond just making connections with others, to a naturalised business logic of the self. Following your dreams and writing that book or getting that exhibition is a nice thought, but it is a constant aspiration, making you work all the time, whilst cynically knowing its impacts; perhaps it is in the cynical knowing that gives participants permission to partake in these self-branding exercises. It also points to the ever-evolving precarity of workers, who now 'become their own auditors' (Fisher 2009, p. 51), responsible for their own employment opportunities.

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Thinking through 'ugly' feelings as a disruption of a happy neoliberal subject, I began to consider the dimensions of emotional vulnerability online. The way that emotional vulnerability was performed within Instagram was interpreted differently by participants. Some felt that there was a taboo around speaking about mental health amongst the diaspora and that this was being disrupted by content that dealt with mental health. For Bal2, the breaking down of these barriers were being carried out by other users she followed:

> *I think it has because there's been a lot of [talk about] mental well-being and encouragement, positivity stuff on there as well. Especially in your own life, sometimes it's hard to see that side of things. (Bal2)*

Bal2 lives at home with her parents and doesn't always feel like she can open up to them; she left the house to have this conversation with me because she didn't want her mum to overhear her responses. She thinks that others talking about their mental health and offering positive thoughts helps her get through difficult things in her own life.

Some see themselves as giving rather than receiving advice around mental well-being:

> *I deliberately put these aspects of my identity up because I feel like offering my own vulnerability, I'm inviting vulnerability onto the table. I'm using myself and my journey. (Aaz)*

> *Mental health, it's something I'm okay with talking about and my own experiences. Even though I know it is taboo and it is stigmatised [...] I have experiences with it but that doesn't make me crazy and it doesn't make me incompetent. If I don't speak openly about that issue, that is me perpetuating that belief that this is indeed a stigma and this shouldn't be discussed. (Abl)*

> *I talk a lot about my mental health on my story and any other issue I feel it's important to address. (Hel)*

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Aaz, Abl and Hel talk about their own experiences of having bad mental health in hopes that it can be destigmatised within South Asian diaspora communities. For somebody like Bal2, this is a useful resource. Others however, do not always think that such emotional vulnerability is genuine:

> *I feel like authenticity and vulnerability have become selling points now […] being open, being real, crying for example, talking about mental health, talking about relationships, talking about identity. Those are ways people connect and the fact that consumerism and capitalism have hijacked those very intimate tools […] they're selling us things. (Pum)*

For Pum, performing this vulnerability becomes about selling a product. This performance of emotional vulnerability according to Zaa, is inappropriate less so because it is consumerist and more because they think it is unprofessional on a public-facing account:

> *With the branding stuff, if you put your personal life in it, its public so you don't know whose watching, it seems unprofessional. (Zaa)*

The interweaving of emotional vulnerability with consumerism and self-branding, in one sense bridges the gap between mental health and the British South Asian diaspora, especially for participants who really feel that they lack that support AFK. For Pum, when it becomes hijacked by advertisers and brands, it becomes a selling point. Illouz refers to such appropriating as emotional capitalism, which has 'realigned emotional cultures, making the economic self emotional and emotions more closely harnessed to instrumental action' (Illouz, p. 23). It would be unfair to say that participants are wrong for doing this, but I highlight it to demonstrate how the commodification of emotion has produced contemporary subjectivities, as Illouz continues

> Emotions have become entities to be evaluated, inspected, discussed, bargained, quantified, and commodified […] emotional capitalism has imbued economic transactions – in fact most social relationships – with an unprecedented cultural

attention to the linguistic management of emotions, making them the focus of strategies of dialogue, recognition, intimacy, and self-emancipation. (Illouz 2007, p. 109)

Thus, the performance of emotional vulnerability has varied functions for participants – for some it is disrupting a cultural stigma via the consuming or producing of such content, whilst others approach it somewhat cautiously. Here, emotional vulnerability is viewed as commodified or unprofessional. I would argue that participants' desire to perform emotional vulnerability is sincere and that the internal logic of contemporary capitalist culture has shaped the economic self into an emotional self and vice versa. Participants have gone on to instrumentalise these emotions as self-branded individuals within Instagram. Following on from Illouz's logic of emotional capital, this instrumentalising is in danger of regulating and applying emotion as a supposed tactic towards self-emancipation instead of actions that are geared towards the dismantling of systems of oppression i.e.: if you feel sad or angry about a particular thing, your emotional response is enough to show others and therefore no action is required beyond this.

In other ways, I would almost be inclined to view emotional vulnerability as an 'ugly' feeling within Instagram because it is viewed as unprofessional and negative by some participants, therefore a disruption of the happy neoliberal subject:

I'm not always really serious about being really anxious or depressed [...] It's trying to make it positive because I'm aware that nobody wants to be that person. (Afs)

When Afs says she doesn't want 'to be that person', I assume she means an unhappy person, someone who doesn't want to bring up difficult subject matter. Dal feels this same pressure:

I'm conscious that I only post good things - like, for this past year, I've experienced a lot of family illness and family death [...] But it's something you can't really post about because of the nature of Instagram. There's always this thing to always be happy. (Dal)

Only displaying a 'positive mental attitude' (Gill 2017, p.621) and avoiding difficult things adheres to the concept of the happy neoliberal subject and so those who perform an emotional vulnerability refuse 'to be constrained by happiness […] open[ing] up other ways of being' (Ahmed 2010, p.15-16). Perhaps conversations around depression or bereavement would have come up if Afs or Dal had opened up. Alternatively, some may not feel comfortable sharing emotional intimacy with those they do not know that well:

> *And you just have to be very careful what you say or do online […] For example, with a friend I've just met I want to get to know them based on what they tell me and trust them, that that is what they're telling me, to retain that old school intimacy. (Pum)*

Pum prefers 'old school' intimacy, as in sharing emotional vulnerability with people in her social networks AFK, which I understand because this is how I also choose to be emotionally vulnerable.

Throughout this final segment, I have demonstrated how the performance of emotional vulnerability has been interpreted by participants. From a genuine resource that combats stigma around mental health within the diaspora, a commodity that has been shaped by processes of late capitalism and an 'ugly' feeling as strategy against the happy neoliberal subject, participants have revealed that their displays of emotional vulnerability all vary. Thus, Instagram is understood and drawn on emotionally by participants in ambivalent ways.

Conclusion

Being a part of the information society massively impacts participants' mental well-being in a myriad of ways. When it came to their questioning of the validity of online connection, socialising had different outcomes; those with ample social resources built upon their existing social networks via Instgram, whilst those with fewer social resources used it to access information, experiment with communication and retain distance to alleviate social anxieties. Thus, connections had varying outcomes for participants dependent on their lives AFK and vice versa. Although they had also found avenues for alternative beauty standards, practices of social comparison and mainstream beauty ideals were recognised as having negative

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mental impacts on participants. Similarly, the uploading of certain content and defending other (usually women) users, at times resulted in trolling from anonymous (usually men) users, making some participants less willing to engage in discussions or keep their profiles public, thus making them more invisible.

Participant concerns for younger users were usually transposed to their girl cousins or nieces, wanting to protect them from content that they perceived as encouraging damaging beauty ideals in pursuit of likes and followers. The algorithmic pushing of normative beauty standards is worrying, but participants must be wary of policing younger users. In the third section of this chapter, I explored the labour of everyday users, concluding that successful self-management is a time-consuming process that permits visibility to those who have the time, money and/or social cultural networks to succeed. Committing to these ongoing labour processes was unsustainable for others and as a result, they put less work into it and became less visible.

Concluding the chapter was participant perceptions of inauthentic content. Here I was keen to unpack participants' dissimulation of social media, whereby they offered critiques but also took part. I argue that this dissimulation signals today's technological social contract of knowing the negative impacts of shaping one's identity for the digital market but partaking anyway. Drawing on Illouz's theory of emotional capital, the enactment of emotional vulnerability further demonstrated how the internal logic of contemporary capitalist culture has commodified emotion. However, I am careful to not apply this to every interaction, as some participants find great value in receiving or giving advice about mental health and disrupting cultural stigmas. Conversely, I was also mindful that not everyone trusted or liked to upload emotionally vulnerable content, especially if they had closed networks that they could rely on for support.

Participant perceptions reveal how Instagram is a highly ambivalent space, one in which the reproduction of neoliberal values encouraged by social media platforms is a complex and complicated issue for users, impacting their mental wellbeing and self-esteem. My previous chapter unearthed the inequalities that emerged as a result of the #browngirl Influencer and the trickle down to everyday Influencing. The erasure of class and caste as a result of this

market logic is explored in my next chapter, where I interrogate the obfuscation of class and caste within Instagram. I conclude that an acknowledgement of these intersections can bring out the politically resistive potential of Instagram as a tool for connection.

Chapter 8: Future reflections

Yeah caste and class - I don't think I really woke up to that fact. (Eri)

Out of 34 participants, only five mentioned class and only two mentioned caste; I cannot be certain in saying that those who didn't mention these things are unaware of them, but it does demonstrate how discourses around class and caste can be obscured within the British South Asian diaspora itself. I must add here that I did not specifically ask any questions about caste directly to participants and so it is a little difficult to ascertain whether participants are actively avoiding it or whether it is obscured out of their own caste-based privilege. Building on analyses of the postfeminist neoliberal self that I explored in the last chapter, I am keen to understand why the intersections of class and caste are not foregrounded in participant perceptions the same way that gender, race and sexuality is. For those few who did mention it, I am invested in understanding how they negotiate and critique notions of class and caste amongst the diaspora and what this erasure means in a transnational context. Differentiating participant understandings of class and caste further emphasises how this approach accounts for the heterogeneity of users who simultaneously are not a monoculture, but a distinct set of users (Brock 2012) with resistive political potential (Graham and Smith 2016).

I begin by interrogating the historically contested territory of authentic displays of British South Asian identity within Instagram, which (more so than class or caste) was discussed by participants. I focus on this because discourses of authenticity reveal much about the dynamics of class within the British South Asian diaspora. I divide this section into three parts that reflect the differing perceptions of participants; the first considers Instagram an experimental site for hybrid identities to exist. The fusing of white subcultures, such as punk and heavy metal with South Asian visual signifiers has meant that some participants haven't had to mask their ethnic minority status, instead being able to center ethnicity by following and displaying content using hashtags such as desipunk or gothpoc. The second part looks at how others contest this display of hybridity, maintaining that users should possess the correct

cultural knowledge of items such as a bindi before coupling it with a pair of Nike trainers, which is seen as an inauthentic display of South Asian-ness. I argue that this form of regulation creates a hierarchy, whereby those who deem themselves most culturally knowledgeable also possess the most cultural capital, perpetuating normative codes of class, race and gender within Instagram. The third viewpoint taken by another participant critiques users who foreground their South Asian identities in a bid to attract the attention of corporations and cultural institutions. Conclusively, in explicating these complexities, I hope to demonstrate the continued contestation of authentic British South Asian identity and how this feeds into understandings of class distinctions.

The second segment of this chapter concentrates on class and the British South Asian diaspora. Here I draw on Rima Saini's research on class affiliations amongst the British South Asian middle-classes to determine the relations between race and class within the UK, as I noticed that most participants did not bring up their class in interviews. Those that did present complex narratives of classed identity, and it is these that I focus on in order to better understand firstly, why class is a difficult subject to comprehend for most participants and secondly, what happens when class is erased from Instagram.

The final section situates Instagram networks within wider global brown networks, showcasing how participants' varied aspirations end up building different kinds of global networks; there are those who align with the logic of platform capitalism and those who work to try and subvert it. I argue that those who work to disrupt the seemingly naturalised logic of neoliberal identity work that shapes users into self-branded individuals, begin to build truly radical and decolonial global networks.

Authentic South Asian identity

Although class wasn't highlighted much by participants, 'authentic' or 'real' South Asian identity was. Just as in ethnographies of British South Asian adolescents (Ghuman 2003) and nightclubbers (Kim 2012; Bakrania 2013), authentic South Asian-ness remains a contested territory even within Instagram, regardless of the visual and technical affordances of social media. Whilst this insight doesn't offer anything new to the fact that contestations of

authentic diaspora identities is ongoing, but I include it to demonstrate how everyday users perceive their roles and the roles of others and what this signals, not only about consumer logic within a digital economy but about British South Asian class politics on social media.

To illustrate the shift in discourse around authentic South Asian identity and its classed dimensions, I make reference to two studies in particular by Helen Kim and Falu Bakrania. I consider them relevant to my research as both look at young British South Asian women partaking in a cultural pursuit (nightclubbing) and both interrogate the gendered and classed dimensions of ethnic authenticity. In some ways, there are parallels between their respondents' perceptions and participant perceptions, but I argue that there is also a shift, marked by the fact that these narratives have moved from club attendees in a nightclub to cultural producers on social media.

In much the same way that club going was a 'key site of actualising ethnic and national belonging' (Bakrania 2013, p.9), participants find ethnic and national ways of belonging on social media. Being open to content where South Asian and western clothes were worn together underscores Bal2's experience of a hybrid British South Asian identity within Instagram:

> *Where I live, there are quite a lot of Indians but I've never felt like part of an Indian community really. The way I've grown up, I've been around like a mix of people like more English people and then I didn't used to like my culture and there were a lot of accounts like desi accounts where you could wear traditional clothes with your normal clothes, like experimenting. I think that's been a good way to connect as well. (Bal2)*

Having grown up with white friends, Bal2 was able to encounter alternative articulations of South Asian identity through Instagram that bridged the gap between 'traditional' (South Asian) and 'normal' (Western), allowing her a connection to a South Asian identity she could relate to; using the word 'normal' to describe Western clothing indicates the pervasive ways in which whiteness is the somatic norm (Puwar 2001), which I assume Bal2 has had to adhere to growing up. Bal2 sees the fusing of clothes as 'experimenting' and something that has brought her closer to others online, precisely because she is encouraged to articulate her

hybridity. This is important to her because she has grown up in an environment where she did not feel comfortable enough to celebrate her South Asian identity.

Others are also impressed by the hybrid ways in which users are shaping identities on Instagram, especially when it comes to alternative subcultures:

> *Someone I know and I've seen every so often would post 'desipunk' or 'gothpoc' as a hashtag and I was like 'oh my gosh! I could be this! (Sta)*

> *I do know South Asian individuals that listen a lot to heavy metal music like I do or that are interested in tattoos or that are interested in the subculture (Pvn)*

For participants to take part in this fusing of white subcultures with South Asian identity has meant that they do not have 'to avoid or veil their race-based position as a brown minority' (Hsu 2013, p. 389) who engages in non-South Asian culture. This is a tension I am familiar with; as a teenager who listened to nu-metal (a subgenre of music that combined metal with hip hop), I was often accused by my South Asian peers of being a 'coconut' (brown on the outside, white on the inside) for my taste in music and clothes - my transgression excluded me from being authentically South Asian. Wendy Fangyu Hsu argues that these hybrid digital diasporas transgress 'the Orientalist East-West binary, a geopolitical construction that reinforces the differences between the two halves of the world' (*Ibid.,* p. 398).

I am not suggesting that participants are experiencing a hybrid sense of belonging that the generation of club goers before them didn't experience – many who attended club nights felt as if they finally belonged, that the music and atmosphere of bhangra and hip hop or classical Indian music and break beats, dancing and drinking accurately articulated their experiences as British South Asians (Bakrania 2013). In accessing and sharing goth/punk/heavy metal/tattoo content that comfortably sits within desi/brown/poc/South Asian identities, participants find 'a new social home' (Hsu 2013, p. 398) for their interests that point 'towards more progressive and inclusive cultural formations' (Saha 2011, p.443). What has shifted is that they are able to access a plethora of subject positionalities that speak to their niche

interests and which are shared by other 'desipunks' and 'gothpocs' online, being able to center their race-based position within Western subcultures and not veil it.

In Kim's 2013 account of British South Asian nightclub goers, clubbers who ethnically transgressed (wore Western clothes, had white partners, listened to rock music etc.) called 'into question [their] being able to claim these identities' (Kim 2013, p. 647). She points out that it was often male club goers who pointed out ethnic transgressions made by women clubgoers, singling out women's bodies as sites of ethnic authenticity, whereas men could transgress by listening to and fusing bhangra with hip hop beats and still maintain their ethnic authenticity. In line with this notion, Bakrania goes on to suggest that these classed distinctions were to do with notions of masculinity; 'bhangra is associated with a working-class masculinity that trades in commercial hip-hop' and Asian Underground 'is ostensibly gender neutral and, because of its use of classical South Asian music, can be associated with the middle-class' (Bakrania 2013, p.6).

Both maintain that the cultural producers in these scenarios – the musicians, deejays and club promoters – were predominantly (although not exclusively) male, therefore women were relegated to a somewhat passive role as club goers, giving them less agency over the cultural form itself. This is not to downplay the role that women club goers played as cultural consumers – without their attendance and financial support, the British South Asian music and clubbing scene would not have flourished. In the case of Instagram, I argue that participants are not just consumers of content but also cultural producers, creating UGC that allows them to form networks, create opportunities and build Professional Public Profiles; a lot of people have smartphones and therefore access to culturally productive tools has increased (although there are still complex barriers to success for users as I explored in chapter six). So what does this technological shift reveal about contestations of authenticity and by extension class, amongst participants, most of whom are British South Asian women?

Through contestations of authentic South Asian identity on Instagram, the parameters of class and gender have not been eliminated, but shifted, revealing a different set of power dynamics amongst women users. Lai, is annoyed by displays of hybrid identity, calling it 'self-fetishization':

There's that fusion culture that exists and I don't feel comfortable with that personally because I feel like if you're gonna be traditional, be traditional but don't be traditional whilst also wearing Nike shoes which are probably made in sweatshops [...] Someone described it in our interviews as self-fetishization. It's like not understanding what the significance of a bindi is but just wearing it just for the sake of taking a picture. Like that kind of culture. What's the difference between a white girl wearing it and you if you're not knowledgeable about what your actual culture is? (Lai)

The notion that you must have prior cultural knowledge of the South Asian clothes you decide to wear before taking a photo and uploading it, shows how South Asian-ness or 'desiness is demonstrated through a certain amount of (sub) cultural capital', writes Helen Kim. In her ethnography of British South Asian club nights, Kim maintains that 'exhibiting awareness of the right music, knowing the right people, going out to the right clubs – all these show skill and competency and function as a display of this capital' (Kim 2014, p. 110). Translating this to Instagram, having the correct understanding of what a bindi is and when or how it should be worn becomes a way to display a cultural capital and middle-class set of tastes that depend on the user displaying how much they know about South Asian culture. For Lai, who becomes a representative of the 'authentic' way of displaying South Asian femininity, the neoliberalising tendencies of self-regulation and the redeployment of its normative codes means that anyone who fuses trainers with saris is outside of 'traditional'/'authentic' South Asian identity. In her research, Kim noted that female interviewees singled out other (working-class) British South Asian women who were wearing revealing clothing, 'chastising their inability or refusal to self-regulate their bodies in the name of 'decency'' (Kim 2013, p.647). In the case of Instagram, Lai does not chastise other women for wearing revealing clothing (she talks about how she is prevented from posting photos of herself in short skirts in chapter four), but rather for their inability to understand and authentically display South Asian cultural signifiers.

Uploading content that authentically displays South Asian clothing with a demonstrable knowledge of the correct way of wearing it, separates those who know how to 'do' South Asian culture correctly from those who do not. A reminder here that visually appealing South

Asian clothing that would gain traction online is incredibly expensive in the UK and therefore those making use of what they already have could be read as working-class compared to those of middle-class sensibility showcasing South Asian-ness in the 'proper' context. Self-designated as the expert of South Asian identity, Lai also feeds into the narrative that those who can afford to, should be the only ones allowed to, as she tells me:

> *All South Asian people 95% just recycle images from other places. Like if I include a picture of a Bollywood poster, I've gone to a museum and I've seen that picture of the Bollywood poster and I've taken a picture of the poster of that going to that museum. Whereas they just recycle old images they've found on the internet and it makes all their pages look the same. (Lai)*

Applying the logic of branding, everyday users become lazy producers in Lai's eyes, and should be working harder to produce better content, regardless of the financial barriers they will face in pursuit of aspirational content. Furthermore, Lai goes on to say that a lack of cultural knowledge is no different to white people wearing South Asian clothes. Lai equates this lack of cultural knowledge to 'self-fetishization'; that South Asian diasporas exoticize their own cultural signifiers where once, particularly for the bindi, this view was commonly applied to 'a particular type of white clubber' (Saha 2011, p 4450). For Lai, authentic South Asian identity within Instagram is being aware and knowledgeable of cultural context, in the same way that displaying cultural forms should be placed within an authentic context (i.e.: artwork in a museum). This could be read as a middle-class sentiment (Lai lives and works in Paris for a luxury fashion brand), whereby those who have the means to access culture and knowledge become the gatekeepers of it, whereas those who are not as resourced, invent in the face of adversity and are accused of not 'doing it properly'.

Zaa uses a similar word – 'self-exoticize'- to describe what they think is a forced push for institutional recognition amongst users:

> *To self - exoticize yourself sometimes (because it does go to that at points), there is a real risk to that […] they get into diasporic solidarity but on the other hand, there's a subconscious playing up to publications (Zaa)*

Zaa's viewpoint varies from Lai's – it is less about regulating bodies to adhere to classed codes of race and gender, and more a critique of users being pushed into foregrounding their South Asian-ness as a form of self-branding. Displaying 'diasporic solidarity' that 'is mediated through a prevailing logic of capital' (Saha 2011, p. 451) subsumes participants into an attention economy. Steered in this direction

> Neoliberal logics effectively neutralize appeals to race through entrepreneurial discourses. Racialized neoliberal subjectivities thus erase the historical and political dimensions of race in ways that allow institutions, industries and cultural actors to appropriate and exploit culture by appealing to niche audiences and Black markets without the worry of Black identity political "baggage" (Stevens 2021, p.3)

In conclusion, participants understand and critique authentic displays of South Asian identity on Instagram in different ways; for those who are drawn to hybrid displays of South Asian identity, white subcultural interests and diasporic identity become mutually inclusive. I noticed this especially for participants who grew up in majority white towns or had white friendship circles, thus allowing them to bring whatever South Asian cultural knowledge they possessed without judgement of not doing it properly. For others, this entry into 'fusion culture' is considered inauthentic, perpetuating classed distinctions of race and gender, i.e., there are clothes and contexts within which to be 'traditionally' South Asian and to step outside of this reveals your lack of cultural capital. Therefore, it is those who are able to display a keen cultural knowledge who become the gatekeepers of South Asian identity, and those without such knowledge are considered fetishists of their own culture. This self-fetishization takes on a different dimension for participants who are critical of the consumer logics through which identity becomes 'a viable commodity that can be bought, sold, and leveraged to better one's economic standing' (Stevens 2021, p.3). That it is participants themselves who are producing these South Asian visual cultures to be noticed by wider institutions, affirms how everyday users become implicated in wider processes of capitalist production.

I argue that in some respects, Instagram reconfigures the idea of South Asian culture and white subcultures as mutually exclusive by becoming a productive site of social interaction, especially for those who feel alienated from the diaspora either geographically or culturally. These hybrid visual cultures are considered inauthentic by others for two different reasons; the first being that they lack a cultural capital that is reserved only for those with the cultural knowledge who know how to perform authentic South Asian-ness through middle-class aspiration. The second being that these cultural signifiers are cynically displayed in a bid to 'play up' to corporations and cultural institutions. This ambivalence is articulated through participants' perceptions of what is authentic, demonstrating the complex ways in which content operates along classed lines of hybrid/inauthentic/working-class and South Asian/authentic/middle-class, which could both can be interpreted again by other participants as performing South Asian-ness as a self-branding exercise. That participants recognise these complexities in their own and their peers' usage points to how everyday users are more than just social interactors on Instagram, they are also producers, consumers and brands.

Moving on from authentic enactments of South Asian-ness as an indicator of class, the next section interrogates class, as I thought the omission of it from participants' narratives was something worth exploring, especially since a couple felt very strongly about its erasure from Instagram.

Class and the British South Asian diaspora

The space that participants occupy as second and third- generation children of immigrants is a complex one; 'intra-ethnic and intra-class differentiation shape relative racial and class privilege in complex ways', writes Rima Saini (2022, p. 4). Besides race, there are a host of identifications from the Indian subcontinent (caste, religion, ethnicity, region) that come to bear upon British South Asian communities when it comes to the enactment of class identity. These complexities can be difficult to untangle, as 32-year-old Bro from Birmingham reflects:

It's like the cultural capital, right, that you can get by being middle-class […] even though technically we're middle-class now, we embody that [working-class identity] - it's in our minds, it's the experiences we had as children, even though we've gone up a class, we've transcended materially, first, we embody that working-class experience. So, I always say my mind is still working-class; the insecurities, the gaps on my knowledge and stuff like that comes from that background but then at the same time my nephews and nieces, they're comfortably middle-class and you see that they get so much more access to things. Yes, they have got a barrier because of their race and their religion, for sure - I would not even deny that but they also have privileges that I never had, that are gonna allow them to navigate a capitalist world that's kind of focussed on materialism and money. (Bro)

Bro is Muslim - her parents are from Kashmir - and so she understands how racism and Islamophobia will impact her nieces and nephews, even though she considers them to have more middle-class privilege than herself. Islamophobia plays a major role in how British Muslims are read, mediating 'their social mobility trajectories and the 'credibility' of their capitals, but also their cultural citizenship' (Saini 2022, p. 4). Their inclusion into British middle-classness which is often mediated through Whiteness, is seen to be at odds with this nationalist sentiment (Banks 2012). For someone like Bro, working-class identity is inextricably linked to her experiences as a child growing up in Birmingham in the early 1990s. The memories of these discomforts are something Bro does not want to forget, the remnants of which still live on today in 'the insecurities' and 'the gaps' in her knowledge, even though she acknowledges that she's 'transcended materially' and is now understood to be middle-class; thus, a middle-class identity feels inauthentic 'with the values accrued from a working-class background an important part of self-conception' (Saini 2022, p. 5).

Similarly, for 21-year-old Zaa, a Bengali Muslim university graduate, working-class values are drawn from their parents:

I think the way that I became an artist was through my mum. She used to sew curtains and she used to make salwaar kameez off the books when we were living off benefits so that was her. Also my dad, he was a bricklayer and he was at work most days and

he used to make pots on the side. It was this non-bourgeois introduction to art and I think, of course, I have picked up bourgeois tendencies for sure but I wanna break down this idea that you have to have been raised with parents who went to art school to have degrees. […] Ideally, I want to inspire our communities outside of the institution. (Zaa)

Zaa highlights a tension between the spaces they are a part of as a result of their university education (academia, art) and like Bro, admits that they have taken on middle-class values or 'bourgeois tendencies'. Both participants show strong affiliations with 'ethnic minority working classness' (*Ibid.,* p. 9) and do not like that this sensibility is erased from Instagram:

I'm from a working-class background and sometimes I find some of the diaspore [sic] scene very middle-class and not necessarily speaking to my narrative […] I almost feel like the people that are on Instagram or the scene on Instagram is kind of a continuation of that […] not necessarily speaking to the working-class South Asian experience. (Bro)

Drawing on Saini's recent study on the racialisation of class amongst British South Asians, I argue that a lack of participant discourse around class reflects 'a lack of clarity around not only the symbolic but material boundaries of class as a whole' (Saini 2022, p. 15). Other participants may well have had similar upbringings to Zaa and Bro, finding themselves higher up the socio-economic ladder, in terms of education, occupation and income; class distinctions become a complex matter, and in some cases, middle-class identity becomes associated with whiteness. Bringing back a point I made in chapter six, some participants were keen to make a distinction between themselves as brown bodies and the majority white middle-class spaces they occupied, thus transgressing the boundaries of class to become space invaders (Puwar 2004). Although I cannot be certain, I assume that these participants perhaps see themselves outside of the middle-class because they are not white, and therefore class distinctions do not apply as readily to them. Saini refers to this rejection of class identity as 'allusions to the racialised 'second existence' of class predicated on a level of mutual exclusivity between the ethnoracial minority experience and middle classness' (Ibid., p. 12).

If middle-class values are about adhering to whiteness, the British South Asian diaspora experience is seen at odds with this, and therefore exempt from it.

In addition, 'the working-class South Asian experience' that Bro wishes to see more of on Instagram sits at odds with Influencer economies that actively encourage upper and middle-class aesthetic values, as Helsper writes:

> It is a problem if who produces most of the content or who becomes famous comes from an advantaged background, since we are motivated to create in 'our own image' (Helsper 2021, p. 159).

For many participants, seeing brown Influencers *is* their own image being reflected back to them, making them feel seen, heard and inspired; Babbu's jet setting fashion shoots and celebrity links create a blueprint for young South Asian women, displaying the trappings of a middle-class lifestyle, without saying as much. Zaa and Bro do not reject class or see themselves outside of it, instead choosing to 'straddle' class boundaries that they have clearly demarcated. Zaa doesn't consider their experiences of working-class Muslim Bengali life in London as mutually exclusive from middle-class cultural pursuits:

> *I think this whole going into academia, making art, is seen as a really bourgeois past time or whatever. I want to say that working-class identity or diaspora identity are not mutually exclusive to that. (Zaa)*

Bro and Zaa, the two most vocal participants on class come from working-class Muslim communities and want to hold on to that. Although they have experienced social mobility through academic qualification and cultural capital, they are proud of being from working-class communities. This straddling somewhat disrupts their consumption of aspirational content within Instagram because they see this content as rejecting an 'ethnic minority working classness' (Saini 2022, p. 5) that is intrinsic to the way that they self-identify.

Eri, who has grown up in an upper-caste, conservative Hindu family tells me that class was never something that was discussed:

within the South Asian community [...] there's a clear marker of class everywhere [...] but it's also not talked about. (Eri)

It is usually Hindus from the diaspora who will readily accept a middle-class identity, although 'in a largely ambivalent way' (Saini 2022, p. 15) whereby identifiers such as schooling, occupation and income are 'generally cited as clear and unproblematic indicators of their (objective) middle classness (*Ibid.,* p. 10). Although no other Hindu participants apart from Eri talked about class, he interrogated class within the diaspora at large, but did not self-identify as middle-class.

This same uncertainty around class for other participants is understandably tied into the immigrant narrative of a 'better life' and the values of social mobility that parents have instilled into their children, alongside the perceived whiteness of the middle classes. These narratives are reflected in participants responses:

Like it's not enough that English is your first language and you literally went to a posh fucking private English school or any of those things, you're not English enough. (Rea)

My whole life I've kind of suffered from an identity crisis. I sound one way and then I look one way and then like I have all these different backgrounds and where I've come from. (Her)

The way that my parents struggled to sort of assimilate because of their otherness or because of their difference, for me that was like a real source of pain. (Eri)

I hope to in the future teach classes like sculpture workshops and especially to me, it's about teaching them to the Asian Community because we're not afforded these opportunities. Even on a random day, like on a normal day I just want Asian kids to know what's out there for them. (Sal)

Despite participants accumulating financial and cultural capital, non-whiteness and 'socio-economic deprivation is construed as an intrinsic part of the ethnic minority experience, and thus not necessarily reflective of the White middle-class experience of capital accumulation and class reproduction' (Saini 2022, p. 13). Consequently, there are 'racialised limits' to adopting an authentic middle-class identity, giving credence to what Saini terms 'a racialised 'second existence' of class':

> Although there are aspects of the (British) middle classes "Asian' people can relate to, there are elements of another (immigrant/ethnic minority) "world' that problematise a comfortable self-definition of middle-class, regardless of how clearly one may be able to define the attributes of this 'group'. Here, we see allusions to the racialised 'second existence' of class predicted on a level of mutual exclusivity between the ethnoracial minority experience and middle classness'. (Saini 2022, p. 12)

This 'second existence' of class plays out in 30-year-old Amo's response:

> *So these kinds of things I cannot translate to a white middle-class audience but what I want to tell other South Asian artists through my Instagram is that it doesn't matter - you don't have to feel obliged to translate and make others understand where you are coming from. That's one thing I try to push through my art, that's why I try to unapologetically, I try to name my art in Hindi and Assamese and avoid translating into English. (Amo)*

Although Amo tells me that the majority of her work appeals to white middle-class audiences, she sees herself and her art practice as transgressing it by refusing to translate her work into English. On the one hand, this demonstrates that diaspora experience complicates theorisations of class within the UK, on the other hand, it erases other intersections of South Asian identity. Amo is an upper-caste, Hindu artist who was able to utilise Instagram to gain a foothold in the London arts scene; she tells me that she was able to land a job at a South London gallery because she had a strong social media following. I assume that social, cultural and financial resources were available for Amo to do this, but the material conditions of Amo's life do not apply to her as a classed subject. This 'second existence' of class can lead

users to simplify class, seeing themselves outside of such constructs because they are not white.

Participants, given the complex nature of their upbringings, do not see how their racialised experiences align neatly within classed categories, especially since, as Ali Meghji contends (2016; 2017), whiteness has often been at the core of dominant theorisations of class cultural capital within the UK. I think it is too simplistic a notion to assume that participants refuse to talk about class because they want to avoid the issue, but rather that the racialisation of class is a complicated issue, and one that deserves further theorisation. Rea, for example, went to a private school and felt left out for being South Asian and Muslim, therefore associates upper and middle-classness with whiteness which she feels is something she will never attain. It also wasn't a question that I brought up directly in interviews – if given prompts, some participants could have had some interesting points to make about race and class.

This is not to say that thinking through class is impossible for participants; both Bro and Zaa self-describe as working-class. Class is not a 'second existence' but something they have an affective relationship with, invoking memories of their upbringings and the difficulties their families went through. A certain set of values have been instilled through their strong affiliations with 'ethnic minority working classness' (Saini 2022) which for Bro includes lifestyle choices which aren't just 'focussed on materialism and money' and for Zaa includes taking pride in their parents' craft skills, which are just as legitimate as any acquired through arts institutions. Both of them acknowledge that they now have accessed the middle-class, but still have strong affiliations with ethnic minority working classness. This straddling of class 'can be construed as a form of symbolic power' contends Saini, as these affiliations 'disrupt the equivalence between White middle-class culture and 'desirable' cultural capital' (*Ibid.,* p.10).

Consequently, in erasing class from Instagram, identities become further subsumed into a neoliberal digital economy that adheres to an untroubled association with middle-class aspirational content, whilst participants themselves perhaps struggle to articulate the complex relationship between race and class within the UK. The material and symbolic dimensions of class, when discussed by the likes of Bro and Zaa, reveals how participants

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conceptualise social stratification, and that Instagram is in danger of homogenising a diverse group of users by creating, in Zaa's words, a 'we're diaspora, we're oppressed' narrative. In avoiding class, content also avoids 'fluid and intersecting typologies of class identity' (Saini 2022*., p.15) by wrongfully assuming that everyone's (low) material conditions are the same, thus disavowing the varying levels of economic and cultural capital that participants have access to within Instagram.

Transnational postcaste sensibilities

Participants were very keen to talk about how intersections of gender, sexuality and race informed their interactions, demonstrating that such conditions of connectivity, as Hedge observed, transform 'the meaning of how communities are formed' (Hedge 2014, p. 100). Thus, participants accept that they are subjects under these categories and therefore create the conditions of connectivity along the lines of gender, sexuality and race. I argue that by ignoring caste politics, participants adhere to a transnational postcaste sensibility that obscures not only their own position, but that of others on the Indian subcontinent and beyond, in the context of global decolonial solidarities and networks. Just as transnational postfeminism is a globalising force, so too are transnational postcaste sensibilities; the idea that we are post-caste (that it is ignored or obscured within the British South Asian diaspora) has come to bear within Instagram and has not been without consequence, as I shall demonstrate through participants' perceptions of Canadian South Asian artist Babbu the Painter.

Babbu the Painter and caste

Babbu the Painter was an oft mentioned and contested figure amongst participants. Some felt a real affinity with the Canadian South Asian artist:

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It was 3am in the morning and I couldn't sleep, and I was scrolling through Instagram and it was like 'Oh Babbu the Painter is gonna be in Birmingham this weekend'. Straight away I messaged my work colleague who I'm really good friends with and we ended up going to the event the next day. (Dal)

I bought a Babbu the Painter t-shirt that I saw on Instagram. (Dil)

People like Babbu the Painter, we connected on Instagram and became really great friends. And then we did an event together when she was here in London. (Ama)

Babneet Lakhesar, who goes by the moniker Babbu the Painter, is an artist and clothing designer who foregrounds her gender and race within her arts and design practice and is a source of inspiration to participants working in the creative industries. In late January 2019, Babbu uploaded a series of photographs to her artist Instagram page. It was of a fashion shoot that took place in Mumbai, India. Modelling her own designs hand painted onto clothing, she is snapped alongside local residents in the neighbourhood. The framing of the image which places a light-skinned, middle-class Indian woman from Canada in the foreground, with darker-skinned working-class Indian men from a district in Mumbai as background, has led to criticisms from other participants:

Innit, yeah, how many jobs have you lost over being light skin? (Zaa)

As an artist I think it's your responsibility to take the care to understand what you put out there - just have a bit more of that awareness in a way. It's 2019, we don't live under a rock, read some free articles on the internet, engage with communities that you're making work about etc, etc. (Eri)

I defer to participants' comments about this incident because I think it aptly demonstrates how caste politics are (mis)understood, suppressing historical and contemporary truths within the diaspora at large (Patel 2016). For those who admire Babbu's work, no comment was made regarding the Mumbai photoshoot. With this image alone garnering over 200 comments, it would be difficult to avoid the incident, especially if you are a fan of the artist. I

didn't directly broach it with these participants, so they possibly could not have known about the incident. However, I maintain that this perceived ignorance of caste and class within Instagram is well represented by this image and by participants' lack of critical commentary. Zaa and Eri, the only two who brought it up, reflected on how class and caste politics were implicated in the situation.

I've taken note of the fact that both of Babbu's critics – Eri and Zaa – are not women and therefore do not necessarily see her as a source of inspiration. For the rest, she is a role model who has successfully utilised Instagram to become financially stable, whilst (according to her fans) being unapologetically feminist and South Asian. These participants see her achieving goals that they themselves aspire to - Dal and Ama (and possibly Dil) live at home with their parents and are working towards careers in the cultural industries. All three, when asked how they would like to be perceived online respond:

I'd like to say confidence, being stylish and fashionable. But then also inspiring to other people, not just in terms of the fashion sense, but what I do through work a lot on my social media; I care about issues, I care about stories, I care about messages and the things that kind of seemed a bit taboo in our culture. (Ama)

If I was going to define my brand, it's kind of like just seize the day. I'm always wanting to convey 'life's a bit too short, why not go out and do something random? (Dal)

I'd want them to see that I work in the creative industries because that's such a key part of my identity. […] I think it's important especially in the arts and academia, especially being a marginalised and underrepresented part of society. (Dil)

Babbu is a single woman, an artist travelling the world and collaborating with Hollywood and Bollywood stars and clothing brands, which undeniably is an attractive prospect and as Dil reminds us, a woefully underrepresented prospect amongst young South Asian women. What seemingly is a push back against the institutional narrative of making known that which is denied her in traditional western institutions (her gender and race that the institution either ignores or commands), becomes a neoliberal practice in self-management. The neoliberal

practice of appropriating 'racialized bodies and subjects under the guise of "appreciating the aesthetic" while increasing profits for individual actors and their brands' (Stevens 2021, p. 4) whether subconsciously or not, becomes the goal. She comes to represent a dream of financial and cultural success for South Asian women from the diaspora, but without class and caste analysis, this representation adheres to, rather than disrupts nationalist sentiments. In turn, participants turn 'desirously towards [a South Asian] postfeminism' (Dosekun 2021, p. 1379) that foregrounds individual choice and consumerism and conveniently does not interrogate class and caste in much depth.

There are frameworks in place for the enactment of racial neoliberalism and postfeminism that reward participants for highlighting raced and gendered dimensions of the self. The most visible South Asian postfeminist content foregrounds the life-worlds of the socially and financially enriched, who go on to represent the diaspora at large and shape follower aspirations. These aspirations adhere to a business ontology of the self, whereby the messiness of the world is obscured by the clean, white grid showcasing a financially and culturally successful self. This logic, as witnessed via Zaa, Eri and other followers' comments, has caused tension within Instagram, demonstrating how the neoliberal self is at odds with histories of class and caste.

I maintain that the digital neoliberal economy would never allow for a meaningful engagement with issues of class and caste anyway because it is an inconvenient truth that disrupts a marketable, branded self. Admittedly, thinking through caste politics as a diaspora subject is hard work, but not impossible – my own experience of witnessing caste discrimination happened when I was a child and my grandmother would derogatively talk about our next-door neighbour, telling us she was a 'chamar' (from the Dalit community). Getting older and understanding this oppression in more depth, has allowed me to re-think my own position globally as a South Asian, and the higher-caste privilege I should be aware of and interrogate. Through this process, I become not only a diaspora subject in Britain, read as 'brown' or 'Indian' by the white population, but a body in communication with the Indian subcontinent, read differently there.

In interrogating caste politics, we begin to key into global and decolonial histories of the world, instead of perpetuating harmful power dynamics that erase the complexity of South

Asian experience across the world; legacies of caste discrimination and activism that were unknown to me became clear and all of a sudden, international networks of solidarity emerged that went beyond the Global North. As South Asian diasporas located in the West, we should be as committed to politics in the Global South – a refusal to engage means a perpetuation of oppressive power structures. A refusal to engage results in angry comments from others under a photograph you've uploaded, telling you that your brand of solidarity is not solidarity at all but a marketing ploy.

Not acknowledging caste amongst the diaspora produces problematic engagements with the subcontinent and with others amongst the diaspora from lower-caste and Dalit communities. The assumption that we are all the same becomes a damaging concept, because although working together as non-white communities is important, this homogeneity is not in service of anti-racist activism, but in service digital markets. Whilst Dal, Amo and Dil find that Babbu's work aligns with their own aspirations, it also prevents them from engaging with global networks of caste-based solidarity. Babbu's collaborations with Bollywood stars also lacks critique; what Dal, Amo and Dil imagine to be activist networks reaching out into the subcontinent, are in fact not, but become the natural order of doing digital identity work.

Eri maintains that it is an artist's responsibility to 'take care to understand', as I think that it is all our responsibilities to take care and understand. I admit that analyses of caste politics within this chapter are not fully developed and deserve further research that builds on the emerging field of Dalit studies (eds. Rawat and Satyanarayana 2016) ; I include them here as thoughts that can become a future site of research when focussing on British South Asian digital diasporas. In this way we can perhaps disrupt the march towards an easily packageable self-identity which in reality is never complete because it remains a site in constant flux – the following section begins to unpack what global brown activist identity is and what it achieves in a neoliberal digital economy.

A global brown network

As mentioned previously in chapter six when interrogating the figure of the #browngirl, I touched on the idea of a global 'brown' network that participants were tapping into via Instagram. Utilising the word 'brown' more than 'desi', they embraced a global brown

network, whilst also remaining culturally South Asian. Babbu, for example, has made links with Hollywood and Bollywood actors, as well as being invited to the UK, where she has met a few of my participants. This network, whilst pushing for international brown connection worldwide, mostly serves a neoliberal end. Rather than building a global network for political solidarities, it is for market change and individual gain. Erasing caste and class from the equation, we are left with a global brown network that homogenises South Asian diasporas, which for Zaa is a problem:

> *With a lot of these South Asian cultural and art movements, I think you do a lot of high caste people who are from really affluent families who do participate in certain systems, who are a ruling oppressive class in certain respects but they jump on this whole 'we're diaspora, we're oppressed' kind of band wagon and it's not the same across the board. (Zaa)*

I am careful to not critique participants' desires to be a part of a global network of other brown individuals, South Asian or not – feeling inspired and communicating with others globally is a very comforting feeling, especially when individuals feel excluded from mainstream cultural discourse. Rather, I am critiquing the aspirations of self-management and success that become examples of activism being performed by brown bodies who themselves 'participate in certain systems', as Zaa contends. Being visible, making connections, starting a business, gaining a following become markers of brown activism, as Lai tells me:

> *In a global sense, I have a lot of Indian American friends who have been key collaborators of my research. (Lai)*

The research in question is a digital platform:

> *I wanna move more to the activism route because basically I need to content create this next 6 months for my platform that I'm setting up, so that'll be where a lot of my energy will be focussed now. [...] Definitely moving towards being vocal about issues,*

vocal about intersectional issues that are currently in the creative industry, especially

in the fashion industry because that's where I come from. (Lai)

Being 'vocal', can also be read as being 'visible' when it comes to digital platforms, and I have already established how it is those with wealthy life-worlds who usually gain the most visibility online. In essence, this global brown network consists of self-managed, branded individuals; making visible who you are as a brown woman, separated from wider political histories and contexts, can depoliticise your position, whilst simultaneously claiming political ground. Thus, Lai, in seeking cultural justice that is separated from caste and class politics, builds a network that engenders 'new forms of subjection and marginalisation' (Gray 2013, p. 791), similar to that witnessed in Babbu's photoshoot; to foreground yourself literally against a backdrop of nameless Indian subjects demonstrates this emergent form of subjection. Thus, difference 'operates as a form of power that normalises and regulates' (*Ibid*.), rather than a form of power that advocates for social justice. In what ways have other participants disrupted this?

Eri is keyed into a global brown network; he has met and made work with a Gujarati artist who moved to New York, on the legacies of colonialism, took part in a reading group on surveillance and race with a South Asian American performance artist and shares work and ideas with a friend from the Punjab:

One of my good friends from Punjab who I met in Europe a few years ago, we just stayed in touch - he started a collective to tell the stories in Punjab about the people, their daily life there. He comes from a photography and writing approach, but we share stuff with each other and then that's the extent of how I engage with other South Asian artists. (Eri)

The global brown networks Eri is keyed into are different to Lai's – connecting with others can be incredibly fruitful and meaningful, if the mode of connection is less about visibility and the marketing of difference and more about the complex intersections of our national and global identities as South Asians. In interrogating these intersections, other kinds of global networks can begin to emerge, ones that disrupt nationalist sentiments and avoid easily packaged self-

branded content. However, Lai wishing to be 'vocal about issues' isn't an invalid action (wanting to connect with other brown women globally to embrace her identity as a South Asian woman) - we see how these intersections have been controlled by either family or institution, and therefore Lai perceives of her position as *already* going against the grain.

Both Eri and Lai have built networks in distinctive ways, demonstrating how Instagram functions in very diverse ways for its users. For Lai, her differences as a fat South Asian woman are readily subsumed into 'the normalizing logics of postfeminist and neoliberal frameworks that nonetheless make room for difference' (Punathembekar et al., 2022, p 15). These differences she is keen to export and make visible within a network of similar creatives for whom caste and class do not figure, making them exempt from global networks of solidarity with other marginalised communities. What they do tap into are global postfeminist and postcaste networks, that continue to perpetuate material inequalities that these users think they are working against by visibilising race, gender and sexuality. For Eri, global networks that shape South Asian diaspora identity through considerations of state surveillance, colonial legacies and connections to working-class communities on the Indian sub-continent allow for a political outlook to emerge outside of the digital neoliberal economy, whilst still using the same tools. Similarly, Bri, another participant who runs a British South Asian LGBTQIA+ support forum through Instagram, fosters solidarity through making visible the plight of queer British South Asians and creating a space both online for users to connect and stay resourced. Undeniably, there are limits to forming radical political networks on corporate platforms (users are in danger of getting their accounts removed from Instagram, in a move similar to shadow banning and discussing things online should inevitably lead to collective action, not just online debate), but these users are operating outside of the logic of neoliberal identity work.

I find these alternative global brown networks promising, because in order to disrupt the seemingly naturalised logic of neoliberal identity work (an insidious business ontology of the self, as Fisher puts it) within Instagram, we must begin to look at the differences of caste and class that are obscured and ask ourselves why this is. In doing so, we being to connect with others interested in collective action and global solidarities; for example, my own understanding of caste politics has allowed me to recontextualise South Asian identity in a

British context. As an upper caste Brahmin, I am only just beginning to pick up on the caste prejudices held by members of the diaspora (something I mistakenly thought had disappeared with my gran when she died) and the extent to which caste violence plays out on the Indian subcontinent. Links between anti-caste activism in India and Black liberation in the United States reveals an alternative global network that recognises these cultural and political differences but is invested in collective action. Just as Zaa contends that the British South Asian diaspora is not 'the same across the board', distinctions of class and caste should be interrogated to pinpoint the source of our subjugations and privileges in the UK and on the subcontinent. In doing this, we dismantle a political outlook that favours the Global North into a decolonial outlook that makes links between class, caste, race, gender and sexuality across the globe. Only then can certain participants understand that the diaspora does not have the same access to things just because we are all brown and rather that these differences enable us to understand and confront inequality more honestly. For the likes of Eri and Zaa, this has meant investing in deeper understandings of those marginalised by class and caste both within the UK and India. For Lai, it has meant building a platform from where she can address normative beauty ideals, gender and race.

Although making difference visible is important for marginalised groups to feel seen and heard, the historical notion that capitalism supresses all differences to make us all the same is a misreading – in its encouragement of *particular kinds* of differences, it urges hierarchies and inequalities to emerge, argues Cedric Robinson:

> The tendency of European civilization through capitalism was thus not to homogenize but to differentiate – to exaggerate regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences into "racial" ones. (Robinson 1983, p. 26).

Thus, the pursuit of difference in and of itself is a stance readily subsumed into the logical neoliberal identity work whereby difference without 'baggage' becomes a sellable commodity. Interrogating the function of visibility within Instagram leads one to see how some participants, whilst feeling validated by visibility, are sucked into the processes of neoliberal identity work and thus, build their global networks according to this logic.

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I conclude this section with a quote from Wendy Fangyu Hsu's case study of South Asian American punk band The Kominas, who built global networks through Myspace and Twitter. Through their constant interrogation of historical and present-day political upheavals and embracing of international subcultures, they built a 'transnational, anti-status-quo solidarity' (Hsu 2013, p. 399) through their global digital networks. Reimagining The Komina's global digital network as an archipelago, Hsu writes:

> Unlike Foucault's archipelago, The Kominas' counterpart is not a punitive system itself, but is a subversion of one. It engages in a constant struggle to survive and flourish in the midst of past and present global inequities left over from the legacy of colonial occupations. A steadfastly growing network, this global archipelago fosters a refuge for its member islands, while countering the forces that impinge upon its dispersed but powerful existence.' (Hsu 2013, p.399)

In the same way that transnational postfeminist sensibilities can end up shaping South Asian diasporic identity, the erasure of caste and class takes diasporas out of histories of global struggle and solidarity and also alienates them from the political discourse taking place on the Indian subcontinent. In the process, I hope participants are able to counter forces of marginalisation through the building of global collective solidarity, not just individual corporate successes.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined participants' contentions around class as read through discourses of authentic British South Asian identity. I found that their varied critiques affirmed the space as a site of ambivalence for users; it confirms that their everyday activities are beyond simple social interaction and include production, consumption and self-branding. I observed that class identifications were not spoken about by most participants and those that did, revealed complex accounts of race and class. Drawing on Rima Saini's research, I contended that British middle-classness's proximity to whiteness could perhaps have contributed to the silence and 'second existence' of class for other participants. I also argued that the perceived erasure of class from Instagram would mean that South Asian identity would end up adhering to an

untroubled association with British upper and middle-classness through the dispersion of aspirational/luxury content and further homogenise a diverse set of users.

In the vein of transnational postfeminist studies, the chapter goes on to look at the erasure of caste within the Instagram. Through participant perceptions of Babbu the Painter, I maintained that in not acknowledging caste, the diaspora produces problematic engagements with those on the Indian subcontinent and with other diasporas from lower-caste and Dalit communities by engaging more with digital markets than caste-based solidarities. These kinds of engagements also go on to determine what kinds of global brown networks participants are keyed into, deploying quite different conceptions of power that either normalise and regulate existing inequalities or advocate for social justice. I conclude by observing how some have disrupted neoliberal global brown networks by keying into alternative modes of connection that do not rely on the building of a visible, individualised self that only foregrounds race, gender and sexuality. Through this conception I hope that more users are able to advocate for more transgressive, decolonial global brown networks of solidarity that allow them to see themselves not as individuals in this world, but as powerful collectives part of global struggle and solidarity.

Conclusion: Disrupting neoliberal brown individualism and moving towards global brown solidarities

The overarching focus of this thesis has been to offer a critical analysis of social media and the role it has played in the construction of contemporary British South Asian identities. More specifically, it has engaged in the digital lives of women and queer British South Asian Instagrammers, who are largely missing from research on social media usage and from accounts of South Asian digital diasporas (which notwithstanding, offer critically engaged accounts of South Asian digital diasporas elsewhere, which I hope to contribute to). To better understand the ambivalence of digital identity work, I maintained that research should account for the complex desires of users, as well as the neoliberal logic encouraged by social media platforms. I conceived of an approach that had both theoretical and practical functions when applied to participant narratives. This approach gave me the opportunity to engage with user insights I would not have been able to access through digital ethnographic methods of Instagram content analysis. Not only was I able to critically engage with participants' understandings of digital identity work as women, queer and diasporic digital users, I was also able to approach them as everyday social media users dealing with the same impacts of digital media technologies as default (white, usually male) users. Throughout this thesis, I have grounded my research in feminist, queer and postcolonial theories that I can only hope my research can build upon, as a critical reflection of contemporary cultural identity in the age of social media.

The introduction of feminist and queer theories of the digital in my opening chapter was significant for its critical contextualisation of digital identity work amongst women and queer users. It was crucial that I acknowledged the role that these digital media scholars have played in foregrounding the ambivalence of digital identity, because the digital (as they understood it) was never a utopia for freedom of self-expression. Within this framing, the feminist discourse of ugly feelings had found a way to digitally disrupt the happy/positive content of the neoliberal subject, offering another way of being on social media. Whilst cynicism can sometimes take hold, it was also important for me to be reminded of the joys of intimate publics and digital counterpublics, where users shared experiences and connections outside

of mainstream, white, cis-gendered, heterosexual and patriarchal digital spheres. I was prompted by this when thinking through postfeminist and racial neoliberal dimensions of digital identity work and to repeat Herman Gray's assertion that digital media scholars should 'detail exactly how and where media organise and circulate affectively compelling sentiment, attachment, and (dis)identification to public policies, bodies, histories, and cultures' (2013, p.793). I entertained the notion that there must be other ways of seeing the messiness of our digital lives, in the same way that Gopinath's queer curation of the archive brought new possibilities into being through 'queer aesthetic practice' and Legacy Russell's Glitch Feminism disrupted the gendered binaries of social media platforms.

The affective theorisations of the digital inspired me to apply the affective turn to everyday social media users by wanting to instigate conversation, not distant (and voyeuristic) observations of their Instagram accounts. My approach was steered by this desire to connect with British South Asian Instagrammers who possibly moved within the same digitally mediated spaces as me, to basically ask them 'what do you make of it all?' In making sense of their perceptions, I hoped I could make sense of my own in the process – how did I perceive my life and the lives of others on Instagram? Where do my perceptions place me within national and global contexts? To what extent do I reproduce the neoliberal dimensions of social media platforms? To what extent are social media platforms used as resistive tools within my life? I understood my position as a member of the British South Asian diaspora as never fixed and found Brah's conception of the 'diaspora space' an apt reflection of how we all must feel. Despite the processes of mainstream cultural production always ready to flatten and pigeonhole diaspora identity, I found a sense of comfort in the 'diaspora space' that accepted us as identities in constant flux; never ethnically inauthentic or authentic, just identities in existence and accepted for what they were. Referring to Brah's work in 2012, Stuart Hall said:

> She draws on a 'structure of feeling' – a range of meanings and feelings that seem to be shared between various people whom she's talked to before. These understandings and feelings always carry in part unconscious meanings and

investments. They are always embedded, not just in the things people do or say, but in the way they say it and so often in what they do not or cannot say at all. The absent/presences are key parts of the 'data' too. (Hall 2012, p. 34-35)

On reflection, this 'structure of feeling' is how I wanted to explore digital usership and it is heartening to read that meaning and feeling shared over conversation is how Brah has approached much of her scholarship. In wanting to lend complexity to the flattening of life and identity encouraged by platform capitalism, I was enthused by Ellen Helsper's digital inequalities intervention that provided me with a solid framework through which I could connect the social and material conditions of participants' lives to their digital ones and vice versa. Being able to transgress boundaries of intersectional identity via the 'diaspora space' and boundaries of online/offline existence via the digital inequalities framework mirrored the complex space inhabited by women and queer British South Asian Instagrammers.

The data I subsequently collected and analysed brought up complex findings that were not reflected in participants' Instagram photo grids, instead offered up through reflective interviews about digital usership; oftentimes participants told me that this was the first time that they had been asked about what they thought other followers took away/learnt about them from their Instagram accounts. Thus, offering up a space for reflection of the digital self (I hoped) allowed pause for thought against the relentless stream of content. Some findings were unsurprising, like the continued surveillance on social media of women and queer bodies by family and wider community. As everyday social media users, it was again unsurprising that employers and colleagues were encroaching on participants' engagements. Through engagements on Instagram, the ambivalence of digital identity work was being demonstrated; participants who'd initially found a space of safety online where they could post up photos wearing bikinis, hanging out with their male friends or experimenting with queer identity were now having to be cautious. There was a freedom from the patriarchal and heteronormative constraints of family and community expectations, which was now being eroded. I enjoyed getting to grips with the inventive ways that participants negotiated their safety in response to this erosion and some of these strategies spilled out AFK (the killjoy), further demonstrating that our digital and material lives are thoroughly enmeshed. Other tactics such as the lockdown account and ephemeral data exchanges exhibited the resilience

of participants who expressed a refusal to stop posting transgressive content by finding ways around this policing. Again, young South Asians finding ways around family and community policing is nothing new but what is noteworthy here are the various digital avenues they find, almost like alleyways and concealed entrances *within* a social media platform that appears to have a very simple and user-friendly interface; it is precisely these perceptions that make known our messy and complex encounters with and on platforms – nothing is ever what it appears to be on the Instagram grid.

This complexity only deepened when it came to participants' queering of Instagram, which proved to be a vital intervention in the face of continued homophobia within the wider diaspora and racism within white mainstream queer spaces. Again, it was participants' desires that shaped the kinds of engagements they wanted to have with each other. I was careful to acknowledge the influence of homonormative cultures on queer South Asian identity online and although this wasn't really expressed through participants' content (perhaps because some did not feel safe enough to upload content that is so public about their queerness), it was something I had seen adopted by South Asian Instagram Influencers from the diaspora. Others made clear the limits for queer self-expression within Instagram as a platform, with a tendency to police and shadow ban queer content, they recognised that it is easy to stagnate when you're 'looking at pretty things' (Aaz). Despite this, a shared intimacy emerged through the practice of queer (in)visibility; a digital pseudonymity that allowed for a level of safety but still managed to tune into a queer optic that could be read by those who recognised the queer signifiers. As one participant put it, it was about 'saying stuff without ever saying it' (Dal). (In)visible queerness became a challenge to the default publicness built into the architecture of social media platforms, which push for users to share everything about their identities (that ultimately fit into a western form of digital publicness) and consequently, to turn it into a brand. (In)visible queerness enabled participants to - and I repeat Gopinath's brilliant words again - 'grasp the unanticipated intimacies between bodies' (Gopinath 2018, p. 170). This intimacy could remain digital or not – there was no expectation, and queer networks remained fluid in their forging of connections both online and AFK.

The ambivalent nature of Instagram meant that some participant desires were at times contradictory, and I used the figure of the #browngirl to analyse these contradictions. The use

of the word 'brown' signalled participants' engagements within global networks of identity performance and communication; it isn't just your friends viewing content about your life – you are searchable to the world, and you want the world to find you and so #brown becomes a way to be found. I was invested in learning why postfeminist sensibilities had taken hold within the #browngirl narrative, applying Puwar's concept of the space invader. This lent credibility to the actions and aspirations of the #browngirl, who had been patronised, left out or made to feel invisible in majority white institutional settings. Hence, Instagram became a space where they could express themselves and nurture transnational inks with one another as cultural allies. What emerges as a result of this expression are complex strategies for belonging; creating UGC with the intention of gaining a visibility you are denied AFK does not necessarily lead to this kind of recognition and reward. What gains visibility online are the life-worlds of upper and middle-class #browngirls, who then reap the rewards AFK through advertising opportunities and sponsorship deals. More importantly, sharing your story of marginalisation becomes a way to be rewarded by a neoliberal system that defangs diaspora politics in service of corporate ends. I argue that this way of being becomes naturalised, with everyday users employing a 'business ontology' of the self, where it makes sense that the self within Instagram operates as a business. Most participants had engineered a Professional Public Persona, which indicated that they didn't just want to be marketed to, they wanted to do the marketing on behalf of a brand or institution. I termed this approach everyday Influencing, where we witness the effects of a trickle-down of aspiration from Influencers to everyday users, encouraged by corporate brands determined to find more niche and authentic brand ambassadors to advertise goods and services to social media followers.

Not wanting to pigeonhole participants as diasporic spokespeople who must only refer to their digital lives in relation to their race, I wanted to contextualise their perceptions within wider discourses around social media and mental health. Again, wanting to capture the nuances of this 'essential [digital] infrastructure underpinning social practices' (Lovink 2019, p. 32), I found that participants were well versed in the risks and negative impacts of Instagram, referring to their cynicism of others 'inauthentic' content, their own feelings of inadequacy and the concern they felt for the girls and young women in their families. Despite this awareness, they still were compelled to participate, capturing a 'particular structure of feeling which emerges from a property of consciousness and action particularly at work in

late capitalist societies' (Illouz 2007, p. 89). This cynicism, which Illouz defines as seeing through something but being compelled to keep doing it, on one level reveals that we all want to be where everyone else is and we will persevere even when we recognise that it is not good for us. On another level, this dissimulation exposes the fact that although we do one thing (upload content) we think another (that it damages our self-esteem and puts pressure on us to self-brand). Thus, there is a value in moving away from the keyboard to reflect on how it makes us feel and perhaps paying more attention to these reflections will allow us to comprehend how we are being shaped by these social practices.

In chapter five, I concluded that participants' reinscribing of queerness into their religious lives signalled a push towards a decolonised relationship with religion that went beyond cultural identities and into global networks of de-territorialised diaspora identities. I continue with this thread in my final chapter when considering where the political potential of Instagram lies for participants. I interrogated the obfuscation of class and caste within Instagram; I did not want to accuse participants of purposefully ignoring caste and class because this is not what they were doing but rather I was trying to understand *why* it had happened. Drawing on Saini's work on the racialisation of class, I found that class identifications were complex because participants' upbringings were complex. However, in not referring to class and perhaps seeing themselves outside of it because upper and middle-classness was akin to whiteness, I contended that a plethora of subject positionalities (including caste) were erased in the process. I admit that the role that caste and class plays in my own life is not clearly defined; I have realised that although I am a racialised minority within the UK, I must learn from those in the diaspora and on the Indian subcontinent who face caste and class oppression if I am truly dedicated to global brown solidarities – these things take work! In denying these complexities, participants made assumptions on the part of others, disavowing the varying levels of economic and cultural capital that they have access to. To reiterate Helsper's point, 'we enter through different doors, so we differ in how we navigate different digital worlds and inhabit different digital spaces' (Helsper 2012, p. 181), regardless of our shared racial identifications – we are much more complex than the digital gives us credit for. I concluded by looking forward to what some participants were already doing to disrupt the neoliberal logic of platforms and continue to encourage a push towards global networks that make known the class and caste struggles of contemporary South Asian

communities within the diaspora and on the subcontinent. I hope that this encourages a move away from neoliberal brown individualism packaged as activism and towards collective brown solidarities.

Perceptions and engagements of and with social media still feel intangible to me at times and I apologise if these come in and out of focus. In some ways, it mirrors our socio-digital existence – moments of the internet in our mind's eye when we are AFK and vice versa (perhaps a snippet of a friend's conversation or a memory of being in physical proximity to them when you are scrolling through their Instagram account) and there are little to no binaries to this digitally mediated social mode of being, especially as a member of a digital diaspora. I come back to Stuart Hall, who gave words to the diaspora experience in Britain, reminding us that it will always be complex despite the neoliberal encouragement towards a simple and individualised branded self:

> The language breaks on you […] because it has to address, without final resolution, the inevitable complexity of the world constructed as it is, materially, politically, socially, psychically and culturally. (Hall 2012, p. 36)

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