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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Re-shaping the boundaries of feminism: the case of #femminismoislamico on Instagram

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ABSTRACT: Although the Italian public discourse is characterized by an underlying Islamophobia and gendered processes of racialization and discrimination, for which the agency of women of Muslim culture is often denied, Italy hosts a growing and increasingly visible feminist movement that adopts intersectionality as practice and method. Particularly relevant for contemporary feminisms appears to be the digital environment, which is at the same time a space for networking and a site of protests and collective action. In this context the paper explores whether an online discourse on feminism and Islam exists, and how it unfolds on social media. In this contribution we focus on the discourse about #femminismoislamico in the digital sphere by analyzing how Instagram users engage with the related hashtags, in the case study of Italy between 2017 and 2021. Data are organized in three categories: information, inspiration & memes, call for change. The discourse developing around the analyzed hashtags contributes to re-shape the boundaries of both the feminist discourse and the place of Islamic feminism in online and offline feminist public space. Furthermore the adoption of the hashtags related to Islamic feminism illustrates the appropriation, reframing and composite reassembling of individual and collective intersectional identities.

KEYWORDS: Digital media, Feminisms, Islamic feminism, Instagram, Intersectionality, Religion

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1. Introduction

The understanding of Islam as a patriarchal culture and religion is a well-established and mainstream discursive frame in the public and the political sphere of European countries (Amiriaux 2016; Ozzano and Giorgi 2016). Even though its roots date back to the orientalist colonialism (Scott 2018; Abu Lughod 2015), the “Muslim question” is in fact quite recent and can be defined as a “polysemous schema that constructs and abstracts Muslims and Muslimness in problematizing their integration within a western secular public sphere” (Selby and Beaman 2016, 8; Bracke and Hernández Aguilar 2020). Islam, in this sense, is the “cultural other” that does not belong (Mepschen 2016), and in the public discourse there is little space for “the ordinary Muslim” (Göle 2015) or queer Muslims, falling outside of the imagined straight (and homophobic) Muslim community (el-Tayeb 2012; Korteweg 2020).

Right-wing populist and far-right actors in particular rise the moral panic around Islam and Muslim immigrants’ cultural practices (e.g. Reilly 2011; Mayer et al. 2015; Giorgi 2021a), often adopting a “rescue narrative” and positioning themselves as champions and saviors of women (and, in some cases, LGBTQI+ persons) (Bracke 2012) – a process for which scholars have introduced a series of concepts, such as alt-feminism, or femonationalism (for a discussion see Arfini et al. 2019). This appropriation and re-purposing of gender rights also resulted in unlikely alliances between conservative parties and women’s rights (and, sometimes, feminist) movements (Ylmaz 2015).

Feminist movements in Europe (and, more broadly, the global north) are in fact mostly secular (Nyhagen 2019; van Der Brandt 2014, 2015) and express caution in dealing with the topic of “Islam” as well as difficulties in articulating the role of Muslim women within a feminist emancipatory project (Giorgi 2021b; Reilly 2017; Scharff 2011). Research shows that, mostly, European feminisms struggle between considering Muslim women as agency-lacking victims of their culture, on the one side, and invoking the respect of cultural diversity and women’s agency, on the other – tensions which are perfectly exemplified by the debate around “the veil” (e.g. Amiriaux 2013; Bilge 2010; Bracke, Fadil 2012; Massari 2014; Rosenberger, Sauer 2011).

However, European feminisms are also undergoing a process of generational renovation, in relation to which scholars speak of “fourth wave” of feminism (Magaraggia 2015): there are increasingly more feminists who happen to be Muslim or have familiarity with Islam (Martinez-Cuadros, forthcoming) and increasingly more feminist movements adopt an intersectional approach, attentive to power relations and how different dimensions of oppression, including those grounded on religion, interlock and create specific configurations of marginalized socio-political identities (Panighel 2022; Mainardi 2022a). Particularly relevant in this process of contemporary re-shaping of feminisms in the fourth wave appears to be the digital environment (Magaraggia and Ruspini 2017), which is at the same time a space for networking and a site of protests and collective action (Pavana and Mainardi 2018). In fact, feminist digital activism has the potential to integrate, articulate and potentially re-frame claims and identity, and to shape and expand the feminist discourse (Pavan 2020), enabling “intersectional conversations” (Baer 2016), to which can contribute people differently positioned with respect to the power imbalances characterizing the social fabric.

In this contribution we focus on the discourse about “Islamic feminism” in the digital sphere by analyzing how Instagram users engage with the related hashtags, in the case study of Italy. We focus on how this expression is used, how its meaning is discursively negotiated and constructed, how the discourse unfolds – in fact, as Pavan (2020: 80-81) synthesizes: “When it develops in connection with feminist activism, the construction of discourses in the online networks [...] contributes to crack the “gender opportunity structure” [...] within which the everyday life of women and LGBTQI+ subjectivities play out [...]” (our translation).

“Islamic feminism” is far from being the only frame for Muslim women activism: many other Muslim activists mobilize within the frame of feminism without putting their religiosity at the forefront, others reject the “feminist” label, yet others articulate Islam and feminism outside of the tradition of “Islamic feminism”, for example making reference to intersectional feminism as a more inclusive category than Islamic feminism (Martinez-Cuadros, forthcoming). Broadly speaking, the expression refers to the attempt to articulate the “principles of gender equality and social justice in Qur’anic language” (Badran 2010) which, since the 1990s, has developed into a composite array of actors and initiatives (Pepicelli 2008, 2010; Pepicelli and Vanzan 2017), particularly in the aftermaths of the Arab Spring (Borrillo 2017). Despite the fact that Islamic feminisms are internally different (e.g. Abdallah 2013), in Europe the public discourse tends to use the expression “Islamic feminism” (singular): rather than indicating a movement, in fact, the expression works as a discursive dispositive that undermines the supposed incompatibility between Islam and feminism, as it highlights the presence of gender rights movements within Muslim communities. This paper is not focused on the analysis of the Islamic feminist discourse: rather, it is interested in the discourse about Islamic feminism on Instagram and how it contributes to redefine the boundaries of feminism.

It is in this perspective, then, that we explore whether an online discourse on feminism and Islam exists, and how it unfolds on social media. In fact, its mere existence has the effect of expanding the feminist discourse (at least in digital environments). In the following section we present the case study and the research questions, in section three we detail the methodology, section four presents the results, while in section five we discuss the outcomes.

2. Case study and research questions

The research focuses on the Italian case study for three main reasons. First, the Italian public discourse is characterized by an underlying Islamophobia and gendered processes of racialization and discrimination, for which the agency of Muslim women – or women whose origin is in Muslim-majority countries – is often denied (Massari 2006), despite research exploring their everyday life often pointed out the opposite (Acocella and Pepicelli 2015; Massari 2014; Peruzzi et al. 2020). Exploring the discourse around the hashtags related to Islamic feminism on Instagram can thus allow understanding whether online environments put forward rigid gender rules and stereotyped visions of the relationships between women and religion, or they can be in fact places for voice for minoritized subjectivities. Second, gender regimes in Italy are ambivalent: on the one side there is an ongoing transformation towards gender equality, on the other side we also witness a re-traditionalization of gender representations and discourses, for instance about family and reproductive rights (Other et al. 2018). Furthermore, Italy hosts a growing and increasingly visible feminist movement (Chironi 2019) that adopts intersectionality as practice and method. Against this background, the analysis of the digital discourse unfolding around Islamic feminism offers an opportunity to explore the topics, discourse, imaginaries and alliances of contemporary feminisms. Third, feminism in Italy has a long and important story characterized by an emancipatory approach with respect to religion and religious tradition (Giorgi 2021b). In this scenario, the analysis allows to understand to what extent digitally mediated practices leave room for discussion on Islamic feminism. The religious aspect here is expressed on a material and symbolic level, redefining the boundaries of feminist subjectivities - for instance when religious symbols such as the veil seamlessly intertwine with feminist ones, or where spirituality contributes to redefining the aspects and characteristics of feminist militancy. Furthermore, the possibility of including Islamic feminism brings

feminist discourse on Instagram to confront different axes of power such as the experience of migration or processes of racialization.

Research focusing on online discourses developing around feminist topics – and, more broadly, digital activism – has explored the rearticulation of the relationships between individual agency and collective participation (Mattoni and Treré 2014; Meikle 2018). As Kavada (2018) summarizes, in the context of digital activism different types of connective actions co-exist, enabling more or less engagement with specific hashtags, keywords and claims, and the platforms’ affordances intersect with individual and collective digital expressions, fostering or hindering connection. Using the same hashtag in relation to, for example, rape culture, can foster a sense of community and solidarity and support processes of feminist subjectivation (Keller et al. 2018) – and this is particularly true for the generations grown at the intersection of online and offline experiences (Mainardi 2022b). Research on Muslim young women in Europe showed how they resort to the digital world to explore their faith and unpack, discuss, and criticize religious norms and conventions, especially in relation to gender and sexuality (for a recent discussion, see Lövheim and Lundmark 2019) and, in some cases, for feminist activism (Peterson 2022). Also, research has explored on the one side the diffusion of the Islamophobic discourse online (Evolvi 2017) and, on the other side, how social media are a place of activism and resistance for Muslim women (Hirji 2021) – which led some scholars to introduce the expression “Muslim feminist 2.0”¹.

We have decided to focus on the following hashtags: #femminismoislamico (Islamic feminism), #femminismiislamici (Islamic feminisms), #femministaislamica (Islamic feminist) and #femministeislamiche (Islamic feminists). In a first exploratory phase we planned a cross-platform analysis including Twitter and Facebook. However, we have decided not to go forward for two different reasons. In the case of Twitter, hashtags related to Islamic feminism are rarely used, and mostly to advertise academic initiatives or mass media news on the topic. On a total of 28 posts, we found four with an activist content, three critics with the idea of Islamic feminism and none with comments. Therefore, we concluded that a discourse on Islamic feminism in the Italian Twitter is not quantitatively relevant. In the case of Facebook, instead, the discourse is primarily organized in private groups: we decided to focus on public profiles instead on Instagram, for ethical reasons.

The paper then focuses on Instagram and is in line with current studies inviting to explore cultural, political and social relationships performed and challenged on this platform (Caliandro e Graham 2020). In this perspective, some study focused on gender regimes and representations of femininity on Instagram, showing how they are characterized by an important mobilization of images and visualization of the self (Caldeira et al. 2020; Mahmudova and Evolvi 2021). Other studies investigate Instagram potential for feminist movements – in particular, Bolling (2019) explored the networked digital communities enabled by the hashtags in the perspective of hashtag activism to understand how feminist discourses circulate on Instagram.

Our objective is to understand whether and how the discourse intersecting Islam and feminism exists and unfolds online on Instagram. Our analytical perspective takes into account the specific role of hashtags on this platform: differently from what occurs on Twitter, hashtags on Instagram are used to specify the content of the picture/image and the text, rather than join a conversation (Caliandro and Graham 2020)..

We manually collected 352 posts between 2017 (the first occurrence of one of the hashtags related to Islamic

¹Expression adopted by the sociologist Malika Hamidi (February 2021) during an online seminar organized by the French Muslim feminist collective Lallab on February 6 2021.

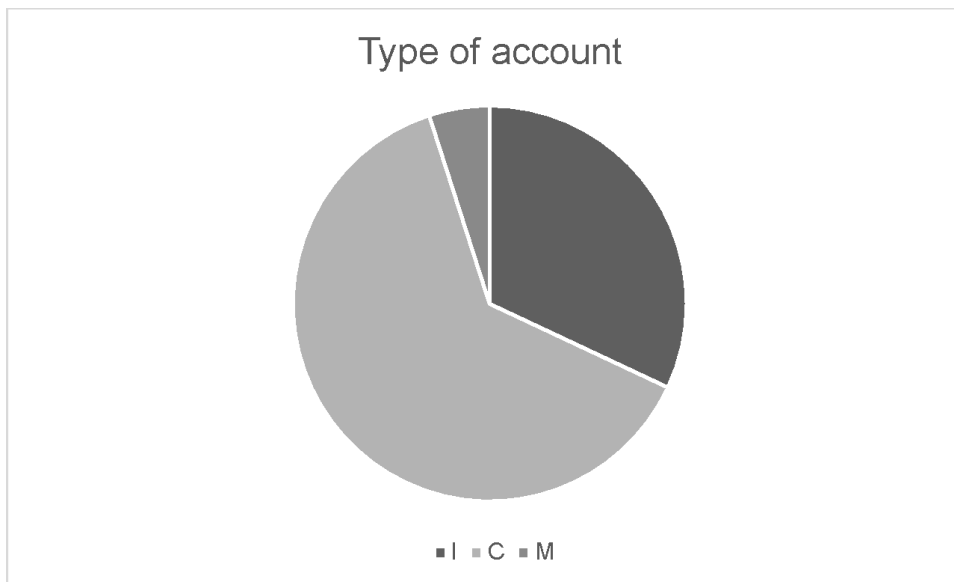
feminism) and December 2021, and we coded the text and the images through a recursive process, for quantitative and qualitative analysis. The qualitative analysis followed the discourse analysis approach. Discourse analysis allowed us to observe emerging discourses, recognize power relations and thus lay the groundwork for understanding how these structure the words that co-participate in the construction of public debate as a whole.

Considering the number of posts published with this hashtag, we know that what has arisen about #femminismoislamico is a relatively marginal discourse in numerical terms. However, we are aware that it is a significant discourse in the way it intervenes in bringing some changes in public discourse and in particular the discursive repertoires related to contemporary feminism in Italy.

3.#FemminismoIslamico – a general overview

The hashtag #femminismoislamico on Instagram begins to be used in 2017 and its adoption has steadily increased over the years. As it is shown in figure no.1, the accounts adopting the hashtag #femminismoislamico are mostly collective actors (63%, n. 222). The rest is divided between individual (32%, n.113) and media profiles (5%, n.17). By collective actors we mean both formal and informal actors, including feminist or otherwise political groups, LGBTQI+ associations, and collective actors interested in Islamic or Arab culture. Among individual profiles, the two categories that stand out are ‘book influencers’ and grassroots and self-identified feminist political activists. Media profiles includes activist and usually multiplatform media outlets, for which spreading out information and counternarratives is the primary political aim.

Figure no1. Type of account



In the figure, I is for Individuals, C for Collective actors, M for Media.

Opinion leaders clearly emerge: among the individual profiles, one account is responsible for 43% of the posts featuring the hashtags, particularly in the first years of its adoption, and the trend is even more evident for

collective profiles, among which one group posted 79% of the posts. The other profiles, in both cases, used the hashtag usually a couple of times. In the case of media, it emerges that the use is quite specific, as it accompanies news related to Islamic feminism. In the case of individual accounts, the use is related to book advice, or it features other feminist and political hashtags, while in the case of collective accounts the hashtag positions Islamic feminism amongst other feminist-related hashtags. This suggests that the hashtags combine descriptive usages with strategic adoptions by militant actors (Kavada 2018). On this first level of analysis we can say that the hashtag can be used on a descriptive level connotating different discussions produced by different actors. However, the presence of central accounts in the spread of this # linked to collective feminist experiences highlights the central role of collective experience online, reflecting their importance on these issues also in offline feminist contexts. In this sense we can trace a strategic use of the hashtags: militants make conscious use of them to construct an online feminist discourse. Anyway this does not exhaust the spread of the hashtag, which is instead used by a significant number of personal profiles (sometimes news media) illuminating the power of online spaces to interweave individual and collective dimensions. Figure no.2 presents the overall co-hashtag word cloud.

Figure no.2 Co-hashtags



The most used co-hashtags are related to feminism, including intersectional feminism, feminism, Islamic feminism, transfeminism, and queer culture. The world cloud clearly positions the discourse of Islamic feminism within the horizon of feminism – and, more specifically, within an intersectional conversation (Baer 2015): as it can be seen, the co-hashtags outline the elements of contemporary feminism(s) – namely pointing out its queer, trans inclusive and intersectional elements. Furthermore, Figure no.2 clearly shows how the hashtags are often used in both Italian and English, thus framing the Italian discourse within a broader international conversation – which is testified also by the use of hashtags related to international movements and activism, such as #georgefloyd and #blacklivesmatter. These hashtags are linked to social movements that have emerged in the United States in the last decade that have helped to make the issue of structural and cultural racism and racial discriminations visible and central in the European context as well. In this sense, co-hashtags

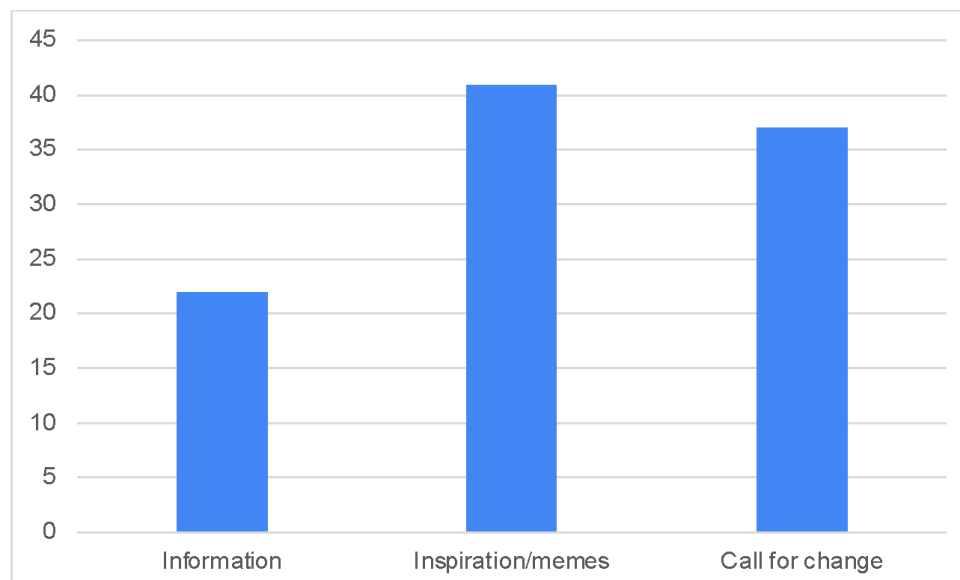
work as a bridge connecting Islamic feminism to specific struggles. Even though Islamic feminism is mainly connected to Muslim majority countries, and it can be seen as confronting “western” feminism, the language politics of the hashtags clearly positions the conversation within the English-speaking world. The use of English can be connected to different reasons: its long-standing connection with the English-speaking world – and, particularly, universities (Badran 2010), and the fact that the use of English allows bridging local concerns and concepts in a broad and potentially global conversation. The use of hashtags in English alongside the Italian one highlights the local and transnational dimension of the discourse in a horizon of feminisms that increasingly feeds on struggles, discourses, identities that cross geographical borders also thanks to the spread of digital technologies.

4. The debate about #femminismoislamico

The discourse developing on Instagram around the #femminismoislamico does not necessarily mirror the discussion occurring within Italian feminisms, or within Italian Muslim communities (See for example Acocella and Pepicelli 2015). As we pointed out, in fact, we do not have (and choose not to have) information about who is posting: our interest is not to analyse the feminist discourse in Italy about Islam, or Islamic feminist discourse in Italy, or Muslim women’s discourse in Italy. We are interested instead in analysing what are the topics and contents that emerge on Instagram around the hashtag #femminismoislamico, from a discourse analysis perspective.

We organized the data in three broad categories: information (22%, n.77), inspiration and memes (41%, n.144), call for change (37%, n.131), as shown in Figure no. 3.

Figure no. 3 Percentage of categories of posts



We detail the categories in the following sections.

4.1 Information: Islamic feminism does exist

Information about Islamic feminisms include posts covering news and cultural products related to the topic. The posts included in this category illustrate the growing awareness on Islamic feminism.

Cultural products include first of all TV Series, such as *Skam Italia*, in which one of the young characters is a Muslim young woman wearing the veil and making sense of her faith in a secular and culturally Christian context, and *Ethos*, a Turkish series which narrates the story and connections of a group of individuals with different socio-cultural backgrounds. Posts usually present a picture of the characters with a caption expressing a sense of discovery and excitement in relation to the existence of Islamic feminism. Fictional and non-fictional books are also mentioned, among which books on Islamic feminism authored by Renata Pepicelli and Amina Wadud. A picture of the book cover is accompanied by some information about the plot (if it is a fictional book) or the broad topic (in case of non-fictions). The reference to cultural products is particularly interesting, and it exemplifies and illustrates how in fact they affect and create specific audiences, contributing to redefining the imaginaries (Antoniazzi et al. 2022). This process can be seen, for example, with the exchange of book recommendations that also continues in the post comments. Here, also through the sharing of emotions and feelings experienced while watching a TV series such as *Skam* (TV series produced in Italy in 2018) or reading a novel such as *'Divorzio all' Islamica a viale Marconi'* (Amara Lakhous EO edizioni), users empathize with Muslim culture, turn it into a resource situated in their own experience (Hake 2015).

Speaking of visual production, this category is closely related to the images and representations that are produced for other types of media products (books, TV series) that are shared and reproduced online, creating a remediation of contents to fit the Instagram format.

This category also includes mentions of specific events dedicated to Islamic feminisms such as meetings, podcasts, magazine interviews. Usually organized or advertised by collective actors, these events aim at making Islamic feminism known among feminist and activist groups. These posts usually include posters advertising the initiative, or ad hoc digital images prepared for the same purpose. More rarely, they include pictures. The broad intent of these initiatives is to raise awareness, by spreading and detailing information about a topic which is presented in the posts as not well known, and to counter stereotypes. In this sense, Instagram appears to be one of the possible channels for spreading information about initiatives aiming at countering stereotypes and creating alternative imaginaries in relation to Islam and gender issues.

The third type of content we found in this category covers news related to Islam and Islamic feminism mentioned by media accounts, not particularly engaged with feminism (or Islam). In this case the post usually shares the picture or the image of the media content. Interestingly enough, these posts are not critics – the tone is usually neutral, which conveys the idea that “Islamic feminism” is nothing out of the ordinary. In this sense, selecting the media news with a normal tone and then spreading those news works in a logic of normalization, countering the often alarmed tones surrounding Islam (Carta di Roma 2021). In other words, it is a work of selective engagement and filter, building up a counternarrative.

Also, we find in this category posts that narrate the ordinary life of an “Islamic feminist” - the hashtag is in fact also used as an identity marker. In this case, self-identified Islamic feminists post their pictures in everyday life situations. As explained by Mahmudova and Evolvi (2021) in their study on “ordinary” Dutch Muslim women on Instagram, the platform offers the chance to challenge stereotypes and, more broadly, to take control of the narrative, strategically choosing what to share and make visible, with the awareness that every content can be policed and criticized. In this case, the use of pictures portraying Muslim women in everyday life (such as tourism or birthday parties) in combination with the use of the hashtags related to Islamic feminism conveys

a sense of normalization and ordinariness, and it works to counter stereotypes about the incompatibility of Islam and feminism through individual verbal and visual testimony (Evolvi 2017). The hashtags related to Islamic feminism on Instagram, then, aggregate individual everyday moments working as counternarratives in a strategic logic of normalization – as it happens in the case of homosexual Christians for example (Giorgi 2021c).

Among the three categories, this is the only one specifically focusing on Islamic feminism, and it is permeated by the excitement of discovery in relation to cultural products, the aim of raising awareness with initiatives and the spreading of information, or the strategic visibility for normalization and “ordinarization” of the narrative.

4.2 Inspiration: articulating Islamic feminism in Italy

This second category covers the posts which construct what is Islamic feminism by connecting the hashtag with other feminism-related hashtags and, more broadly, filling the expression “Islamic Feminism” with specific contents. The posts mean to be inspirational, by sharing memes, quotations, or captioned pictures of well-known activists. This category is characterised by a large production and circulation of images that are in line with the digital meme aesthetic.

The majority of the mentions are connected to one collective actor, which defines itself as a shared project of Islamic, trans- and intersectional feminism - in fact, #intersectionalfeminism and #transfeminism, both in English and in Italian, together with #queer, are the most used hashtags.

Islamic feminism is rarely addressed as such – rather, it is included in a broader discourse of intersectional and trans- feminism that touches upon a wide range of topics, including: the rights of sex-workers, the politics of care (including environmentalism and animals’ rights) and self-care in particular (including mental health), gender violence, identity and diversity and rights, abortion, activism, technology, toxic positivity, capitalism, racism (including islamophobia), pride, masculinity, menstruations, politics, sexuality, body and embodiment, violence, sisterhood, and, more broadly, feminism. The feminism to which Islamic feminism is associated also marks its identity by difference from “Twerf” (trans-women-exclusionary radical feminist) and “Terf” (Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist). Compared to a transphobic and trans-exclusionary politics, #femminismoislamico refers to a feminism made up of alliances with different subjectivities that redefine the subject entitled to be at the centre of feminism from an anti-racist, queer, and transfeminist perspective. Islamic feminism, then, is framed in the broader feminist intersectional discourse, and performed as “diversity work” (Ahmed 2017).

Posts often translate feminist keywords and highlight key themes: broadly speaking, the use of #femminismoislamico is related to the work of building up a feminist culture in which Islamic feminism has a place, in articulation with a variety of political concerns. In this sense, the use of hashtags together with general and well-known feminist hashtags works to legitimize Islamic feminism within the feminist global conversation.

Mainly, the discourse revolves around the self and the individuals, who are the agents of change, starting from themselves to articulate situated relationships with the outer world. In a way, it could sound resonant with what Rottenberg (2018) has labelled ‘neoliberal feminism’ that includes the attention to individual forms of women’s empowerment that disregard structural inequalities. However, this is not the case: rather, it illustrates an understanding of activism centered around the individuals, their connections, and the combined

effect of their actions – what Fenton (2011) has defined, more than a decade ago, as ‘networked activism’.

In a similar vein, the posts invite to self-care as an act of political warfare, echoing the famous statement by Audre Lorde, who is one of the women whose story and quotations are often mentioned for inspiration - other references include, for example, Frida Kahlo, Huda Sha’rawi, and Nzma Khan (who launched the World Hijab Day). The dimension of self-care, in particular in relation to mental health, includes the criticism against what is defined ‘toxic positivity’, that is the constant invite to think positive, pointing out the importance of expressing bad feelings, including sadness and rage (Lecompte-Van Poucke 2022)².

The posts in this category pay attention to explain the content of the images for those who may have visual impairments – or, images include alt-text – and to translate the content if in languages other than Italian. Broadly speaking, the posts include colorful images, which usually depict one or more persons and a text in handwriting lettering summarizing basic concepts of feminism in the logic of meme. People in the images are of different body-sizes and skin color, are often gender-neutral and sometimes disabled, and women wearing hijab are also present. The images try to navigate the fine balance between conveying diversity and pluralism without exploiting them.

Also, this category includes feminist memes – even though the discussion of humor and feminism exceeds the scope of this paper, it is worth noticing that memes are an increasingly used digital feminist strategy to challenge anti-feminism and problematic assumptions, with the potential of fostering intersectional conversations (Lawrence and Ringrose 2018).

Clearly, this category includes strategic actions by individual and collective actors engaged with Islamic feminism, attempting to start a conversation, and pushing the boundaries of contemporary feminisms.

4.3 Call for change: what Islamic feminism stands for (and against)

In the third category we included all the posts directly calling to action: boycott, street protest, mail bombing, fund raising, and the likes. Causes range from international issues – related, for example, to *Black Lives Matter* and George Floyd’s death, or women’s protests in Polonia occurred between 2020 and 2021 against the law denying the right to abortion – to local concerns, such as calling out the sexism of Italian television and politics, or supporting local activists and protests.

This category also includes those posts that are directly linked to political initiatives carried out by the feminist agenda in a broader sense, such as the transfeminist strikes of March 8 and the international demonstrations against violence against women on November 25. These posts contribute to producing a specific knowledge that feeds contemporary transfeminist mobilizations, thus constructing a discourse on intersectional transfeminism that is situated in the embodied experience of women of Muslim culture, and that questions the dimensions of power related to those specific subjectivities. This discourse feeds on the experiences of those who cross different positions with respect to gender, skin color and religious culture and who find a home, on a collective level, in contemporary feminist mobilizations. On the one hand, the posts promote a feminist and queer posture in the context of Muslim religious culture and practice, and, on the other, they contribute to the decolonization process of Italian feminism from within.

The posts in this category show two relevant levels of connection. The first between ongoing initiatives on the Italian national level and the international level. #femminismoislamico is connected to the most participated feminist Italian political initiatives along with some of the most visible political initiatives on the

²See also Hedva 2020 - https://johannahedva.com/SickWomanTheory_Hedva_2020.pdf

international level - from Poland to the Arab region to the United States. In this way, this hashtag is used by marking a transnational sense of participation to these forms of political action. This # opens a discourse in which Islamic feminism shows the continuities of intersectional struggles by connecting diverse spaces of protest.

The second level of connection is between practices that may seem distant from each other, but which have in common a level of active involvement - from fundraising initiatives, to expressions of solidarity, to street protests. This dimension of call to action is particularly relevant because it posits #femminismoislamico as a semantic field closely linked to the political dimension, as a living space of participation, action, and struggle. This category includes posts that evoke the need for change. The iconographic representation and the texts refer to practices of social transformation on the axes of power already evoked – e.g. gender, processes of racialisation, police violence. Furthermore, these posts also indicate a complicit alliance with the instances of the queer and LGBTQI+ movement expressed in national and local contexts.

Intertwined with the calls for change with different political subjectivities, which are evoked and supported, is the experience of the Covid 19 pandemic. In this sense, in some cases, forms of protest are exploded online as a place of choice for the impossibility of meeting face-to-face, giving even more strength to the discursive repertoire supported in this category.

The visual content of the posts in this category combines different aesthetics of protests, showcasing ad hoc images claiming for actions together with highly symbolic pictures that are included in the global visual culture of protests and act as bridges connecting activists all over the world (McGarry et al. 2020).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The discourse developing around the analysed hashtags contributes to re-shape the boundaries of the feminist discourse online. In part, this is the effect of a conscious effort to re-frame the conversations around Islam in feminist circles. In part, it is the result of socio-technologic logics of Instagram – in fact, we have not found contestation of the hashtags, which can be explained by the platform logic. In this sense, Instagram opens a public space for the discussion around – and the articulation of – a discourse on Islamic feminism.

The analyses we conducted reveal a chain of continuity between the online and offline dimension in all the three categories that emerged from the study, be the posts produced by collective or individual actors. In some cases, the contents produced online are in clear continuity with initiatives that are organized and managed offline - as in the case of book presentations or political initiatives. In other cases, the production of online content has its own original dimension imagined for and performed in, and through, Instagram - in particular in the Inspirational category – and the content usually feeds on the materiality of offline life. In this sense, the relationship between online and offline is not a dichotomous one.

The visuals and images shared through posts on Instagram are linked to the embodied experiences of everyday life and reflect upon, and challenge, the micro-practices of power along the line of gender and religion, and the process of racialization within which subjectivities are immersed. Thus, this intertwining of online and offline contributes to the production of a mediated intersectional feminist discourse that on Instagram brings together the spaces of everyday life, which is commonly considerate private, with that of collective production of meaning (Magaraggia and Ruspini 2017).

Since part of our observation was conducted during the initial and emergency phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, a specific reflection can be made about some elements introduced by this unexpected event. A considerable number of posts were related to the lockdown period, during which the health risk had led the

Italian government to introduce rules of conduct for the use of public space that drastically limited movements and mobility – and, thus, hindered public demonstrations. As some studies have shown (Bringel and Pleyers 2022), the activities of grassroots political groups and social movements did not stop during the lock-down: instead, they found different tools to enact their agency, and redefined their objectives in relation to the changing context. In the posts we have analyzed, the “offline” spaces of protest (such as squares and streets) are evoked, though not materially crossed. What is produced through posts and comments is then a discourse that not only tries to make up for the impossibility of protesting in the offline public space but also allows the subjects to continue producing political debate and content around the issue of Islamic feminism and open new areas of discussion and production of meaning. The mediation offered by Instagram specifically allows to continue to feel like a political subject in relation to others.

From an intersectional perspective on agency (Rebughini 2021), the adoption of the hashtags related to Islamic feminism also illustrates the appropriation, reframing and composite and various reassembling of an identity, that of “Muslim feminist”, that lies at the intersection of complex power and political dynamics of labelling (echoing what cooke, 2000, defines as “multiple critique). First, Muslim (or Islamic) feminists face the evoked political processes of racialization and “religiosization”, that constructs Islam as something that does not belong, and that is a problem to be solved and dealt with (Selby and Beaman 2016; Hernández-Aguilar and Bracke 2020). Second, they face the complex dynamics related to the transformations of religious epistemic authority – who has the legitimate authority of speaking for (and about) religion, and what counts as religious authority (Campbell 2021). Third, they also face contextual power dynamics: who has the legitimate power of speaking for (and about) Italian feminism and, more broadly, how the categorizations and processes related to Islam play out in the Italian context. Hence, the online discourse on Islamic feminism is shaped by the practices of diverse actors, immersed in a specific context. These practices contribute to create a discourse and a subject, as well as to define its boundaries. The discourse developing on Instagram, for example, touches upon some topics (including disability and racism), while leaving other topics out (including, for example, citizenship, or abortion). In this sense, the Islamic feminism developing on the Italian Instagram is one specific occurrence of this discourse.

Moreover this is a discourse by feminists about feminism. The hashtag “femminismoislamico” turns out to have a transformative potential since it brings forward issues that have to do with Eurocentrism, Islamophobia, processes of racialization and thus to initiate processes of change in public space and specifically in the feminist movement. Even if it is a small-scale phenomenon, it has transformative potential because it takes place online, and digital spaces are crucial for the formation of contemporary feminist cartographies. Furthermore, what happens at the margins is often anything but marginal: it is dense with meanings and alternative forms of subjectivities with respect to what is considered to be at the centre of the discourses. This is a fruitful perspective from which to look at processes that bring social change.

By analyzing the mediated discourses and practices opened up by digital tools for intersectional feminist groups and collectives, we argue for a more situated understanding of the resources available to activists for a full formulation of contemporary political subjectivity. In doing so, paper is in dialogue with recent research that considers the Internet and social media as ambivalent spaces where on the one hand there is a growing digital islamophobia, while at the same time digital spaces are tools to challenge stereotypes and altering narratives (Evolvi 2019; Farokhi 2019) in the context of the possibility of expression for girls of Muslim culture.

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